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Gag Reflexes: Disgust, Spectacle, and Irony in Film and TV Comedy, 1992-2012

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Abstract

From the 1990s through the 2000s, gross-out comedy – in the broadest terms, the style of physical comedy that emphasizes bodily functions and fluids, transgressive imagery and behavior, and shock value and disgust – triumphed as a subgenre of popular narrative film and television comedy. Gross-out comedy first emerged as a film genre in the late 1970s and early '80s with such films as *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) and *Porky's* (1981), and the prevailing explanation for its popularity argues that the films affirm a 'grotesque realism' of radically democratic carnality and abundance. This dissertation analyzes the gross-out comedy of the decades that followed by both affirming and elaborating this thesis. Specifically, the dissertation examines the rhetorical functions of disgust, spectacle, and irony as correlates of popular laughter in addition to, and sometimes in tension with, the populist ethos of grotesque realism. Furthermore, it taxonomizes the gross-out gag as a trope unto itself that has dispersed during this same period across a wide range of narrative film and television genres, identifying its consistent formal characteristics. Key case studies include the gross-out romantic comedy hybrid film *There's Something About Mary* (1998), the Eddie Murphy fatsuit vehicles *The Nutty Professor* (1996) and *Norbit* (2006), and *Freddy Got Fingered* (2001) and *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* (2007-10), two 'cult' texts that are emblematic of gross-out comedy's migration and evolution during the early digital era's atomization of mass media audiences into specialized taste niches.

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Introduction

The title of this dissertation is saturated with double meanings. Together, these meanings map out the dissertation's wide-ranging yet precisely oriented terrain. "Gag" first signifies the basic unit of comedy – or, at least, of physical and visual comedy, as distinct from verbal comedy, the basic unit of which may be more likely referred to as a joke. Since the dissertation specifically addresses the film and television subgenre of gross-out comedy, a variation of physical comedy, and even more specifically tracks the combination of this subgenre with others and the migration of its sensibilities and strategies into a variety of comedic contexts, gags are consistently the central object of my critical attention herein. "Gag" also signifies the nervous response most commonly associated with disgust, the response that gross-out comedy seeks alongside laughter. Just as gagging can be both physiological and psychological in nature, so too is disgust both physical and moral, a defense mechanism against contamination of the body as well as transgression of moral boundaries, an emotional manifestation of hardwired instinct and a corporeal expression of socially conditioned, culturally variable conventions and standards. "Reflexes" similarly signifies multiple contrasting yet intertwined valences. In the case of this dissertation, the valences pertain specifically to laughter – like disgust, a phenomenon both physiological and psychological in seemingly equal measure. Insofar as a reflex is, on the one hand, an involuntary response, reflexive laughter is impulsive, primitive, even precultural, corresponding to humor that bypasses the mental machinery of cultivated sophistication and taps into a universal 'lizard brain.' On the other hand, reflexive laughter refers to quite the opposite: Laughter as its own object, laughter not at the content of humor – of a gag, of a joke – but at the form it takes and the exhibited conventions therein. This reflexive laughter, then, expresses a

cultivated literacy in humor's formal properties, a fundamentally cerebral disposition that is by its very nature particular rather than universal.

From the double meanings emerges my overarching thesis. In his pioneering *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror & Comedy*, a magisterial study of the twin cycles of gore horror and gross-out comedy that emerged from 1970s Hollywood and prevailed through the end of the 1980s, William Paul argues that these subgenres not only draw from overlapping repertoires of grotesque imagery, but also share an organizing principle of ambivalence in their rendition of that imagery. *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), *Porky's* (1981), and their imitators – what Paul names "Animal Comedy" – invites audiences to take pleasure in the experience of disgust, which is expressed, in both cases, as "festive laughter."[1] I'd like to extend this heuristic of ambivalence to understand the persistent ubiquity of gross-out comedy in the years following the historical scope of *Laughing Screaming*. This extension also entails an expansion: of the canon of what can falls under the banner of gross-out comedy, but also, moreover, of theoretical concerns. Paul's comprehensive analysis hews rigorously to the social meanings of grotesque aesthetics and popular laughter as established over a long tradition of Western literary theory, most influentially articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, as a restoration of the material body as the universal cosmic principle, the site of collective common experience and identity across all time and space, contra the repressive, hierarchical, and individualistic symbolic order upheld and imposed by the official culture of the West. The Animal Comedy

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[1] Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy.* Columbia University Press, 1994. 68.

films, according to this heuristic, thus represent a populist aesthetic not simply because they cater to mass audiences. Rather, in their deliberately crude way, they affirm a deep realism of radically democratic carnality and abundance. I would suggest that this framing is both indispensable and insufficient for making sense of the varieties of grotesque, transgressive imagery that have proliferated in our media culture. Specifically, I'm interested in the rhetorical functions of disgust, spectacle, and irony as correlates of popular laughter, as represented by a range of popular film and television comedy.

Over those three decades, gross-out humor – in the broadest terms, encompassing everything from audible farts and visible vomit to comically excessive spectacles of gore – has prevailed as a trope of the popular cinema, then quickly television, and, more recently, digital media, which, with the advent of streaming, basically also includes everything else now. At some point, the subgenre had so thoroughly diffused into the aesthetic commonwealth of moving-image media production that gross-out comedy also described a fugitive trope, mingled with the recombined fragments of other established genres into the current occupants of today's multiplexes, TV networks, and streaming platforms. Another objective of my dissertation, then, is to account for gross-out comedy as a cross-generic tendency, a distinct pop cultural mode functioning within a variety of signifying contexts. Certainly, gross-out comedy as a distinct Hollywood subgenre, clustered around a specific set of thematic concerns, stock characters, formal conventions, and genre iconography, has existed in some form since the decline of Animal Comedy. Accordingly, much of the dissertation addresses gross-out comedy as a narrative genre, itemizing how it has and hasn't changed over the years: for example, the shift from ensemble comedies to star vehicles in the 1990s, described in the first chapter; or the intensified ambivalence of popular film comedy at and after the turn of the millennium,

described in the third. Nevertheless, telling the story of gross-out comedy over the last thirty-odd years would be badly impeded by focusing solely on Hollywood cinema, when the hegemonic stature of Hollywood in particular and the cinematic arts in general has only eroded during the time period, in an increasingly globalized and platform agnostic mass media landscape. After all, how could an analysis with any credibility of turn-of-the-century gross-out comedy sideline such crucial texts as *South Park* (1997-), *Jackass* (2000-02), or *Scary Movie* (2000), all of which, strictly speaking, exceed the parameters of gross-out comedy as a narrative genre*?* Ultimately, the operational concept of gross-out comedy in this dissertation errs on the side of Mark Jancovich's assertion that "genres are not defined by a feature that makes all films of a certain type fundamentally similar; rather they are produced by a discourse through which the films are understood."[2] As I discuss in the third chapter, marketing and popular discourses on gross-out comedy at the start of the new millennium focused keenly on the show-stopping gross-out gags featured in every new film and television show. With this in mind, I devote much consideration in this dissertation to gross-out gags as a distinct formal entity, characterized by consistent stylistic techniques and aesthetic conventions. Furthermore, I insist upon a literal reading of the term "gross-out," devoting much attention also to the dynamics of aesthetic disgust and its mobilization in the construction of spectacle. This emphasis on disgust and spectacle gives pride of place to media texts typified by graphic extremity; accordingly, while film and TV comedy dominate my scholarly attention, I also put them into conversation with select non-comedic texts.

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[2] Jancovich, Mark. "Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinction." *Horror: The Film Reader*, edited by Mark Jancovich, Routledge, 2002, p. 151.

Finally, the prevalence of irony as both a reading protocol and a textual attribute of film and television comedy is examined extensively, particularly with regard to its paradoxical association with gross-out comedy. For what could be more definitive of the ambivalence of comedy than the partnership between an affect most conventionally linked to cerebral distance, and a genre most commonly known for its visceral, base appeal?

I. A Semi-Autobiographical Pre-History

My interest in gross-out comedy developed during childhood. This is appropriate enough: gross-out humor, especially of the scatological variety, remains in the popular consciousness primarily as the province of adolescence, both actual and putative, and certainly I shared with my young peers a healthy appreciation for the noisy biological functions over which we'd only recently secured sovereignty. Their apparent incompatibility with basic decorum enforced by our parents, alongside schoolteachers, babysitters, rabbis, and other figures of ideological discipline, only added to the appeal, even – perhaps especially – for those of us disinclined to overt disobedience. But if adolescent interest in shit, snot, and gaseous emissions is transhistorical, my generation's was affirmed openly by an increasingly pluralistic media culture. Nickelodeon in particular distinguished itself during the American cable subscription boom of the late '80s and early '90s with original programming meant to indulge the more scatological sensibilities of young viewers and their likeminded forebears. In 1986 the network premiered the game show *Double Dare*, in which contestants endured an array of zany, increasingly messy physical trials, including retrieving a relay flag from a giant human nose clogged with viscous, pale-green mucus. Green slime would quickly become an recurring motif of Nickelodeon's brand identity.

The network's particular style of kid-friendly grotesquery came into even sharper relief in 1991, when Nicktoons, a block of original animated series, premiered. With *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-95) and *Rocko's Modern Life* (1993-96) especially, the cable network filled a market niche for tame but grotesque youth irreverence that had apparently been left mostly vacant by American public culture's residual prudishness.

Marketing gross-out at a mass scale to kids to the extent that Nickelodeon did had little precedent in American media culture. Even as Anglophone pop music, TV, and film production turned to the young audience in the postwar era as a discrete consumer market, comprising distinct cultural needs and sensibilities shaped by, if not anti-authoritarianism per se, a desire to divest of the standards and practices of their elders, overt gross-out humor – actually visualizing and dwelling on what's meant to disgust us – remained exclusive to the privately consumed, collectible media culture of comics and trading cards: namely, DC's *Mad Magazine*, which launched its long-running color format in 1954, and Topps' Wacky Packages, premiered properly in 1973 under the creative direction of Art Spiegelman and featured art and writing from an array of Mad contributors and their spiritual successors in the underground comix scene[3]. Accordingly, *Mad* and Wacky Packages shared not only a quasi-surrealist, anarchic, often grotesque cartoon sensibility, but also an appeal to kid consumers' blooming pop cultural savvy. *Mad* had quickly become known for the cheerfully rude caricatures of cultural figures, mass media, and current events featured among its one-off splash gags and narrative content

[3] Kochman, Charles. *Wacky Packages.* Harry N. Abrams, 2008. 238.

alike, while the foundational gimmick of Wacky Packages was that each of its trading cards parodied a recognizable consumer commodity, such as Kooloff's All-Brain, visualized as chunks of cerebrum floating in milk,[4] or Minute Lice, touted as yielding "6 sloppy servings."[5] Topps and Spiegelman charted new frontiers of youth-targeted gross-out in 1985, when they launched the Garbage Pail Kids sticker card series, bluntly spoofing the immensely popular Cabbage Patch Kids dolls. Each card introduced a new Garbage Pail Kid with an alliterative name and a thoroughly abject bodily compulsion, illustrated in nauseating Ivan Albright-esque detail: Consider, for example, Juicy Jess, shown squeezing the contents of a pimple carefully onto her toothbrush; or Peeled Paul, who apparently removes skin from sinew and hangs it in the closet at the end of each day. Rather than target specific brands, as the Wacky Packs had, the Garbage Pail Kids lampooned the commodification of childhood more broadly. That included the Cabbage Patch Kids but also, more pointedly, the sickly-sweet sentimentality of hegemonic popular media images and narratives of children. The genius of Spiegelman, et al. was recognizing that youth consumers would resent these images and narratives most of all. Much like the anti-*Barney* folk humor that prevailed across the schoolyards of my own youth in the 1990s, the Garbage Pail Kids offered a cathartic annihilation of childhood, both as a psychological reality in which young consumers adamantly disavow the cultural choices of their juniors and, by extension, their younger selves, and as a media construct comprising the normative ideology of the adult world. The gross-out aesthetic is key to this annihilation. Posed

[4] Ibid. 53.
[5] Ibid. 22.

against the idealized child's unsullied innocence and purity is Juicy Jess's prodigious acne, a symbol of contamination only intensified by its incongruity with her cherubic face, as if puberty had set on ten years ahead of schedule. Against the learned ritual of dental hygiene is Jess's carnivalesque, considerably less hygienic variation, a refusal of parental authority so self-defeating that it verges on masochism. And against the anodyne reassurance evoked by kitsch images of the nuclear family – from which the idealized child is inextricable – in the context of Reagan-era revanchism is the elicitation of disgust.

Although it was popular within the niche domain of trading cards, the Garbage Pail Kids never quite made the big time; a 1987 live-action feature film adaptation, starring dwarves in hideous rubber masks, was a legendary commercial and critical flop. Yet its particular youth-oriented, irreverently 'hip' gross-out sensibility endured, and on Nickelodeon, it reached a mass, mainstream audience. The key text in this regard is *The Ren & Stimpy Show,* which premiered in 1991 as part of the Nicktoons programming block. Created by animator John Kricfalusi, *Ren & Stimpy* was emblematic of Nicktoons' emphasis on auteur-driven animation – and Nickelodeon's on original productions in general – ostensibly as counterprogramming to the cheaply-made, brand-driven dross that accounted for much of kids' cartoons on TV at the time. Recalling stylistically UPA's geometric minimalism and Tex Avery's elastically hysterical bodies, Kricfalusi's overtly 'retro' vision perhaps above all exhibited clear roots in the ethos of the underground comix, which were often interpreted as 'corrupting' the comic strips and studio cartoons the comix artists grew up on, generating subversive tension from the incongruity between the upbeat sentimentality of the characters' design and hyperbolically graphic depictions of violence and countercultural libertinism – thus anticipating the Garbage Pail Kids' annihilation of childhood, though distinguished by the artists' apparent affection for their cultural

reference points. Of course, with its young and relatively mainstream target demographic, *Ren & Stimpy* never broached the X-rated terrain of R. Crumb's *Zap Comix* or Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli's *Tits & Clits Comix* – though Kricfalusi's defiant envelope-pushing did occasionally run afoul of Nickelodeon's standards and practices and, after he was fired at the beginning of the show's second season of five total, he desublimated the original's profane subtext in the misbegotten, swiftly-axed 2003 reboot series *Ren & Stimpy "Adult Party Cartoon"* – yet it nevertheless carried on the project of 'exposing' the grotesque underside of American cartoons. Like the anthropomorphic protagonists of Avery and Chuck Jones, Ren the chihuahua and Stimpy the cat are granted the metaphysical flexibility to endure limitless slapstick abuse and explosive eruptions of id; but unlike their cartoon forebears, Ren and Stimpy also vomit, pass gas, and are not-infrequently reduced to vascular blobs of bones and guts before returning after a cut no worse for wear. In short, *Ren & Stimpy* embellishes cartoon violence *ad absurdum* by rendering spectacles of flesh-and-bone vulnerability with cartoon bodies that are nevertheless ultimately invulnerable. A similar subtext of grotesque demystification can be read from *Ren and Stimpy*'s signature gross-out gesture: its frequent use of static, extreme close-up inserts. Offering a closer, unflattering look at the characters' various bodily afflictions – Ren's rotting teeth in one instance, his sickly, blepharitic eyes in another – these inserts echo the hyperbolic, hyperreal visual style of the Garbage Pail Kids, the Wacky Packages, and *Mad Magazine*, which invites the viewer to linger on intentionally disgusting details. They also contrast sharply with the relatively simple, elastically agile cel animation characteristic of the series, further emphasizing their demystifying aspect.

The revelry in disgust encouraged by *Ren & Stimpy*'s close-up inserts also characterizes its extended gross-out sequences, which are often as aggressive as they are surrealistic. The

episode concerning Ren's poor dental hygiene is emblematic. After his teeth crumble and fall out, Stimpy assures him of a silver lining: once his newly exposed nerve endings themselves fall out, he can leave them under his pillow to be collected by the Nerve Ending Fairy, who will exchange them for money with which to buy new teeth. So, Ren endeavors to speed up the process and is shown yanking each of his nerve endings from his gums. Without a doubt, the tactile effect is maximized: each pluck is mercilessly protracted, accompanied by hyperreal sound effects and visible winces of pain.[6] Above all, *Ren and Stimpy*'s gross-out strategies are emblematic of the ambivalence of disgust as an element of screen comedy aesthetics: at the same time that the visceral texture of gross-out spectacle evokes the 'real' in a way that triggers a reflexive response – disgust, laughter, or ideally both – it also calls attention to the spectacle's integral unreality within the context of narrative continuity, a comic irony that only intensifies in correlation with the vividness of the gross-out.

Another key historical development coinciding with the dispersal of gross-out comedy to the mass media was the rise of PG-13. By the early 1990s, studios had picked up on the expanded audience potential of the rating. In 1984 the graphic – though thoroughly fantastical – violent set-pieces of Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins,* which he produced with Joe Dante directing, compelled the MPAA to introduce the rating as a buffer between the often family-friendly PG designation and the definitively explicit if not always grown-up-oriented R. The age threshold chosen seemed to imagine specifically a 13-year-old boy's aesthetic sensibilities, if the studio comedies that benefited from the rating

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[6] "Ren's Toothache." *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, Nickelodeon, 1992.

through the turn of the decade are any indication. New Line Cinema profited mightily in 1994 by taking a chance on two Jim Carrey vehicles, *The Mask* and *Dumb and Dumber,* aimed squarely at the preteen audience following the unexpected success of *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* earlier that year. 1994 also saw Adam Sandler take his first starring role as the quintessential man-child *Billy Madison,* drawing considerable box office returns. *The Mask* exploits Carrey's Jerry Lewis-indebted elastic performance style in the service of state-of-the-art CGI that transforms him into a 'real-life' cartoon[7]; all the others, meanwhile, put their TV sketch comedy-derived stars into gross-out farce narratives that combine the populist blue humor of Animal Comedy with the zany individualist ethos of comedian comedy. One contrast between the primarily R-rated gross-out film comedies of the 1980s and their PG-13 successors of the 1990s is, predictably, a reining-in of normatively defined adult content. Sexualized nudity and harsh expletives are especially conspicuous exclusions. Another, related contrast is that the newer films courted preteen audiences much more overtly. Certainly the R rating attached to the comedy and horror films catalogued by Paul in *Laughing Screaming* did little to stop adolescents from seeking them out, not least of all on home video, which further enabled kids to circumvent an age restriction that often wasn't – and isn't – enforced theatrically in the first place. PG-13, though, formalized gross-out comedy's *de facto* appeal to minors, while at the same time retaining the promise of tantalizing 'adultness' in the PG-13 rating's distinction from G and PG.[8]

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[7] Russell, Chuck. *The Mask*, New Line Cinema, 1994.
[8] Leone, Ron; Barowski, Laurie. "Mpaa Ratings Creep: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Pg-13 Rating Category in Us Movies." *Journal of Children and Media*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 53-68. 4.

As with Nickelodeon, my childhood concept of the PG-13 comedies of Carrey, Sandler, and their similarly regressed cut-up contemporaries was that they represented a socially sanctioned mode of symbolic resistance to the norms of adult society. Ironically, this concept led to more puzzlement at what I saw in these films, rather than less. I understood that definite boundaries of sex, violence, language, and substance use separated PG-13 from R; that, for example, the appearance of Kate Winslet's bare breasts in *Titanic* (1997) was an exception that proved the rule,[9] and that, contra lesser foul oaths, more than one "fuck" could push an otherwise unobjectionable film over into R. What I didn't understand were how these standards applied to the gross and the scatological. Did *Dumb and Dumber,* which features a noisy, bare-assed bout of diarrhea, the accidental swigging of urine, close-ups of frozen snot, and a man getting his heart plucked out of his chest in a dream sequence, risk jeopardizing its PG-13 with those gross-outs alone?[10] I saw no consistent signs one way or the other, and indeed, while the MPAA's Classification and Rating Administration identifies normative thresholds for sex, violence, language, and substance use, no such parameters are even suggested for scatological content, and gross-out gags more generally are apparently only cause for concern once they incorporate graphic violence or sexual imagery, as with gore gags and gags involving reproductive fluids.[11]

Notwithstanding my precocious affliction with academic overthinking, one reason I became fixated on gross-out gags was that several lingered with me, disturbing yet intriguing me

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[9] Cameron, James. *Titanic,* Paramount Pictures, 1997.
[10] Farrelly, Peter. *Dumb & Dumber,* New Line Cinema, 1994.
[11] Leone, Ron; Barowski, Laurie. "Mpaa Ratings Creep: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Pg-13 Rating Category in Us Movies." *Journal of Children and Media,* vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 53-68., 5-6.

for uncertain reasons. One was the heart-plucking gag from *Dumb and Dumber,* the culmination of a kung fu parody that ends with Jim Carrey's Lloyd dropping his opponent's ticker into a doggy bag. Another was from another Carrey vehicle, *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* (1995), in which the title character is forced into a series of physical trials to earn the trust of an African tribe; in one trial, Ace's competitor pulls an organ out of an apparently conscious tribesman's abdomen, which Ace one-ups by plunging his arm down another tribesman's esophagus and retrieving an apple core, then pushing down on a pregnant tribeswoman's womb, launching her newborn into the elated father's arms, umbilical cord still attached. Yet another was from the first season of Nickelodeon's sketch comedy series *All That* (1994-2000), concerning the rather contrived premise of Kenan Thompson bringing in his friend's freshly-harvested spleen for show-and-tell.[12] The shared gore theme is undoubtedly key to the impact these gags had on my then-squeamish sensibilities. Yet similar imagery, usually entailing far more visible bloodshed, hardly ever bothered me in the context of horror narratives. That was, after all, where it belonged. These comic renditions, on the other hand, without the genre iconography of horror or the legibly satirical syntax of satire, alienated and unsettled me, as if broadcast from a distant moral and aesthetic universe where disgust and disembowelment unproblematically provided the raw material for mainstream comedy targeted at kids. The lack of any commentary on these gags or their radical ambivalence in the archives of cultural criticism suddenly made available to me by the internet, the same discourse that regularly warned of horror films' nihilistic violence, only aggravated my alienation. If the conventional wisdom holds that comedic stylization mitigates

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[12] "Craig Mack." *All That*, Nickelodeon, 11 Feb 1995.

the illusion of reality that gives onscreen live-action gore its visceral effect, then these gags that wisdom only to a degree. On the one hand, the *All That* sketch features an unconvincing prop spleen that leaves Thompson's hands covered in green dye; on the other, the sketch ends with the spleen's original owner stumbling back into the classroom, his torso wrapped in duct tape, reluctantly answering dispassionate questions about how painful surgery without anesthesia is and how necessary a spleen is to the body's well-being before collapsing. In short, the gag generates humor simultaneously from obviously stylized mise-en-scène and protracted exploration of the 'real-life' implications of the dramatic scenario. Reflecting on the sketch two decades later – which is, incidentally, currently unavailable via any official channels, despite the much-hyped addition of *All That*'s original run to the Netflix streaming roster – I realize that this self-conscious semiotic ambiguity, the deliberately unresolved contradiction of stylized and naturalistic renditions of the human body, remains one of my central points of fascination with gross-out comedy, especially when it appears in mass market contexts, rather than specialized niches of taste.

My nascent interest in comedy, transgression, and aesthetic disgust and concurrent, similarly nascent development of a critical perspective on culture and society were brought together, validated, and encouraged further by Comedy Central's *South Park* (1997-). The animated sitcom premiered three months prior to my 11th birthday, not much older than the show's four precocious, potty-mouthed protagonists. *South Park* quickly became a decisive, even sacred, text of my adolescence, as it did for many young men of my generation – and, presumably, some young women, too. It might as well have been engineered in a lab to satisfy my tastes precisely. The deliberately crude, eccentric, faux-stop-motion visual style, originally made using actual construction paper cutouts before switching to a far more efficient digital

fabrication of the same after the pilot episode, tapped into my long-held love of cartoons and especially unusual animation processes. The narrative setting of childhood encouraged my identification, while the ironic interpolation of gruesome violence, hyperbolic bathroom humor, adult sexuality, and a steady stream of foul oaths satisfied my related appetite for the annihilation of childhood described previously vis-à-vis the Garbage Pail Kids. The fact that the series was explicitly positioned as meant for adult audiences, accordingly occupying a 10pm weekday cable TV timeslot and bearing one of the few newly-introduced TV-MA ratings, only enhanced its appeal, marking *South Park* as 'authentically' transgressive by contrast to the domesticated, kid-tested/mother-approved irreverence of Nickelodeon or even the youth-targeted PG-13 comedies of the same era. Perhaps most important, though, was the hybrid of 'juvenile' comic sensibilities with pointed social satire, pop culture parody, and self-reflexivity. The more infamous of these sensibilities among the cultural commentariat at the time were the show's ornate verbal vulgarities and scatological gags. In my family's household, toilet humor was stigmatized in much the same way as it was by conventional middle-class moral standards, that is, as cheap, dumb, mean-spirited infantilism, and thus incompatible with the cultivation of a mature mind and sensitive soul. By the time of *South Park*'s premiere, I had begun to feel increasingly at odds with this premise: What did it mean that I was so often appraised as uncommonly intellectually and emotionally mature, when I was also so prone to helpless laughter at the sound of an especially robust fart? *South Park*'s combination of scatology, irony, and politically-engaged wit, then, was deeply validating for my pubescent self, not only flattering my burgeoning sense of sophistication while also indulging my baser impulses, but, moreover, modeling a harmonious synthesis of the two, especially in the many instances of gross-out humor that were also quite explicitly *about* gross-out humor. This synthesis – this embrace of comedic ambivalence

between high and low, body and mind, reality and unreality, text and metatext, attraction and revulsion – has stuck with me and, in a sense, finally culminated in this dissertation.

II. Basic Concepts: Humor, Disgust, and the Grotesque

For the mutual benefit of reader and author, I'd like to take this opportunity to establish some key conceptual first principles.

Humor: As comedy is my subject, the dynamics of humor are essential my work. Humor is famously subjective, however, and resistant to the rigors of precise analysis. My preference, then, is for some simple, easily applicable coordinates, For that purpose, I turn to Simon Critchley, who pithily defines the three most prominent theories of humor in the Western intellectual tradition:

1. **Superiority theory:** As the name suggests, this theory of humor, espoused most famously be Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, asserts that "we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people."[13] While this is, in my view, too reductive and inflammatory an account of how humor works for it to be widely applicable, it nevertheless is important to keep in mind when considering the aggressive affective appeal of gross-out comedy.

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[13] Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. Routledge, 2002. 2.

2. **Relief theory:** Most commonly credited to Sigmund Freud, the relief theory of humor contends that "the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity."[14] In other words, Freud argues that we laugh when we give voice to the libidinal drives that we normally inhibit as our tacit compact with civilized society. This theory is limited by its exclusive privileging of the semantics of humor over syntax and formal structure. That said, it is extremely useful for the specific subject matter of this dissertation, for obvious reasons. It also resonates with Bakhtin's concepts of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism, which are foundational to my work.
3. **Incongruity theory:** Again, as the name suggests, this theory of humor, associated with Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard, holds that "humor is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague."[15] In my opinion, this is easily the most versatile of the three theories defined here. Its explanatory power owes precisely to its conceptual simplicity: humor almost always boils down to a contrast that defies our notion of the normative in some way. Accordingly, I make frequent reference to this theory throughout my work.

[14] Ibid., 3.
[15] Ibid.

Grotesque realism: This is Bakhtin's term for the aesthetic regime mobilized by the Renaissance novelist Francois Rabelais, which Bakhtin sources in the "heritage…of folk humor" going back to the Middle Ages. Grotesque realism comprise "images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life," distinguished by exaggeration, "brimming-over abundance," and an "all-popular festive and utopian aspect." In the metaphysics of grotesque realism, "the cosmic, social, and bodily elements [constitute] an indivisible whole," and "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract…to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" is the "essential principle."[16] Grotesque realism, therefore, is not realism as it is generally understood, but rather the manifestation of a collective folk imaginary, counterposed to the individualistic and cerebral values of official bourgeois culture. This is an especially useful concept for my purposes as a concept of realism as a utopian, spectacular materiality, rather than a faithful representation of reality *per se*.

Grotesque body: In the grotesque style enlisted by Rabelais, "exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness" distinguish bodily imagery.[17] Bakhtin writes that the grotesque body

> is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world … All these convexities and orifices [the bowels, the phallus, the mouth, and the anus] have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating,

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[16] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World.* Indiana University Press, 1984. 20-22.
[17] Ibid. 303.

> drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.[18]

Any character that is represented as at the mercy of their bodily functions and sensual appetites could be considered in the tradition of the grotesque body. What distinguishes Bakhtin's taxonomy is its emphasis on regeneration and collectivity. The fleshly bodies that populate Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantegruel* eat in order to incorporate the world and eliminate in order to reproduce it. Food and the body are inseparable in Rabelais and eating never takes place in solitude. "There is hardly a single page in [Rabelais] where food and drink do not figure, if only as metaphors and epithets," Bakhtin observes, while stressing that "this is no commonplace, privately consumed food and drink, partaken of by individuals. This is a popular feast, a 'banquet for all the world.'"[19]

Theories of disgust: Disgust deserves some special attention here, as a concept that's often taken to be self-evident. Most dictionaries describe an emotion comprising intense antipathy and aversion, reactive and reflexive in its expression. It's also intentional, not in the sense that it's voluntary but rather that disgust always directs itself at something in particular. Conventional wisdom supplies a taxonomy of material filth as common objects of disgust: worms, feces,

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[18] Ibid. 317.
[19] Ibid. 279.

rotting organisms; slimy textures, pungent aromas, writhing movement. Likely because of the emotion's visceral and superlative quality and association with the symbolic terrain of the base and primordial, though, it also frequently bears the metaphoric burden of moral censure as well. One might claim to gag at a relative's overt racism, for example, or to describe political corruption as repulsive. In his formative writings on disgust, philosopher Aurel Kolnai even distinguishes a "moral disgust" from its material counterpart with the caveat that while informed by contingent moral standards, this form of disgust still proceeds from sensory experience, such as smelling liquor on someone's breath. [20] Jonathan Haidt expands this taxonomy of disgust into three general categories: "core" disgust, which regulates "what we touch or put in our mouths"; "animal-reminder" disgust, which correlates with "violations of the body envelope (including amputations, sores, and injuries), diseases and vermin, and certain kinds of sexual phenomena" and, true to its name, reminds us of our animal origins, contra the belief that "the body is a kind of 'temple' which houses our souls"; and "sociomoral" disgust, our reflexive response to "morally 'contaminating'" behavior.[21] For my purposes, I'm foregrounding the more directly physical form of disgust, comprising core disgust and animal-reminder disgust, which afflict the olfactory, visual, and tactile senses.[22] At the same time, I want to recognize that the material and moral dimensions are not mutually exclusive. Anthropologist Mary Douglas famously demystifies the elemental nature of the objects of disgust in her 1966 study, *Purity and Danger,* which recasts notions of filth as normative social constructs, structured by overlapping but

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[20] Kolnai, Aurel. *On Disgust.* edited by Barry; Korsmeyer Smith, Carolyn, Open Court, 2004. 66.
[21] Plantinga, Carl. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience.* 1 edition, University of California Press, 2009. 205.
[22] Kolnai, Aurel. *On Disgust.* edited by Barry; Korsmeyer Smith, Carolyn, Open Court, 2004. 48.

culturally variable boundaries between symbolic order and disorder. In any given society, what is considered gross or dirty constitutes "matter out of place,"[23] to be purged from the physical body and the body politic alike,[24] and thus a strong correspondence emerges between hygiene standards and the less tangible category of cultural taboo. Haidt's category of animal-reminder disgust, which interprets reflexive aversion to certain objects as a symptom of deep-seated existential anxiety, echoes this correspondence. Comedy that uses disgust as a rhetorical device tends also to concern itself with contravening taboos more generally, so Douglas's insights remain useful to the tasks of this dissertation, despite vigorous challenges to the social construction theory of disgust that have emerged in the interim.

Since the publication of Douglas's seminal study, researchers in neuroscience and cognitive psychology have restored an evolutionary basis to disgust to some degree, arguing that the physiological response of aversion is, fundamentally, a defense mechanism against contamination. Hence our instinct to be disgusted by physical matter that will poison us if we consume it or even remain too long in its vicinity. But wherever between nature and nurture the origins of disgust lie, a paradox persists: our attraction to the things that disgust us. This paradox has generated a fresh surge of interest across the humanities and social sciences in more recent years. William Ian Miller, Colin McGinn, Daniel Kelly, Winfried Menninghaus, Donald Lateiner, and Dimos Spatharas are just a few of the scholars who've tackled the subject at book length since the turn of the 21st century. My own analysis of disgust in film and television

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[23] Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* Praeger, 1966. 36.
[24] Ibid. 125.

comedy chiefly follows the lead of Carolyn Korsmeyer, who in her 2011 book *Savoring Disgust* examines disgust and its arousal as an aesthetic function available for strategic deployment and manipulation. Korsmeyer synthesizes cognitivist and non-cognitivist theories of the physiology of emotions – the former proposing that embodied emotional responses are *post-facto* manifestations of cognitive judgments, the latter proposing rather that such responses represent "automatic affective appraisals" that don't inevitably entail cognitive judgments *per se*[25] – and argues, apropos of an expansive canon of apparently, if not necessarily deliberately, disgusting, that "the arousal of disgust often has a positive value in appreciation and understanding of artworks."[26] For my purposes of applying these concepts to film, television, and digital media, the obstacle immediately emerges that disgust's prime perceptual vessels – taste, smell, and touch – exceed the direct reach of the audiovisual. In their place, this dissertation centers the formal strategies that emphasize proximity, duration, and tactility: close-ups; long takes; hyperrealistic sound design and special effects that simultaneously pursue naturalistic credibility and conventionalized exaggeration; and images of sustained contact between human bodies and "matter out of place." Such strategies epitomize what Korsmeyer observes makes disgust unique among the "emotive variety of aversions": unlike, for example, pain, artistic representations of which can inspire sympathy but cannot inflict pain itself, disgust can be authentically aroused by art, even via the seemingly indirect means of appealing to the ears and the eyes.[27] In the context of comedy, the spectacularization of the foul – the elicitation of disgust as audiovisual intensity –

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[25] Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics.* Oxford University Press, 2011. 27-29.
[26] Ibid. 11.
[27] Ibid. 58.

constitutes the Platonic ideal of the gross-out gag, the comedic manifestation of what Paul describes as the tendency for gross-out films to test "how much they can show without making us turn away."[28] Presumably virtue of this potentially alienating effect on the spectator, the most extreme forms of these gags have long prevailed in the "cult" precincts of media culture, where acquired tastes thrive. Since the early 1990s, though, they have increasingly appeared in more mainstream fare as well, a phenomenon explored at greater length in the next section as well as the third chapter of this dissertation. Clearly, then, the aversive aspect of disgust hasn't impeded its capacity to provide pleasure on a wide enough scale to become a marketable commodity. On the contrary, the aversive aspect may be key to disgust's enduring allure, promising the adrenaline rush of a shock response and the lingering buzz of perverse fascination as well as, according to Korsmeyer, the more highminded pleasures of contemplation and aesthetic admiration.[29]

The notion that aesthetic disgust can and often does prompt not only pleasure but also a reflective disposition is affirmed and elaborated by Carl Plantinga, an associate of the cognitivist tradition in media studies. Plantinga examines film-elicited disgust as emblematic of the link between bodily reactions and ideology in cinematic rhetoric, a link established, significantly, through the rhetorical mechanism of irony.[30] Approaching disgust as an artistic strategy enacted upon the spectator's cognition, Plantinga echoes Korsmeyer as well as Menninghaus,

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[28] Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy.* Columbia University Press, 1994. 20.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Plantinga, Carl. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience.* 1 edition, University of California Press, 2009. 203.

characterizing disgust as triggered directly through aesthetic means. It is not, however, an aesthetic emotion, "in which the spectator is distanced by the knowledge of the fictional status of what is seen…seeing (and hearing) the disgusting object causes aversive tendencies that are identical to those we might experience outside the movie theater." Disgust thus differs from a host of "sympathetic" emotions elicited during media spectatorship, that is, emotions that we feel alongside onscreen characters. It is, rather, a "direct" emotion, producing a visceral phenomenological effect whether onscreen characters register the same or not: averting our eyes, recoiling, becoming sick to our stomachs, or even leaving the movie theater.[31] Yet as Plantinga notes, the negative tenor of disgust doesn't foreclose its presence in popular media specifically because of its ambivalent nature: echoing both Korsmeyer and Paul, he writes that "the disgusting may also attract the viewer, creating a push and pull between curiosity and fascination on the one hand and aversion and repulsion on the other." Disgust can therefore serve a complex function in film and television, where it is "often used to manipulate the spectator's stance towards characters and narrative events." [32]

One such stance, as suggested, is a disposition of irony towards a visual media text and its subjective effects. For a case study of ironic disgust as a cinematic rhetorical strategy, Plantinga turns to John Waters' *Polyester* (1981), describing the film as a "reflexive parody of the disgust response itself."[33] Waters is an appropriate filmmaker for discussing the deliberate elicitation of disgust, to say the very least. Since the mid-1960s, Waters' films have concerned

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[31] Ibid. 210-11.
[32] Ibid. 212.
[33] Ibid. 217.

themselves with a vast array of transgressive characters and behaviors. His early feature films in particular – *Mondo Trasho* (1969), *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977) – revel in graphic gross-out spectacle as a matter of anarchic, anti-heteronormative principle. *Pink Flamingos* famously ends with its heroine eating fresh dog feces, *Desperate Living* features a castration performed in close-up with dressmaker shears, and in *Female Trouble*, the protagonist bites through her baby's umbilical cord, anticipating a similar gag in Tom Green's *Freddy Got Fingered* (2001), which is discussed extensively in the third chapter of this dissertation. The very act of grossing the audience out is narrativized in *Pink Flamingos* as a competition between two factions of Baltimorean outcasts over the title of "Filthiest Person Alive." The contest motivates the film's threadbare structure as a linear sequence of surreal, perverse bits of business, many of them unsimulated – including the aforementioned coprophagy. *Polyester* represents the migration of Waters' shock tactics into slightly more mainstream precincts. Under the auspices of New Line Cinema, which had begun funding independent productions in 1978 after considerable success distributing 'midnight specials' such as *Pink Flamingos*,[34] Waters was granted a budget nearly five times that of *Desperate Living*, as well as an R rating, allowing *Polyester* wider exhibition and marketing visibility than Waters' X-rated earlier features. But while *Polyester* lacks the pornographic explicitness of those earlier films, it still bears the mark of Waters' signature grotesque aesthetic, particularly in the abject humiliations visited upon Francine Fishpaw, played by the rotund drag

[34] Wyatt, Justin. "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood." *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve; Smith Neale, Murray, Routledge, 1998, pp. 74-90. 76-77.

queen Divine – a principal player of Waters' stock troupe, the Dreamlanders – but also through the film's scratch-and-sniff exhibition gimmick, Odorama.

Polyester is a black comedy spoof of Technicolor domestic melodramas such as Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), which similarly features an alienated middle-aged housewife swept off her feet by a younger man (played in *Polyester* by '50s heartthrob Tab Hunter). In *Polyester,* Francine is beset by a philandering, verbally abusive husband who runs a porn cinema, a nymphomaniacal daughter, an overbearing, cruel mother, and a teenage son who terrorizes local women as the "Baltimore Foot Stomper." Despite the support of her best friend Cuddles (Edith Massey), Francine descends into a deep, alcoholic depression and regularly makes a spectacle of herself. At numerous points Francine is shown on the toilet, crawling on the floor in a stupor, in closeup with her makeup smeared, and even vomiting into her purse.[35] As Plantinga notes, "the images and experience of her travails, her appearance, and her behavior – all of which make her conventionally disgusting – are much more powerful than her eventual triumph."[36] Viewers are thus cued to wallow in disgust and recognize it as part of the film's parodic function:

> "The savvy spectator of *Polyester* will recognize the film as a parody not only of melodrama but also of the very conditions for the elicitations of disgust found in conventional melodrama and perhaps also in middle-class culture. These conditions could be characterized as a fastidious attachment to cleanliness and a rigid social order. Thus, the film is parody that functions in part through the gross exaggeration of disgusting

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[35] Waters, John. *Polyester,* New Line Cinema, 1981.
[36] Plantinga, Carl. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience.* 1 edition, University of California Press, 2009. 216.

> behavior and objects. In this way, the film encourages laughter at the sociomoral disgust that serves as a kind of gatekeeper emotion, function as it can to stigmatize and ostracize various members of society."[37]

Plantinga thus credits the gross-out comedy of John Waters with asking viewers "to laugh at themselves being disgusted (and thus to ironically dispel the force of the disgust)."[38]

This notion of ironic disgust can be extended to gross-out comedies more broadly, insofar as their transgressions of cultural norms are always asking us to question our own observance of those norms. I would like to push this notion further to incorporate Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction, that is, the elevated social status gained from demonstrating 'refined' taste in art and culture. Contra the "ideology of charisma," the conventional wisdom that 'good' taste corresponds with absolute aesthetic standards and is itself a "gift of nature," Bourdieu argues that taste is a political construct judged according to highly relative standards that are understood as absolute only insofar as capitalist superstructure 'naturalizes' the values of the dominant social classes.[39] Although normative notions of 'good,' 'bad,' 'high,' 'low,' and so on correlate significantly with economic hierarchy, Bourdieu's model of taste accounts for a dynamic cultural field where diverse opportunities for distinction abound in fluctuating, autonomous social contexts ranging from broad and vast to infinitesimally specialized. With the concept of taste distinction as an expression of social difference in mind, we can see an additional subtext in ironic disgust's function as ideological critique. The ironic disgust of gross-out comedy isn't just

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[37] Ibid. 217.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press, 1984. 29.

ironic insofar as we laugh at our own response. It's also ironic in that we laugh at the disgust of others, those lacking the stomach to withstand and the cultural competency to appreciate the gross-out spectacles on offer. This is an especially useful heuristic for Waters' earlier films. Though the difference between *Polyester*'s gross-outs and *Pink Flamingos*' is in some sense simply a matter of degree, the latter's pursuit of overt shock value and novelty demands a consideration of alienation as part of its effects. Plantinga acknowledges that *Polyester,* as a "cult" film, attracts a "savvy spectator" who understands the ironic nature of Waters' films. This is only truer for Waters' pre-*Polyester* output, which played primarily to boutique audiences such as college film clubs and the midnight movie circuit. Janet Maslin comments on the difference in her review of *Polyester,* quipping that the film "can just as well be shown in the daytime." Only by reining his "grotesque touches" can Waters' cinema thus be suitable for mass consumption.[40] Waters' own words describe a deliberate departure from anything that could be considered the "popular aesthetic," in Bourdieu's terms (emphasis mine):

> To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about. If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation. But one must remember that there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste. It's easy to disgust someone; I could make a ninety-minute film of people getting their limbs hacked off, but this would only be bad bad taste and not very stylish or original. **To understand bad taste one must have very good taste. Good bad taste can be creatively nauseating but must, at the same time, appeal to the especially twisted sense of humor, which is anything but universal.**[41]

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[40] Maslin, Janet. "'Polyester,' an Offbeat Comedy." *The New York Times*, 29 May 1981, p. C6. https://www.nytimes.com/1981/05/29/movies/polyester-an-offbeat-comedy.html.
[41] Waters, John. *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste.* Running Press, 2005. 2.

Disgust is thus reclaimed from the realm of the lowbrow and refigured as a highbrow delicacy, at least when done 'right.' Crucially, no longer does it occupy the aesthetics of the "dumb," regressive popular: on the contrary, Waters' gross-outs appeal only to the most discerning, exclusive, "smart" taste. The disgust they elicit is a pointedly ironic form of disgust, fulcrumed as much on laughing at one's own disgust as distinguishing oneself from an imagined other who is alienated by the gross-outs at hand. This function of novelty and extremity establishes an oft-elided link between the "cult" indie films of John Waters, the Hollywood Lowbrow, and the gross-out film and television comedy that would emerge in its wake.

III. Gross-out Poetics: Style, Rhetoric, Genre, Ontology, Ideology

Now we turn to the matter of gross-out comedy's construction: What are its stylistic, rhetorical, generic, ontological, and ideological inclinations? The first sub-section offers a taxonomy of the formal aesthetics of gross-out gags during the era under discussion. The strategies that constitute this aesthetics are guided by the principles of proximity and duration. The second explores the relationship between irony, disgust, and excess as rhetorical functions in gross-out comedy. The third section addresses the stylistic overlap between horror and comedy, which exceeds the scope of this dissertation's chapters but represents a key antecedent for the arousal of aesthetic disgust as a comedic method. This section also discusses the legacy of slapstick, of which gross-out comedy is undeniably a part. The fourth section then deals with the ontological dimension of gross-out gags: What is the relationship between disgust, spectacle, laughter, and indexical reality? Accordingly, this section discusses 'reality' media, another key antecedent of gross-out comedy that nevertheless exceeds the temporal and categorical scope of

this dissertation. Finally, the fifth section elaborates on the social-ideological dimension of gross-out comedy, focusing on the genre's interconnection of scatological vulgarity and evolving masculinities and surveying numerous further examples of media texts beyond the purview of this dissertation.

Proximity, Duration, and Gross-out Style

Two techniques intertwine for the achievement of proximity in gross-out film and media: shock cuts and close ups. The attributes of shock cuts aren't narrowly defined. Sustained discussions of shock cuts understand them as equally dependent on content and on style, and as primarily the province of the low genres. Mark Goodall identifies the shock cut as a key technique of the "mondo" film cycle. Typified by sudden cuts to often willfully obscene images, mondo shock cutting link shots thematically and metaphorically for ironic comment as well as visceral impact.[42] To put it crudely, it's the exploitation version of Soviet intellectual montage, that bedrock of film studies curricula, whose putative father, Sergei Eisenstein, maintained that by delivering emotional shocks, revolutionary theater and film aesthetics awaken their audiences to the reality of their material circumstances. David Scott Diffrient provides perhaps the most focused analysis available of the shock cut, which he locates almost exclusively in the horror genre. "The underlying intent of filmmakers who mobilize shock cuts," Diffrient writes, "is to

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[42] Goodall, Mark. *Sweet & Savage: The World through the Shockumentary Film Lens.* Headpress, 2005.

add shots of adrenaline to the proceedings as well as to startle, horrify and sometimes even nauseate the viewer."[43] Depictions of flayed or rotting flesh dominate these shots. Their startling rhythm and grisly subjects collaborate to underscore narrative events - such as the discovery of a corpse - but also to briefly disrupt the narrative's smooth elaboration. The result is to "lay bare" the "ruptures inherent" to the cinema's illusion of spatiotemporal continuity, founded as it is both on the "intermittent movement" of 24 frames per second, and the interlocking network of conventionalized shots known as "decoupage." Shock cuts "bring our own fragmented lives into the fray," according to Diffrient, and "tap into our collective fears about the potential material collapse of bodies biological, celluloidal, and historical."[44] As such they stand to fulfill Walter Benjamin's cautious optimism about the cinema restoring "tangible presence" to subjectivity in the age of mechanical reproduction, contrary to Jean-Louis Baudry, Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey, and many other film theorists who've emphasized the dominant narrative cinema's containment of all ideological aberrations. Whereas most challenges to the cinematic apparatus have come from avant-garde practice, however, Diffrient frames shock cuts as a feature of what Linda Williams famously termed the "body genres," which actively abolish the critical distance of proper aesthetic experience and are regularly derided as cheaply manipulative.

Close-ups figure prominently among Diffrient's examples. Even without recourse to the abundant scholarship on close-ups, it's easy to see why: insofar as the shock cut consists of a

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[43] Diffrient, David Scott. "A Film Is Being Beaten: Notes on the Shock Cut and the Material Violence of Horror." *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, edited by Steffen Hantke, University of Mississippi Press, 2004, pp. 52-81. 58

[44] Ibid. 59.

bracing confrontation with horrifying and disgusting imagery, a reduced camera distance amplifies its effect by situating the viewer uncomfortably close, and also – especially within the walls of a movie theatre – blowing the object of the image up to massive size. Mary Ann Doane's comprehensive synthesis of the history of close-up as the privileged object of film theory notes that these two valences – proximity and enormity – are constitutive of the dominant formal practices of American filmmaking, and Soviet and French filmmaking and theory, respectively. She writes that "in the American context, it is conceptualized in terms of point of view, perspective, the relation between spectator and image, the spectator's *place* in the scene, and an assumed identification between viewer and camera. In the Soviet and French context, it is thought of as a quality of the image, as extensiveness, scale, an imposing stature, the awe of the gigantic as opposed to the charm of the miniature."[45]

I would argue that the shock value of a close-up benefits from both the camera's closeness to its subject and the scale of the resulting image equally. But as Doane notes, the phenomenological experience of the cinematic close-up projected on a large screen in a dark theater - the experience upon which its theorization has principally been based - is no longer the most common mode of viewing films, much less moving image media more generally. Contemporary accounts therefore predominantly focus on the close-up as the privileged site of cinematic empathy and affect, with the face as its privileged subject. This has its roots as far back as Hugo Munsterberg's conflation of the photoplay's formal attributes with human

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[45] Doane, Mary Ann. "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *differences*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2003, pp. 89-111. 92.

psychology, and Béla Balász's notion of "microphysiognomy," that is, the minute facial manifestations of emotion made visible in the close-up[46]; and has been explored more recently in light of the imitative function of mirror neurons and the potential interdisciplinary concerns of film studies and neuroscience.[47] Only some of my examples depict faces, but the emphasis here on an embodied contemplation of visual detail is salient. Its emotional content and sensory stimulation notwithstanding, a close-up, at base, imparts visual information austerely and unambiguously. An eyeline match that cuts to a close-up leaves no doubt as to what is being seen. But when it's onscreen, the subject of a close-up invites further inspection: there is, after all, nothing else to look at. In Doane's words, "the close-up transforms whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence and yet, simultaneously, that deeply experienced entity becomes a sign, a text, a surface that demands to be read."[48] For many film theorists, this overdetermined quality has rendered the close-up an "autonomous fragment" that subsumes linear narrative time with its own temporality. Jean Epstein in particular valorized the close-up "as a lurking danger, a potential semiotic threat to the unity and coherency of the filmic discourse." [49] Much like the shock cut in Diffrient's account, the close-up here is imbued with the power to rupture cinematic continuity, however briefly. This sense of rupture in the boundary between the narrative illusion of the film, and the construction

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[46] Balázs, Béla. *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art.* translated by Edith Bone, Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1952. 65.
[47] Turvey, Malcom. "Mirror Neurons and Film Studies: A Cautionary Tale from a Serious Pessimist." *Projections,* vol. 14, no. 3, 2020, pp. 21-46.
[48] Doane, Mary Ann. "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *differences,* vol. 14, no. 3, 2003, pp. 89-111. 94.
[49] Ibid. 90.

of the film itself, in terms of where we invest our attention at any given moment, is the subject of the next section, which addresses the rhetorical and affective architecture of gross-out comedy of the 1990s and 2000s.

Ironic Disgust and Rhetorical Ambivalence

Peter and Bobby Farrelly's *There's Something About Mary* (1998), which provides this dissertation's key case study of the hybridization of gross-out comedy and romantic comedy, also exhibits, in its showstopping gross-out set-pieces, the deceptively simple formal aesthetics of gross-out comedy's second wave, particularly its development of ironic and ambivalent reading protocols on the part of the popular audience. In the film, Ted pursues his high school crush Mary as a full-grown adult, only to encounter several variably unscrupulous competitors for her affection. *There's Something About Mary* is exemplary of how the gross-out comedy has expanded beyond the generic foundation of Animal Comedy, while retaining and intensifying some of its fundamental elements. In particular, the gross-out gags, the comic centerpieces of gross-out comedy's carnivalesque ethos, have become more spectacular, more graphic, more hostile to its audience's tolerance for being disgusted. Gross-out gags are exemplary of the parallels Paul draws between gross-out comedy and gore horror films. Inspiring disgust is central to the formal activity of both genres, and although the tonal and semantic features specific to each genre accompany their displays of bodily excess, the excess itself can be far more indeterminate. In Paul's words, "the horror films often become farcical in the extremity of their

devices, while the comedies often move into nightmare sequences."[50] Hence the slippage between laughter and screaming critics observed at slasher flick screenings in the early 1980s. And hence the horror film rhythms that mark many gross-out gags.

One such gag that centralizes the shock cut close-up represents the primal scene of Ted's frustrated pursuit of Mary. A teenaged Ted arrives at Mary's house to bring her to prom. After some awkward but good-natured interactions with her family, he retreats to urinate. As he peers out the window, his gaze falls upon lovebirds upon a branch, prompting an expression of pleasure as the Carpenter's "Close to You" plays on the soundtrack. Suddenly, the birds fly away, and Ted's gaze inadvertently falls upon Mary undressing in a window just beyond the branch, revealed in racked focus as the record unceremoniously scratches. Misreading his expression as lustful, she and her mother quickly cover her up. Ted, flustered by embarrassment, quickly zips up – too quickly. The scorched zipping noise on the soundtrack followed by Ted's agonized scream, shown in a repeated establishing shot of the house as resounding throughout the neighborhood, readily imply that Ted has caught his genitalia in his zipper. The nightmarishness of his predicament only worsens as Mary's stepfather Charlie enters to investigate. Upon seeing Ted's grievous injury, he recoils and cringes animatedly. The staging of this initial look is significant. Charlie takes a seat, dons his reading glasses, and leans in: in other words, he gives himself a close-up, which until later is kept from the viewer. His reaction is not merely disgust, either. He immediately cups his own genitals, mirroring the empathic response of

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[50] Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy.* Columbia University Press, 1994. 68.

the audience upon realizing Ted's ordeal. But even as his hands hover over his groin and he paces the bathroom, he's unable to draw his gaze away completely, a fact underscored as he takes his glasses on and off nervously.[51] Charlie thus dramatizes the embodied spectatorship of the gross-out close-up, its vacillation between fascination and repulsion. Korsmeyer accounts for these intertwined responses as the "paradox of aversion," the phenomenon of being drawn towards that which causes us to recoil.[52] Although Korsmeyer dismisses gross-outs – disgust qua disgust – as a "pretty crude experience," she nevertheless submits that the appeal rests on a metaresponse, "a kind of self-exploration that teases the edges of our tolerance, bringing us to the brink not only of our individual psyches but also of what creatures such as ourselves can countenance."[53] The pleasure is not in the experience of disgust itself, then, but rather having experienced disgust and lived to tell the tale.

Considering that, as Korsmeyer and other theorists of disgust assert, disgust is always directed towards an intentional object, it is significant that the image of Ted's calamity is absent for much of the described sequence. The sequence proceeds: in a panic, Charlie calls in Mary's mother, who is horrified. A cop, claiming to be drawn by the sound of a girl screaming, soon appears, followed by a fireman, all crowding into the bathroom in a raunchy riff on the stateroom gag from the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933). The cop, ensuring Ted that it'll feel "like taking off a Band-Aid," finally emancipates him, with bloody results. The scene is structured by anticipation of visual evidence: first and foremost of Ted's ensnared genitalia, and then of its

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[51] Farrelly, Peter. *There's Something About Mary*, 20th Century Fox Studios, 1998.
[52] Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics.* Oxford University Press, 2011. 113.
[53] Ibid. 121.

hard-fought liberation. Anticipation for the former accumulates through a series of audio and dramatic cues. First is the offending zipper on the soundtrack, itself foreshadowed by the vinyl scratch abruptly cutting off Karen Carpenter's dulcet contralto just moments before. Then, Charlie's structuring look, followed by his wife's, the police officer's, and the fireman's. The lack of an eyeline match in the first case, as well as the second and the third, instills a false sense of security that the anticipated close-up won't show at all, just as the graphic match of a cloud bisecting a full moon leads the viewer to believe she's been spared the sight of an eyeball being sliced in Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). But then an eyeball *is* sliced in the shot that abruptly follows, and so, too, is the viewer subjected to an extreme close-up of Ted's compromised "frank and beans" to match the fireman's eyeline. By the time the shot arrives, its effect exceeds an evidentiary function. Indeed, in the process of building the crescendo of comic tension up to the close-up, the scene renders it redundant. Ted's crisis is well-known by the time of the close-up's reveal through abundant suggestion in dialogue, on the soundtrack, and through the actors' physical comportments. Charlie's slack-jawed question about the "bubble" emerging from Ted's zipper doubles as descriptive audio for the visually impaired. The viewer's imagination is given plenty to work with. For most of the scene's duration, it appears to abide by the axiom that nothing is ever as frightening as what remains off-screen. When the close-up appears, it follows precisely Diffrient's description of the shock cut in that it disrupts the scene's established rhythm, of unfulfilled eyeline matches, as well as Doane's assertion that the close-up functions as an "autonomous fragment" in the filmic discourse. The shock cut close-up delivers a gross-out that is, like the many gags described throughout this dissertation, characterized by formal excess.

Gore-Comedy, Slapstick, and Excess

The firefighter's laughter, in sequence with the disgusted horror of the others, is an instructive gross-out response: first we are repulsed by the image, like Mary's parents; then, we laugh with relief, having withstood the shock of the close-up. In this sense it evokes Linda Williams' elaboration of Carol Clover's concept of body genres. Body genres comprise narrative films that show the human body in states of high intensity and seek a mimetic response from the audience. In Williams' formulation, they include gore horror, hardcore pornography, and melodrama.[54] Gore horror – encapsulating the horror films of the graphically violent and often disgusting persuasion that emerged in the '60s and had a heyday in the '80s – bears the closest relation to the *There's Something About Mary* scene in question. Certainly, the scenario dramatizes a nightmare scenario of pubescent male humiliation, built on a base of quintessential castration anxiety. The punctuation of disgust with laughter draws out a reaction that, as Paul notes, is common to the gross-outs both of horror and comedy. The fireman's laughter, in this sense, is readable as ironic: it seems incongruous with the horror the audience has finally witnessed after much suspense. At the same time, it evokes Plantinga's concept of ironic disgust, since we laugh at ourselves being disgusted. Specifically, we laugh at ourselves becoming the butt of a joke playing out at the level of the film's stylistic form. Just as we might laugh at Buñuel's bait-and-switch – substituting the graphic match of a cloud bisecting the moon for an eyeball being sliced, only to then subject us to the image itself – we laugh at ourselves becoming

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[54] Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1991, pp. 2-13.

the subject of the Farrelly brothers' formal play, at the excess of actually seeing the close-up that had been sufficiently implied up until that point. The rupture introduced by the shock cut fulfills the recourse to metanarrative that is, as I argue throughout this dissertation, at the heart of gross-out spectacles. Our response, whether wincing, laughing, or some combination of both, takes us outside the diegesis of the film, correlating instead with the profilmic reality of the filmmakers playing a trick on us.

It is worth also considering the satiric potential of the scene as an instance of particularly cruel slapstick. Muriel Andrin notes that as a rhetoric of violence, film slapstick originally centered the human body as impervious. Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd draw laughter precisely because of the comedians' apparently unflappable will to survive their hyperbolic trials and tribulations. As time drew on, however, the trajectory of slapstick violence has settled increasingly on the depiction of violence's consequences, on the pain and suffering imparted upon slapstick clowns such as Jerry Lewis and the Three Stooges. Andrin locates a logical endpoint of this trajectory in the very scene of *There's Something About Mary* discussed here. Citing Alex Clayton, Andrin describes a "new type of slapstick" that prompts the audience to vacillate between "sharing the pain and, more cruelly than before, laughing at it."[55] Disgust is deeply intertwined with this new type of slapstick. Spectacles of pain and elicitors of disgust are, after all, quite similar in that they produce aversive reactions, then followed, at least for certain sections of the viewing audience, by fascination and laughter. That laughter could be an

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[55] Andrin, Muriel. "Back to the "Slap": Slapstick's Hyperbolic Gesture and the Rhetoric of Violence." *Slapstick Comedy*, edited by Tom Paulus et al., Taylor and Francis, 2010, pp. 226-235. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=515325. 234.

Aristotelian laughter of superiority, at least in part: superiority over those in the audience unable to endure and take pleasure in spectacles of pain and disgust, as described above with regard to *Polyester*. I would argue further that a satiric component emerges here in the rhetoric of violence. The shocking exposure to the painful and appalling reality of Ted's predicament in *There's Something About Mary* prompts reflection on gags about physical humiliation. Faced with a body vulnerable to violation, our laughter no longer has the moral alibi afforded by the slapstick body's presumed imperviousness, thus encouraging us to reckon with the cruelty inherent in slapstick laughter, just as we may reflect on the normativity of toilet humor when a scatological gag crosses a threshold of disgusting excess, as discussed in the third chapter vis-à-vis *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001).

Indeed, disgust reveals itself in these moments as the signifying absence of slapstick that, when restored, exposes the absurdity and cruelty inherent to the form. *The Simpsons* relishes in this exposure through its show-within-a-show, *The Itchy and Scratchy Show*, based roughly on the Hanna-Barbara *Tom and Jerry* shorts with its cat-and-mouse knockabout premise. The major difference is that whereas Tom the cat and Jerry the mouse subject each other to slapstick mayhem with no lasting consequences, Itchy the mouse's violent vengeance against Scratchy the cat always results in the latter's bloody demise, graphically displayed in spectacles of dismemberment and disembowelment. The violence comes to a head in the Season 2 episode "Itchy & Scratchy & Marge," in which the Simpson matriarch, Marge, protests the network broadcasting *Itchy and Scratchy* when the family baby attacks her husband, Homer, with a

mallet, akin to the iconography of the cartoon.[56] The episode is a transparent satire of censorship battles undergone by television networks. Yet it hardly neutralizes the satire inherent to *Itchy and Scratchy* itself of the excesses of slapstick violence, particularly slapstick marketed towards children; even Lisa, the young Simpson daughter and the show's moral and intellectual center, is not immune to *Itchy and Scratchy*'s charm. The excess is the joke: *The Simpsons* invites laughter at *Itchy and Scratchy*'s spectacles of over-the-top gore as an indication of the desensitization that even the fictional Springfield's most sensitive residents have undergone in an era of hypermediated overstimulation.

A similar dynamic attends the phenomenon of gore-comedy. Donato Totaro describes this subgenre, also known as "splat-stick," as drawing audiences who "laughed hysterically as horrific, gross imagery." The cycle began in the early 1980s with such films as Frank Henonlotter's *Basket Case* and Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* and reached its peak in the early '90s with the early New Zealand films of Peter Jackson, particularly *Dead Alive* (or *Braindead* as it was originally titled overseas).[57] Gore-comedy signaled a shift away from body-horror, itself a shift from the slasher films of the late 1970s and early '80s that introduced a combination of grotesque spectacle and hilarity – what Philip Brophy terms "horrality"[58] – to the gory horror firmament that had become a source of steady box office revenue during the period. Gareth Samson notes that films trafficking in horrality transform the human body into flesh, which is to

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[56] "Itchy & Scratchy & Marge." *The Simpsons*, written by John Swartzwelder, 1990.
[57] Totaro, Donato. "Your Mother Ate My Dog! Peter Jackson and Gore-Comedy." *Offscreen*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2001, http://offscreen.com/view/peterjackson.
[58] Brophy, Philip. "Horrality-the Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films." *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1986, pp. 2-13. 3.

say, extricate it of subjectivity and tear it asunder, turning it into a mere meat puppet ready for all manners of defilement.[59] *Dead Alive* advances these developments to their apex by structuring its gore-gags after the fashion of silent film comedy's sustained visual gags. Totaro differentiates here between simple and developed gags, noting that Jackson's splat-stick draws upon the latter. The difference is a matter of complexity. Whereas a simple gag may comprise, say, a comedian slipping on a banana peel, a developed gag might find him carefully avoiding the banana peel only to end up waist-deep in a puddle of mud, punctuated by the added comic layer of a "close-up slow burn stare." In short, a developed gag "builds comic layers through more variables in editing and/or mise-en-scène."[60] I would add that developed gags move freely between text and meta-text, incorporating the narrative ruptures that Donald Crafton identifies with the gag structure of slapstick comedy.[61] The meta-joke of being subjected to the close-up of Ted's "frank and beans" after seemingly being spared can be seen as a modern example of this metatextuality in play in a developed gag. Since gross-out spectacles, as I have argued, always carry a subtext of metatextuality via disgust-eliciting excess, I would further argue that the developed gags of gore-comedy persistently draw their comedic value both from our disgust and the satiric undercurrent of adding bodily viscera to familiar slapstick tropes.

As described at the beginning of this section, a key formal element of gore-gags is their intertwining of proximity and duration via the use of close-ups, repetition, and long takes.

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[59] Samson, Gareth, qtd. in Totaro.
[60] Totaro, Donato. "Your Mother Ate My Dog! Peter Jackson and Gore-Comedy." *Offscreen*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2001, http://offscreen.com/view/peterjackson.
[61] Crafton, Donald. "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy." *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 106-120. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins.

Running gags serve as a source of repetition that tests the viewer's tolerance for particular grotesque images. In *Dead Alive,* which follows the outbreak of zombie virus in Newtown, New Zealand, an undead nurse is nearly decapitated, leaving her head dangling by a small sliver of skin on the back of her neck. Throughout the film, her head is repeatedly thrown back, opening her neck like a Pez dispenser.[62] Totaro also identifies "gore-bracelets" and "gore-toppers" as sources of durational comedy. Gore-bracelets describe gags that develop over a chain of linked events in a single scene. Similarly in gore-toppers, a gag develops vertically, building upon a sustained theme until reaching a crescendo of excess, often with an incorporated surprise. In *Dead Alive,* a representative gore-topper takes the form of what Totaro calls the "disgusting food gag." A couple from the Wellington Women's Welfare League attends lunch at the protagonist Lionel's house, where his newly infected mother Vera is decaying precipitously. Lionel struggles to conceal his mother's condition from their visitors as Vera's decomposing body inadvertently contaminates their custard: first with blood from a festering wound, which the guest consumes none the wiser; then with her ear, which falls off into her own bowl. When Vera proceeds to start chewing on her own ear, one of the guests vomits. The vomiting is key: like the fireman's laughter in *There's Something About Mary,* it provides an embodied model for the viewers' response to the gross-out spectacle. They may not puke, but they are as likely to be disgusted as they are amused.

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[62] Jackson, Peter. *Dead Alive,* ORO Films, 1992.

Dead Alive is, in its extreme visuality, an exemplary case of duration as a formal trait of gross-out. Duration is manipulated at two levels: individual shots, often close-ups, that depict the human body spectacularly rent asunder; and the film as whole, which subjects the viewer to a rapid acceleration of gory mayhem as the narrative progresses towards its epic climax. Consider that the aforementioned luncheon scene is the pinnacle of gross-out during the film's second act, while the third features Lionel charging through a horde of zombies with a lawnmower, nearly losing his footing in the slimy viscera that resultantly covers the parlor floor. The film becomes, in short, an endurance test of gruesome spectacle. The same could be said of individual moments. Describing the emergence of horrality in the early '80s "body-horror" cinema, Brophy emphasizes that films such as David Cronenberg's *Scanners* had shifted from the theatrical to the photographic in their spectacles of bodies transforming – or, in the case of *Scanners*, exploding: "Veins ripple up the arm, eyes turn white and pop out, hair stands on end, blood trickles from all facial cavities, heads swell and contract." The emphasis is not on emotional or psychological charge of classically constructed sequences, but on the physical, as it manifests in "real time."[63] Commenting on John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Brophy writes that "one's body is queasily affected not by fear or horror, but by the precision that the photographic image is able to exact upon us. *The Thing* perversely plays with these extensions of cinematic realism, presenting them as a dumbfounding magical spectacle in total knowledge of the irreducible effect that is generated by their manipulation."[64]

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[63] Brophy, Philip. "Horrality-the Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films." *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1986, pp. 2-13. 9.
[64] Ibid. 11.

Dead Alive performs similar, indeed altogether amplified and multiplied, feats of real-time gross-out. No act of violence visited upon human bodies, both undead and soon to be, is spared from prolonged and proximate depiction. One man has his bottom half reduced to bloody skeletal remains by ravenous zombies. Another has his ribcage lifted out of his chest. At one overtly comic moment, a pile of coiled intestines, freshly emancipated from their original owner, gain sentience and begin to act and move freely of their own accord. Obviously, none of these events is realistic in a strict sense, yet the film takes great care to show them in meticulously rendered close-up detail. Hence the peculiar textuality of horrality: the viewer is pushed to feel disgust at the convincing rendering of grotesque imagery, while simultaneously fully registering it as the product of special effects, and – perhaps begrudgingly – admiring the artisanal handiwork: "The contemporary horror film in general plays with the contradiction that it is only a movie, but nonetheless a movie that can work upon its audience with immediate results."[65] All of this is achieved through careful manipulation of visual proximity and temporal duration. This excessive display, finally, contributes to the comedic effect that body-horror films ushered in. Brophy asserts that "the humour in a gory scene is the result of the contemporary horror film's saturation of all its codes and conventions – a punchline that can only be got when one fully acknowledges this saturation as the departure point for viewing pleasure."[66] When splat-stick pushes cinematic violence to its logical extreme, hilarity ensues.

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[65] Ibid. 11.
[66] Ibid. 12.

The phenomenon of humor that derives from the ironic appreciation of oversaturated, over-the-top images of gore resonates with Kristin Thompson's concept of cinematic excess. Thompson defines cinematic excess as the aggregate of any apparent elements of a film's form that lack sufficient identifiable motivation as functions of the film text's unity. Whatever remains as textual surplus once this unity is identified, according to Thompson, calls upon a wholly distinct reading protocol that attends to the film's material dimension, that is, its concrete, historical existence as an aesthetic construction. This meta-textual reading then has the potential to signify back upon the film itself and add to, complicate, or even transform its unified meanings.[67] Applying this metric of excess, which depends first and foremost on the normative premise of the narrative film as a 'classical' coordination of meanings and effects, to media texts that foreground aesthetic spectacle as the key to their appeal, is tricky. In popular critical discourse, excess as defined against an implied unity is usually articulated as 'gratuitous,' at least when addressing overtly spectacular features: gratuitous violence, gratuitous sex or nudity, and so on. If the commonsense elaboration that tends to follow amounts to, "This gore is gratuitous because it does nothing to advance the story," an unanswerable question inevitably arises: "What degree of gore wouldn't be gratuitous, from a storytelling perspective?" What makes this question unanswerable is that such a threshold doesn't exist in any universally legible sense. After all, a gruesome death hardly needs to be visualized at all to be established as a plot point. The critique of excess in this case is instead more likely animated by a latent moralism, which

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[67] Thompson, Kristin. "The Concept of Cinematic Excess." *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Leo; Cohen Braudy, Marshall, Sixth edition, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 513-524.

disavows the aesthetic pleasure derived from violent, erotic, shocking, or otherwise sensationalistic imagery as degenerate and unseemly, by contrast to the 'legitimate' pleasures of a good story. Thompson doesn't address spectacular cinematic excess *per se,* yet her conceptualization is useful for discussing gross-out gags in terms of excess, not because I'm able to or interested in providing an absolute definition of excess in non-moralistic terms, but because the meta-textual reading protocol she associates with excess reverberates strongly with both the contemplative distance Korsmeyer argues is facilitated by aesthetic disgust, and the irony and ambivalence that are integral, in my view, to the experience and appreciation of gross-out gags.

Spectacles of Reality

The durational component of gross-out is especially pronounced in gross-out film and television that, rather than making forays into the fantastical nightmares of horror, put a premium on capturing the real. *Pink Flamingos* is a foundational text in this regard. The gross-out centerpieces of the film depend for their effect on the fact that what is being documented is almost entirely unsimulated. In order to convey Waters' access to uninterrupted scandalizing reality, a heavy premium is placed upon close-ups and long-take cinematography. Nowhere is this clearer than in the film's final shot, of Divine consuming dog feces. In one unbroken shot, the camera captures the dog defecating and Divine scooping the dung into her mouth, smiling a toothy, excrement-smeared grin directly at the viewer as the camera zooms out and the film ends. No opportunity is given for a fake-out. The unedited camerawork is a signifier for unvarnished reality, harnessed for maximum disgust. Gustatory taste is, after all, a prime arena for disgust,

making the potential for triggering our empathetic gag reflex high, especially as the camera lingers on Divine's browned pearly whites. The film fortified Waters' reputation for rubbing his audience's noses in muck, a tendency Kate J. Russell perceptively links to the legacy of William Castle's exhibition gimmickry, an influence Waters readily avowed.[68] One such instance of gimmickry involved Divine tossing dead mackerels into the San Francisco audience for *Multiple Maniacs* as a flurry of flashbulbs exploded onstage. Another, more ornate gimmick was Odorama, the aforementioned scratch-and-sniff accompaniment to the theatrical release of *Polyester* – revived for the Criterion Collection's Blu-ray release – which motivated the distributors to use the quasi-realist mantra "Smelling is Believing" as the film's marketing tagline. Odorama predictably comprises a series of jokes at the audience's expense, as the expectation for pleasant smells is persistently flouted. At one point, for example, Divine, playing long-suffering housewife Francine Fishpaw, sniffs perfume as the cue for viewers to scratch-and-sniff appears onscreen, only for her husband to fart loudly, revealing the actual smell to which audience members are subjected.

In the contemporary era few media texts have matched Waters' fondness for docu-realist gross-outs as has MTV's *Jackass,* which first ran as a television series before spawning a series of films. *Jackass* proceeds on a structurally minimalist premise: both the series and the films comprise series of brief segments in which an assembled crew of "jackasses" perform crude daredevil stunts, often incorporating public humiliation, sadomasochistic homoeroticism, and,

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[68] Russell, Kate J. "The Cinematic Pandemonium of William Castle and John Waters." *Refocus: The Films of William Castle*, edited by Murray Leeder, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 237-254.

very frequently, an intertwining of disgust and laughter, both from the viewer and the jackasses bearing witness on the sidelines. Animality is a constant theme as the performers dress up as and encounter a wide variety of wild beasts including gorillas, snakes, bulls, squids, bees, jellyfish, and alligators and invariably entailing intimate bodily contact, such as head jackass Johnny Knoxville's artificial insemination of a cow[69], and his lieutenant Steve-O's ingestion and ejection of an earthworm in one instance – through his nasal cavity[70] – and a live goldfish in another.[71] Indeed, ingestion and ejection are frequent activities in the *Jackass* repertoire, whether during competitions to consume the most hard-boiled eggs[72] and eggnog,[73] Steve-O snorting wasabi,[74] or, in one especially harrowing segment, jackass Dave England constructing and consuming an omelet from ingredients he has chewed, swallowed, and vomited up.[75] Scatology is another constant theme. Pranks involving portable toilets abound. Several jackasses defecate on-camera, both accidentally and on purpose. England even ingests horse manure in *Jackass Number Two* (2006), echoing the influence of John Waters, who makes an appearance in the film.[76]

The realist bona fides of the *Jackass* series and films are established via unflinching documentation of not only its many wince-inducing stunts but also their aftermath. Indeed, in several instances, as much footage is offered of the jackasses responding to the stunts as of the

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[69] "Jai Alai." *Jackass*, MTV, 2001.
[70] "Cup Test." *Jackass*, MTV, 2001.
[71] "Blind Driver." *Jackass*, MTV, 2000.
[72] "Poo Poo Platter." *Jackass*, MTV, 2000.
[73] "Santa Colonic." *Jackass*, MTV, 2000.
[74] Tremaine, Jeff. *Jackass: The Movie*, Paramount Pictures, 2002.
[75] "Beard of Leeches." *Jackass*, MTV, 2001.
[76] Tremaine, Jeff. *Jackass Number Two*, Paramount Pictures, 2006.

stunts themselves. The camera lingers on welted, bloodied bodies following failed jumps, successful impacts, and, in one instance, a tooth extracted via Lamborghini.[77] After the gross-outs, emesis is almost guaranteed. In *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), as the jackasses inflict papercuts on the webbing between their fingers and toes, the cameras turn on the camera operator, Lance Bangs, as he heaves miserably.[78] In *Jackass 3D* (2010), Bangs is again captured on-camera heaving and vomiting in two separate instances: first, after filming England defecating with his buttocks disguised as a volcano; then, after Steve-O drinks a cupful of Preston Lacy's sweat.[79] Once again, the embodied response to gross-out spectacle is modeled by the film, in this case the literal carrier of the gaze, implicated in close proximity to the elicitors of disgust. That proximity is simulated vividly as the camera lingers over bodily fluids: vomit pouring out of knocked over buckets during the hard-boiled egg challenge;[80] pit bull feces collected in a bag before the first portable toilet stunt; and a feces-drenched Knoxville after the toilet's been overturned, flies buzzing excitedly on the soundtrack.[81] This sense of proximity is especially pronounced in *Jackass 3D,* which, as the title suggests, is filmed using a 3D camera, setting the *Jackass* series in the Castle tradition of theatrical gimmickry. Much as Waters appropriated such gimmickry with a carnivalesque emphasis on grossing out his audience, so too does *Jackass 3D* bring its viewers into simulated close contact with its spectacles, including, at one point, Steve-O vomiting on the camera lens and, at another, a kazoo blown out of a flatulent

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[77] ---. *Jackass 3D*, Paramount Pictures, 2010.
[78] ---. *Jackass: The Movie*, Paramount Pictures, 2002.
[79] ---. *Jackass 3D*, Paramount Pictures, 2010.
[80] "Poo Poo Platter." *Jackass*, MTV, 2000.
[81] "Poo Cocktail." *Jackass*, MTV, 2000.

anus. The long-gap third film sequel, *Jackass Forever* (2022), while foregoing 3D, furthers the series' dedicated obscenity, in both the common sense of the term and Jean Baudrillard's definition as the "total visibility of things" that so far exceeds the semiotic function of representation as to abolish it outright:[82] an exemplary image displays Steve-O's scrotum, covered in bees, rendered in close-up in unsparing high definition.[83]

Masculinities and Social Ideology

Numerous scholars have analyzed the queer-adjacent sadomasochistic masculinity constituted by the spectacles of *Jackass.*[84] Finton Walsh in particular views the stunts of the *Jackass* crew across the television series and films as part of a "recuperating, masculinizing strategy," whereby male body's boundaries are repeatedly transgressed in order not to cast doubt upon that body's infallibility, in the manner of contemporary gross-out slapstick, but rather to reinforce it. To support this claim, Walsh makes recourse to Julia Kristeva's influential concept of abjection:

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[82] Baudrillard, Jean. *Passwords.* Verso, 2003. 29.
[83] Tremaine, Jeff. *Jackass Forever*, Paramount Pictures, 2022.
[84] Brayton, Sean. "Mtv's Jackass: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2007, pp. 57-72.; Feil, Ken. "From *Batman* to *I Love You, Man:* Queer Taste, Vulgarity, and the Bromance as Sensibility and Film Genre." *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, edited by Michael DeAngelis, Wayne State University Press, 2014, pp. 165-190.; Walsh, Fintan. "The Jackassification of Male Trouble: Incorporating the Abject as Norm." *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 160-181.

> As an example of abjection, Julia Kristeva describes the body's rejection of spoilt milk: ' "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it.' And in this process of expulsion, the body rejects itself as it rejects the milk, a dynamic which frames abjection as the simultaneous repulsion of what the self is not and as well as what the self is - 'I expel myself, I spit myself out.' On the contrary, the *Jackass* team actively seek out the correlates of spoilt milk, not to confirm the fragility of identity, but through the defiance of a self-abject or self-other relationship, to assert the indestructibility of the male subject.[85]

Walsh finds especially meaningful the prevalence of mock castration as a recuperative event: for the assembled jackasses, enduring injury to the groin – particularly through more baroque means via the Cup Test, in which Johnny Knoxville 'tests' the structural integrity of male groin guards with BB guns and bowling balls[86] – serves to affirm the male jackass's "indestructability as a phallic agent."[87] Theirs is "a masculinity based on endurance rather than obvious productivity," in which putting the self at high risk confirms a sense of being "in charge" in the face of the fear of "annihilation and dissolution of the self."[88] Of the *Jackass* crew's dalliances with queerness, sartorially and performatively, Walsh writes that "queerness is managed as a condition of the normative," inasmuch as it is part and parcel of the "jackassification of masculinity in

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[85] ---. "The Jackassification of Male Trouble: Incorporating the Abject as Norm." *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 160-181. 164-65.
[86] "Poo Cocktail." *Jackass*, MTV, 2000.
[87] Walsh, Fintan. "The Jackassification of Male Trouble: Incorporating the Abject as Norm." *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 160-181. 165.
[88] Ibid. 175.

contemporary culture, whereby male trouble is turned into a commercial commodity, divested of real social and critical urgency."[89]

My aim here is not necessarily to confirm or deny Walsh's conclusions about the presence of "authentic carnival" in *Jackass*'s gross-out slapstick. The normative aspect of the carnivalesque is precisely what makes it so ambivalent: if the official culture sanctions its temporary transgressions and inversions, doesn't that suggest that those transgressions and inversions present no real threat to extant power structures?[90] For my purposes, what resonates so strongly about Walsh's critique is its definition of gross-out transgressions as a particularly gendered dynamic. This raises an important question: is the gaze addressed by gross-out spectacle, in *Jackass* and elsewhere, similarly gendered male? Relatedly, is the gross-out encounter, like the *Jackass* crew's scatological and masochistic confrontations, another masculinizing strategy, rendering Korsmeyer's gross-out "metaresponse" as a specifically masculine phenomenon? The examples catalogued throughout this dissertation would suggest as much. In *There's Something About Mary,* the viewer is confronted with a close-up of an imperiled phallus. In one infamous scene of *Freddy Got Fingered*, the gaze falls upon a man-child's ersatz, grisly delivery of a baby.[91] *Not Another Teen Movie* bears witness, along with a trio of horny teen boys, to the gendered boundaries of scatology, when the visibility of a young woman's gastrointestinal distress disqualifies her as an erotic spectacle.[92] The same gendered

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[89] Ibid. 179.
[90] Ibid. 180.
[91] Green, Tom. *Freddy Got Fingered*, 20th Century Fox Studios, 2001.
[92] Gallen, Joel. *Not Another Teen Movie*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2001.

boundaries are tested in *South Park* with Randy Marsh's colossal bowel movement rendered as a kind of male birth, replete with an ultrasound. When his wife responds with exasperated bafflement, their son retorts, "You just don't get it."[93] Even *Pink Flamingos* masculinizes its closing *coup de théâtre*, insofar as Divine, though dressed as a woman, was a cisgender man named Harris Glenn Milstead offscreen, thus rendering his coprophagy no less a "recuperative, masculinizing strategy" than those of his oft-crossdressed counterparts in *Jackass.* None of this forecloses upon non-male viewers drawing gross-out pleasures from these texts' spectacles of proximity and duration, of course. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the viewing position granted by these gross-outs is more often than not gendered male, especially when the viewer's gaze is conflated with that of their disgusted onscreen proxies.

The conventionally masculine structuration of gross-out spectacle is consistent with the similarly gendered character of scatological imagery throughout the history of cinema. Yasujirō Ozu's coming-of-age comedy *Good Morning,* from 1959, possibly the first narrative feature in film history to exhibit audible flatulence, features a running gag concerning the group of prepubescent boys at its center and their bonding ritual of farting on command.[94] The youngest of the group repeatedly tries to participate but soils himself every time. Farting signifies entrance into young male homosociality whereas defecation signifies its failure; the poor boy's inability to bend his bowels to his will, a key milestone of Freud's conceptualization of psychosexual development, is a recurrent reminder of his lagging manifestation of the normative masculine

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[93] "More Crap." *South Park*, Comedy Central, 2007.
[94] Ozu, Yasujirō. *Good Morning*, Shōchiku Films Ltd., 1959.

mastery established by his peers. Another running flatulence gag involves the same boy's parents: whenever the father idly, loudly passes gas, his doting wife appears, repeatedly mistaking his farts for verbal requests. In this case flatulence signifies a latter stage of gendered socialization, when the patriarchal distribution of domestic power has been so successfully internalized that merely relaxing his sphincter causes the husband to summon his wife. In the context of Ozu's much-celebrated humanist inclinations as an auteur, *Good Morning'*s scatological spectacle can be interpreted as affirming a universal animal humanity, especially as an ironic contrast to modernization afflicting the film's diegetic milieu as well as the technological advances in synchronized sound that benefitted its production. Moreover, Ozu harnesses scatology as a vivid comic device for satirizing the excessive investment in fundamentally arbitrary gendered social orders exhibited by his characters.

Until the second wave of gross-out comedy, scatological spectacle had been somewhat rare, even if the scope is expanded beyond popular comedy *per se* and adds urination to scatological iconography's more strictly defined intestinal origins. In films made prior to *Dumb and Dumber* – a milestone of dramatizing defecation in mainstream comedy – evacuation is more often implied than depicted, and when depicted, marked still by relative restraint; the graphic aesthetics of the Animal Comedy cycle is primarily limited to nudity. The insistence upon the prevalence of "toilet humor" in contemporaneous critical accounts of the first wave of gross-out comedy was likely an overstatement borne of a mass media consensus that had, as recently as 1960, deemed the image of a flushing toilet to be equally scandalous to the depiction of a nude Janet Leigh's violent murder *Psycho;* otherwise, it could be a collective distortion in response to the powerful, yet conceptually elusive, element of tone, not unlike the perception of ultraviolence in the *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which, especially when compared to

prior exploitation fare such as Mario Bava's *A Bay of Blood* (1971) or the early output of Herschell Gordon Lewis, reveals itself as minimally gory in actuality. When instances of cinematic depictions of the act of defecation, flatulence, urination, or the material products thereof in the 1970s and '80s is compiled, the common thread between examples as various as the farting demons of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), the prodigious coprophagia of his later *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), the possessed child protagonist of *The Exorcist* (1973) peeing in front of a cocktail party, the bourgeois grotesques of Luis Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty* defecating at the dinner table (1974), the cruel older brother of *Weird Science* (1985) transformed into a sentient mound of shit, and Windy Winston's weaponized flatulence in *The Garbage Pail Kids Movie* is that scatological events appear not as universal bodily functions prone to disrupt our carefully-guarded sense of ourselves as more man than beast, but rather as paranormal interventions or allegorical extremes, affirming the integral unreality of the broader text.

Consideration of the distinct audience appeals and rhetorical functions among these examples provides further clarity; in this regard, the contrast between Pasolini's films vis-à-vis their exploitation of scatological spectacle is instructive. *The Canterbury Tales* is the middle part of Pasolini's "Trilogy of Life," which the Marxist polymath filmmaker intended as a recuperation of pre-semiotic reality from the overbearing "unreality" of consumer-capitalist ideology. Along with *The Decameron* (1971) and *Arabian Nights* (1974), *The Canterbury Tales* was positioned as politically radical mass entertainment, presenting the eroticized "subproletariat" body, unburdened by the carnal restraints of bourgeois superstructure, as "the last bulwark of reality" with the potential to arouse the mass audiences to a universal

revolutionary consciousness.[95] In short, Pasolini sought to harness the festive laughter identified by Bakhtin in the grotesque aesthetics of Rabelais, thus anticipating the populist appeal that Paul identifies in the gross-out films of the 1970s and '80s. The penultimate segment of *The Canterbury Tales,* which stages "The Summoner's Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's source text, is emblematic of the carnivalesque anti-authoritarianism of the trilogy. First, a sickly parishioner exacts revenge on a friar attempting to extort him with a blast of flatulence inches from the friar's face. Then, the same friar finds himself in Hell, watching in horror as other corrupt clergymen erupt from a naked demon's muscular ass.[96] All three films, but especially *The Decameron,* were international critical and commercial successes. Shortly after the release of *Arabian Nights,* though, Pasolini publicly disavowed the Trilogy of Life, proclaiming that the intended liberalizing effect of the films had "contributed, in practice, to a *false* liberalization," one that was not only accommodated but effectively absorbed and commodified by the machinery of capital, echoing Herbert Marcuse's concept of repressive desublimation.[97] Pasolini's next – and last – film, *Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) thus represents his heel-turn on the utopian prospects of bacchanalian indulgence. Significantly, scatology serves an even more pronounced function as a signifier of homosociality than in the Trilogy of Life. The difference is that its subtext is dystopian, rather than utopian, allegorizing the supreme decadence of absolute power – represented by four Italian Fascist officials who abduct a group of teenagers

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[95] Syrimis, Michael. "Pasolini's Erotic Gaze from *Medea* to *Salò*." *Italica*, vol. 89, no. 4, 2012, pp. 510-531. 520.
[96] Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *The Canterbury Tales*, United Artists, 1972.
[97] Syrimis, Michael. "Pasolini's Erotic Gaze from *Medea* to *Salò*." *Italica*, vol. 89, no. 4, 2012, pp. 510-531. 522.

for sadistic physical, sexual, and emotional torment during the final days of World War II – which enables the total freedom of the few via the violent subjugation of the many.[98]

What emerges from this survey of the ideological dynamics of onscreen scatology is a gendered contradiction: while the activities of the material lower bodily stratum, to borrow Bakhtin's terminology, signify universal human experience, thus also representing liberation from bourgeois pretension and conservative social restrictions, they are at the same time coded as categorically masculine, and thus exclusionary by default. When the scatological and the feminine do collide, the outcome is almost always negation. *Detroit Rock City* (1999)[99], *Not Another Teen Movie*, and *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004)[100] each feature scenes of young men inadvertently witnessing, much to their dismay, the intestinal distress of young women they previously objectified. Accordingly, women seldom serve as narrative agents in gross-out comedy, at least not until the early 2010s, a cultural turning point addressed further in the conclusion of this dissertation. Meanwhile, scatological iconography in particular both affirms masculine gender performance, sometimes even giving it license to incorporate 'non-masculine' traits. The trope of anal birth, for example, a recurring motif in *Salò*, appears in the aforementioned *South Park* episode "More Crap," as well as the *Ren & Stimpy* episode "Son of Stimpy" (1993), in which Stimpy's fart cloud develops sentience and arouses Stimpy's dormant maternal instincts.[101] More often, flatulence – and scatological spectacle more broadly, prior to the second wave of gross-out comedy – signifies male homosociality, as in *Good Morning*;

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[98] Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, United Artists, 1975.
[99] Rifkin, Adam. *Detroit Rock City*, New Line Cinema, 1999.
[100] Leiner, Danny. *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, New Line Cinema, 2004.
[101] "Son of Stimpy." *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, Nickelodeon, 1993.

masculine dominance, particularly over repressive institutional power, in the vein of *The Canterbury Tales*; or exclusion from civilized society, as in the notorious campfire scene of *Blazing Saddles* (1974), in which the tuneful farts of the assembled cowboys contributes to the film's demystification of the Western genre mythos and deflation of the white frontiersman archetype's stoical gravitas.[102]

IV. Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter 1, I examine what I refer to as gross-out comedy's second wave, which began in the mid-1990s, through the conceptual frame of gross-out comedy's evolution as a distinct popular genre. The trajectory that is thus mapped out tracks the genre's shift from the Animal Comedy narrative syntax of teenage and collegiate collectivity to comedian comedy narratives of man-child individuality. This trajectory also entails an overt incorporation of irony, self-reflexivity, and intertextuality, in particular an ironic disposition towards the performance of 'dumbness.' The chapter concludes with an in-depth case study of *There's Something About Mary* (1998) as the pivot point of gross-out comedy's hybridization with the romantic comedy genre, analyzing the film's ambivalent gender politics and the satirical subtext its gross-out gags generate in their persistent, ironic negation of rom-com conventions and clichés.

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[102] Brooks, Mel. *Blazing Saddles*, Warner Bros., 1974.

In Chapter 2, I examine the phenomenon of Hollywood fatsuit performances as a genre trope of gross-out comedy's second wave that epitomizes this cycle's purchase on the themes of the grotesque, aesthetic excess, and stylization of the body. First, I consider fatsuits as star vehicles, especially in their tendency towards the star-driven, self-reflexive comedian comedy tradition. I then analyze how playing a role in a fatsuit impacts stardom, how it differs from roles played by actual fat performers, and the relationship fostered by fatsuits between performers and viewers. This is followed by a discussion of fatsuits as spectacles of obesity: costly, elaborate, verisimilar yet hyperbolic simulations of the fat body, dramatized as aberrant and incongruous with, but also a product of, the modern world. As such, fatsuits are situated in a constellation of grotesque aesthetics, size discourse, and critiques of consumption. These discussions culminate in a sustained analysis of Eddie Murphy and his performances in the fatsuit comedies *The Nutty Professor* (1996), *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps* (2000), and *Norbit* (2006), which I put into extensive conversation with his other work, particularly his stand-up concert films *Delirious* (1983) and *Raw* (1987). What they share with their Hollywood brethren, and Mr. Creosote especially, is a vision of the fat body as an elaborate, grotesque spectacle, confronting us with its sensual mass and appetites, inviting with equal measure laughter, fascination, and disgust – particular a *moral* disgust, motivated by the ideological commonplace that fat bodies represent an imposition of private moral failure upon public space.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I theorize the deployment of gross-out gags as an ironic strategy that challenges the populist ethos of grotesque realism as gross-out comedy's dominant narrative during its development through the late 1990s and into the 2000s. First, I analyze the function of parody as a major modality of gross-out comedy over the course of its evolution as a popular genre in the 1990s. This discussion gives way to a case study of Tom Green's *Freddy Got*

Fingered as a text that at once culminates and deconstructs the ambivalent logic of gross-out comedian comedy as it had developed over the course of the prior decade. Then, I typologize a specific category of conventionalized gross-out gag, the explosive diarrhea gag, as emblematic of gross-out comedy's consistent yet complex negotiation of spectacle, excess, disgust, and gendered social ideology. The chapter concludes with a close reading of the cable TV series *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* (2007-10), a seminal text with regard to willfully accelerating gross-out gags beyond the outer limits of popular taste and imagining masculinity as hyper-regressively abject, its bodily sovereignty relinquished to the whims of consumer-capitalist decadence and postmodern digital virtuality.

Chapter 1

The Eternal Man-Child: Gender, Genre, and Textual Ambivalence

I. Gross-out Marches On: Popular Comedies of the 1990s

Comedian Comedy and Gross-out's Second Wave

As a mode of narrative mass media, gross-out comedy has proceeded apace since its origins in the popular cinema of the late 1970s. Its history could be usefully divided into a series of overlapping cycles. First was the "Animal Comedy" cycle, thus named by William Paul for their emphasis on primal indulgence, crystalized both by the prominence of animal imagery in the films themselves as well as the titles of the cycle's founding texts, *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) and *Porky's* (1982). Animal Comedy is typified by loosely-plotted narratives of microcosmic culture wars, fought between collectives of young men, representing the forces of hedonism and civil libertarianism, and avatars of repressive institutional power, whether the domineering rival fraternities of *Animal House*[1] and *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984),[2] the titular club owner and his police chief brother in *Porky's*,[3] the upscale country club in *Caddyshack* (1980),[4] or the lead's conservative father-in-law-to-be in *Bachelor Party* (1984).[5]

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[1] Landis, John. *National Lampoon's Animal House*, Universal Studios, 1978.
[2] Kanew, Jeff. *Revenge of the Nerds*, 20th Century Fox Studios, 1984.
[3] Clark, Bob. *Porky's*, 20th Century Fox, 1981.
[4] Ramis, Harold. *Caddyshack*, Warner Bros., 1980.
[5] Israel, Neal. *Bachelor Party*, 20th Century Fox, 1984.

As Paul notes, these comedies recast the anarchic farce style of Golden Era Hollywood slapstick – particularly the films of the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, Frank Tashlin, and Jerry Lewis – in the mold of the culturally liberal but largely depoliticized aftermath of 1960s counterculture. The films celebrate hedonism, mischief, and vulgarity with an off-color comic style carried out by casts of broadly sketched types and grotesques. They also express a yearning for a stylized past, specifically from the perspective of Baby Boomers, the generational cohort that came of age in the '60s and early '70s. Hence the films' often-nostalgic mise-en-scène: *Animal House* and proto-Animal Comedy *American Graffiti* (1973)[6] are set in 1962, *Porky's* is set in 1954, and even the films without explicit historical designation feature the iconography of varsity jackets, malt shops, nerd-vs.-jocks social divisions, and rockabilly-style pop. Gross-out comedies of the same era that deviate from Animal Comedy's "slobs vs. snobs" agonism tend still to carry this Boomer orientation. *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983)[7] and its two sequels, *European Vacation* (1985)[8] and *Christmas Vacation* (1989),[9] for example, concern the invariably feckless efforts of a middle-aged family man, played by Chevy Chase, to fulfill the imperatives of middle-class fatherhood while staving off the animal drives of his waning youth. One gag from the first *Vacation* crosscuts between Chase as he preens for a glamorous blonde driving a pink convertible, and his family, just a short distance away, as they discover dog urine on the sandwiches they had packed for lunch. In a classic gross-out clincher, Grandma shrugs and eats hers anyway. The midlife anxiety here is consonant with the collegiate nostalgia of *Animal*

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[6] Lucas, George. *American Graffiti*, Universal Pictures, 1973.
[7] Ramis, Harold. *National Lampoon's Vacation*, Warner Bros., 1983.
[8] Heckerling, Amy. *National Lampoon's European Vacation*, Warner Bros., 1985.
[9] Chechik, Jeremiah S. *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, Warner Bros., 1989.

House as a regulating function of the same generational ego: the idealized bacchanal of the postwar frat house is the pleasure principle kept tenuously in check by the reality principle of listless middle age, a milestone that was rapidly approaching for the Baby Boomers during gross-out comedy's first peak, especially by the time *Christmas Vacation* was released and the Animal Comedy cycle had functionally come to an end.

Paul's prediction that gross-out comedy would die out by the early 1990s quickly proved false; by the middle of the decade, it prevailed once again as a Hollywood subgenre, remaining ubiquitous into the mid 2000s. Paul was correct, however, that the more specific Animal Comedy mold, marked with the generational specificity of "Boomer humor"[10], would fade, giving way to comedy more closely aligned with the contemporary youth culture and heavily inflected by a rapidly changing mass media environment. Philip Drake observes moreover that Hollywood's ongoing confidence in the commercial appeal of vulgarity, pratfalls, and bodily functions through the '90s manifested as a resurgence of what Steve Seidman terms "comedian comedy"[11], as star vehicles for Adam Sandler, Jim Carrey, Chris Farley, Eddie Murphy, and Mike Myers quickly became studio staples[12]. Seidman defines comedian comedy as the subgenre of Hollywood narrative cinema structured by the performances of one or more established comedians in leading roles, a longstanding tradition that endures to some extent even today, though it accounted for a much larger share of studio production during prior historical eras.

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[10] Hendra, Tony. *Going Too Far: The Rise and Demise of Sick, Gross, Black, Sophomoric, Weirdo, Pinko, Anarchist, Underground, Anti-Establishment Humor.* Doubleday, 1987.
[11] Drake, Philip. "Low Blows?: Theorizing Performance in Post-Classical Comedian Comedy." *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, Routledge, 2003, pp. 186-198. Frank Krutnik. 187.
[12] Ibid.

Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon furnished the silent era with popular early entries. W.C. Fields, Mae West, the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, and Laurel and Hardy starred in "talkies" of the same vein. Comedian comedies continued to proliferate through the studio system's peak in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, and into its decline in the '60s, with these stars as well as Bob Hope, Danny Kaye, Abbott and Costello, and Jerry Lewis securing reliably lucrative box office yields. Writing in the late 1970s, Seidman identifies Mel Brooks and Woody Allen carrying on the comedian comedy tradition once Hollywood had risen from the ashes of its commercial nadir in the late '60s and early '70s. Three decades hence, we could add Eddie Murphy, Robin Williams, Martin Lawrence, and Mike Myers, all of whose forays into comedian comedy in the 1990s have included fatsuit performances, the specific subject of the next chapter.

Central to comedian comedies is the tension between the textual and extratextual. According to Seidman, comedian comedy

> is generated by two seemingly contradictory impulses: (1) the maintenance of the comedian's position as an already recognizable performer with a clearly defined extrafictional personality (and in the case of the comedians from 1930 on, a *highly visible* extrafictional personality); and (2) the description of the comedian as a comic figure who inhabits a fictional universe where certain problems must be confronted and resolved. [13]

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[13] Seidman, Steve. *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film.* UMI Research Press, 1981. 3.

What distinguishes comedian comedy within the broader genre of narrative comedy is that the comedians never quite 'disappear' into their characters. The performative elements that popularized them on live comedy platforms are folded into their fictional personas. Key among these elements is acknowledgement of an audience, prompting a "nonhermetic approach" to film narrative.[14] In contrast to the rigorous self-effacement demanded by the classical narrative cinema's conventionalized naturalism, comedian comedy is often self-reflexive, its exemplary entries periodically referring explicitly their own artificiality as well as the films' production and the larger "network of film business practices, lore, and history" of which they are part.[15] The lead comedians enjoy a "particular narrational stance" within the films' fictional signifying contexts that empowers them to activate this reflexivity, most overtly by breaking the fourth wall, but also by alluding to their extratextual appearances onstage, onscreen, and in public life.[16] Seidman distinguishes comedian comedy from its narrative comedy brethren by describing it as *discours,* linguist Émile Benveniste's category for speech acts characterized by a present-tense temporality and second-person address, as opposed to *histoire,* the past-tense, third-person mode associated with the relatively self-contained properties of conventional film narrative.[17] Although Seidman does not discuss television at length, sitcoms in particular exhibit many of the same properties as comedian comedy. *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972-78), *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), *Seinfield* (1989-1988), *Roseanne* (1988-1997), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005), and *Louie* (2010-present) are just a handful of sitcoms that have installed popular standup

[14] Ibid. 5.
[15] Ibid. 4-5.
[16] Ibid. 3.
[17] Ibid. 4.

comedians into fictional, sometimes autobiographical narratives. Not incidentally, TV has long been distinguished from film as *discours* on account of its 'live' aesthetics, even when those aesthetics outlasted actual live broadcast, as is the case with canned laughter.

Notably, even more than the Animal Comedy stable, which drew a handful of its stars from *Saturday Night Live*, the new crop came almost exclusively from television. Mike Myers, Chris Farley, and Adam Sandler rose as part of the show's reorientation towards Generation X, the babies of the Boomers, when producer Lorne Michaels swapped in a decidedly more youthful cast and writing staff during the show's 15th and 16th seasons. These newcomers – who also included Chris Rock, David Spade, and Rob Schneider – are often credited with (or blamed for) popularizing a more raucous, sophomoric, and frankly phallocentric style of comedy on the program; a 1998 compilation of collaborations between Rock, Spade, Schneider, Sandler, and Farley even christened them the "Bad Boys of *Saturday Night Live.*"[18] Michaels leveraged the newfound success with Gen Xers to produce *Wayne's World* (1992), his second *SNL* spinoff to go into wide release after *The Blues Brothers* (1980). The film was massively successful, securing *SNL*'s foothold in feature film production and arguably inaugurating the decade's wave of lowbrow comedy. In its production and aesthetics, *Wayne's World* is thoroughly emblematic of *SNL*'s demographic outreach to the so-called "MTV Generation" and, by extension, the successful incorporation of its subcultural sensibilities into mainstream comedy production. Directed by Penelope Spheeris, previously known for her documentaries and social problem

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[18] *The Bad Boys of Saturday Night Live*, NBC Home Video, 1998.

films concerning teenage itinerants and punk and heavy metal subcultures, the film is steeped in the argots, fashions, and attitudes of its young ticketholders and advances a narrative that, by focusing on its metalhead protagonists' struggle to wrest control of their cable access talk show from opportunistic corporate interests, reads as a thinly veiled parable about the film itself.[19] Oddly enough, the lone exception to the *SNL* rule among the era's breakout icons of film comedy was also one of its most lucratively popular: Jim Carrey, whose star rose at high velocity after leading three massive hits in 1994 – *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *The Mask,* and *Dumb and Dumber* – had accrued his relatively modest visibility as a cast member of Fox's *In Living Color* (1990-94). Like the contemporaneous seasons of *SNL*, *In Living Color* was also caught up in promotional and critical discourses of youth, hipness, and cultural vanguardism, not least of all because its majority African-American cast contrasted sharply with the predominantly white personnel of other sketch series, but also because the brand identity of risk-taking distinction the relatively young Fox network actively fostered[20].

Gross-out comedy's second wave, then, witnessed a generational shift in tandem with the semiotic priorities of comedian comedy: namely, individualism, and, to a lesser degree, self-reflexivity. Films such as *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *Tommy Boy* (1995), and *Happy Gilmore* (1996) pit their protagonists against stuffy foils reminiscent of the authoritarian snobs of Animal Comedy, but the comic tension is primarily produced by the star personas' strident independence from, and eventual awkward integration into, the wider social world, rather than their

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[19] Spheeris, Penelope. *Wayne's World,* Paramount Pictures, 1992.
[20] Holt, Jennifer. *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1986.* Rutgers University Press, 2011.

participation in broader carnivalesque collectivities. A notable deviation from the star vehicle tendency is the teen sex farce subgenre that followed the success of *American Pie* (1999), the ensemble cast of which comprised mostly unknown newcomers. As Paul observes, however, even as these films present their horny protagonists within tableaus of their peers in the Animal Comedy mode, their family and home lives are given more visibility than they would have been in their counterparts of the 1970s and '80s: consider, for example, the role played by Jim's dad in *American Pie* as the overeager chaperon to Jim's sexual awakening,[21] or the individualistic narrative arc of *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (2002), in which the eponymous *bon vivant* hero reluctantly finishes college after his father cuts him off financially – a melodramatic contrast to the relatively decentralized *Animal House,* whose Tim Matheson stars as Wilder the elder.[22] Otherwise, the lowbrow comedies of the '90s manifest the gross-out sensibility through individualized infantilism, a longtime pillar of the comedian comedy form. Their self-reflexivity, meanwhile, appears latently rather than patently, as discussed in the following chapter vis-à-vis fatsuit performances. *Wayne's World* and its sequel (1993) represent significant exceptions, as Wayne and, to a lesser extent, Garth – played by Mike Myers and another *SNL* alum, Dana Carvey, respectively – repeatedly break the fourth wall, address the audience directly, and assume the "particular narrational stance" that allows them to reconfigure the narrative at will: consider, for example, the film's ending, when Wayne presents several possible denouements before settling on the 'real' one. For several critics, this self-reflexivity is part of the film's

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[21] Paul, William. "The Impossibility of Romance: Hollywood Comedy, 1978-1999." *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, edited by Steve Neale, British Film Institute, 2002, pp. 117-129.
[22] Becker, Walt. *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, Artisan Entertainment, 2002.

saving grace, redeeming its characters' infantile vulgarity: Roger Ebert opens his review by remarking, "I walked into *Wayne's World* expecting a lot of dumb, vulgar comedy, and I got plenty, but I also found what I didn't expect: a genuinely amusing, sometimes even intelligent, undercurrent."[23]

Ebert's reaction to *Wayne's World* exemplifies the latent tension between "dumb" and "smart" in gross-out comedy in general and the second wave in particular. Many critics made sense of the '90s comedian comedy cycle, with some alarm, as the conquest of dimwittedness over Hollywood comedy production. The films themselves didn't hesitate to foreground performative stupidity as part of their appeal. The Jim Carrey film *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) is the most blatant example, signifying in its very title a willingness to confirm and capitalize upon suspicions of Hollywood's intellectual deterioration. Adam Sandler's debut vehicle *Billy Madison* (1995), which *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin judged according to a "dumb-dumber-dumbest scale,"[24] concerns its adult protagonist's return to the academic rigors of primary school, which he had circumvented thanks to his wealthy and powerful father. On the flipside of *Wayne's World*'s compensatory moments of ironic distance is a common complaint about Sandler's films especially, which is that they establish too *little* distance from their sophomoric material. In his review of *That's My Boy* (2012), "Sandler's sudden swerve into post-[Judd] Apatow, hard-R comic raunch," for example, Andrew O'Hehir reads Sandler's

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[23] Ebert, Roger. "Wayne's World Movie Review and Film Summary." *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 Feb 1992. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/waynes-world-1992.
[24] Maslin, Janet. "Film Review; Repeating Grades 1-12: Do the Daiquiris Help?" *The New York Times*, 1995. http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=990CE7DD1539F932A25751C0A963958260.

character as simply an older variation on the established persona of his earlier films, without sufficient countervailing subtext – akin to the "genuinely amusing, sometimes even intelligent, undercurrent" Ebert is so grateful for in *Wayne's World* – to appeal to fans of his more prestigious dramatic work in the intervening years, such as *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) and *Spanglish* (2006). Confessing his own longtime distaste for this persona, O'Hehir asks, "Why does he have to play a character who is universally agreed to be the coolest guy in the universe (except by squares and pussies)?"[25]

Yet while Sandler's films are notorious for their seemingly straightforward insistence that the audience roots for and even admires the Sandler persona, they nevertheless contain sometimes significant elements of ironic internal contradiction. *Billy Madison* is significant in this regard, as not only the first of Sandler's starring roles but also the first to establish a melodramatic redemptive arc as a feature of the Sandler formula. Near the film's end, during a climactic academic decathlon, Billy is tasked with describing the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the modern novel. In response, Billy ab-libs an impassioned fable comparing the Industrial Revolution to a puppy who had "lost his way" in the woods, ending with a declaration: "Knibb High football rules!" The speech is shot, edited, and scored according to well-established melodrama convention, including a series of reaction shots from his supporters in the crowd that culminates in wild cheering.[26] The formal components alone set the template for later Sandler

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[25] O'Hehir, Andrew. "Adam Sandler Hates You." *Salon*, vol. 2022, 2012. https://www.salon.com/2012/06/16/sympathy_for_adam_sandler/.
[26] Davis, Tamra. *Billy Madison*, Universal Pictures, 1995.

films such as *Big Daddy* (1999), which ends in a similarly generic courtroom custody battle.[27] The decathlon concludes with Billy's victory, due to the inability of his crooked businessman rival to answer a question on ethics, thus enlisting yet another sentimental cliché: a hero's triumph on the basis of moral, rather than merely meritocratic, criteria. But before the win can be furnished, the competition's moderator addresses Billy and declares his puppy story to be "one of the most insanely idiotic things I have ever heard," lacking any trace of "rational thought" and even causing everyone in attendance – including, presumably, the viewer of the film – to be "dumber for having listened to it." Structurally the moment doesn't depart from the comedic narrative convention, well-represented among Animal Comedy, of dramatizing the scandalized reaction to a protagonist's trickster-like transgression of established institutional norms. But whereas we might expect this reaction to invite further transgressive pleasure with the spectacle of a hysterical commitment to those norms, *Billy Madison* offers instead a response distinguished by its cold and, considering what precedes it, unassailable reason. While doing little to prevent stupidity's triumph, the moderator's appraisal manifests the self-conscious irony that attends this gross-out cycle's performances of "dumb" even without *Wayne's World*'s pseudo-Brechtian self-reflexivity. The humor of the sequence is generated by the incongruity of Billy's asinine speech and the gravitas with which it's rendered. But the moderator provides the humor's release, prompting the pent-up tension to erupt in laughter on the other side of the screen as the viewer's own judgements of Billy's routinely rewarded idiocy are finally, if temporarily, voiced and

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[27] Dugan, Dennis. *Big Daddy*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 1999.

validated. The viewer is thus situated between the two: perfunctorily rooting for Billy, but given the opportunity to align with the moderator, regarding "dumb" from the standpoint of "smart."

The point here is not to nominate '90s comedian comedy as an untapped vein of vernacular *Verfremdungseffekt*, nor to present the described gags as evidence of profound formal innovation. Complex configurations of reflexivity and performativity are common to even the least intellectually ambitious film and TV comedy, as the broad swaths of critically neglected studio comedies in Seidman's study suggest. Differentials of "smart" and "dumb" across and within gross-out comedy cycles are a matter of degree and incremental evolution, rather than clean historical breaks. Still, I wish to emphasize the prevalence of cues for metacritical engagement in gross-out comedy's second wave as a reflection of dominant trends in media representation at the time – what likely would have been referred to contemporaneously as postmodern symptoms – and as an extension of the logic of ambivalence that Paul identifies as the central aesthetic principle of gross-out cinema in the 1970s and '80s.

Vulgar Modernism and the Masque of Dumbness

It must be stressed that while comedian comedy may have dominated gross-out comedy's second wave in terms of box office returns – as well as figuring centrally in what few attempts to draft a poetics of a subgenre there have been – it is far from the sole tendency. Indeed, the gross-out sensibility's migration across screen media contexts is a constitutive dimension of the second wave I'm mapping out in this chapter. One scholar who addresses gross-out comedy as a cross-generic tendency is Paul Bonila, who terms the second wave of gross-out comedy "Hollywood

Lowbrow."[28] As the succinct yet expansive distinction suggests, Hollywood Lowbrow is characterized by dispersal into a range of comedic modes, subgenres, and narrative templates, some of them already well-established as commercially viable film comedy formats during the previous decade: romantic comedy and spoof in particular, but also 'adult' animation and 'reality' media, both of which gained their gross-out bona fides on television before making their debuts on the silver screen. Seeking to account for the prevalence of scatological vulgarity across the mass media landscape by the early 2000s, Bonila establishes Hollywood Lowbrow as a mode of film practice characterized not by a common deep structure or a shared repertoire of narrative conventions – or even narrative structure at all – but rather by four "imperatives" that the constituent texts fulfill for their audiences. First are the psychological and sociological imperatives: in the case of 'low' comedy forms, seeking relief from the social norms and taboos that discipline the body and its functions and imagining a world in which those norms and hierarchies are inverted, if only temporarily. This drive to reassert the body as a source of common humanity and "life force" in the context of modern civilization is most canonically articulated by Freud and Bakhtin, whose writing is foundational to the analytical premises throughout this dissertation.[29] Another is the cognitive imperative, which Bonila invokes to address the prevalence of parody as a textual attribute of gross-out comedy in the 1990s and early 2000s.[30] I will address the cognitive imperative later in this chapter when I discuss the impact of parody's hyperbolic use of gross-out gags, particularly self-satirizing gross-out gags.

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[28] Bonila, Paul C. "Is There More to Hollywood Lowbrow Than Meets the Eye?" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2005, pp. 17-24.
[29] Ibid. 19.
[30] Ibid. 21-22.

Finally, Bonila proposes an allegorical imperative to describe a self-aware performative dimension of auteur-driven gross-out comedy. Following Paul de Man, Bonila describes the allegorical imperative as distinguishing what gross-out comedy films "say" from what they "do," reading their spectacles of regressed male grotesquery as playing out a "masque of dumbness," whereby "playful male auteurs seize the moment to revel in sheer irreverence."[31] For my purposes, Bonila's formulation is especially useful for thinking through gross-out comedy's tendency to be double-coded as "smart" and "dumb." This is especially true for '90s comedian comedy: whereas the uncouth clowns of Animal Comedy – prototypically John Belushi's Bluto from *Animal House* – are peripheral to the relatively 'straight' men that anchor the narrative action, their spiritual successors tend to be "centrally located"[32] within the individualistic paradigm of comedian comedy, albeit sometimes with a sardonic comic foil as in the Farley/Spade vehicles *Tommy Boy* and *Black Sheep* (1996). Insofar as the allegorical imperative prompts viewers to read gross-out performances and sensibilities as always already in quotation marks, the masque of dumbness can also reasonably be interpreted as an ironic framing mechanism.

Though allegory and irony both promote a gap between signification and meaning, they should not be too cleanly conflated as heuristics. Whereas Bonila's notion of Hollywood Lowbrow's "metatheatrical" aspect coheres into an argument for the subgenre's democratizing functions – in that the masque of dumbness revels in defying the shared mores that govern our

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[31] Ibid. 22.
[32] Ibid.

bodies and behavior – an ironic distance often suggests a derisive and divisive, or at least critical, perspective on the performance in question. It is in this cultural climate that gross-out comedy would develop the most overt internal challenges to its own tradition of aesthetic populism. If gross-out comedy is guided by the festive spirit of Bakhtin's grotesque principle and the collective laughter that arises from the shared experience of bodily functions and drives, then an ironic disposition – particularly one that self-selects into a niche public, such as fans of *Tim and Eric*, as discussed in the third chapter – is theoretically antithetical to its functions. The antisocial conception of irony is perhaps most vividly conveyed by Jedediah Purdy in his 1999 tract *For Common Things*: if sincerity and trust signify faith in human flourishing as a common project, then the prevalence of ironic rhetoric in public discourse and popular culture manifests a corresponding lack of faith, a retreat from the possibility of consensus into the narcotic comforts of intellectual detachment and derision.[33]

In practice, irony isn't inherently incompatible with the textual functions of mass culture at all. The appropriation of irony, intertextuality, bricolage, and other strategies of the 20th century avant-garde by the popular mass media is magisterially described by J. Hoberman as "vulgar modernism." Hoberman defines vulgar modernism as "a popular, ironic, somewhat dehumanized mode reflexively concerned with the specific properties of its medium or the conditions of its making [and] conscious of its position in the history of (mass) culture." According to Hoberman, this mode "developed between 1940 and 1960 in such peripheral

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[33] Purdy, Jedediah. *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today.* Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

corners of the 'culture industry' as animated cartoons, comic books, early morning TV, and certain Dean Martin/Jerry Lewis comedies."[34] What distinguishes pioneering works of vulgar modernism such as the studio cartoons of Tex Avery, the studio comedies of Frank Tashlin, the TV productions of Ernie Kovacs, and *Mad Magazine* is a playful, deceptively prosaic formalism, a persistent and dynamic engagement with the iconography, lore, conventions, and clichés of the broader pop cultural landscape and an appetite for aesthetic experimentation, producing a critical vernacular that appealed to the intelligentsia as much as popular audiences without the high-minded militancy or preference for austerity and ambiguity that typically characterized the 'legitimate' modernist avant-garde. Writing in 1982, Hoberman mourns the cooptation of vulgar modernism's "oppositional" techniques by the culture industry as a means of "flattering…the TV community into smug pseudo-dissociation from the banalities it otherwise accepts."[35] Nevertheless, in such popular texts as Norman Lear's *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* (1976-77), the films of Brian De Palma, and the B-52s' pastiche post-punk, Hoberman sees the potential for "an authentic vulgar *post*-modernism" that dispenses of the angst of the modernists and embraces the opportunity to "eat one's cake and have it, too."[36] Theorists of postmodernism have variously echoed Hoberman's critique, asserting that the capitalist superstructure's capacity to absorb modernist aesthetics and repackage them as consumer spectacle has effectively neutralized their promise of radical sociopolitical transformation; in the tradition of media studies specifically,

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[34] Hoberman, J. "Vulgar Modernism." *Vulgar Modernism*, Temple University Press, 1991, pp. 32-40. 33.
[35] Ibid., 39.
[36] Ibid., 40.

John Caldwell's analysis of the deradicalized appropriation of modernist principles by *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* (1986-1990) is emblematic.[37]

Without pursuing the elusive fine distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, and instead taking as a given instead that the latter is often functionally a continuation of the former, I would argue that the second wave of gross-out comedy often exhibits the characteristics of vulgar modernism. The deconstructive maneuvering of *Wayne's World*, for example, can be read as an adaptation of the self-reflexive play of Chuck Jones' *Duck Amuck* (1953) for the MTV generation. Indeed, comedy is especially representative of mass culture's incorporation of its own critique because whereas the ironic demystification of a given trope might threaten our ability to take it seriously in another genre, we expect that even the 'serious' material is available for subversion in a comedy, particularly in slapstick or farce. Consider a typical scene from *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo* (1999), the debut star vehicle for Sandler's *SNL* colleague Rob Schneider, in which Schneider brokers a third act romantic reconciliation while hopped up on Novocain. Similar to *Billy Madison*'s climactic standoff, the words and the music convey dramatic sincerity, but Schneider's slack-jawed, slurred delivery through a steady stream of drool comically undermine them.[38] Is the scene 'meant' sincerely or ironically? Pragmatically, it's both: notwithstanding the interpretative cul-de-sac of discerning creative intent, we can cynically assume that Happy Madison – the Sandler-run production company that made the film – would happily sell the film's pleasures to credulous saps and callow ironists alike. Irony, then,

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[37] Caldwell, John T. *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television.* Rutgers University Press, 1995. 293-300.
[38] Mitchell, Mike. *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo*, Buena Vista Pictures, 1999.

isn't inherently a rhetorical redemption of the "dumb" by the "smart." It can also, in the eyes of cultural custodians anyway, manifest the profit-driven condescension of the culture industry responsible for peddling "dumb" in the first place.

Nevertheless, if the ironic sensibility of gross-out comedy's second wave corresponds as much with the commodification of evolving popular trends as with an oppositional stance towards the banalities of mass culture, the spirit of vulgar modernism lives on in the genre cycle's incorporation of disgust and spectacular excess, which encourage a spectatorial ambivalence between narrative immersion and critical distance. Indeed, dismissing out-of-hand the popular prevalence of irony, parody, intertextuality, reflexivity, and hybridity during this era as cynical commercialism ignores the way these modernist strategies reflect authentic experiences of alienation and disillusionment. Jeffrey Sconce raises this point in his discussion of "smart" cinema, a cycle of films spanning the mid-1990s to the early 2000s that prompted consternation from cultural critics over the perceived contamination of popular culture with empty nihilism. "Smart" cinema encompasses American films located "at the symbolic and material intersection" of Hollywood, independent, and art cinema and includes titles as various as Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), Wes Anderson's *Rushmore* (1998), and Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001). These films are thematically concerned with "the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture," which they typically regard with "ironic disdain."[39] Sconce identifies

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[39] Sconce, Jeffrey. "Irony, Nihilism, and the New American 'Smart' Film." *Screen*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2002, pp. 349-369. 351-352.

these concerns and the films' bleak, disaffected, ironic sensibility with Generation X – the same demographic cohort linked to the gross-out comedian comedy cycle. Little else obviously links these cycles; indeed, as the nomenclature suggests, studio gross-out comedies represent precisely the "dumb" films against which "smart" films define themselves and, by extension, their audiences. The trope of ironic disgust, however, represents a point of unexpected overlap. Just as gross-out gags aim to provoke strong, ambivalent responses, so too do the tonal ambiguity and internal heterogeneity of the "smart" films, which present grim events and shocking imagery with either ironically 'inappropriate' emotional cues, or none at all, adopting a gaze of blank detachment. Gross-out gags even appear in some "smart" films. Hal Hartley's *Henry Fool* (1998) features an early scene of Simon, the protagonist, projectile vomiting after swigging spoiled milk, matched by a later scene of the eponymous Henry suffering violent diarrhea after one espresso too many. Both scenes contrast sharply with the rest of the film, a slow, mannered, rigorously understated chamber 'dramedy,' not least of all because they are stylized in the hyperbolic fashion of similar gags from the gross-out canon. The latter scene develops further irony by building on the contrived premise that Henry is forced to use the bathroom where Simon's sister Fay is taking a shower. Fay, whom Henry has impregnated, flees once his noisy bowel movement is underway; once it's finished, though, she returns, carrying a ring she interprets as indicating his desire to propose to her. She drops to her knees, caresses him

tenderly, and accepts his presumed proposal, as a treacly melody plays on the soundtrack and Henry remains on the toilet, still indisposed and wordlessly bewildered.[40]

II. No Future: Desire, Disgust, and Negation in the Gross-out Rom-Com

A crucial turning point for the evolution of gross-out comedy, especially vis-à-vis women performers and audiences, is represented by *There's Something About Mary* (1998).[41] In the first chapter, the film provides an important case study for the deployment of ironic disgust in mass-market comedy. The film is also noteworthy for demonstrating the commercial viability of merging two seemingly incompatible comedic veins: gross-out and romance. Of course, gross-out comedy and romantic comedy have never been thematically mutually exclusive. Both genres have historically shared a keen interest in navigating sexuality and gender difference. Broad, even transgressive physical comedy has often appeared in romantic comedies, and love interests have often figured into the narratives of gross-out comedies, especially during the gross-out comedian comedies analyzed in the first chapter, wherein winning a woman's approval by the third act represents the hero's redemption and overdue transition into adulthood. Yet *There's Something About Mary* effects an overt hybridization that had, by its release in 1998, been unusual, if not entirely unprecedented. The narrative draws directly from romantic comedy with

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[40] Hartley, Hal. *Henry Fool*, Sony Pictures Classics, 1998.
[41] Farrelly, Peter. *There's Something About Mary*, 20th Century Fox Studios, 1998.

its premise of one man competing with several other suitors in pursuit of his high school crush. The formal architecture of the film, meanwhile, is structured around a series of gross-out set-pieces that, while plausibly motivated by the plot, sustain their own momentum autonomously as spectacles in the long tradition of slapstick comedy, as discussed in the introduction vis-à-vis Donald Crafton's analysis of silent comedy's narrative-gag dialectic and in the first chapter vis-à-vis gross-out comedy's formal shifts during the rise of the Hollywood Lowbrow. This merger of gross-out and rom-com brought the subgenres' markedly gendered audiences together, at least for film producers who had previously imagined these ticket buyers as mutually exclusive, and a series of crossbred progeny predictably followed in *There's Something About Mary*'s wake: *Head Over Heels* and *Say It Isn't So* in 2001 and *The Sweetest Thing* in 2002 are only the most immediate examples. Films seeking to revive the Animal Comedy cycle at the turn of the 21st century – particularly *American Pie* and *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* – likewise feature bolstered roles for their women characters, at least as love interests motivating arcs of romantic coupling in their plots. As meager as these textual advances may have been, and certainly seem now, they nevertheless reflected an acknowledgement that the audience for the Hollywood Lowbrow was far from exclusively male.

That is not to say that gross-out semantics are necessarily subordinated to rom-com syntax, either. On the contrary, since the blockbuster success of *There's Something About Mary* – unforeseen not least of all because of the film's R rating, theoretically a box office impediment, by contrast to the Farrelly brothers' previous films *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *Kingpin* (1996) as well as the vast majority of '90s comedian comedy – entailed the word-of-mouth notoriety of the film's more outrageous gags, it could reasonably be argued that *There's Something About Mary* inspired the carnival barker ethos of gross-out comedy marketing of the

years that followed, promising at least one showstopping gross-out with each successive hard-R raunchfest. *Van Wilder*'s cultural footprint, such as it is, almost certainly has to do with its scene of tyrannical frat brothers enthusiastically consuming chocolate eclairs filled with bulldog cum. Even the unsuccessful, mostly forgotten *Miss March* from 2009, which was, as was customary for gross-out comedies in the DVD era, released on home video in its unrated, supposedly "fully exposed edition," specifically promises gross-out gags too extreme for the MPAA on the jewel case.[42]

The key comic motif across the gross-out/rom-com hybrids, especially regarding its distribution across gender roles, is embarrassment. In *There's Something About Mary*, most of the gags and much of the interstitial verbal and visual humor proceed from the basic premise of the protagonist, Ted, finding himself in a personally compromising situation, witnessing the situation spiral out of control, and suffering the consequences. Leger Grindon observes that this dynamic presents a countervailing force of ambivalence to the machinery of romantic comedy.[43] If the narrative momentum of romantic comedy is sustained through the construction of obstacles between the central couple and their inevitable union, then, following the release of socially enforced inhibitions over many decades' worth of hegemonic shifts, the barriers between true love and its fruition in *There's Something About Mary* are both psychological and physical, constituting Ted's internalized repression that is then challenged, and reaffirmed, through physical humiliation. Hence William Paul's assertion that the romantic comedy cycle of which

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[42] *Miss March*, 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2009.
[43] Grindon, Leger. *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011.

There's Something About Mary is representative renders romance itself to be "impossible," as the feckless hero's determined pursuit of love yields instead a succession of abject tribulations.[44] The fact that these tribulations begin with genital trauma – Ted catching his penis in his zipper – further affirms the symbolic opposition between the film's gross-out spectacle and the prospect of true romance.

Central to the process of dramatizing ambivalence towards the prospect of romance, according to Grindon, is satirizing the very conventions on which the romantic comedy genre depends, often in combination with grotesque exaggeration. Dogs, for example, who take pride of place within romantic comedy's sentimental iconography, figure into *There's Something About Mary* as one of many blockades between Ted and Mary. After being sedated, shocked back to life with a frayed lamp cord, accidentally set ablaze, and then finally doused in water by Healy, one of several sinister competitors for Mary's affection, her next-door neighbor's dog confronts Ted with renewed suspicion, leading to a brawl that ends with the poor animal in a full-body cast. Since the neighbor is convinced, like many dog owners, that her pet has a sixth sense for men of bad character, this event does not bode well for Ted's chances with Mary. Animals thus function here more in the style of Animal Comedy, where they populate the mise-en-scène as signifiers of unrestrained, primal behavior. Furthermore, the film juxtaposes the tender and the grotesque according to the logic of parody. A predictable rom-com payoff – in which the dog, as an avatar of the extrarational, elemental 'truth' where 'true love' resides,

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[44] Paul, William. "The Impossibility of Romance: Hollywood Comedy, 1978-1999." *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, edited by Steve Neale, British Film Institute, 2002, pp. 117-129.

affirms the hero's essential goodness – is set up, only to be spectacularly negated and substituted with physical humiliation. Nowhere is this more apparent than during the aforementioned zipper sequence, which begins with the kitsch image of lovebirds canoodling to the saccharine pop stylings of the Carpenters and ends with symbolic castration. The resulting laughter of the audience simultaneously reflects fictional and metacritical investments: we laugh at Ted's ordeal, but we also laugh at the send-up of genre clichés, which are exposed as deeply absurd.

Significantly, though the film draws together normatively gendered genre appeals, its motif of embarrassment applies exclusively to male characters, particularly Ted, the central figure of diegetic identification. Mary, on the other hand, is primarily a satirical construction, an on-the-nose cinematic embodiment of heterosexual male fantasy. As Grindon describes her, Ted's elusive object of desire is

> ravishingly beautiful, but genial and easy going. She is a "jock" who loves to play ball, follows sports culture… and is ready to pal around with the guys. She nurtures her mentally challenged brother and homeless old men, and appears to have limitless time to care for others. She earns a big salary as an orthopedic surgeon, but her career makes minimal demands on her time or attention. She has fun with her sassy women friends; loves the movies, art, and exotic travel. Though she is highly educated, skilled at sports, and knows how to use a vibrator, she is so innocent that she can't spot the duplicity of her many suitors. To top the cake, she is given the name of the most idealized woman in Western culture, the mother of Jesus.

In short, Mary's characterization "is a joke in itself."[45] As such, she is spared the screenplay's gross-out humiliations, which would knock her off her pedestal and into muck of common animality. The one gag that appears to be the exception proving the rule is the infamous "hair-gel" sequence. Following the advice of his squirrelly long-time friend Dom – himself eventually revealed to be pining for Mary's affections – Ted masturbates before a dinner date with her, only to lose track of his ejaculate after the fact. When Mary arrives at his door, she discovers the fugitive payload hanging from Ted's ear, mistakes it for hair gel, and before Ted can conjure a dignified objection, wipes it briskly through her hair. The following scene at dinner shows her hair upright in an extravagant cowlick, a fact to which she is apparently blissfully oblivious. At face value, the comic payoff appears to be at Mary's expense, in accordance with the sexist dynamics of smut. Freud defines smut as a discourse of homosocial bonding: a man expresses his sexual desire for a woman in the presence of both her and another man, eliciting laughter from the other man at the "exposed" and embarrassed woman's expense.[46] The corresponding interpretation of "hair-gel" gag would be that by unwittingly bearing the abject emblem of Ted's lust, Mary becomes the object of ridicule for the presumed male viewer, the sympathetic witness to Ted's smut. Yet the film takes pains to defuse Mary's potential embarrassment. Surrounding restaurant patrons and waitstaff seem to be about as oblivious to Mary's eccentric coiffure as she is, and once she and Ted leave the restaurant, her hair returns to normal and the gag is abruptly abandoned. Only Ted seems to notice at all, and of course, he alone also knows where the "hair-

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[45] Grindon, Leger. *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011. 174.
[46] Oring, Elliott. *Engaging Humor.* University of Illinois Press, 2003. 42.

gel" originated. The gag, therefore, is actually about Ted's shame, his confrontations with internalized repression, as he comes literally face-to-face with the embodiment of the perfect woman, sullied by the material manifestation of his own prurience. Mary, meanwhile, remains intact as an idealized mirage, and her union with Ted remains an enticing impossibility.

As Grindon observes, *There's Something About Mary* never really resolves its ambivalence towards romance. It features a 'happy' ending, but as James MacDowell argues, the concept of the happy ending as an ironclad rule of Hollywood cinema so thoroughly precedes any given narrative film that the structuring significance of any actual happy ending is easy to overstate. Ted and Mary share a passionate kiss, realizing the final coupling that MacDowell identifies as the quintessential feature of the Hollywood happy ending, but only after a series of false rejections, including the surprise arrival of Mary's own supposed ideal mate, Brett Favre. Neither the screenplay nor the performers demonstrate any effort to motivate the coupling convincingly. Opportunities to do so are deliberately wasted: during Ted and Mary's earlier date, their conversation turns to an inane discussion of the merits of corndogs, rather than the soul-baring heart-to-heart we might expect once the romantic leads finally get to spend time alone together. Their eventual union, then, is presented as yet another romantic comedy cliché for the film to skewer. The difference is that *There's Something About Mary* declines to apply the same grotesque subversion to this inevitable coupling that genre conventions are subjected to throughout the rest of the film. The absurdity of Ted's neurotic nebbish realizing true love with Mary, a sentient male fantasy, is left to speak for itself. It is, however, tonally undercut by a macabre blackout gag that ends the film, in which yet another spurned suitor reveals himself, brandishes a shotgun, and, in an attempt to kill Ted, instead shoots Jonathan Richman, the film's ersatz Greek chorus. This final gag is consistent with the film's – and the Farrelly brothers' –

penchant for violent, improbable slapstick, especially as a counterpoint to sentimentality. It also frays the film's diegetic credibility, since Richman, while appearing within the film's diegetic space, sings directly to the camera and is otherwise apparently invisible to the other characters. The presence of a Greek chorus (of sorts) throughout the film itself ironizes the diegesis, calling attention to the narrative's ritualistic genre structure through such a whimsically archaic device. Despite any efforts made throughout *There's Something About Mary* to naturalize its fictional cast – to anchor them in a plausible reality – Richman's musical narration emphasizes the iconicity of Ted and especially Mary as proxies of an 'ancient' stock plot's formulaic inevitabilities. The literal violence that closes the film thus echoes the semiotic violence towards the sentimental demands of romantic comedy represented by the film's showcase gags, which similarly trouble the boundary between the real and the unreal via ironic disgust. The unreality is only further emphasized during the end credits, which feature cast members singing the Foundations' "Build Me Up, Buttercup" directly to the camera. *There's Something About Mary* reflects the impossibility of romance not only as an existential crisis reflected in the diegesis, but moreover as a representational problem, by which the fulfillment of generic narrative demands is haunted by the ironic subtext of that narrative's lack of credibility as a representation of reality.

Contra conventional wisdom, then, the film's perfunctory happy ending does little to streamline its meaning-making, instead only further promoting the ambivalence that is foundational to gross-out comedy. If anything, an 'unhappy' ending might have provided more effective closure in this case, as a final rejection from Mary would corroborate the established pattern of shattering romantic idealism with pessimistic realism, manifest in the film's bait-and-switch comedic approach. Certainly this would be characteristic of the "nervous" romantic comedy cycle, which, in Grindon's taxonomy, preceded the "grotesque" cycle of which *Mary* is

representative, and shares its realist rejection of what's alleged to be the classical studio-era's phony starry-eyed optimism. Woody Allen's *Annie Hall,* the quintessential nervous rom-com, not only rejects the final couple convention but frontloads the couple's disunion, narrating in flashback as Alvie (Woody Allen) and Annie (Diane Keaton) try to make sense of their relationship's failure. In many ways, *Annie Hall* and *There's Something About Mary* represent opposite solutions to the same problem of the romantic comedy's obsolescence as a representation of a commonly understood reality. Allen's film, characteristic of New Hollywood, refracts the genre through a concatenation of modernist strategies, combining verisimilar mise-en-scène with nonchronological, self-reflexive narration and forays into surrealism. These modernist strategies reinforce rather than challenge the narrative's diegetic integrity by demarcating an objective reality beyond Alvie and Annie's subjective retellings. *Annie Hall* promotes a modernist ethos of creative destruction, subverting 'classical' genre film aesthetics in pursuit of a putatively more credible emotional realism.[47] By contrast, *There's Something About Mary* represents a return to screen naturalism, which is not to say it is naturalistic *per se* – on the contrary, it calls upon the broad, extroverted theatrics of farce – but that it maintains a manifest internal verisimilitude. Ironically, by limiting its diegetic ruptures to subtext, the film further accommodates a reading of its diegesis as an extended unreality, lacking the explicit demarcations between the real and unreal of *Annie Hall* and reflecting something closer to the metaphysical flexibility of cartoons. *Mary*'s flimsily motivated happy ending is thus symptomatic of the film's overdetermined discourse, both 'straight' romantic comedy and satire

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[47] Allen, Woody. *Annie Hall*, United Artists, 1977.

of the same, incorporating a vernacular metatextuality discussed in Chapter 3 with regard to *Freddy Got Fingered* in particular.

Yet this interpretation is near-totally absent from contemporaneous critical discourse on *Mary.* As Kristin J. Anderson and Christina Accomando observe in their critical feminist analysis of the film and its reception, critics appeared to take *There's Something About Mary* at face value at the time as a hybrid of gross-out and rom-com; several even credited the film with auguring the mix of broad vulgarity and good-natured humanism that would, for many of the Farrelly brothers' critical defenders, distinguish their style. Accordingly, Anderson and Accomando's critique reads the film as having a normative semiotic function: because Ted hires Healy, a private investigator, to track Mary down, and subsequently must compete with Healy's own deceptive pursuit of her within the context of a generic romantic comedy framework, Anderson and Accomando argue that the film normalizes stalking. They argue further that the very title promotes a "victim-blaming" logic by which Mary herself is implicitly responsible for the hysterical entitled behavior she inspires in Ted and his competitors for her affection, and as they show, several contemporary reviews casually echo this logic.[48]

Anderson and Accomando's critique is valuable for demonstrating the polyvalence of the gross-out comedy cycle of which *There's Something About Mary* is representative. On the one hand, at least from Grindon's and my own retrospective position, the primary source of the film's comedy is its persistent self-contradiction, as the spiritual ideal of romantic satisfaction is

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[48] Anderson, Kristen J.; Accomando, Christina. "Madcap Misogyny and Romanticized Victim-Blaming: Discourses of Stalking in *There's Something About Mary*." *Women and Language*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999, pp. 24-29.

repeatedly upended by the anarchic designs of the lower bodily stratum. This is not quite the 'accidental' rupture famously described by Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni as constitutive of the "category E" film, i.e., the mass-market film that, though apparently determined by prevailing ideological and aesthetic norms, plays out onscreen at semiotic cross-purposes with those norms. *Mary*'s self-contradiction occurs at the level of text as well as subtext; it is winkingly aware of its own unreality. On the other hand, if this textual self-contradiction is unapparent or insignificant to Anderson, Accomando, and the critics they cite, then clearly, at least in 1998 and the immediately subsequent years – Anderson and Accomando's critique was published in 1999 – the film sufficiently fulfilled the demands of genre naturalism to work as simply a variation on the romantic comedy, rather than a full-scale deconstruction thereof. *Mary* is thus emblematic of the post-Animal Comedy gross-out films' tendency to have it both ways, seamlessly interweaving the disruptive excess of ironic disgust with the self-contained illusionism of continuity narrative.

While the normative semiotic functions of *There's Something About Mary* are important to consider, Anderson and Accomando's critique is nevertheless limited by its dependence on the film's plot as its source of meaning. The tone and specific comic logic are relegated to supporting roles rather than sources of meaning for the film in and of themselves. When Healy, along with Dom and Mary's friend Norm, both revealed to also be in love with her, accuse Ted of being a stalker, Anderson and Accomando claim the film is using self-conscious humor to "put the viewer at ease," rendering the theme of stalking explicit to distinguish Ted's actions as acceptable by contrast. According to this interpretation, the accusation is meant to be at least overwrought, if not categorically false, when compared to the behavior of his accusers, simply one of many brutal cosmic ironies visited upon the hero for our amusement. Just as Healy's

machinations cause Mary's neighbor's dog to misidentify him as virtuous and Ted as sinister, so, too, are the fraudulent, borderline criminal ploys of Healy, Norm, and Dom projected onto honest, hapless Ted. Anderson and Accomando observe that the screenplay makes considerable efforts to demonstrate Ted's anxiety about being perceived as a creep – especially when Mary regales him of her own history with a stalker (who turns out to be Dom) – whereas the other men exhibit no such introspection. Similarly, when Healy reveals that Ted hired him, Ted pleads his case in stock sentimental terms: "I did it because I never stopped thinking about you. And if I didn't find you, I knew that my life would never ever be good again."

Anderson and Accomando make a significant oversight, however, in taking as a given that *There's Something About Mary* is exemplary of the romantic comedy genre's deep structure of odious gender politics. That's not to say it's necessarily a repudiation of the same. But their reading depends upon the assumption that the film's incorporation of gross-out comedy, and the persistent ironic logic it generates in contact with the rom-com norms that structure the narrative, performs a palliative and thus ultimately affirmative role. In other words, the specific rhetorical style of the comedy in the film – and, by extension, any romantic comedy – is entirely incidental, serving simply to provide market-tested pleasure to the audience while the underlying ideological subtext is transmitted unabated. Any explicit acknowledgment and articulation of the problematic nature of that subtext within the text of *There's Something About Mary,* such as Healy, Dom, and Norm accusing Ted of stalking Mary, is thus interpreted as a signal to the audience of self-aware sophistication, a mark of hip distinction from the creaky machinery of typical rom-com narratives deployed to obscure the film's corroboration, rather than interrogation, of the genre's normative functions. Such an interpretation reflects a hermeneutics of suspicion that is perhaps understandable given the urgency of routing patriarchal violence

from contemporary public culture. Nevertheless, even leaving aside the dubious notion of credulous audiences internalizing mass media messages uncritically, Anderson and Accomando's reading is not quite sustainable when confronted with the film's recurrent insistence on its own parodic unreality, which hardly passes muster as a credible context for normalizing anything at all. If contemporaneous reviews appear to have taken the film at face value as a straightforward rom-com with a likeable hero we identify with, that may speak to the critics' inability to resolve the film's ambivalence with the presumed lack of interest of popular comedy audiences in anything that sounds too semiotically complex. They could also simply have been a bit credulous themselves; this is the same critical establishment that just a year prior to *There's Something About Mary* famously missed the joke of Paul Verhoeven's much more obviously satirical *Starship Troopers* (1997). In any event, from the retrospective vantage point of nearly a quarter-century hence, when so much popular narrative media is burdened with a neurotic, hyperdiscursive vernacular didacticism, *There's Something About Mary*'s relative semiotic ambiguity and ambivalence comes into sharper relief than ever. Indeed, even the title reads now as unmistakably ironic. There is, in fact, nothing at all about Mary, because Mary herself is nothing at all but a generic signifier for narcissistic heterosexual male desire.

Chapter 2

The Fatsuit Grotesque: Performance, Spectacle, and the Excessive Body

In perhaps the most notorious sequence of Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* (1983)[49] concerns the colossal Mr. Creosote and the explosive consequences of overconsumption. Once the projectile vomit commences it becomes hard to see anything else in "The Autumn Years," as this segment of the film is titled. But long before that scene-stealing *frisson,* and its visceral escalation, another spectacle demands our attention: Mr. Creosote himself. Preceded first by ominous cellos, then by a sagging, ovate midsection, Creosote is a pear-shaped, tuxedoed colossus. His approach prompts fish in a nearby aquarium to flee. Nothing slows his walk through the well-populated dining room, not least of all the ingratiating maître d'. On the contrary, the space seems to yield to him. By way of introduction, a wide-angle close-up tracks up from his naval to his sweat-slick, double-chinned face, confronting us with his excessive body just as he later confronts his fellow dinners with his unruly digestive tract. When he takes his seat, his waistline asserts itself from behind and underneath his table, concealing his legs to the point of nonexistence.[50] He is a spectacle of obesity as confrontational and aberrant, overwhelming the world it occupies, dominating the frame.

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[49] Jones, Terry. *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, Universal Pictures, 1983.
[50] Indeed, his legs are never actually visible at any point in this scene. Deleted footage, however, shows Creosote entering the restaurant from the street, carrying his belly on a gurney.

Like the emetic spectacle that erupts from him, Creosote is a special effect: Terry Jones plays him in a body-length costume that has come to be known simply as a fatsuit. Fatsuits had existed for a while before *The Meaning of Life* went into production, in much more primitive form, as a stage prop and stock costume. The spectacular aspect of Mr. Creosote, however, foreshadows the elaborate fatsuits that would prevail in film and television a decade later. More than just foam padding worn under clothing, these fatsuits are meant to simulate obesity, rather than simply signify it. Attention is given to visible extremities, for example, that older suits would have left to the suspension of disbelief. Post-Creosote fatsuits require considerable resources and artisanal man-hours (and in some cases, body doubles).

Both are quite explicitly in evidence in "The Autumn Years." Produced by Universal Studios for an estimated $9 million, *The Meaning of Life* was Monty Python's highest budget project yet. Mr. Creosote's scene was filmed on location at the Seymour Leisure Centre in London, and in addition to the elegant mise-en-scène and crane cinematography, the extreme extent to which the set is doused in fake vomit and gore by the scene's close reads as a deliberate display of not only shock tactics, but flagrant overspending. No less demonstrative is the close-up that introduces Creosote. He first appears in long shot, the seams of his costume obscured by camera distance. A wide-angle close-up tracking up from his naval, however, brings Jones' artificial double chin into full view. In place of the fakery we might expect from a sketch-based film, which lacks the obligation to diegetic integrity expected of longer form narratives, are thoroughly convincing prosthetic jowls, affixed to Jones' scowling, sweat-slick face. Once again,

the production values are exhibited: Jones reportedly spent three hours in makeup to look so persuasively fat.[51]

Jones' fatsuit body, however, suggests little of the commitment to credibility conveyed by his face. On the contrary, the fatsuit is unrealistically round, referring less to the organic shape that extreme obesity actually takes than to a common caricature of it. The hyperbolic dimensions are matched by Creosote's apparently bottomless capacity for food and reach their logical climax by the scene's surreal conclusion: following the fateful "wafer thin" mint, Creosote becomes quite literally spherical. The subsequent burst makes his body a spectacle in a more traditional sense - bombastic, self-contained sensory stimulation - and is even accompanied by a blinding flash cut and a stock dynamite sound effect, like a detonation in a war movie. The spectacle of an excessive body, and the craftsmanship behind it, lapses from aesthetic verisimilitude to hyperbolic fantasy. The fatsuit body at once imagines the fat body as recognizably human and fleshly, and as somehow beyond human, even beyond flesh, as indeed it is in the profilmic reality of *The Meaning of Life*. Post-explosion, what remains of Creosote - a beating heart, a sputtering sphincter, a watch chain hanging from an outlying rib - is, of course, just more special effects.

Fatsuits and their robust historical and semiotic dimensions are the subject of the chapter that follows. Few fatsuit performances are as joyously graphic and nasty as "The Autumn

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[51] Michael, Chris. "How We Made Monty Python's *the Meaning of Life*." *The Guardian*, 30 Sept 2013. http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/sep/30/monty-python-meaning-of-life.

Years," and yet I consider Mr. Creosote emblematic of them for a number of reasons. As a combination of intensive costuming and makeup art, Creosote represents a highly sophisticated form of the fatsuit that would eventually become *de rigueur* for its use in film and television production. Perhaps the most influential case is Eddie Murphy's performance in *The Nutty Professor* (1996).[52] The fatsuits worn by Murphy to play Professor Sherman Klump and his equally obese father, mother, brother, and grandmother quickly became the industry standard, and their craftsmanship under the supervision of makeup impresario Rick Baker earned easily as much attention from the press as Murphy's comedic showmanship. Much of that attention focused on the fatsuits' illusory effect: according to one report, Baker allowed Murphy to "disappear" into his fat characters, who appeared to the naked eye as perfectly real. Much like Murphy's participation, that illusory spectacle came at a price: Baker's sophisticated fatsuits could quickly run a tab of several hundred thousand dollars apiece. Part of what makes fatsuit comedies historically significant, then, is that costly spectacles are essential to their comedic functions. High-budget comedies have hardly been a rare thing per se, not least of all the intricately and expensively staged comedies of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, yet it has still long been considered commonsense that comedy itself functions independently from production values. The New York *Times* critic Vincent Canby rehearses this axiom in his review of *The Meaning of Life* when he claims that the special effects "overwhelm" the otherwise sharp satire.[53]

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[52] Shadyac, Tom. *The Nutty Professor*, Universal Pictures, 1996.
[53] Canby, Vincent. "Monty Python, 'the Meaning of Life'." *The New York Times*, March 31 1983.

Whether or not Canby found "The Autumn Years" sufficiently funny, the bodily spectacle is quite inextricably part of the joke.

Another part of the joke is recognition: the image of a known performer, fattened up, is the structuring sight gag of fatsuit comedy. Terry Jones might not be as iconic a Python as John Cleese or Eric Idle, but the introductory close-up of Creosote nevertheless presumes our familiarity, if only after seeing him in numerous other guises throughout *The Meaning of Life.* Similarly, Murphy's made-up face features prominently in the advertising for *The Nutty Professor,* its 2000 sequel *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps,*[54] and the narratively unrelated 2006 fatsuit comedy *Norbit.* Fatsuits are conduits of star power. In earlier forms, it was often deployed for impersonating celebrities whose obesity was part of their image. Jack Benny wears foam-stuffed coveralls as Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden in a spoof of *The Honeymooners* (1955-56) during the eighth season of *The Jack Benny Program* (1950-65), and veteran variety show writer Frank Peppiatt recalls wearing one to play Oliver Hardy on *Perry Como's Kraft Music Hall* (1958-71).[55] The contemporary fatsuit meanwhile is almost always worn by a major star, to play an original character. The fatsuit's prohibitive cost renders it primarily the province of major studios, whose investment carries the commonly understood condition that its wearer represents a sufficient box office draw. After all, if the aim were simply to signify obesity, an actual fat actor would cost far less than Eddie Murphy, to say nothing of the special effects labor to bring him up to size. Fatsuit performances therefore have featured most prominently in

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[54] Segal, Peter. *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*, Universal Pictures, 2000.
[55] Peppiat, Frank. *When Variety Was King: Memoir of a Tv Pioneer: Featuring Jackie Gleason, Sonny and Cher, Hee Haw, and More.* ECW Press, 2013.

comedian comedy, a narrative film comedy subgenre structured by the lead performance of an established comedian, defined and discussed at length in the previous chapter. The Murphy film comedies fall easily into this category, as do *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999)[56] and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002),[57] featuring the average-sized Mike Myers as Fat Bastard, and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and the *Big Momma's House* films (2000, 2006, 2011), in which Robin Williams and Martin Lawrence, respectively, wear fatsuit disguises as part of the narrative. Even when the context is not strictly comedian comedy, however, the visible presence of an established entertainer is fundamental to the fatsuit's semiotic impact. Hence the conspicuous effort in even the most meticulous fat makeup to avoid obscuring the performer's features. Creosote's close-up is typical in that it confirms Jones' presence while confronting us with his prosthetic fatness.

Moreover, the fatsuit body pushes fatness to the fore thematically as well aesthetically. If an actor's real life overweightness is sometimes incidental to the role he plays, the simulated version never is. When Benny parodies Jackie Gleason, for example, his very first line - imploring Ralph's wife Alice (Audrew Meadows) to notice his half-pound weight loss - references his girth, echoing Benny's frequent jokes at the expense of his rotund announcer Don Wilson. Like the 1963 original starring Jerry Lewis, *The Nutty Professor* concerns a chemically-achieved Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde transformation from a woefully awkward scientist to the suave, obnoxious womanizer Buddy Love, but the Murphy version explicitly credits the professor’s

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[56] Roach, Jay. *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, New Line Cinema, 1999.
[57] ---. *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, New Line Cinema, 2002.

lack of confidence to his obesity. *Shallow Hal* (2001) stars Gwyneth Paltrow in a fatsuit as Rosemary, whose girth similarly causes subterranean self-esteem.[58] But although Sherman and Rosemary's plight is framed in sentimental, sympathetic terms, fat jokes abound in both films, as they do in *Norbit,* the Austin Powers films, and *Date Movie* (2006). Their content invariably concerns the assorted difficulties of fitting in as a fat person, leaving shattered furniture, emptied pools, oversize underwear, and annoyed lecture-hall patrons in their wake. In reality, of course, the physical world is more regularly accommodating, but the hyperbolism of fatsuit representation persists in fatsuit humor, echoing the dominant logic of verbal fat jokes: "Your mama's so fat, when she sits around the house, she sits *around* the house!" Even in less overtly farcical surroundings, the size of fatsuit characters defines their relationship to their fictional worlds, occupying the dialogue, guiding the narrative, and availing them of certain stereotypic traits: neediness, festiveness, impulsiveness. In terms of character depth, some are ‘flatter’ where others are ‘rounder,’ but fatsuit characters are almost always fat first and foremost.

Returning to Mr. Creosote, we find his extreme obesity is indeed his defining characteristic. The demands he places on the waitstaff is subordinate to the imposition made on space by his spectacular mass. But his fake fat is no empty signifier. Especially when coupled with Creosote's decadent dinner, obesity denotes overindulgence, the material manifestation of unused calories *en masse*. Creosote is less a character *per se* than a sign of nonutilitarian consumption. Critic A.S. Hamrah observes that with "The Autumn Years," the fatsuit was "born

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[58] Farrelly, Peter; Farrelly, Bobby. *Shallow Hal*, 20th Century Fox, 2001.

as a sign of the redundancy of post-scarcity excess."[59] "Post-scarcity excess" refers to what has been theorized as a shift from an economy of production to an economy of consumption. Under these specifically modern circumstances, a sustained abundance of commodities has overtaken the alternation of scarcity and abundance that once characterized resource availability, unburdening consumption of necessity, making it an end as well as a means. Hence Creosote's vigorous binge-purge cycle: his gluttony-qua-gluttony defies satiation. Even prior to detailed knowledge of how and why fat accumulates, obesity bore an association with indulgence, of food among others earthly pleasures. Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantegruel, and Shakespeare's Falstaff, are only the most prominent figures of the Western canon to represent this association, which has been since validated by modern science's discovery of the basic process of surplus caloric intake converting to dense, stubborn adipose tissue. In recent decades a more nuanced portrait of body fat has emerged, troubling conventional wisdom about the origins of obesity and the health risks of overweightness, and calling out stigma against full-figured bodies.[60] But weight loss remains big business, and the causal link of food and fat persists beyond the satirical hyperlegibility of Monty Python. Even within classical realist narratives, fatsuit performances almost always occasion displays of compulsive eating, contributing to the spectacle already inherent in the fatsuit itself.

In this chapter I examine the phenomenon of Hollywood fatsuit performances from several angles. First, I consider fatsuits as star vehicles, especially in their tendency towards the

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[59] Hamrah, A.S. "Does This Fat Suit Make My Heart Look Big?" *Reason.com*, 2000.

[60]Gilman, Sander. *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity.* Polity press, 2008.

star-driven, self-reflexive comedian comedy tradition. I examine how playing a role in a fatsuit impacts stardom, how it differs from roles played by actual fat performers, and the relationship fostered by fatsuits between performers and viewers. Then, I discuss fatsuits as spectacles of obesity: costly, elaborate, verisimilar yet hyperbolic simulations of the fat body, dramatized as aberrant and incongruous with, but also a product of, the modern world. As such, fatsuits are situated in a constellation of grotesque aesthetics, size discourse, and critiques of consumption. These discussions culminate in a sustained analysis of Eddie Murphy and his performances in the fatsuit comedies *The Nutty Professor*, *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*, and *Norbit*, which I put into extensive conversation with his other work, particularly his stand-up concert films *Delirious* (1983) and *Raw* (1987). What they share with their Hollywood brethren, and Mr. Creosote especially, is a vision of the fat body as an elaborate, grotesque spectacle, confronting us with its sensual mass and appetites, inviting with equal measure laughter, fascination, and disgust.

I. The Double-Bodied Performance of Fat

Fatsuit Comedian Comedy

When *The Nutty Professor* was released in 1996, two significant fatsuit performances on film had already preceded it: Goldie Hawn during a brief but memorable scene of *Death*

Becomes Her (1992),[61] and Robin Williams in diegetic fat drag in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993).[62] It was Eddie Murphy's film, though, that inaugurated the fatsuit comedy properly, epitomizing the cycle's combination of a thematic preoccupation with fatness, conspicuously expensive state-of-the-art special effects, and, perhaps most important, integral semiotic duplicity. More specifically, by calling upon and rewarding outside knowledge of an established performer's star image and persona, fatsuit performances are almost always a function of comedian comedy's intertextual, deconstructive signifying practice, inasmuch as the performers are deliberately "double-bodied": they appear at once as the diegetically-integrated fat characters they play, and as the recognizable stars they are, encased in fake fat. In most cases, the presence of the star body is not merely inferred through recognition of unconcealed facial features and performative signatures, but indeed made manifest elsewhere in the text. When fatsuits signify temporary obesity, whether part of a longer form narrative on TV,[63] a narrative ellipsis on film,[64] flashbacks,[65] or alternate realities,[66] both bodies are fully visible but chronologically separate. The thin and fat versions of Rosemary in *Shallow Hal*, meanwhile, are divided between subjective and objective points-of-view, respectively. Jack Black's eponymous skirt-chasing

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[61] Zemeckis, Robert. *Death Becomes Her*, Universal Pictures, 1992.
[62] Columbus, Chris. *Mrs. Doubtfire*, 20th Century Fox, 1993.
[63] Elizabeth Moss as pregnant Peggy and January Jones as "Fat Betty" on *Mad Men* seasons 1 (2007) and 5 (2012), respectively.
[64] Ryan Reynolds as Chris in *Just Friends* (2005); Adam Sandler as Michael in *Click* (2006); Alyson Hannigan as Julia in *Date Movie* (2006); Gábor Máté as Öreg Balatony Kálmán in *Taxidermia* (2006).
[65] Goldie Hawn as Helen in *Death Becomes Her* (1992); Courtney Cox as Monica on *Friends* episodes "The One With the Prom Video" (1996) and "The One With the Thanksgiving Flashbacks" (1998); Julia Roberts as Kiki in *America's Sweethearts* (2001).
[66] Cox as Monica on *Friends* episodes "The One That Could Have Been Part 1" and "The One That Could Have Been Part 2" (2000); Johnny Galecki as Leonard and Kunal Nayyar as Raj on *The Big Bang Theory* episode "The Cooper Extraction" (2013); Anna Faris as Christy in *Mom* episode "Sonograms and Tube Tops" (2014).

hero is hypnotized to only see “inner beauty,” so that altruistic men and women appear to him as chiseled demigods, while their conventionally attractive but morally suspect counterparts are rendered physically hideous. Rosemary is morbidly obese, but all Hal sees is her kindness and integrity, which take the svelte form of Paltrow. Many shots are thus doubled to convey what Hal sees, then what the rest of the world sees, establishing a pattern of comic incongruity.

The fatsuit comedies that conform most closely to the comedian comedy tradition, however, are those in which the “double” bodies occupy the same narrative space. For Eddie Murphy, Mike Myers, Martin Lawrence, and Robin Williams, fatsuits provide ample carriage for presentational performances, and the functionally self-contained gag sequences of which they consist. The presentational mode of performance is central to comedian comedy’s nonhermetic approach: it prioritizes image, behavior, and delivery over narrative motivation, allowing the comedian to signify simultaneously as a fictional character, as the comedian’s extrafictional persona – established across other performances as well as presentations of the ‘real’ self in entertainment journalism and social media – and as a standalone performer, in the manner of a variety act or musical number. As Philip Drake notes, in more recent comedian comedies especially, the narratives provide enclosures for the comedians’ performances to take place.[67] One method is to cast them as multiple characters. Myers takes on bogus weight to play the titanic Scotsman Fat Bastard in the *Austin Powers* films, alongside the titular International Man of Mystery, the Dutch villain Goldmember, and the global supervillain Dr. Evil. In addition to

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[67] Drake, Philip. "Low Blows?: Theorizing Performance in Post-Classical Comedian Comedy." *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, Routledge, 2003, pp. 186-198. Frank Krutnik. 190-92.

playing Buddy Love and all five adult Klumps in *The Nutty Professor* films, Murphy embodies both the needle-thin title character of *Norbit,*[68] and his giantess wife Rasputia. The shot/reverse shot editing required to incorporate multiple guises into the same scene works in favor of the presentational mode since it isolates them into momentary prosceniums. The spectacular aspect of fatsuits is made especially vivid in this arrangement. Fat Bastard's interactions with Austin Powers are marked by the visual contrast of his girth occupying much of the same medium-shot frame that accommodates both Austin and the female companion invariably at his side.

Another method of integrating narrative flow and fatsuit performance is to frame the performance as part of the story. According to Seidman, the comedian of a comedian comedy articulates a dialectic between sociocultural integration and "individual creativity." The film negotiates the comedian creativity through "the fictional translation of the comedian's performing talents into the comic figure's behavioral traits," in particular an "adaptability to disguise, verbal manipulation (dialects, impressions), and physical dexterity."[69] In *Mrs. Doubtfire,* Williams plays a voice actor who reunites with his estranged children by disguising himself as a plump Scottish nanny. In the *Big Momma's House* films, Lawrence plays an FBI agent who goes undercover as a heavy-set African-American midwife and grandmother.[70] Both disguises require Hollywood-grade prosthetic makeup and tailored foam costuming, which is, naturally, readily available to both protagonists. The montage sequences depicting their

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[68] Robbins, Brian. *Norbit*, Paramount Pictures, 2006.
[69] Seidman, Steve. *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film.* UMI Research Press, 1981. 5-6.
[70] Gosnell, Raja. *Big Momma's House*, 20th Century Fox, 2000.; Whitesell, John. *Big Momma's House 2*, 20th Century Fox, 2006.

transformations could double as behind-the-scenes features, as silicone is steeped in plaster molds, delicately painted in skin tones, and affixed to docile faces and extremities. Once the fatsuits are on, their arch portrayals of full-figured femininity are narratively motivated by the need to stay undercover, while also furnishing Williams and Lawrence a platform to showcase their comedic virtuosity. Furthermore, the comedians' star personas are dramatized as their characters' faculty for impersonations. Williams is introduced in a recording studio providing the vocals for an opera-singing cartoon parrot, while Lawrence's Malcolm first appears rescuing his partner from the Kkangpae disguised as a fellow Korean gangster. Both films open on these disguises and delay revealing the performers behind them, a bait-and-switch that emphasizes their range – and foreshadows their eventual synthetic fattening. *Mrs. Doubtfire* in particular gives Williams the stage. The first moments linger on his rendition of Rossini's "Largo al factotum," and his transformation sequence becomes an opportunity for what might derisively be called "mugging" as he tries on different ethnic identities, complete with exaggerated accents and two songs.[71] Buddy Love from the *Nutty Professor* films goes one step further, as I shall discuss later in the chapter, both replicating and critiquing Murphy's established comic persona as a brash, virile, apolitical Black man.

One less gallant characteristic shared by fatsuit comedy and comedian comedy is a blind spot towards women. As the examples of Murphy, Lawrence, and Williams make clear, female fatsuit characters are often played by male comedians in drag. When they are played by women,

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[71] These identities include a Boricuan socialite, a Russian babushka, and Barbra Streisand, occasioning a performance of Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick's "Matchmaker" and Streisand's "Don't Rain on My Parade."

the performers' clout as comedians is secondary to their representation of the thin beauty ideals flouted by the fatsuit body: consider the fact Gwyneth Paltrow, by and large considered a serious dramatic actress, plays her role in *Shallow Hal* straight, as does Julia Roberts before her character's slimming down in *America's Sweethearts*.[72] Two of the more prominent recent female fatsuit performances on TV occurred in the cable drama *Mad Men* (2008-2015)[73]. Two exceptions are Courtney Cox and Goldie Hawn. Cox wore a fatsuit to portray her character Monica in flashbacks on the sitcom *Friends*, and Hawn wore one for scenes of her descent into sedentary depression in Robert Zemeckis's fantasy farce *Death Becomes Her* (1992). Still, while both Cox and Hawn's standing as comediennes is uncontroversial, sex appeal is nevertheless a strong element of their star images,[74] with which their fat selves are meant to contrast. Indeed, *Death Becomes Her* works doubly in the self-reflexive register of comedian comedy, by casting Hawn and Meryl Streep, 43- and 47-years-old respectively at the film's release, as aging beauties who resort to black magic to retain their youth and glamor.

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[72] Roth, Joe. *America's Sweethearts*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2001.

[73] At different points in the series' chronology, Peggy (Elizabeth Moss) and Betty (January Jones) gain considerable weight, due to pregnancy and depression, respectively. Both actresses are typically quite slender; before her first roles in Hollywood productions, Jones was a clothing model for Abercrombie & Fitch.

[74] Courtney Cox was recently included among the Telegraph's "Sex Symbols Over 50" ("Sex Symbols over 50." *Telegraph*, 28 April 2015. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/goodlife/11566788/Sex-symbols-over-50.html?frame=.). A lot of tabloid fare on Goldie Hawn is unfortunately preoccupied with her recent forays into cosmetic surgery, but one recent listicle celebrates her sex symbol status in the 1970s (Nastasi, Alison. "The Biggest Sex Symbols of the 1970s " *Flavorwire*, 2015, http://flavorwire.com/525197/the-biggest-sex-symbols-of-the-1970s/view-all.).

Stardom and the Extra-Ordinary

The different conditions for female performers in fatsuits show how the "double-bodied" nature of fatsuit performances can exceed the contours of comedian comedy, even as they activate the narrative genre's self-reflexive, uniquely performative properties. Richard Dyer's influential insights on the semiotics of Hollywood stardom are useful in this regard. Dyer casts stars as dynamic composites of sometimes contradictory cultural meanings, drawing correspondences between their consolidation of those meanings into coherent public and artistic identities, and the ideological fluctuations of the societies in which they live and perform.[75] The fatsuit is more than just one of many implements available for comic performance: it also depends for its comic effect on the contrast with an established star image. This contrast in turn depends on the repeated marginalization of fat bodies within standard star image typologies. According to Dyer, star images are “a complex configuration of visual, verbal, and aural signs” culled from a star’s on- and off-screen life that “function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they variously manage or resolve.”[76] The contradiction between “the stars-as-ordinary and the stars-as-special” in particular is a pillar of the Hollywood star system: “Are they just like you and me, or do consumption and success transform them?”[77] By housing Paltrow’s exceptional star body – a sign of regimented fitness and dieting, demanded by the actor marketplace, afforded by wealth – within the prole body *par excellence* of obesity,

[75] Inasmuch as this consolidation negotiates between individual stars' appearances across media texts, as well as their public image, comedian comedy could be said to be performing a similar operation.
[76] Dyer, Richard. *Stars.* BFI Publishing Ltd., 1998. 34.
[77] Ibid., 43.

the fatsuit makes the special/ordinary dyad visible. What makes Roseanne Barr exceptional in this regard was that her round *actual* body, coupled with the "looseness" of her demeanor, poses an avowedly working class affront to "middle-class and feminine standards of decorum and beauty" upheld by *Shallow Hal*'s distillation of fatness into component parts: fat Rosemary, the abject victim; and thin Rosemary, the visualization of her 'true' beauty.[78]

Obesity's association with low social standing is one of the more ironic turns of the late capitalist screw. Whereas in the time of Rubens a heftier frame denoted good fortune, wealth, spiritual well-being, and a "sense of social stability and order," it now signifies the inability to regulate desires "in a society that encourages us to lose control at the sight of desirable commodities."[79] Its prevalence was borne of industrialization: mass production made food both more available, and less nutritious.[80] As the century progressed, a sustained abundance of resources overtook the macro fluctuation of abundance and scarcity. The *en masse* emergence of fatsuit performances in film and television coincided with critiques of the Western economic order's shift from production to consumption: economic analyses such as John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) and Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran's *Monopoly Capital* (1966), as well as George Bataille's openly contrarian *The Accursed Share* (1949), have yielded to broader philosophical works such as Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism,*

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[78] Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter.* University of Texas Press, 1995. 60-65.
[79] Kipnis, Laura. "Life in the Fat Lane." *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 93-121. Laura Kipnis. 97-99.
[80] Douglas, Andrew J. "B.M.O.C. -- Big Men on Celluloid: Images of Masculine Obesity in Popular Film and Television." Dissertation, ProQuest, 2005. 19-20.

or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991). As a "sign of the redundancy of post-scarcity excess," Terry Jones' fatsuit prototype participates in just such a critique. The flat, broad characterization of Monty Python's satirical format encourages Mr. Creosote to be read allegorically: he is neither special nor ordinary so much as a grotesque sign. The fact that we see him regurgitate more than we see him consume makes plain just how far his consumption exceeds necessity.

Predictably, as fatsuits proliferated in Hollywood narratives, mass appeal has overtaken critical divisiveness, particularly in an American context that tirelessly labors to efface its own trenchant class system. Now,

> when an army of personal trainers exists solely to help Julia Roberts work off last night's dessert, the fat suit provides a way for actors to show themselves doing the one thing they can't do: eating to excess, behaving the way they think their audience behaves. When Gwyneth Paltrow orders pizza burgers and chili fries in 2001's *Shallow Hal*, we witness the modern spectacle of a glamorous woman not being cut down to size but being brought up to it.[81]

The same process continued extradiegetically for Paltrow: promoting the film on the talk show circuit, she repeatedly decried the "obscene discrimination" she encountered when she deigned to wander offset in her fat disguise.[82] Talk show host, former supermodel, and current queen

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[81] Hamrah, A.S. "Does This Fat Suit Make My Heart Look Big?" *Reason.com*, 2000.
[82] Kucynski, Alex. "Charting the Outer Limits of Inner Beauty." *The New York Times*, 2001.

regnant of *America's Next Top Model* Tyra Banks also wore one publicly as a well-documented experiment over the course of "one of the most heartbreaking days of [her] life."[83] More recently, for the dating guidance service Simple Pickup, a man and a woman wore fatsuits to dates they had arranged through the online dating service Tinder with photographs that concealed any signs of overweightness, with hidden cameras poised to capture the hapless representatives of American culture's shallowness.[84] In all cases, fatness is situated as a uniquely abject subject position, the commonsense antithesis of desirability. This is especially the case for women, whose bodies endure a higher degree of scrutiny as a matter of course, and indeed, a swimsuit photo is affixed to the Simple Pickup actress's video but not her male counterpart's.

What makes the fat body extraordinary is precisely that it is extra-ordinary. The National Institutes of Health estimates that two out of five American adults are considered obese, while one out of three are considered overweight.[85] Fatness currently functions as a sign of the normalcy against which the lifestyles of the rich and famous are defined, and with which media personalities are tasked to show familiarity, to efface their own sequestered privilege. Whereas the functionally anonymous protagonists of the Simple Pickup videos offer their lessons outward, Paltrow and Banks present their experiences as lessons for themselves first and foremost, glimpses they would otherwise never have into the daily indignities of the quintessentially unexceptional. As such they amount to acts of shrewd public relations, however

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[83] "Banks Dons Fat Suit to Feel Discrimination Firsthand." *Desert News*, 2005.
[84] Clifton, Derrick. "Woman Wears a Fat Suit on Tinder Dates to Expose Horrible Double Standard." *Mic.com*, 2014, http://mic.com/articles/99880/woman-wears-a-fat-suit-on-tinder-dates-to-expose-horrible-double-standard.
[85] Diseases, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney. "Overweight & Obesity Statistics." National Institute of Health https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-statistics/overweight-obesity#prevalence.

sincere their intentions: alliances of compassion forged over the wide gulf of body ideals, the correlative sliding scale of glamor, and the bodily discipline – or presumed lack thereof – that underwrite both.

For Paltrow in particular this might be interpreted as a corrective measure. As previously discussed, much of the film's humor is based on the incongruity between Hal's subjective vision and the physical reality of Rosemary's mass: the ironic visual gag of Paltrow sans fatsuit tipping a rowboat on its end, for example. The film thus takes a novel approach to critiquing beauty-obsessed culture through a satirical use of a Hollywood shorthand that conflates moral and physical attributes. The positive reception in the popular press endorsed the film's critical method. Salon film critic Stephanie Zacharek observed that once Hal's hypnosis wears off and Paltrow is visible only in a fatsuit, "the sight of her in it is as distressing to us as it is, at first, to Hal. This beautiful woman doesn't belong in that misshapen body — which is, of course, precisely the point."[86] Conversely, a reader writing to Roger Ebert echoed the concerns of many when she claimed that its good intentions notwithstanding, *Shallow Hal* was simply replicating Hollywood's preference for slender bodies.[87] Activists and cultural critics agreed, taking umbrage with a film they considered to frame the fat body as inherently comic and ultimately dysfunctional and undesirable. Katharina Mendoza notes of *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor* that fatsuits worn by star performers implies "detachable weight" surrounding a

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[86] Zacharek, Stephanie. "Shallow Hal." *Salon*, 2001, http://www.salon.com/2001/11/09/shallow_hal/.
[87] Ebert, Roger. "Shallow Hal." *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2001, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shallow-hal-.

"whole, thin body full invested with personality, movement, and agency, unburdened by fat."[88] *Shallow Hal*'s tendency to fragment Rosemary's "real" body – played below the neck by Paltrow's body double, Ivy Snitzer – into close-ups or medium shots, or to obscure her face from behind or in long shots, contrasts with its full body framing of Rosemary's "inner beauty." The film's supporters have retorted by noting the confidence and sense of humor with which the screenwriters endow Rosemary.[89] Although Paltrow's public experiment and equally public accounts of it made no explicit reference to this debate, they served to encourage the reception of *Shallow Hal* as salutary, rather than inflammatory, towards fat people.

II. The Meaning of Fake Fat

Average Grotesqueness

The fatsuit comedy cycle emerged at a moment when Western culture, and the United States in particular, was already a couple generations deep in a weight loss frenzy. Laura Kipnis writes,

> "With a multi-billion-dollar diet and fitness industry, tens of millions of joggers, bikers, and power walkers out on any sunny weekend all trying to banish fat, work off fat, atone for fat, health ideologues who talk of little these days besides fat, research and

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[88] Mendoza, Katharina. "Seeing through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in "the Nutty Professor" and "Shallow Hal"." *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York University Press, 2009, pp. 301-310.

[89] Zacharek; Scott, A.O. "Inner Beauty Counts, and She's a Perfect 10." *The New York Times*, 9 Nov 2001. http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B01E2D91F39F93AA35752C1A9679C8B63.

> development dollars working overtime to invent no-fat substitutes for fat - our intense wish for fat's absence is just what ensures its cultural omnipresence."[90]

A dramatic ambivalence about fat and its visibility is manifest in the fatsuit wearer's ability to toggle quickly between fat and thin. Obesity is rendered the nightmare scenario to which anyone, glamorous stars like Gwyneth Paltrow and Eddie Murphy included, is vulnerable. Indeed, in *The Nutty Professor,* Sherman dreams of his body as monstrously gigantic, leveling a city in one instance and crushing a lover in another. And yet even as fat endures ongoing exile from America's collective ego-ideal, it also stands in for averageness. As discussed previously, fat is extra ordinary.

It is also almost exclusively male when characterizing a starring role. According to Jerry Mosher, television has been ground zero for the typecasting of overweight actors in everyman roles. As opposed to film's tendency to "spectacularize even the most mundane characteristics," the TV medium's "seriality allows for a slower development of physical nuance and encourages viewers to regard its characters as 'real people.'" Mosher is correct that, as previously discussed, fat film actors get pigeonholed by their girth into performing as "clowns, grotesques, 'heavies,' and minor character roles."[91] As Douglas shows, however, fat everyman roles are actually somewhat common on film as well, and Mosher's analysis applies to them aptly. Furthermore, full-fledged fat stars of film establish continuity across their films by taking similar roles and

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[90] Kipnis, Laura. "Life in the Fat Lane." *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 93-121. Laura Kipnis. 93.

[91] Mosher, Jerry. "Setting Free the Bears: Refiguring Fat Men on Television." *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, University of California Press, 2001, pp. 166-193. Kathleen LeBesco Jane Evans Braziel. 166.

maintaining a recognizably *sui generis* performing style, generating familiarity along the same lines as both TV seriality and comedian comedy. For example, the down-on-his-luck blue-collar loser John Candy has played across films as various as *Summer Rental* (1985), *Uncle Buck* (1990), and *Cool Runnings* (1993), is consonant with the disheveled, working class, softened patriarchs Mosher identities in the sitcoms *The Honeymooners* (1955-6), *All in the Family* (1971-79), and *Roseanne,*[92] and that we can see also in *King of Queens* (1998-2007) and *Mike and Molly* (2010-present). Fat everymen are "broadly drawn from contradictory impulses: they are rendered ordinary but deviant, average but grotesque, male but not masculine."[93] The fat male body acts as shorthand for American averageness even as it is evacuated of any 'average' degree of masculine virility or sexual viability, portraying, however cheerfully, a culture losing its potency.

A significant part of the cultural animus towards fat is the notion that its accumulation reflects a deep failure of character. As Douglas observes, "exterior excess is often the sign of interior lack."[94] Hence the frequency of fat villains in Hollywood history, as superfluous body mass is conflated with moral vacancy. Even when fat male characters are among the good guys, though, they show a tendency towards overindulgence, especially in food, that dovetails with oversensitivity. The latter is often framed as a response to the former, with the implied metabolic consequences: "the obese man is wearing his emotions on his frame, by way of their

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[92] Ibid., 168.
[93] Ibid., 187.
[94] Ibid., 25.

manifestation through his fatness."[95] Contradicting the statuesque stoicism of typical leading men, the fat male star thus enters orbit with feminine, juvenile, or even infantile stereotypes. The incongruity of a grown man exhibiting feminine or childlike qualities has long been a trope of comedy, and fittingly, fat male stars have historically occupied comic roles. Even in dramatic roles, their deviation from heteromasculine physical ideals excludes them from sexual viability almost without exception.

As this chapter has probably made abundantly clear the situation is both similar and very different for women. Their obesity is similarly pathologized: their eating habits are presented as compulsive and compensatory. More than their male counterparts, however, fat women are associated with defiance. Rowe Karlyn's analysis of Roseanne Barr's comic persona is instructive in this regard. For Rowe Karlyn, Barr is emblematic of the figure of the "unruly woman" in Western modernity. Although the unruly woman is found in mass culture, specifically comedy, she is a fundamentally transgressive figure, "unwilling to confine herself to her proper place" as a woman in a patriarchal society. In contrast to the "silent, static, invisible" ideal of women's "divine composure" on the sidelines of social power and process, the unruly woman talks and laughs loudly and frequently, is sexually uninhibited, and openly contests the authority of men. She is also physically excessive, deviating from conventional femininity: aged, androgynous, or fat.[96]

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[95] Douglas, Andrew J. "B.M.O.C. -- Big Men on Celluloid: Images of Masculine Obesity in Popular Film and Television." Dissertation, ProQuest, 2005. 43.
[96] Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter.* University of Texas Press, 1995. 31.

Barr's star image encompasses all of these traits, not least of all in her unabashed overweightness. *Roseanne* restored the rebellious, wisecracking autonomy to the sitcom housewife that, as Patricia Mellencamp has argued, was taken from her over the course of the 1950s.[97] Rosanne Barr ruled the roost as a fictionalized version of herself, and John Goodman – one of the most prominent serious obese actors in Hollywood – played her powerful but subordinate husband Dan, and the show was candid about their active sex life together. Sutured into a family-oriented, working-class milieu that stood opposite the fashion-conscious corporate careerism of *Murphy Brown* (1988-98), *Roseanne*'s vision of empowerment was no less acquiescent to the rightward intelligentsia. Where Barr really ran afoul of conservative taste, though, was as a public figure. Her irreverent bowdlerization of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a 1990 San Diego Padres game was considered no less than an assault on the dignity of the Republic. Rose Karlyn asserts that Barr's fatness is key to her "semiotics of unruliness," and the "source of the hostility directed against her."[98] For the last half-century, the cult of thinness has functioned as a disciplinary regime for women in particular. If "femininity is gauged by how little space women take up," then "women who are too fat...appropriate too much space, obtruding upon proper boundaries" because of their inability or refusal to control their appetites. Citing Susie Orbach, Rose Karlyn notes that "since the 1960s, when women accelerated their demands for more space in the public world, the female body ideal has become smaller and ever

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[97] Mellencamp, Patricia. "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy." *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* edited by Charlotte; D'Acci Brunsdon, Julie; Spigel, Lynn, Oxford University Press, 1997. 62.
[98] Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter.* University of Texas Press, 1995.62.

more unattainable."[99] The fat female body thus has the privileged capacity for feminist transgression.

These representational come into even sharper relief in fatsuit comedies, which tend to foreground fatness as such thematically. The compulsory exclusion of fat bodies from normative sexual life is the central narrative premise, and a comic motif, of both *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor*. Rosemary has become so accustomed to public ridicule and dismissal for her size that Hal's romantic attention is only legible to her as insincerity. Sherman of *The Nutty Professor* embarks on a desperate weight loss regimen after enduring a standup comic's fusillade of fat jokes in front of his crush, Carla. The jokes aim primarily at what the comicassumes to be Sherman's incapacity for sexual congress – "last time this fella felt a breast, it was in a bucket of KFC! Extra crispy!" – and when Sherman dreams of such an encounter with Carla, he imagines crushing her in precisely the hyperbolic manner of a fat joke. Ultimately both films capitulate to the erasure of fat sexuality: the former via the visual device of presenting the lingerie-clad Rosemary through Hal's hypnotized point-of-view; the latter by bracketing any bedroom scene at all, answering what Mosher calls TV and film's "need to hide fat's raw appearance."[100]

Simulated obesity also conflates obesity with ordinariness, but, significantly, sans class. The working class association is mostly effaced. One exception is Sherman's family, which bears class markers seemingly cobbled together from fifty years of representing middle American blackness on TV: Mama Klump is typically found unfurling a spread of deep-fried

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[99] Ibid., 63.
[100] Ibid.

Southern comfort food, while her husband Clesius's inclination towards overalls and plaid flannel invokes a plump Redd Foxx, as junkyard overlord Fred Sanford of *Sanford and Son* (1972-79). The matronly full-figured frames of Big Momma and Mrs. Doubtfire meanwhile add credibility to their conventionally maternal occupations, midwife and nanny, as feminine fat is historically associated with desexualized, domestic labor.[101] For his part, Fat Bastard goes undercover as a parcel deliveryman in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me.* He does not *actually* deliver parcels, however, nor ply any trade that exists beyond the world of spy movies. Big Momma and Mrs. Doubtfire are just disguises, roles-within-roles drawn from well-worn cultural iconographies, particularly those that conflate full-figured bodies with maternity. And if the Klumps present a cartoonishly broad, African-American version of the Roseanne and Dan Connor household, they are also only supporting players to Sherman, whose position as a tenured academic contrasts sharply with his family's humbler standing (which is conflated with the obesity he inherited from them and the shame it elicits). Still, while Sherman's backstory is an unelaborated bootstrap narrative of individual genius overcoming disabling weight and a modest upbringing, the relentless fat abuse that accompanies the pressure his dean puts him under to

[101] Patrica Turner, Patricia Collins, and Donald Fogle, among others, have commented on the figure of the black mammy - brought into perhaps its widest circulation by Hattie McDaniel as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) - as a pivotal figure of the American racial imagination. Originating during American slavery, the mammy is a maternal figure par excellence, charged with caring for the white master's family from delivery through young adulthood - rendering her part midwife and part nanny. Amy Farrell notes that, as with many black stereotypes, the mammy is defined by how her body is "in 'excess' of white normative standards." (Farrell, Amy Erdman. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture.* New York University Press, 2011. 75.) In this case, the excess is her obesity, which in turn becomes essentialized with her motherly qualities, namely her asexuality.

secure research grants corresponds with the job stasis and "downward mobility" statistically linked with obesity.[102] Even here, though, the class dynamics are very implicit.

Instead, social mobility is abstracted from its basis in material class relations and mapped onto the transformation between a fat and thin. The fatsuit, by reducing this onscreen transformation to the offscreen act of taking the suit on and off, accommodates both ends of the transformation within the film or television narrative. Indeed, it encourages as much, insofar as the fatsuit almost always adorns the body of a star: one of the fundamental draws of a star-powered film is that said star is at least eventually fully visible. In *Death Becomes Her*, *Just Friends*, and *America's Sweethearts*, the fatsuit is the "cocoon stage from which a butterfly emerges,"[103] as excess weight is exchanged not only for conventional attractiveness but worldly success and the fulfillment that presumably follows a happy ending. On the chronological flipside is a fall from grace, as in the final shot of the slapstick comedy *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (2004), showing obsessive bodybuilder White Goodman, played by Ben Stiller, after a descent into milkshakes and fried chicken.[104]

Due to TV narrative's long duration relative to film, the ugly duckling use of fatsuits on TV follows a less linear and more elastic chronology. The fatsuits on *Mad Men* dramatize periods during the show's serial narrative at which the characters Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) and Betty Draper (January Jones) temporarily gain weight, the former due to pregnancy.

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[102] Kipnis, Laura. "Life in the Fat Lane." *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 93-121. Laura Kipnis. 100-01.
[103] Hamrah, A.S. "Does This Fat Suit Make My Heart Look Big?" *Reason.com*, 2000.
[104] Thurber, Rawson Marshall. *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*, 20th Century Fox, 2004.

Compared to the elephantine dimensions of most fatsuits, the simulated fat of *Mad Men* is notable for its modesty, recalling the actual weight gained by Robert De Niro while shooting *Raging Bull* (1980), Renee Zellweger for the *Bridget Jones Diary* films (2001, 2004), or Rob McElhenney for the seventh season of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-present). Otherwise, fatsuits almost exclusively feature in flashbacks or "what if" timelines in situation comedy. Jeffrey Sconce describes “what if” storytelling, or “conjectural storytelling,” as “wholly speculative exercises…that recast, through radical stylistic and narrational deviation, the already well-established series architecture” of a TV show.[105] One such deviation is reimagining a character as comically obese. On *Friends,* flashback and conjectural narration function in tandem once Monica’s fat past is revealed: Cox is shown in a fatsuit in flashbacks as well as storylines that envisage a present wherein Monica never went on the weight-loss regimen that led to her current lithe frame. On "The Cooper Extraction" (2013) episode of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present), secondary nerd Raj imagines becoming happily corpulent together with primary nerd Leonard, had Leonard lived with him and not his current roommate Sheldon.

As a function of stardom, the fatsuit’s differing use on film and TV resonates with Mosher’s claim that film spectacularizes where TV normalizes. On film, the fatsuit body precedes or follows the bloom of glamor. On TV, the fatsuit body represents an aberration for a character domesticated by episodic repetition. Within this dyadic framework, fatsuit fat cannot signify as average exactly: its appearance is the exception to the corresponding character’s

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[105] Sconce, Jeffrey. "What If?: Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries." *Television after Tv: Essays on a Medium in Transition,* Duke University Press, 2004, Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson. 108.

normalized rule, to the point of even seeming entirely out of the ordinary. According to Douglas, "the viewers' disbelief becomes so highly suspended that they accept the relatively homogenous physical types presented to them on the screen to such a degree that the dash of 'reality' a fat person provides seems to be unrealistic."[106] Furthermore, with the exception of *Roseanne*, the bodies on display among Mosher's examples tend towards overweightness rather than outright obesity. *All in the Family*'s Archie Bunker and *Louie*'s Louie C.K., for example, are distinguished by the concentration of adipose tissue around their abdomens, a common consequence of advancing age for men. Fatsuits, however, most often simulate fatness as obesity, the relatively extreme dimensions of which mobilize fat's association with excess, hyperbole, and spectacle.

Perhaps predictably, then, fatsuits shed some of the realist aspects of fat representation, particularly class identity. The blue-collar signifiers that sometimes attend fatsuit performances are vague and free-floating, abstracting class from any concrete role as a determinant of bodily destiny. All that remains is individual agency, aloft in a manicured facsimile of earthly existence. The fat self is the failed self. Mendoza charges that the fatsuit's "detachable weight" perpetuates the "'inside every fat person is a thin person' trope so often found in weight loss discourse," [107] and indeed, in fatsuit comedy, fat is the excess baggage that must be shed to reveal the true,

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[106] Douglas, Andrew J. "B.M.O.C. -- Big Men on Celluloid: Images of Masculine Obesity in Popular Film and Television." Dissertation, ProQuest, 2005. 14-15.
[107] Mendoza, Katharina. "Seeing through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in "the Nutty Professor" and "Shallow Hal"." *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York University Press, 2009, pp. 301-310. 302.

fully-realized, immutable, invariably thin self – whether Julia Roberts or simply a workaday sitcom denizen.

The construction of fat as a sign of physical and personal deficiency has a long history. According to Peter Stearns, American receptiveness to anti-fat ideology resulted from the attempt to reconcile a Victorian middle-class work ethic and moral hygiene with the accelerating temptations of liberalism and consumerism, and the sedentariness of white collar work: "Constraint, including the new constraints urged on eating and body shape, was reinvented to match – indeed, to compensate for – new areas of greater freedom."[108] The unbound flesh of obesity makes it a salient metaphor for the ethic of constraint. The expert testimony of doctors and dieticians legitimates the prejudice as fact. The corroboration of fashion and culture industries integrates it into our aesthetic standards.

A paradox emerges: the fat body is produced by the modern world but not considered to belong in it. Hence the durability of fatsuit comedy, whose major components – comedian comedy and fat jokes – both involve 'fitting in.' For comedian comedy this is the dialectic of sociocultural integration and individual creativity, and the related dialectic of the comedian's performance and the narrative in which it is enclosed. For fat jokes, the struggles of fitting in are quite literal, and fatsuit comedies frequently feature slapstick scenarios concerning the challenges faced by the fatsuit characters in everyday life. In an opening scene of *The Nutty Professor,* for example, Sherman's protrusive belly erases the bottom half of a chalkboard as he

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[108] Stearns, Peter N. *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West.* New York University Press, 1997. 54.

writes across the top. Another joke finds him unable to exit a small sports car after transforming prematurely out of his trim alter ego. A similar joke provides a running gag to *Norbit* about Rasputia's inadequately sized car. Her breasts are so enormous that her slightest movement activates the car horn, leading her to accuse Norbit erroneously of having adjusted her steering wheel. In *Shallow Hal,* broken seats are a frequent problem for Rosemary, and when she cannonballs into a pool, the resulting splash sends a young boy sailing into a tree. The formal construction of fatsuit comedies further marginalize obesity: in addition to wide angle photography that exaggerates the dimensions of simulated fat, fatsuit bodies are often fragmented across separate shots, as if the film frame is unable to accommodate them in full.

The broad slapstick staging and visualization accentuates the spectacular aspect of the fatsuit body. The rendition of bodies as spectacles is a principal theme of this dissertation, of course, and the operative concept of spectacle draws from its Latin root: *spectaculum,* a "public show." One form found in media texts is the erotic spectacle, elucidated by Mulvey as a showstopper in the literal sense, halting narrative progress to satisfy the male gaze. Another form applies to the same invasive, voyeuristic look – fragmenting the objectified body into fetishized parts, examining them in close-ups and intimate tracking shots – as yet is the erotic spectacle's obverse: the freak. The gaze fixates on the aberrant body, possibly repulsed, but fascinated. As Amy Erdman Farrell notes, when freakshows were still in vogue in the 19th century and early 20th century West, extremely fat people were lined up next to the usual bearded ladies and pinheads to be ogled and disparaged. One prominent example was Daniel Lambert, or "Fat Dan,"

who was put on display in the Hall of Wonders in London in the early 1800s.[109] Farrell links the flagrant indignity of this early spectacle with *Shallow Hal* and other more contemporary fat jokes, asserting that

> what links all these representations is the way that they play on the embarrassment of the fat body – how it literally and figuratively does not fit in with the built environment of chairs, doors, and vehicles, and with the world of other 'normal-sized' people. What is important to note here is the way that the spectacle of the fat person engages its viewers precisely because it is perceived to be so different, so far removed from the bodily experience of the 'average' person.[110]

Farrell's use of "average" as fat's foil is significant, since average is precisely how fat is presented in many cases, not least of all because fat is a burden so many modern people bear. Yet at the same time, the fat body is positioned as an "other," against which the self can be defined. Hence Mosher's description of fat men on television as "average but grotesque." In its colloquial usage, "grotesque" refers to a kind of anti-aesthetic abnormality, the favored terrain of the modern carnival exhibit. But far more than his fellow freaks, whose marginalizing conditions could be taken for granted as lousy genetic luck, Fat Dan's girth was likely to be seen as his own doing, a manifestation of defective self-discipline. Then as now, his spectators may very well have thought, "There but for the grace of God go I." It is perhaps for this very reason that the fat body generates such an extreme response. Just as abundance and leisure were becoming available to a vast proportion of the population, so, too, was the fate of fatness. As Kipnis

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[109] Farrell, Amy Erdman. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture.* New York University Press, 2011. 32-33.
[110] Ibid., 34.

observes, “Fat is the site of deep social contradiction, [provoking] not only undisguised contempt…but also in many cases, an intense, unexamined, visceral disgust.”[111]

Undisciplined Consumption

However varied the deep-seated meanings of fat may be, they are all based on commonsense logic that has been challenged seriously only very recently: that fatness results from eating too much, and moving too little. This belief manifests in cultural texts as what Douglas calls the tendency “narrativize the obese body.”[112] Inherent in media representations of fat is how it came to be, and since conventional wisdom would hypothesize overeating, that’s precisely what overweight characters are routinely shown doing.[113] Fatsuit characters are perhaps even more so, since the process of gaining or losing weight is made more visibly plain. When Rosemary orders a "double pizza burger, chili fries with cheese and a large chocolate milkshake" in *Shallow Hal,* Hal remarks that "it's nice to see a girl order a real meal" and complains that "I hate it when you guys order a glass of water and a crouton," the contrast of the meals' abundance and scantness corresponding with Paltrow's doubled body. Fat Monica is without exception shown consuming rich desserts in her limited screen time. Fat Bastard's appetite is excessive to the point of comic absurdity, as when he commands his supervillain boss Dr. Evil's dwarf

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[111] Kipnis, Laura. "Life in the Fat Lane." *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 93-121. Laura Kipnis. 96.
[112] Douglas, Andrew J. "B.M.O.C. -- Big Men on Celluloid: Images of Masculine Obesity in Popular Film and Television." Dissertation, ProQuest, 2005. 32.
[113] Ibid., 23-4.

doppelganger to "get in my belly." Even tamer depictions emphasize impulsive eating. The opening moments of *Just Friends* (2005) find a prosthetically double-chinned Ryan Reynolds pausing a soulful rendition of Gary Baker and Frank J. Meyers' "I Swear" - the film's first punchline - to gorge on a handful of chips.[114] When Kiki suspects Eddie of continuing to carry a torch for Gwen in *America's Sweethearts,* she indulges in a massive, high-carb breakfast, described by Lee (Billy Crystal) as "30 pounds of food." Although Roberts remains her chiseled, skinny self in this scene - establishing a tone of comic incongruity for her monologue of romantic frustration - it echoes Douglas's point that obesity onscreen is not only narrativized but pathologized: even though Kiki has since lost the 60 pounds that made the difference between her plain and desirable self, an inclination towards "eating her feelings" reveals itself in a moment of vulnerability. In fatsuit comedy, then, obesity is consistently disarticulated from external, uncontrollable forces, and linked instead to a lack of necessary discipline, a common theme of weight loss discourse.

More importantly, fat stigma's moral undertow of personal responsibility has adapted seamlessly to the ideological demands of late capitalism. Especially by the 1980s and the coincident leadership of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK and President Ronald Reagan, the bootstrap narrative enjoyed renewed relevance, as the widespread defunding of social services in both countries dovetailed with a rhetoric of self-reliance. Programs such as food stamps and unemployment insurance, hallmarks of New Deal liberalism in the American

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[114] Kumble, Roger. *Just Friends*, New Line Cinema, 2005.

context, were pilloried as having produced a class of permanent dependents. The main recipients of cultural animus towards conspicuous consumption, then, were not the rich and famous, who were seen to have earned the right, but rather those receiving government benefits, whose consumption was theoretically being billed to the public. The sentiment metastasized most notoriously as the "welfare queen." The stereotype emerged vernacularly from growing consternation about welfare fraud in the postwar period. The most notorious use of the image for political purposes is credited to Reagan. During a January 1976 campaign stop in New Hampshire, the presidential candidate soliloquized about a Chicago woman whose elaborate fraudulence of social relief programs resulted in an untaxed annual income of $150,000. Reagan was referring to the actual case of con artist Linda Taylor, reported on by the Chicago Tribune, and did not actually use the term "welfare queen" himself.[115] Nevertheless, a face had been put to a name, so to speak. The image took hold in subsequent years in conservative demagoguery, perpetuating longstanding myths about Black overrepresentation on welfare – Taylor was African-American – through what Ange-Marie Hancock calls the "politics of disgust."[116]

The prevalence of obesity among low-income populations has both validated and consolidated moral prejudices concerning overconsumption. Kipnis writes,

> Substitute 'welfare class' for 'fat' here and you start to see that the phobia of fat and the phobia of the poor are heavily cross-coded, and that perhaps the fear of an out-of-control

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[115] Levin, Josh. "The Welfare Queen." *Salon*, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2013/12/linda_taylor_welfare_queen_ronald_reagan_made_her_a_notorious_american_villain.html.
[116] Hancock, Ange-Marie. *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York University Press, 2004. 57.

> body is not unrelated to the fear of out-of-control masses and their voracious demands and insatiable appetites – not just for food, but for social resources and entitlement programs.[117]

The poor fat body as a sign of parasitic dependency withstands evidence of obesity's genetic predisposition and the lack of nutritional value in today's cheap food. "Entitlement" works double duty as a technical term for the taxpayer-funded safety net, and a pejorative for those making use of it. Growing concern about the impact of obesity on mass transit is illustrative. Nowhere are fat bodies "violating territorial limits"[118] more visibly and immediately to the general public more than in tightly-packed aircraft cabins and railcars. Proposals to charge extra for a waist that exceeds the width of a seat are floated as only fair. Plans to expand seat widths at the expense of availability are seen as anathema, the burdening of many with the carelessness of few.

Fatsuit representations fully dramatize the guilt and shame of fat, while dissolving class distinctions but integrating its signifiers. For Sherman and Rosemary, ridicule is a regular obstacle to overcome. Sherman in particular internalizes the stigma against his size and the habits associated with it: after his disastrous date with Carla, he dreams of himself on a King Kong-like rampage, in which he forgoes Carla's Fay Wray surrogate for a freshly roasted chicken – echoing the standup comic's joke predicting that fried chicken replaces sex in his life. Fat Bastard and Rasputia, on the other hand, are impervious to society's rejection. Fat Bastard

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[117] Kipnis, Laura. "Life in the Fat Lane." *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 93-121. Laura Kipnis. 101.
[118] Ibid., 102.

does launch into a self-pitying diatribe in *The Spy Who Shagged Me* when Felicity Shagwell asks, "Are you happy?"

> Of course I'm not happy! I'm a big fat slob! I've got bigger titties than you do! I've got more chins than a Chinese phonebook! I haven't seen my willy in two years – which is long enough to declare it legally dead! I can't stop eating…I eat because I'm unhappy, I'm unhappy because I eat. It's a vicious cycle. Excuse me, there's someone I have to get in touch with and forgive: myself. [pinched flatulence] Excuse me, I farted. It's a long road ahead.

The speech may very well be sincere: he does eventually emerge victorious from the Subway diet – "just like Jared!" – in the final scene of *Goldmember*. On its own, however, the delivery scans more as a parody of weight loss discourse's therapeutic rhetoric. Beyond this momentary narrative enclosure, Fat Bastard seems quite pleased with himself, even referring to himself as "dead sexy."

Rasputia is similarly unflappable. She eats voraciously, dresses provocatively, and even admonishes Norbit's childhood crush, Kate (Thandie Newton), for being too skinny. As if to model proper viewer identification, both fatsuit performances are structured by the reaction shots and commentary of characters on the periphery, all of them dutifully disgusted. "We ain't got to worry about this brother buying the milk," laments a local pimp (Eddie Griffin) at Norbit and Rasputia's wedding. "He just bought the whole cow." "That's a special cow, too," his colleague (Katt Williams) adds. "That must be where buttermilk comes from." Rasputia's Blackness, in the bizarrely classless but racially diverse world of *Norbit* where inner-city stereotypes mix with cherubic orphans in a storybook suburb is significant. Racial subtexts fit easily into both anti-fat and anti-poor moralism, especially regarding entitlement programs, and while Rasputia may not make use of social services, her strident and deceitful conduct, ghetto fabulous style, and daily

indolence – much attention is given to her elaborate leisure rituals while Norbit labors to support her and run her errands – mark her as a comic descendant of the welfare queen, the terror of white Reagan America.

The irony of policing consumption on the lower rungs of the social order is at least as old as Oscar Wilde, who remarks in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” that “to recommend thrift to the poor…is like advising a man who is starving to eat less.”[119] But it gains special resonance in the context of fatsuit performances by major Hollywood stars, because consumption, according to Dyer, is a major vector of stardom. Citing Leo Lowenthal's study of celebrity biographies, he notes that between 1901 and 1941, public admiration shifted from "idols of production" to "idols of consumption." The former commanded esteem because they represented success as the outcome of industriousness, self-reliance, and being "useful to society: bankers, politicians, artists, inventors, businessmen." The latter, however, were defined by leisure. Not only were they employed in less "socially productive" professions - they were primarily entertainers and athletes - but, more important, publicity focused on how they spent their time away from work: their favorite cocktails and golf courses, the parties they attended, what they wore and where they shopped.[120] Contemporary Hollywood stardom has only amplified this pattern. Displays of lavish celebrity wealth remain a fixture of tabloid media, whose *raison d'être*

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[119] Wilde, Oscar. "The Soul of Man under Socialism." 1891, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/.
[120] Dyer, Richard. *Stars.* BFI Publishing Ltd., 1998. 39.

is providing a glimpse into the "backstage" of stars' lives. Conspicuous consumption is, in short, a constitutive aspect of the Hollywood glamor for which the fatsuit is the “cocoon stage.”

The problem, then, is not consumption per se, but the wrong kind of consumption: gluttony, that is, conspicuous consumption that is truly conspicuous, that fails to efface itself through a publicly disciplined body. Returning to Monty Python’s Mr. Creosote, we find the exaggerated exemplar. Unlike the fatsuit characters for whom he paved the way, Creosote is quite explicitly classed, no doubt due to his British origin. Even absent a history or much of a personality, Creosote's coarse, Cockney speech patterns – he variably instructs the maître d' to "shut up" and "fuck off" – in conjunction with his unashamed display of bodily functions, are heavily coded as working class, contrasting sharply with the aristocratic rigidity of his fellow diners. Their horror transcends the transgression of vomiting at the dinner table: Creosote is nothing less than old money’s worst nightmare, the *nouveau riche,* refusing to conceal the leisure class's conspicuous consumption beneath patrician manners, eventually raining it back down on them in no uncertain terms. Furthermore, Creosote’s hyperbolic roundness and Gilded Age presentation – replete with coattails, watch chain, and pomaded part – evoke the “fat cat” archetype of British and especially American early 20th century iconography. As Farrell notes, fat’s valorization as the mark of health and prosperity, often sourced in Renaissance painters such as Rubens, extended well into the late 19th century, when it more specifically denoted wealth. Fatness often appeared on the pages of *Harper’s Weekly, Life,* and other magazines, in cartoons commenting on and, as wealth inequality accelerated prior to World War I and the Great Depression, critiquing capitalist society. The upper classes might have more reason than anyone to express disgust at the fat cat: he is their dark mirror image, the all-too-possible outcome of abundance.

Fascinating Obesity

Mikhail Bakhtin's taxonomy of the grotesque resonates considerably with critiques of cultural representations of fat, especially in comedy, Rabelais' favored terrain. While he doesn't address obesity per se – that is, the more modern medical designation and social identity marker – Bakhtin refers often to the "superabundance" of flesh on the grotesque body,[121] and the belly is privileged among its oversized "convexities." Furthermore, the inextricability of the grotesque body and food resonates with the narrativization of the fat body, the assumption that it was 'caused' by gluttony. Hence the prevalence of round bodies not only in illustrated interpretations of Rabelais' narratives, but in the Renaissance depiction of banquets more generally, as Bakhtin notes.[122] The fat body's propensity for "violating territorial limits" in public space seems informed by Bakhtin's concept: just as the grotesque body is perennially on the verge of merging with the world around it, in the popular imagination, according to Elena Levy-Navarro, "fat flesh…oozes forth" from the obese body.[123] The extravagance of this image is consistent with the grotesque body's hyperbolic nature, which is also, as I have argued, a key characteristic of fat jokes brought to filmic fruition by fatsuit comedies.

Bakhtin's grotesque body thus resonates with the performances of Rowe Karlyn's unruly women and Douglas's big men on celluloid. But it is brought into even sharper relief by fatsuit performances. As previously discussed, the need to narrativize fatsuit characters' obesity is

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[121] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World.* Indiana University Press, 1984. 221.
[122] Ibid., 278-302.
[123] Levy-Navarro, Elena. *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity: Body Image in Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and Skelton.* Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. 36.

generally greater than for their authentically fat counterparts because of the implicit need to account for a familiar performer's uncharacteristic girth, which leads also to the thematic focus on their fatness more generally. Hence the seemingly compulsory images of fatsuit characters, especially temporary ones like Fat Monica, Kiki, and Betty, and Chris from *Just Friends*, inhaling cake, potato chips, and other low-nutrient foodstuffs. The junk food is the modern equivalent of the banquet accoutrements in Rabelais, engineered entirely for pleasure beyond necessity.

Moreover, fatsuit performances activate the grotesque body at the extrafictional level. The doubled body of the fatsuit performer suggests flesh that can expand and contract indefinitely and instantaneously. The digitally-assisted scenes of transformation in *The Nutty Professor* films are exemplary. As Buddy Love and Sherman tousle over control of Sherman's body during the first film's climax, his fingers, lips, and belly bulge out, evoking Bakhtin's note that there are parts of the grotesque body "in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body…they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary."[124] This theme of grotesque expansion is a common trope of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Elaborate special effects enable spectacular mutations in scenes as various as Violet Beauregarde's transformation into a blueberry in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971); the final villains' enlargement in *The Story of Ricky-Oh* (1991) and *Dead Alive* (1992); and the clothes-bursting metamorphoses of

[124] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World.* Indiana University Press, 1984. 317.

TV's *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-82), David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), and countless werewolf films. Magical breast expansion is also a common gag on film and television,[125] and even constitutes a subgenre of pornography. The mutation of the fatsuit body, however, inheres in its very being, in the transformation between the thin star body and the fake fat body.

III. Eddie Murphy's Grotesque Body

"Fa**ot Leather Shit": *Delirious* and *Raw*

Raised first in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, then in a suburban household in Roosevelt, New York, Eddie Murphy entered the public scene as the cocky, potty-mouthed, precocious protégé of Richard Pryor and Bill Cosby, specializing on the standup stage in observational humor and impressions. He secured a spot on *Saturday Night Live* at 19, and quickly gained national attention for a roster of characters that lampooned black stereotypes, including a grown-up Buckwheat from the Little Rascals, the Mr. Rogers of the projects Mr. Robinson, and Black militant radio DJ Raheem Abdul Muhammad. Krin Gabbard observes that these characters echo the media's construction of Murphy at the time as "a curious amalgam of streetwise ghetto boy and dutiful son from a middle-class Long Island suburb."[126] This sense of double access is perhaps most saliently embodied by Mr. Robinson and Little Richard Simmons,

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[125] *Charmed* (1998-2006), *The Benny Hill Show* (1955-1989), *Repossessed* (1990), and *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000) are just a handful of TV shows and films that feature this gag.
[126] Gabbard, Krin. "Eddie Murphy: The Rise and Fall of the Golden Child." *Acting for America: Movie Stars of the 1980s*, edited by Robert Eberwein, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 120-138. 124.

the latter exactly the crossbreed of rock 'n' roll mania and effeminate edification the name suggests. In both cases, the performance of effete whiteness is repeatedly subverted by eruptions of volatility unambiguously raced as black. Gabbard's critique understands this performance as addressed to crossover audiences and frames Murphy's claims to street cred accordingly as a sort of winking authenticity.[127] Bambi Haggins meanwhile describes Murphy's individualist, racialized yet depoliticized blue humor as epitomizing "a time when progressive and regressive representations of blackness were intertwined in the rhetoric of Reagan America…the days of trickle-down, greed-is-good, aspirations to yuppiedom."[128] By either account, Murphy had perfected a version of black comedy early on that could fit seamlessly into network television hegemony.

Murphy's star rose quickly to the silver screen. By the mid-80s he was one of the hottest comedy commodities in Hollywood, and in many ways, he brought his mode of depoliticized blackness with him. Herman Beavers claims that in Murphy's concert films *Eddie Murphy Delirious* (1983) and *Raw* (1987), and buddy cop films *48 Hours* (1982), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), and their subsequent sequels, he consistently strikes a variation on what Richard Majors has termed the "cool pose": the transgressive performance of "potency and control" that defends the black male body against domination – social, sexual, physical, and otherwise. Although this pose descends from the anti-racist revolutionary ethos of Black Nationalism, Murphy sublimates its politics into an unruly sense of "individual license" acted out in white racial milieus. Yet

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[127] Ibid., 125.
[128] Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America.* Rutgers University Press, 2007. 75.

while Murphy's trademark "wisecracking and flamboyance" bears a "black cultural signature," they are always ultimately enlisted in the restoration of white patriarchal order.[129] In the words of Manthia Diawara, Murphy's body is most bankable once "deterritorialized" from black culture[130]; Gabbard asserts that only by limiting sexual expression to dialogue, and violence to law and order, could Murphy keep white audiences, entertaining the fantasies of corporal power played out on the black male body while containing its potential threat to white patriarchal order.[131]

This containment was doubly articulated by the notorious leather suits worn by Murphy for the standup performances documented in *Delirious* and *Raw*. These garish, tantalizingly form-fitting ensembles protect the world from a racialized potency that manifests in his routines as egomaniacal tirades against adversaries ranging from gold-diggers to Bill Cosby. But they also protect *him* from unwanted penetration – specifically, the homoerotic gaze, a threat he dramatizes in a joke about hiding his ass from gay audience members, and names by christening one suit "faggot leather shit."[132] Thus the defenses erected by the cool pose are configured to

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[129] Beavers, Herman. ""The Cool Pose": Intersectionality, Masculinity, and Quiescence in the Comedy and Films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy." *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, edited by Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 253-285. 255-59.
[130] Diawara, Manthia. "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance." *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1988, pp. 66-76.
[131] Gabbard, Krin. "Eddie Murphy: The Rise and Fall of the Golden Child." *Acting for America: Movie Stars of the 1980s*, edited by Robert Eberwein, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 120-138. 129.
[132] Beavers, Herman. ""The Cool Pose": Intersectionality, Masculinity, and Quiescence in the Comedy and Films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy." *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, edited by Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 253-285. 263-4.

close his body off and optimize it for consumption that crosses racial, gender, and class divides, but is structured by white, patriarchal, homophobic ideology.

The cool pose's bodily closure is literalized sartorially in Murphy's leather suits. These suits act as body-length sheaths, definitive of an impermeable territory of the self, in the words of Erving Goffman "the purest kind of egocentric territoriality."[133] Vivid head-to-toe coloring – red in *Delirious,*[134] purple and black in *Raw*[135] – along with bright stage lighting visually emphasize their angular, skintight density. Their relative ostentation to each other corresponds with distinct junctures of his meteoric rise: whereas the flamboyant fire-engine red of the earlier performance signifies the attention-grabbing, spotlight-stealing breakthrough Murphy was experiencing in 1983 following the success of *48 Hours* and *Trading Places* (1983), the relatively subdued, paisley-patterned tones of *Raw*'s outfit reflect a man at the height of his stardom, seasoned and bemused but at no cost of braggadocious swagger. Indeed, much of the running time of *Raw* is devoted to addressing his fame. A montage preceding his stage performance alternates between merchandise, billboards, and marquees bearing his name, and interview clips softballing questions about the man of the hour to the performance's attendees. Diversity is the prevailing theme: diversity of favorite films, but also of fans, who visibly vary in class, race, and gender, attesting to Murphy's enduring and constitutive crossover appeal. One clip in particular stands out. Three youngish, conventionally attractive African-American women allude to Murphy's sex

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[133] Goffman, Erving. "Status, Territory, and the Self." *The Goffman Reader*, edited by Erving; Lemert Goffman, Charles C.; Branaman, Ann, Blackwell, 1997. 50.
[134] Gowers, Bruce. *Eddie Murphy Delirious*, Paramount Pictures, 1983.
[135] Townsend, Robert. *Eddie Murphy Raw*, Paramount Pictures, 1987.

appeal in no uncertain terms, anticipating the return of his leather suit in particular. Soon thereafter, a limousine approaches the venue in bird's-eye-view, followed by the performer and his posse entering the building, shot from the waist down. An attempt to frame Murphy's formfitting, gaudy garb in heterosexual terms thus preempts its appearance onscreen.

The rationale for this precaution becomes immediately apparent, as Murphy launches into a fictional encounter with a gay cop in San Francisco whose manic frisking Murphy performs vigorously on his own ass and groin. The joke both extends and responds to a homophobic diatribe that opens *Delirious*, in which he explains that moving back and forth across the stage prevents any men from getting too good a look at his posterior. Because he doesn't "know where the faggot section is," Murphy reasons, he needs to keep his body in motion. As the three African-American women in *Raw* suggest and his leather suits in both sets confirm, that body is not available to them. If his ass and groin are to be groped, they will be groped entirely on his terms – by his own hands, if need be. The leather suit is thus figured as a heterosexist fortress.

The regressive tendencies of Murphy's performance, manifest in his leather suits, need not necessarily preclude emancipatory potential. The cool pose's roots in Black Nationalism, after all, link it to discourses that were both politically radical and unapologetically sexist.[136] But as many critics have noted, Murphy's comedy repeatedly invokes black social realism only to dismiss the collective in favor of the individual – that is, himself. This is precisely how Murphy is often differentiated from Richard Pryor, to whom he has positioned himself

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[136] The most emblematic example of this is the oft-quoted, potentially apocryphal assertion attributed to Stokely Carmichael that "the only position for women in the [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] is prone."

repeatedly as the heir apparent, especially in their shared specialty for mimicking black stereotypes. Donald Bogle observes that "Prior [gets] inside his winos, junkies or numbers runners, uncovering their vulnerabilities, their troubled histories, and revealing at times their sadness and touching beauty. Murphy, however, seem[s] to see his various characters as lowlife characters without any innate dignity."[137] Herman Beavers speaks to the self-serving dimension of Murphy's chameleonic imitations when he writes that, while fortifying the limits of his own body through the cool pose, Murphy "make[s] incursions into the bodies of others [by] occupy[ing] their voices."[138] Even Murphy's arguably most overtly political performance, in the *Saturday Night Live* sketch "White Like Me," is constrained by his anti-collectivist ethos. In a parodic inversion of John Howard Griffin's infamous race masquerade from 1961, Murphy goes undercover as a white man and discovers, naturally, a world of excessive privilege: cocktail parties on public transit, interest-free bank loans, and so on. Murphy ends by warning viewers that "I've got a lot of friends, and we've got a lot of makeup," so the next white person they encounter may not be white at all. Bambi Haggins notes that this "solution" is still too "rooted in individual initiative and action" to define black access to whiteness as anything but "still only for a privileged few – in this case, 'friends of Eddie.'"[139]

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[137] Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America.* Rutgers University Press, 2007. 73-4.
[138] Beavers, Herman. ""The Cool Pose": Intersectionality, Masculinity, and Quiescence in the Comedy and Films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy." *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, edited by Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 253-285. 264.
[139] Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America.* Rutgers University Press, 2007. 77.

If Murphy's leather suits are the sartorial manifestation of his depoliticized, mass-market cool pose, then they can be more precisely defined as ideological vessels for a tacit liberalism, in which the individual's self-sovereignty is paramount. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin usefully defines such a body – "entirely finished, completed, [and] strictly limited," signifying a "closed individuality"[140] – as the "classical body," and although this definition explicitly pertains to the aesthetic ideals of Enlightenment rationalism, its ethos clearly persists in the individualist ideology embodied by Reagan-era Eddie Murphy. Bakhtin opposes to the classical body the "grotesque" body, which is conversely porous, excessive, and constantly in "the act of becoming." It furthermore prioritizes hyperbole and the "material bodily lower stratum": that is, excrement, ejaculate, vomit, and everything in-between. This body prevails in the work of Renaissance novelist Francois Rabelais, the founding corpus for Bakhtin's taxonomy.[141] It also prevails in Murphy's standup and sketch comedy. Indeed, the contrast of the Murphy's leather-clad cool pose and his roster of outlandish characters echoes that between the classical and grotesque body, the one closed-off, coherent, and charismatic, the other unstable, coarse, and excessively sensual.

Murphy acknowledges as much in the sketch that opens *Raw.*[142] In the sketch, a prepubescent Murphy pantomimes urination, flatulence, defecation, and finally violence to the

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[140] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World.* Indiana University Press, 1984. 317-20.
[141] Ibid., 368.
[142] Not incidentally, the sketch is co-written with Keenan Ivory Wayans, who along with Murphy and *Raw*'s director Robert Townshend is identified by Haggins as a forerunner of the "Black Pack": the group of mass-market filmmakers who "used film comedy as social discourse on black culture and the African American condition" in the late '80s and early '90s. (Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America.* Rutgers University Press, 2007. 108.)

genitals, as part of a joke delivered to a mostly horrified extended family. Another prolonged foray into scatology occurs during Murphy's onstage performance, when he imitates his younger self describing different types of feces in the style of Richard Pryor. In both cases a similar operation of displacement occurs. Murphy indulges in ribald bathroom humor, while at the same time distancing himself from it. It is not Eddie per se making these jokes, but an Eddie of a different era, an Eddie who occupied a completely different body from the one onstage and onscreen. Another compromise is brokered: Murphy engages in the bawdy "language of the marketplace"[143] – the favored terrain of the grotesque body – without degrading his "completed" body and jeopardizing his cool pose. Such performances abound in *Delirious.* His imitation of Vegas-era Elvis involves his "butt sticking out like he gonna shit," and flatulence punctuating "My Way." An extended bit on the horrors of family barbecues introduces a giantess named Aunt Bunny, who terrifies the children in attendance with her mustache, aggressive kisses, and considerable size, prompting one to ask, "She Bigfoot, isn't she?" In all these cases, Murphy's grotesque characters are abstracted from his virile classical body.

During his peak in the 1980s, then, Murphy's star image was explicitly comprised of resolved ideological contradictions. Black identity was expressed through the swaggering individualism of the cool pose, eliminating its more problematic radical components to better fit a crossover appeal. He offered his body for sexual objectification, but labored to disavow availability to the homoerotic gaze. Finally, his virtuosity as a performer obtained in his roster of

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[143] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World.* Indiana University Press, 1984. 145.

grotesque characters, whose excessive bodies he occupied in mimesis while keeping them abstracted from his own trim, virile, self-sovereign body. These resolutions materialized in his leather suits, which functioned as sheaths, confirming the closure of his own body while allowing him still to make incursions into others. In the following section, I examine the fate of this sheath once Murphy entered a career slump and was forced to recalibrate his star identity and performance practice in the 1990s. I argue that Murphy sustained the integrity of his egocentric classical body by bracketing it off, housing it in a new sheath: the fatsuit.

A New Sheath: *The Nutty Professor* Series

Murphy's cool pose would get reconfigured in a number of ways as his film career drew onward: consider *Boomerang* (1993), for example, which poses him as a prodigious womanizer in bad need of taming. But by all accounts, at some point after 1988's *Coming to America,* his commercial viability began to wane. The diversity of the films that followed, including *Boomerang,* the gangster epic *Harlem Nights* (1989) and the vampire comedy *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995), makes the cause unclear. But whatever caused the tailspin was clearly corrected by *The Nutty Professor,* a runaway box office hit. Gabbard conjectures that its success owed in part to "put[ting] quotation marks around" the Eddie Murphy of the '80s, in the character of Buddy Love, the "priapic sex machine" alter ego the obese protagonist Sherman

Klump unleashes in attempts to develop a weight-loss serum.[144] This retools the division of classical and grotesque bodies attendant to Murphy's standup performance, except that it casts the lean, virile, flamboyantly cocky black man as the villain – an enemy from within, no less – rather than the wisecracking hero. Audience sympathy is reserved instead for the disarmingly kindhearted Sherman. More significantly, Sherman's fat body, and the fat bodies of his mother, father, brother, and grandmother, all also played by Murphy, become sites of broad humor that is, in a way, the tamed dramatization of his standup routine's verbal humor. Flatulence, sexual mishaps, and gags concerning overburdened furniture and Olympian feats of gluttony comprise the PG-13 performance of the grotesque body Murphy's fatsuit allows him to make, all the while explicitly preserving the trim leading man body that had been central to his star image up to this point. Like the leather of *Delirious* and *Raw*, the fatsuit is a literal and symbolic sheath. As such it renders Murphy double-bodied, in that his thin body is always copresent with his fatsuit body. The before-and-after visual logic of the promotional material for *The Nutty Professor* certainly reflects as much (Fig. 2).

The risk of applying Bakhtin's terminology too promiscuously accompanies any use of his concepts outside of their prescribed historical and literary context, but is especially emphatic vis-à-vis describing fat bodies as grotesque. The exemplars of Bakhtin's use of the term are Rabelais' giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, whose scatological indulgences and blasphemous merriment invoke the subversive, fantastical tropes of the medieval folk imaginary. Murphy's

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[144] Gabbard, Krin. "Eddie Murphy: The Rise and Fall of the Golden Child." *Acting for America: Movie Stars of the 1980s*, edited by Robert Eberwein, Rutgers University Press, 2010, pp. 120-138. 138.

fatsuit performances, on the other hand, represent real fat bodies, however subject to slapstick abuse. Their CGI-assisted science fiction elements notwithstanding, *The Nutty Professor* and its sequel, *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps* (2000), are chiefly governed by representational realism. The use of such a value-laden term as grotesque to describe actual obesity is thus potentially irresponsible.

And yet Murphy's fatsuit body is not merely obese. As the Klump clan, and as Rasputia in *Norbit*, Murphy engages freely in the activities of the material lower bodily stratum. These activities are characterized by the "exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness" inherent to the grotesque body.[145] Consider not only the struggles between Sherman's protruding belly and the chalkboard, or between giantess Rasputia's heaving bosom and the steering wheel of her car, or the wide-angle photography favored for visualizing them; but also that when these characters fart, belch, and eat, they do so in excess of what could reasonably be considered normal human capabilities. When Klump patriarch Clesius is administered the Heimlich maneuver in *Nutty Professor 2*, the consequent fart starts a small fire. In similar fashion, the films exaggerate the gravitational consequences of their full-figured characters' existences. When Rasputia visits a water park in a particularly mean-spirited scene of *Norbit*, she is first only just barely able to fit through the turnstile, and then accumulates so much momentum on a water slide that she catapults through a fence at the end of it. Then there's the soundtrack: Rasputia's appearance onscreen is often preceded by the ominous elephantine rumble of her approach. The magnitude

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[145] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press, 1984. 307.

of her sonic presence does not correspond realistically with her visible girth, which, while considerable, conforms nevertheless to feasible dimensions of morbid obesity. Indeed, the fatsuit developed for Rasputia was so burdensome that for the water park scene, Murphy's made-up face was digitally placed on a body double.[146] The signifying economy of these fatsuit comedies thus visualizes actual fatness as grotesque.

The Nutty Professor was Murphy's second collaboration with makeup artist Rick Baker, who had won the first Academy Award for Best Makeup for 1982's *An American Werewolf in London*. Baker and Murphy's first collaboration, *Coming to America,* albeit sans fatsuits, also featured Murphy in multiple roles, including the cantankerous elderly Jew Saul. This could be seen as the logical conclusion of Murphy's chameleonic comedy practice. If, as Beavers asserts, Murphy takes on the voices of his socially archetypal characters to make incursions into their bodies, then his heavily-made-up multiple performances in *Coming to America* make these incursions manifest in the visual field. The fatsuits of *The Nutty Professor* and its sequel, requiring up to five hours' daily application of rubber prosthetics to Murphy's face and visible extremities in addition to the polyurethane-spandex suit underneath his clothing,[147] brought his mimetic embodiment to full-figured fruition. One virtuosity thus enabled another. With these films, as well as *Bowfinger* (1998), Murphy nominated himself for the august tradition of playing multiple comic roles at once that included Alec Guinness, Peter Sellers, and Jerry Lewis, who plays the eponymous boffin and Buddy Love in the original *The Nutty Professor* (1963). But

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[146] Magid, Ron. "Life on Girth." *Make-Up Artist Magazine*, no. 65, 2007, pp. 38-47. 41-2.
[147] Mallory, Michael. "The Man Behind the Rubber Masks; Makeup Master Rick Baker Enables Eddie Murphy to Put on His Many Faces." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Jul 2000.

even by the time Baker took on *The Nutty Professor*, he was still considered a "monster meister," as one headline puts it.[148] While the press continued to describe his work as the craft of imagining radical bodily alterity – "Rick Baker Makes People Look Like Something Else," reads the title of one piece[149] - he was simultaneously praised for the unprecedented verisimilitude of his creations, especially in regards to the *Nutty Professor* films.[150]

The discourse of virtuosity around fatsuits is thus a contradictory one: simulated full-figured bodies are valued as grotesques, but only if they are believable. The visual treatment of Rasputia in *Norbit* reflects as much. Her portrayal as a black female Gargantua prioritizes close-ups that linger bug-eyed on her exposed rubber flesh. One such moment shoots her from behind, as she lowers herself into a bathtub like oversized Archimedes, with predictable results. The meticulously rendered rolls of fat cascading down her back fixate the camera, making a spectacle equally of a full-figured black woman's body, and of Baker's unmatched attention to detail.

Scenes such as these make it easy to sympathize with fat acceptance activists, fat studies scholars, as well as the viewing public more largely, who charge that even at their most ostensibly edifying, fatsuit comedies – and Murphy's in particular – corroborate notions of obesity as monstrous and abject in contrast to reified ideals of thinness. Hence the necessary reservations about ascribing the designation "grotesque" uncritically. But this contradictory coalition of hyperbole and verisimilitude only further invokes Bakhtin's relevance for these

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[148] Sanello, Frank. "Monster Mesiter Rick Baker's Newest Is 'Something' on Tv." *Chicago Tribune*, 6 May 1988.
[149] Lyman, Rick. "Rick Baker Makes People Look Like Something Else." *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 14 Aug 2000.
[150] Mallory, Michael. "The Man Behind the Rubber Masks; Makeup Master Rick Baker Enables Eddie Murphy to Put on His Many Faces." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Jul 2000.

thoroughly modern texts. He terms the aesthetics defined in *Rabelais and his World* as grotesque *realism*, not because the fantastical escapades of Gargantua and Pantagruel reflect social reality per se, but because their persistent preoccupation with the lower bodily stratum prioritizes the material over the cerebral. The same could be said of Eddie Murphy's comedy. His forebears on the standup stage – Pryor and Dick Gregory especially – were similarly preoccupied, but Murphy, by evacuating black social realism of sociopolitical critique, takes the process further. The short-lived Claymation series *The PJs,* for example, follows the quotidian exploits of Murphy-voiced housing projects superintendent Thurgood Stalls, and mines the topos of black inner-city poverty for what could charitably be called cavalier for network television but what Spike Lee has unambiguously deemed "really hateful…towards black people, plain and simple."[151] When Baker makes Murphy's characters visually manifest in live action, the realism is aesthetic as well as social.

The Nutty Professor effects this transition by displacing Sherman's most hyperbolic grotesque moments into figments of his imagination. When he falls asleep feeling sorry for himself in front of the television one night, Sherman dreams he has reached King Kong-size girth and is terrorizing a crowded city. After devouring a rotisserie chicken he finds in a high-rise, he is stricken with appropriately colossal flatulence. The subsequent blast is visualized as a pulsing shockwave, and when a hapless vagrant lights a cigarette down below, a mushroom cloud engulfs the city. At this moment Sherman awakes. In another nightmare, a romantic rendezvous

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[151] Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America.* Rutgers University Press, 2007. 86.

with his love interest Carla on a sunlit beach is sabotaged unceremoniously when he mounts her only to bury her in the sand. Other moments that fall under the banner of the Bakhtinian grotesque involve the inopportune emergence of Buddy Love. *The Nutty Professor II* opens with a dream that Sherman's wedding to Denise – the sequel's love interest – is interrupted by Buddy's head bursting from Sherman's fly at the altar. Significantly, these fantasy sequences are the only instances in either film that engage Sherman's body in activity of the lower bodily stratum. Each of them envisions an instance of "flooding out," which Erving Goffman defines as the "flow of affect" that puts a stricken subject "momentarily 'out of play'" – that is, unable to "sustain an appropriate expressive role" for the given social encounter.[152] Laughing, crying, and losing one's temper are exemplary, and although Goffman only refers to emotional responses, the eruptions of excessive appetite and its fallout in Sherman's dreams, as expressions of the protagonist's ongoing body anxiety, fit the model. Almost without exception, the grotesque realism of Sherman's fatsuit body is sequestered by fantasy to maintain the diegetic world's credibility as well as some measure of classical dignity.

The finale of the first film is one exception. Sherman's serum begins to wane in public, generating a climactic struggle between him and Buddy Love over control of Sherman's body. Distinguishing the grotesque body from the classical body, Bakhtin writes that it "is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body."[153] If Rick Baker's makeup wizardry instantiates Murphy's

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[152] Goffman, Erving. *Encounters.* Bobbs-Merrill, 1961. 55.
[153] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World.* Indiana University Press, 1984. 317.

body in the act of becoming, then the moments of Buddy's emergence, and especially this CGI-assisted id-versus-ego battle royale, are emblematic. Indeed, they seem to dramatize the very act of expanding Murphy's body for the screen, in much the same way that Vivian Sobchack describes the special effects of *Death Becomes Her* as eliding the labor of weight loss and plastic surgery through the "surface 'magic'" of digital imaging.[154] Moreover, these scenes make plain the presence of Murphy's body onscreen. He is already hardly disguised – his features are never obscured by Baker's prosthetics, much as his voice is always recognizable in *The PJs* and the animated films *Mulan* (1998) and the *Shrek* series (2001-10) – but his scenes of transformation and flux in *The Nutty Professor* films emphasize that inside Sherman Klump is Eddie Murphy. In light of the contemporary "inside every fat person is a thin person" trope, Bakhtin might say that inside Sherman's grotesque body is Murphy's classical body. At the very least, Sherman's simulated obesity is envisioned as the very same diegetic flesh and blood as Murphy's trim movie star frame. The sequestering of lower bodily stratum activity to Sherman's imagination could be understood, then, as an expression of the egocentric sheathing identified in Murphy's standup comedy. The fact that the only body function gags that do occur in the diegetic real world engage the bodies of fatsuit characters besides Sherman – namely, the flatulent Clesius Klump – would be consistent with this expression, since their foundation in Murphy's thin body is comparatively obscured.

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[154] Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture.* University of California Press, 2004. 60.

As a sheath to replace his leather suits, Murphy's fatsuits thus introduced a new set of resolved contradictions to his star image while preserving the integrity of his slender, sexually viable performing body. The virile masculinity of *Raw*, *Delirious*, and Murphy's buddy movies of the 1980s was bracketed off as an unruly id, given ample screen time in *The Nutty Professor* films as Buddy Love but subordinated to the crossover appeal of the sympathetically humble, desexualized Sherman Klump. The fatsuits materialize the grotesque characters of Murphy's stand-up comedy in diegetic space and accommodate a display of virtuosity: his, as a chameleonic comic performer, and Rick Baker's, as a gold standard makeup artist. But Baker's virtuosity is constituted by the credibility of his simulations, meaning Murphy's fatsuit bodies must be both hyperbolic and verisimilar. The grotesque aspect of these characters must be further reconciled with the presence of Murphy's body within them, and so Sherman's excessive bodily functions are cordoned off narratively into his dreams as expressions of his fat shame. To conclude, I argue that the compromised purchase on the Bakhtinian grotesque made by Murphy's comedy practice reaches its logical conclusion in *Norbit.* As Rasputia, the obese battle-axe married to the titular henpecked nebbish – who he also plays, with subtle prosthetic makeup – Murphy dons villainous hypersexual fat black femininity as his latest sheath.

The Negative Grotesque: *Norbit*

Addressing the prevalence of black comics playing black women in fatsuit in the new millennium, which include Tyler Perry and Martin Lawrence in addition to Murphy, Mia Mask contends that it constitutes a contemporary form of blackface, a performance style motivated, according to Eric Lott, by an admixture of "desire and disgust."[257] Mask goes on to lament that these fat female grotesques fail to fulfill their potential to upset the dominant, patriarchal production of "culture, knowledge, and pleasure"[258] – a process Bakhtin calls the "carnival" after the medieval folk festivals where these symbolic subversions of official culture took place – with the "sassy efficacy" afforded them by their liminal status.[259] Indeed, in *Norbit*, Rasputia is thoroughly contained by the dominant order on both formal and narrative terms. The leering camera frames her as a figure of contempt by documenting every inch of her unruly body in rejoinder to her excessive vanity, a sort of softcore pornography of comic revulsion. When her town finally loses patience with her selfish demands and manipulative tactics, she is driven out of the film's idyllic setting along with her cartoonish thug brothers, by what can only be described as a multiracial lynch mob.

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[257] Mask, Mia. "Who's Behind the Fat Suit? Momma, Madea, Rasputia and the Politics of Cross-Dressing." *Contemporary Black American Cinema*, edited by Mia Mask, Routledge, 2012, pp. 155-174. 161.
[258] Ibid., 169.
[259] Ibid., 160.

If *Norbit* renders Rasputia as a grotesque figure, then it is thus in the mode of the "negative grotesque." She harnesses all the attributes of the grotesque body – including a ravenous sexual appetite, much to the misery of the impotent Norbit – but is characterized as morally deformed and spiritually vacant, thereby calling for her expulsion from civilized society. According to Bakhtin, the negative grotesque is the version of the grotesque body that occupied post-Renaissance literature, leaving future readers ill-equipped to appreciate the joyous, democratic, universalizing laughter Rabelais' grotesque imagery was meant to evoke.[260] *The Nutty Professor* films come closer to the latter via the Klump family, especially during dinner scenes. Gathered together around the banquet table – a favored terrain of the grotesque – they eat in excess, drink only slightly less, insult each other, occasionally hurl utensils at each other, pass gas freely, and discuss fornication openly, all under the sign of joyous togetherness. Sherman, however, abjures, ashamed of his size, embarrassed by his family's indecorousness, and blaming their merry excess, and his mother's smothering love, for his obesity – indeed, during the King Kong nightmare sequence, he envisions her cheering on his gluttony from the asphalt. Although he is made the object of many fat jokes throughout *The Nutty Professor* films, they tend towards the grounded terms of Goffman's sociology, often involving Sherman's inability to maintain his own territories of the self properly, as in the chalkboard gag, or when he attempts to sit in the center of a crowded auditorium. The films' purchase on the grotesque is ambivalent: two scenes at a comedy club in the first indulge cruel verbal jokes at the expense of fat people while sympathizing with Sherman's hurt feelings, rendering the crowd's carnivalesque laughter both

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[260] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press, 1984. 123-39.

shameful and reflective of our own. But Rasputia tips Murphy's fatsuit comedy performance unambiguously into the realm of the negative grotesque.

As Mask suggests, Murphy's performance of the negative grotesque through fat black femininity is especially charged due to Rasputia's overt lustfulness. As Mama Anna Klump, Murphy is asexual and maternal, perpetuating hoary representational clichés for fat middle-aged African-American women in the cinema.[261] Grandma Klump is conversely highly sexually active, and expresses as much through bawdy dialogue and, in *The Nutty Professor II*, an audacious sexual advance on Buddy Love. But she is also thoroughly defeminized. Her features are made androgynous by the wages of age and a perpetually furrowed brow, and her voice is pinched, scratchy, and low. Rasputia, however, signifies as both highly feminine - if outlandishly so – and sexually available. The film's advertisements feature Rasputia in states of undress and suggest hypersexuality: in one television spot, she washes a car in slow motion while Kelis' fellatio anthem "Milkshake" plays on the soundtrack. In the film itself, Norbit and Rasputia's honeymoon is staged as a montage of Rasputia donning different sets of lingerie before taking running jumps onto her horrified, supine husband and a bed that gets repeatedly destroyed, much as the staircase does under the mustachioed Aunt Bunny in *Delirious*. In a later scene set at a water park, Rasputia declares to Norbit's childhood friend and love interest Kate that he "can't keep his hands off me." Kate grimaces, echoing an attitude shared unanimously

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[261] Victoria Sturtevant argues, through Donald Bogle, that black actresses in early Hollywood rarely had more than two choices of types to play: either the "sexy, tragic, volatile" mulatto, such as Lena Horne, or the "sexless, cheerful, maternal" mammy, such as Hattie McDaniel. (Sturtevant, Victoria. "'But Things Is Changin' Nowadays an' Mammy's Gettin' Bored': Hattie Mcdaniel and the Culture of Dissemblance." *Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 44, no. Fall, 1999, pp. 68-79.)

among the film's characters, in case the film's gags didn't make it clear enough: this fat black woman's sexuality is monstrous.

Andrea Elizabeth Shaw traces fat black women's hypersexuality throughout black diaspora culture and finds that agential representations of such almost always must position themselves as resistant to dominant Western epistemologies. One such example is Guyanese poet Grace Nichols' "Invitation," which describes "her large, ungraspable breasts and her slippery thighs [to] suggest the elusiveness of her sexuality, a result of her immense body and subsequently a bodily representation of sexual and cultural independence."[262] Rasputia's sexuality is by contrast an imposition, upon Norbit as much as their long-suffering bedframe. Tectonic sound effects and shattered prop furniture further signify her gravitational impact. Shaw argues that conventional representations conflate fat black women's appetite for sex with their appetite for food,[263] and indeed, in *Norbit,* Rasputia expresses both amply.

But perhaps the most salient cultural antecedent for Rasputia, and fat black women's hypersexuality more generally, is Saartjie Baartman, or as she was more colloquially known, "Hottentot Venus." Baartman was a Khoi native of South Africa who was exhibited in England and Paris in the early 19th century under the pretense of scientific study. Of particular interest was her steatopygia, a genetic characteristic associated with Khoisan peoples that produces pronounced buttocks and a "Hottentot apron," an "unusually formed labia caused by 'a

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[262] Shaw, Andrea E. *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies.* Lexington Books, 2006. 56.
[263] Ibid., 52.

hypertrophy of the labia and nymphae caused by a manipulation of the genitalia and serving as a sign of beauty among certain tribes,'" according to medical historian Sander Gilman.[264] After Baartman's death her genitalia and hindquarters were preserved and kept on display in Paris's Musée de l'Homme until 1974. The emphasis on Baartman's sexual organs formed part of a discourse that emphasized hypersexuality as inherent to African peoples, and much as her preserved organs served as emblems of this antiquated discourse well into the 20th century, the linkage of hypersexuality and black bodies – particularly black women's bodies – persists to this day.[265] According to Janell Hobson, these bodies have consequently been conceived of historically as "'grotesque,' 'strange,' 'unfeminine,' 'lascivious,' and 'obscene,'" and are epitomized by their buttocks.[266] Eddie Murphy's performance of Rasputia is an especially legible instance of this tradition. The final *coup de grace* against her is even delivered against her rear end by Mr. Wong – played by Murphy in yellowface – who cheers victoriously, "Light in the brow-hole!" Moreover, the fragmentation of Baartman's body after her death resonates with the simulation of obesity via fatsuit performance, which, as Mendoza notes, imagines the fat body as capable of being broken apart to reveal a thin, ideal, whole body underneath.[267] Indeed, a feature in the trade press periodical *MakeUp Artist Magazine* on *Norbit* takes this fragmentation for granted, revealing that Murphy's body double was given meticulously-rendered breast prosthetics (Fig. 4) to wear for Rasputia's bikini scenes. These simulated breasts

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[264] Ibid. 48.
[265] Ibid. 48-9.
[266] Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture.* Routledge, 2005. 88.
[267] Mendoza, Katharina. "Seeing through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in "the Nutty Professor" and "Shallow Hal"." *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, New York University Press, 2009, pp. 301-310. 304.

are pictured alongside a prosthetic stomach that Murphy wears during Rasputia's conversation with Kate, a scene that replicates not only the fat/thin dichotomy of *The Nutty Professor*'s movie poster, but also the dark skin/light skin dichotomy central to conventional Western standards of beauty, even when applied to black bodies.

The resonance between Rasputia and Saartjie Baartman echoes the ideological corroboration of white patriarchal order that characterizes Murphy's performances in *48 Hours* and *Beverly Hills Cop*. In the case of *Norbit* and "Hottentot Venus," full-figured hypersexual black femininity is presented as monstrous, and contrasted with a body that conforms more narrowly to Western ideals of fair-skinned slenderness. Indeed, the film seems to hearken back to the past in a number of ways. Its mountain town setting is photographed in oversaturated color and populated by utopic diversity, like a post-racial Normal Rockwell painting. Furthermore, as many critics contend, Wesley Morris included, the film's notion of beauty is a bit antediluvian: by 2007, hegemonic struggle in American popular culture had produced standards that, while still privileging slender over curvy and caramel over dark chocolate, were at least incrementally closer to equal-opportunity objectification than *Norbit*'s storybook Manicheanism would suggest. Most significantly, though, Rasputia's shrieking shrew voice recalls vividly Murphy's gold-digger character from *Raw*.

Murphy's unadorned body, meanwhile, is nowhere to be found. In Buddy Love's stead are a host of duplicitous black men, played by well-known actors such as Cuba Gooding Jr., Marlon Wayans, and Terry Crews, all of whom are driven out along with Rasputia. But the closest Murphy himself comes to taking a starring role in the film is as the protagonist Norbit. As this emblem of dominated masculinity, Murphy repurposes the character of Jiff Ramsey from

Bowfinger (1998), a sweet but socially graceless nobody enlisted to impersonate his twin brother, conceited action star Kitt Ramsey – also Murphy. Kitt himself is a reprisal of Buddy Love in that Murphy plays him as a parody of his wisecracking, virile self of the '80s. Norbit, as a facsimile of the foil to this parody, effects Murphy's double displacement of his former self from his star image. And yet, as the pages of *MakeUp Artist Magazine* reveal, even Norbit required facial prosthetics to materialize. For Murphy, then, the emasculated 'nice guy' is still a sheath. The body-length leather suits he wore for *Delirious* and *Raw* asserted an egocentric black identity that emphasized personal gain and sexual potency over collectivist politics, by flattering his trim frame while at the same time shielding it from penetration in a materialization of the cool pose. The fatsuits of *The Nutty Professor* films made his grotesque characters visually manifest while bracketing off the virility of his star image in the figure of Buddy Love. This process continued with *Norbit,* which further abstracted the Buddy Love persona by not only assigning the fatsuit to an even more legible sign of monstrosity, the hypersexual fat black woman, but by excluding Murphy's body from signifying any of his '80s image at all. That would be left to his performance in *Dreamgirls* as Jimmy "Thunder" Early, which would appropriate his manic virility towards a bid at serious character acting. Indeed, the role attracted a nomination for an Academy Award that he did not eventually take home. Speculation persists that his lowbrow, outsize performance of the negative grotesque in *Norbit* jeopardized his Oscar chances. Perhaps this was the one contradiction in his star image no sheath could resolve.

Chapter 3

Scatological Formalism: Irony, Intertextuality, and Dystopian Masculinities

Like innumerable series creators before them, Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim followed the 2010 finale of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, their sketch comedy series on Cartoon Network's late-night Adult Swim programming block, with a leap to the silver screen. *Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie* premiered at Sundance in 2012 and was not well-received, to put it charitably. Will Leitch takes a particularly blunt and striking interpretive stance in his negative review of the film on the blog Deadspin. Titled "The Oppressively Nihilistic Anti-Comedy of Tim and Eric, Who Think You're Stupid For Laughing," the review argues that the comedy duo's obliquely ironic style is, above all else, a mockery of anyone so lacking in refinement as to find something funny that is meant to be. At first blush this might seem to be merely an insult, accounting for a film's badness by sarcastically suggesting it is bad by design. But as the review proceeds it becomes clear that Leitch genuinely interprets *Billion Dollar Movie* as an attack on the enterprise of comedy itself. Hence "anti-comedy." Philip Auslander, discussing the postmodern performativity of stand-up comedy in the mid-to-late 1970s, describes "anti-comedy" as "comedy that seems to have given up on the possibility that it could function as a significant critical discourse on the model of classical satire and, instead, takes the failure of comedy, the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world, as

its subject."[1] In *Billion Dollar Movie,* and to an even greater extent in *Awesome Show,* there's no shortage of awkward timing, tonal dissonance, and amateurism, the surest aesthetic markers of anti-comedy. But to make his case, Leitch foregrounds two gags in particular. He writes:

> Oh, do you like your *Bridesmaids* group-diarrhea jokes? [...] Well, in *Billion Dollar Movie*, you get a scene in which six adolescent boys excrete on [Eric] Wareheim for two full minutes. You laugh when Jason Segel stands naked, crying in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*? In *Billion Dollar Movie,* you watch as Wareheim gets his penis pierced right there in front of you. Funny? Of course not. (God, I hope not.)[2]

Shrewdly, Leitch decodes the willfully evasive language of anti-comedy via comparison with instances of popular comedy that take on similar material, arriving at the common conclusion regarding anti-comedy that it functions as a satire of a specific comic form. Here, the form is gross-out comedy, which, like anti-comedy, came of age in the aftermath of 1960s counterculture. *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2007) are emblematic of gross-out comedy's ongoing commercial viability and, significantly and ironically, its newfound respectability. Both films were greeted upon release with a critical consensus of approval, a common theme of which was the embedment of ribald bodily humor with reputable narrative aesthetics: verbal wit, psychological realism, and in *Bridesmaids*' case, even a whiff of progressive convictions.[3] *Bridesmaids* even managed a couple of Academy Award nominations

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[1] Breznican, Anthony. "Sundance 2012: Angry Moviegoers Storm out of Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie." *Entertainment Weekly*, 2012, http://ew.com/article/2012/01/25/sundance-furious-tim-and-eric/. 137.
[2] Leitch, Will. "The Oppressively Nihilistic Anti-Comedy of Tim and Eric, Who Think You're Stupid for Laughing." *Deadspin*, 2012. http://deadspin.com/5889909/the-oppressively-nihilistic-anti-comedy-of-tim-and-eric-who-think-youre-stupid-for-laughing.
[3] Feig, Paul. *Bridesmaids*, Universal Pictures, 2011.

– Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Melissa McCarthy and Best Original Screenplay – though it won neither. In short, gross-out comedy had finally cleared middlebrow standards of legitimacy, availing itself to approbation regularly denied its popular forebears, even if it still figured into cyclical harangues against mass cultural coarseness.[4] Leitch's critique echoes some of the same moralizing spirit, but rather than defend elite culture's "sweetness and light" – as Matthew Arnold, middlebrow culture's putative forefather, famously described the immutable virtues of the Western canon – against the encroachments of hoi polloi vulgarity, Leitch draws a line of distinction within the vulgarity itself. On one side lie the gross-out gags of decent folk, characterized by relative restraint and dramatic integrity; on the other, the gross-out gags of ironists, bereft of the civilizing repressions of wit or any attempt to curry favor with a wide audience, dedicated singularly to triggering disgust.

The latter category of gags is the central subject of this chapter. Scholars of gross-out comedy take as a given that, as the "gross-out" moniker implies, film and TV in this mode pursue disgust to a significant degree. As discussed in previous chapters, William Paul writes of gore horror and gross-out comedy alike displaying "a real sense of exhilaration...in testing how far they can go, how much they can show without making us turn away, how far they can push the boundaries to provoke a cry of 'Oh, gross!' as a sign of approval, an expression of disgust

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[4] Leonard Maltin includes *Bridesmaids* in a 2011 blog post decrying "the New Vulgarity," conjecturing that "perhaps because Hollywood shied away from R-rated comedies for such a long time—until a few box-office hits turned the tide—producers, directors and writers are now acting like children who have suddenly been given permission to curse. And since every film wants to top the previous one in its genre, all bets are off when it comes to that elusive quality known as good taste." Maltin, Leonard. "Comedy Goes Down the Toilet." *Leonard Maltin*, 2011. http://leonardmaltin.com/comedy-goes-down-the-toilet/.

that is pleasurable to call out."[5] Similarly, Geoff King describes these moments of successful provocation in gross-out comedy as "frissons," denoting a visceral response that dovetails well with, but is not quite the same as, laughter.[6] Yet both Paul and King make sense of gross-out's pleasures as a form of aesthetic populism in which universal bodily drives triumph over the superstructure that represses them. By contrast, Leitch accounts for the extremity of Tim and Eric's gross-outs as a punitive rebuke to the apparent populism of *Bridesmaids* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall.* The film's alienating potential is confirmed by an Entertainment Weekly report from its Sundance premiere, where it hemorrhaged roughly a third of its audience by the end credits. In response to Tim shouting "get the fuck out" at one point in the film, an audience member, already headed to the exits, reportedly shouted back, "We fucking are!"[7]

Distinguished from the comedy of repressed but familiar bodily humiliations, then, is the comedy of refusal, negation, alienation, and detachment. Tim and Eric sabotage the surface denotation of their shit and dick gags and promote ironic readings in its place, achieving both at once by ratcheting up the intensity of the gags' gross-out spectacle. The gags' contrived excess becomes at least part, if not the totality, of their function. If, as conventional wisdom asserts, jokes are indeed social sorting mechanisms, always tacitly demarcating an in-group and an out-group, the outgroup for Tim and Eric – certainly by the reviewer's account – is whoever fails to

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[5] Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy.* Columbia University Press, 1994. 20.
[6] King, Geoff. *Film Comedy.* Wallflower Press, 2002. 65.
[7] Breznican, Anthony. "Sundance 2012: Angry Moviegoers Storm out of Tim and Eric's Billion Dollar Movie." *Entertainment Weekly*, 2012, http://ew.com/article/2012/01/25/sundance-furious-tim-and-eric/.

see the ironic logic underneath what at face value are just contrived, undisciplined gross-out gags.

Though the case of Eric in a bathtub of feces and getting a Prince Albert in closeup is an extreme and unusual one, the gags' guiding principle of aesthetic disgust, intertwined deeply with irony, is a constitutive feature of contemporary gross-out comedy. There's no clean divide here: although *Tim and Eric* and *Bridesmaids* are juxtaposed, the latter's overtly commercial, chiefly naturalistic ilk has long drawn inspiration from the visceral aesthetics of "alt" comedy like *Tim and Eric* as well as horror, surrealism, and performance art. As Paul's description of gross-out comedy's boundary-pushing suggests, the trend is detectable as far back as the Animal Comedy cycle of the 1970s and '80s. As I argue in the chapter that follows, however, it was during gross-out comedy's second wave, beginning in the mid-1990s, that aesthetic disgust emerged as a more powerful force in film and television comedy. My aim is to develop a genealogy of this trend through *Tim and Eric*, casting the appearance of disgust in gross-out comedy not just as an inevitability of jokes about bodily functions and social transgression, but more significantly as a manifestation of ironic detachment and self-reflexivity that have long provided the "smart" undercurrent to gross-out comedy's "dumb" sensibility. This genealogy calls for a broadened frame of reference for gross-out comedy: in addition to elaborating on Paul's interest in the affinity between the subgenre and "splatter" horror, I also find roots in the transgressive avant-gardism of film surrealism as well as John Waters' midnight movies, and expand gross-out comedy's formal boundaries to address film parody, animated sitcoms, sketch comedy, and reality TV in addition to the 'classical' narrative film form at the center of Paul's analysis.

I. Reflexive Gags and Satirical Subtext in Studio Comedies, 1998-2001

Parody, Excess, and Having It Both Ways

As Carl Plantinga argues, ironic disgust serves a parodic function. It stands to reason, then, that gross-out comedy has flourished in the context of film parody; indeed, Paul Bonila identifies parody has central to the cognitive imperative of Hollywood Lowbrow. Bonila identifies the cognitive imperative with the intertextual aspect of Hollywood Lowbrow films, the extent to which they demand their viewers to recognize pop cultural references. The parody subgenre has long had strong affinities with gross-out comedy, owing to its unique tendency towards exaggeration and the grotesque: the infamous campfire scene of Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974)[8] and the literalized sight gag of shit hitting a fan in *Airplane!* (1980)[9] are particularly key contributions of scatological performance and imagery to the Hollywood lexicon. The 1990s and 2000s saw this emphasis on spectacularized bodily functions renewed and intensified. In *Jane Austin's Mafia!* (1998), a mob movie spoof from Jim Abrahams (one third of the *Airplane!* team), an epidemic of projectile vomiting breaks out at a funeral in one extended gag.[10] In *Scary Movie* (2000), made by and starring Shawn, Marlon, and Keenan Ivory Wayans, who aside from founding *In Living Color* had become veritable auteurs of hard-R gross-out parody, the heroine's first sexual experience is bookended by the unveiling of her

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[8] Brooks, Mel. *Blazing Saddles*, Warner Bros., 1974.
[9] Abrahams, Jim; Zucker, David; Zucker, Jerry. *Airplane!*, Paramount Pictures, 1980.
[10] Abrahams, Jim. *Jane Austen's Mafia!*, Buena Vista Pictures, 1998.

bountiful pubic hair, which her boyfriend hacks through with a machete, and his stentorian climax, which sends her skyward on a geyser of semen.[11] All these examples, from *Blazing Saddles* through *Scary Movie,* share a capacity for hyperbolic scatological display that their non-parodic counterparts, constrained by causal narrative logic, can never quite share. Still, *Mafia!* And *Scary Movie* are clearly more hyperbolic in their gross-out gags, lingering considerably longer on the attendant scatological spectacles, reflecting not only a cultural logic of acceleration between the two historically disparate sets of examples but also a distinct premium on the provocation of disgust for parody films of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

To situate gross-out within the textual functions of parody, it is important to theorize parody itself. Dan Harries identifies the "normative patterning" of parody's oscillation between "similarity and difference" as taking place through "six primary methods along the lexical, syntactical, and stylistic planes: reiteration, inversion, misdirection, literalization, extraneous inclusion and exaggeration."[12] Gross-out gags intersect with all six methods, but their spectacular, excessive nature aligns them most clearly with exaggeration. The question then becomes: what is being exaggerated and why? This assumes, of course, that the gross-out gags in question are necessarily being read as parodic gags rather than simply standalone gags that happen to appear within a parodic framework. The cited examples from *Mafia!* and *Scary Movie* could be taken as just more grist for the Hollywood Lowbrow mill without any need to identify referents. I would argue, however, that the usefulness of gross-out gags to the parody format is

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[11] Wayans, Keenan Ivory. "Scary Movie." Dimension Films, 2000.
[12] Harries, Dan. *Film Parody.* British Film Institute, 2000. 37.

that their excessiveness can endow them with double-coding: as lexical units in their own right and as parodic exaggerations thereof. The projectile vomiting in *Mafia!,* for example, refers us back to similar canonical scenes in *The Exorcist* (1973), *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983), and *Stand By Me* (1986). The comic variations introduced – the Busby Berkeley-like staging, the gravestone marked "Chunks," the extraneous inclusion of a vomiting horse – could then be read as the parodic difference counterposed to the similarity with those scenes' gross-out premise.

A question of legibility arises here. Parody is detectable as such because it first appropriates a recognizable "prototext" – a specific example of a form or genre, the form or genre more broadly, or both[13] – and transforms it through comic variation. At base, the parody is legible because of the difference between the "serious" original and the comedic appropriation. How, then, can comedy be parodied, when comic intent is already encoded into the prototext? How are the above examples able to generate irony between the original and the supposed parody when irony is already a constitutive textual element? After all, although neither *The Exorcist,* a horror film, nor *Stand By Me,* a coming-of-age film,[14] are explicitly comedies, their spectacles of emesis carry comedic overtones; as William Paul notes, even the solemn *Exorcist* situates its grossness as "hideous slapstick comedy" through which we take pleasure in the "game of one-upmanship" between the possessed child Regan and the titular priest Damien.[15]

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[13] Ibid. 33.
[14] Reiner, Rob. *Stand By Me*, Columbia Pictures, 1986.
[15] Paul, William. *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy.* Columbia University Press, 1994. 312-13.

Since the projectile vomiting in *Mafia!* functions as an ironic counterpoint to the somberness of parodied prototext, Vito Corleone's funeral from *The Godfather* (1972), does that mean the vomiting itself, within the film's metatext, is not parody but pastiche, the appropriation of signifiers without any element of critique?[16] I would argue that disgust is an important component to consider when answering this question. Aesthetic disgust and our response to it is variable according to personal and cultural parameters. The oscillation between repulsion, attraction, and laughter among spectators and within a single spectator's response produces a profound ambivalence. Disgust is the threshold that cues a metatextual reading of the gross-out gag in question, a reading that occurs simultaneously with a straightforward, monotextual reading.

A textbook example of this double-codedness takes place in *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001). Directed by Joel Gallen, the film is, along with *Scary Movie*, among the first of a cycle of film genre spoofs that would continue through the following decade and a half, many of them helmed by Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer of the *Scary Movie* writing team. As its title suggests, *Not Another Teen Movie* takes on the cycle of films targeted towards the teen market that had emerged with renewed force in the late 1990s, many within the Hollywood Lowbrow paradigm.[17] Its prototexts include *She's All That* (1999), *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998), and *American Pie,* as well as their spiritual forebears, the John Hughes romantic comedies *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and the Animal Comedies *Fast Times at Ridgemont*

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[16] Harries, Dan. *Film Parody*. British Film Institute, 2000. 31.
[17] Gallen, Joel. *Not Another Teen Movie*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2001.

High (1981) and *Porky's* (1981). Much of the criticism of *Not Another Teen Movie* was premised on the futility of satirizing comedy. Mike LaSalle wrote in the San Francisco *Chronicle* that "something that's already absurd, already intentionally ridiculous, can't truly be parodied. It can only be referenced -- and then, in a desperate attempt at humor, vulgarized." LaSalle closes by dismissing the film as "just another teen movie."[18] Central to this critique is the assumption that for much of the film's audience – presumably, young adults – it simply functions as a teen comedy, rather than a skewering thereof. In other words, the inherent farce of, say, Jim masturbating into the titular baked good of *American Pie* leaves little room for parodic difference; all *Not Another Teen Movie* can manage is an end-credits outtake of the heroine's father (Randy Quaid) exclaiming "Threesome!" and smashing two pies onto his crotch. The film's litany of references thus appears to LaSalle and other critics as closer to the "blank parody" of pastiche than to the ironic commentary of parody. An extension of this critique is that the parody has become indistinguishable from the parodied. In the context of what Harries terms "ironic supersaturation," parody and pastiche precede their originals to the point that audiences are more likely than ever to become culturally literate through intertextual references rather than exposure to a cultural canon prior to that canon's ironic citation.[19] Comedy's semiotic ambiguity renders it especially prone to this scrambling.

Nevertheless, *Not Another Teen Movie* provides an illustrative example of a parody of comedy as such, specifically gross-out comedy. Three underclassmen who have, per *American*

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[18] LaSalle, Mike. "A Crass Act / Gross-out Teen Flick Imagines It's a Parody." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 Dec 2001, p. D3. https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/A-crass-act-Gross-out-teen-flick-imagines-it-s-2839798.php.
[19] Harries, Dan. *Film Parody.* British Film Institute, 2000. 3.

Pie, made a pact to lose their virginity, escape detention, per *The Breakfast Club*. They find an air duct marked with large signs leading to the girl's locker room, a riff on this space's role as a mecca of horny male mischief in Animal Comedies from *M*A*S*H* (1971) through *Private School* (1983). In a callback to the peephole scene from *Porky's* in particular, the boys overhear one girl ecstatically tell another, "I can't believe we just did all that stuff to each other, Kristy," to which the other responds, "It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that will never, ever happen again." The boys settle for a young woman urinating – after their leader insists that they be "open-minded" – only to bear witness to an escalating bowel movement, recalling a gag from *Detroit Rock City* (1999)[20] in which the young male heroes inadvertently witness a popular girl's flatulence as well as, more broadly, the dramatization of explosive diarrhea inaugurated by *Dumb and Dumber* (1994)[21] and repeated not only in *American Pie* (1999)[22] and *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (2002) but also Hal Hartley's indie chamber drama *Henry Fool* (1997).[23] Meanwhile, a poetry lesson is interrupted by a student's defiant flatulence, causing the class to erupt in laughter and the teacher to launch into a righteous harangue against their generation's puerile sense of humor. "Shakespeare, Molière, Oscar Wilde – *these* were humorists," he declaims, as the film cuts back and forth from the young woman's loud gastrointestinal distress and the boys' repulsed response. "The sublime poetic genius of a clever turn of phrase, *that* is true comedy!" Absent reverse-shots of his class, the teacher finishes by seemingly addressing the audience directly: "Your moronic, feeble-minded, sophomoric excuse for wit is merely a parade

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[20] Rifkin, Adam. *Detroit Rock City*, New Line Cinema, 1999.
[21] Farrelly, Peter. *Dumb & Dumber*, New Line Cinema, 1994.
[22] Weitz, Paul. *American Pie*, Universal Pictures, 1999.
[23] Hartley, Hal. *Henry Fool*, Sony Pictures Classics, 1998.

of filthy, nasty, vulgar human excrement!" All at once, the air duct collapses, followed by floor of the bathroom stall, which is revealed to be located quite conveniently directly above the classroom. The three boys and their unwitting voyeuristic target tumble into the room, and then they and the teacher are hosed down by raw sewage, issuing violently from the toilet bowl.

It hardly takes a deep read to locate the scene's double-coded self-reflexivity. It is at once an example and a deconstruction of scatological humor. As a recombinant pastiche of gross-out comedy, the scene fits into the trajectory of acceleration that, as I've established, gross-out comedies already follow, not least of all because its messy *coup de théâtre* pushes the explosive diarrhea trope into previously uncharted territory of visualization. It is that very acceleration that also fulfills the scene's parodic exaggeration: the rapid succession of gross-out tropes in extremis strains credibility, exposing these gags as implausible and contrived. Yet the question of parody's critical aspect returns. Even if we establish enough irony between the invoked gross-out tropes and their use in *Not Another Teen Movie,* what, exactly, is the film saying about them? The teacher mouthpieces for critics who have long militated against scatological comedy – including this very film – yet the latter certainly seems to emerge victorious, considering the teacher's critique is quickly drowned in a tidal wave of feces. The gag is thus carnivalesque in the Animal Comedy tradition, upending the stodgy values of the institutional elite with a howl of lowbrow laughter. At the very least, then, the scene is ambivalent: we're given the opportunity to sympathize with the teacher's dismay even as we laugh at his eventual humiliation. The presence of self-reflexive rhetoric therefore doesn't necessarily constitute critical discourse; as critics of postmodern irony often remind us, on the contrary, irony can have a reactionary function, serving as "hip" window-dressing for hoary clichés – indulging them, but with a knowing wink – rather than necessarily subverting them.

Once again, then, we turn to disgust as a central rhetorical technique of the scene. By provoking disgust *Not Another Teen Movie* draws satirical value from its parody of gross-out comedy. Describing satire as one of parody's closest intertextual cousins, Harries notes that it typically "focuses on the inherent weaknesses found in the social order through exposing their constructedness and highlighting their contradictory nature."[24] A common distinction drawn between parody and satire is that parody is strictly formal in nature, critiquing other texts aesthetically rather than morally. Yet Harries argues that the two are never fully disaggregated since aesthetic normativity always has a sociocultural foundation. Quoting Joseph Dane, he writes that "when parody calls attention to the norm, it criticizes the very system on which its own plane of expression depends."[25] By spoofing gross-out gags as such, *Not Another Teen Movie* critiques their normalization within the popular comedy lexicon. It exaggerates and exposes the absurdities that audiences must take for granted for such over-the-top scatological humor to work: that teenage boys would, in 2001, go through the ethical and physical trouble of spying on their classmates to spectate nude female flesh; that a woman defecating is somehow an aberration to an established social order; and that the structural layout of the air duct, bathroom, and classroom would allow for the accident to happen at all, to say nothing of the geyser of excrement it manages to produce. For audiences to suspend their disbelief so willingly and thoroughly to accept these conditions of contrivance could indeed indicate a moral decline along the lines against which the teacher sermonizes. After all, if the desire for toilet humor so

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[24] Harries, Dan. *Film Parody*. British Film Institute, 2000. 32.
[25] Ibid.

categorically eclipses any commitment to causal logic and 'good taste,' what can that mean other than a total regression into "sophomoric," "feeble-minded" slovenliness?

The sociomoral aspect of disgust is thus invoked and, to some extent, affirmed by the gag's scornfully hostile tone. An additional element of embarrassment is the ordeal visited upon the poor young woman who only meant to visit the toilet in peace, a comment upon the long tradition of cavalier humiliation of women in gross-out comedies. This is not to say the gag is univocal in its satirical aspect. As I've discussed above, the incorporation of the teacher's diatribe into the sequence of the gag structures the gag as a carnivalesque comeuppance for the cultural custodians who esteem teen movies in general and gross-out humor in particular so lowly. In that sense, the disgust provoked by the scatological spectacle is part and parcel of the laughter of superiority over anyone who can't stomach it. Certainly the shock value is intentional: on a DVD featurette for the film the director cites the scene as provoking the "most extreme reactions" at test screenings.[26] But our laughing disgust is also directed towards ourselves for laughing in the first place. In other words, the ironic disgust Plantinga describes with regard to John Waters' films is repurposed for a context in which grotesque humor has become normative and ironic supersaturation prevails.

The ironic, parodic, self-reflexive deployment of gross-out gags is especially common in television comedy. Live television's discourse of presence readily accommodates self-reflexive play. Consider the infamous sequence of cannibalism-themed sketches from *Monty Python's*

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[26] *Not Another Teen Movie: Unrated Extended Director's Cut,* Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2005.

Flying Circus's second season as a precursor of contemporary self-reflexive gross-out: first, a sketch set on a lifeboat, in which the survivors of a shipwreck weigh their options for eating each other; then, another sketch set in an undertaker's office, where a man delivers his departed mother in a burlap sack and the undertaker suggests cooking her to eat. The bereaved son is hesitant but finally agrees, admitting he's "a bit peckish." The undertaker offers, as recompense, an open grave into which the son can vomit if he feels guilty afterward. The sketches are joined a plea for decency from Python Terry Jones and, in both cases, feature numerous interjections from the repulsed studio audience. Indeed, the lifeboat sketch calls frequent attention to its liveness by restarting numerous times after the Pythons flub their lines. The undertaker sketch, meanwhile, ends with a small section of the studio audience rioting in outrage as the sketch's tasteless excesses, an apparent late addition to the material demanded by an uneasy BBC.[27]

A similar self-reflexive dynamic characterizes the gross-out excess of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch featuring several of the aforementioned "Bad Boys of *Saturday Night Live*," Chris Farley, Norm Macdonald, and Adam Sandler (along with Jay Mohr and Tim Meadows), who would shortly thereafter helped kick off the comedian comedy resurgence of the 1990s. Starring as themselves, the five comedians break into the Central Park Zoo's polar bear exhibit and, one-by-one, find excuses to throw themselves into the enclosure with predictably bloody outcomes. As the mayhem ensues, the increasingly blood-drenched comedians insult each other with ab-libs, particularly against Macdonald as "Mr. Dictionary," apparently unimpressed by the ghastly,

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[27] "Royal Episode Thirteen." *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, BBC1, 1970.

gross-out fates of their compatriots. At one point Macdonald even asks Farley, “Are you serious? You can’t remember which of our buddies was killed first?” Once Macdonald is left the last man standing, he hatches a plan to enter the enclosure himself and stick his finger down the bear’s throat in order to have the predigested remains of his fellow comedians vomited up, just in case the bear is still hungry. The host of the episode, David Duchovny, follows with an announcement that the segment was not planned but in fact captured through hidden cameras as a warning to future hosts that “these are the type of people you have to deal with all week long.”[28] Escalating gross-out thus becomes an important element of the sketch’s self-reflexive gambit.

More escalating, ironic gross-out excess appears in a classic episode of the cult television series *Get a Life* (1990-92). The laugh-tracked, multicamera sitcom features Chris Elliott as Chris Peterson, a regressive man-child in the comedian comedy mode, as he navigates situations both familiar to the form and wildly surreal. “S.P.E.W.E.Y. and Me” (1992)[29] is an example of the latter. In a transparent parody of Steven Spielberg’s *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* (1982) as well as Stewart Raffill’s knockoff *Mac and Me* (1988), Chris takes in a pear-shaped alien after its spaceship crash-lands in his driveway. Chris expends much effort assimilating the visitor into his everyday life, to little avail: all it appears capable of is attacking anyone it encounters, secreting thick mucus from its pores, and projectile vomiting. Hence the name S.P.E.W.E.Y., though Chris claims that it’s an acronym for “Special Person Entering the World, Egg Yolks.” Disgust forms the fulcrum of the episode’s irony, as Chris’s insistence upon the otherworldly wisdom and love

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[28] "David Duchovny." *Saturday Night Live*, NBC, 1995.
[29] "SPEWEY and Me." *Get a Life*, Fox, 1992.

S.P.E.W.E.Y. can offer him and his neighbors is persistently undermined by repulsed responses to its antics and odor. This is especially acute when S.P.E.W.E.Y. vomits, which it does repeatedly and prodigiously, drenching the sets and the faces of anyone with the misfortune to be standing nearby. The disgust factor is ratcheted up when Chris consumes some of S.P.E.W.E.Y.'s viscous secretions in order to gain its trust. As Carolyn Korsmeyer observes, smell, taste, and touch are the primary senses in play in the arousal of visceral disgust.[30] Hence the element of physical contact that is common to the gross-out gags discussed in this chapter. It would be insufficient for these spectacles of bodily fluids to simply appear. For the gags to take their full effect, onscreen characters must be too close for comfort – likely theirs, but more importantly ours, as we sympathize with the bodily sensation of, say, biting through an umbilical cord or being doused in feces. Introducing the sense of taste into *Get a Life*'s carnival of outrages indicates a calculated effort to trigger disgust that only grows more potent once Chris's roommate Gus (Brian Doyle-Murphy) kills, cooks, and eats S.P.E.W.E.Y., echoing Monty Python's deliberately shocking forays into cannibalism. The ironic humor persists through Chris's own verdict on the alien's flavor profile: he deems its secretions "the nectar of the gods" and, after hesitantly indulging in Gus's culinary creation, admits that S.P.E.W.E.Y. is "darn delicious." Thus does the episode plays with the thin line between disgust and delicacy, conferring a perverse refinement on Chris and Gus at the same time that it finds their animal instincts of hunger triumphing over their higher functions of empathy for extraterrestrial life. The series' cult status similarly reflects a quality of not agreeing with everyone's palate as it

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[30] Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics.* Oxford University Press, 2011. 61.

aggressively pushes the boundaries of good taste. Unsurprisingly, the Fox network was hesitant to air "S.P.E.W.E.Y. and Me" due to its gross-out content and the season, the show's second, would also be its last.[31]

Relating closely to live television's discourse of presence, the durational aspect of narrative television comedy also accommodates a self-reflexive, ironic discourse, allowing ample opportunity for a series to refer back to itself as time goes on, as well as imaginative potential for playing with the series architecture that lends it the "what if?" quality of alternate world-building.[32] *Get a Life*, considered by its fans to be an 'anti-sitcom,' makes frequent reflexive asides as it plays with the sitcom format. Given the expanded textual boundaries afforded by animation, such ironic gestures are especially common on animated satirical sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* (1989-), *South Park*, and *Family Guy* (1999-), wherein intersection with hyperbolic gross-out spectacles is frequent.

South Park offers an illustrative case. The eleventh season episode "More Crap" (2007) finds Randy Marsh pursuing the record for largest bowel movement. At opportune moments throughout the episode, a ticker appears across the bottom of the screen reminding viewers that *South Park* is an "Emmy-Winning Series" alongside an animated replica of the award. One moment is during Randy's first attempt to defecate, his vocal, sweaty agony depicted in thorough detail. Another is at the episode's end, when Randy succeeds in passing a BM that elevates him

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[31] Vineyard, Jennifer. "Five Things You Never Knew About *Get a Life*." *Vulture*, 2012. https://www.vulture.com/2012/09/five-things-you-never-knew-about-get-a-life.html.
[32] Sconce, Jeffrey. "What If?: Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries." *Television after Tv: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, Duke University Press, 2004, Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson.

skyward. A member of the Swiss awards committee plucks the Emmy from the foreground and inserts it into the towering turd.[33] The show spoofs its own indulgence of scatological humor by hyperbolizing it. It also targets the cultural gatekeepers that have, despite *South Park*'s gleeful prurience, conferred middlebrow respectability upon the show. As in the case of *Not Another Teen Movie,* the gag's satirical value is at once carnivalesque and conservative, reaffirming the established status quo of gross-out comedy as part of the popular lexicon while also expressing bemusement at the incongruity of gross-out comedy, ostensibly defined by its calculated transgressions against dominant values, assimilating into the pop cultural firmament.

Regression, Ironic Disgust, and Cult Laughter: *Freddy Got Fingered*

By 2001, the second wave of gross-out comedy already had its radical apotheosis. An aggressively eccentric comedian comedy trafficking in self-reflexive, ironic disgust – the epitome of "smart"/"dumb" double-coding, Tom Green's *Freddy Got Fingered* (2001) was, perhaps, inevitable: the massive box office haul of *There's Something About Mary* in 1998 and *American Pie* and *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* in 1999, and *Road Trip* in 2000 led to a veritable Gold Rush in Hollywood for the next opportunity to profit handsomely from selling comic transgression to teenagers and young adults. Green, who hosted an eponymous talk show in his native Canada before premiering the show on MTV and becoming an overnight sensation,

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[33] "More Crap." *South Park*, Comedy Central, 2007.

had minimal film background; his on-set experience amounted to appearing in a small (but well-compensated) role in *Charlie's Angels* and a supporting role in *Road Trip,* both in 2000. Nevertheless, he was given $14 million by Fox to produce and star in a faintly autobiographical script he co-wrote with frequent collaborator Derek Harvie; eventually he assumed directorial duties as well. The film immediately became notorious as a fiasco, breaking even in revenue but inspiring nearly unanimous critical disapprobation of a tenor that seemed to exceed mere aesthetic disapproval and consider Green's film an affront to common decency. Two decades later, *Freddy Got Fingered* is a quintessential *film maudit,* much beloved by a devoted cult for pushing the Hollywood gross-out comedy template to such extremes that it transforms into ersatz avant-gardism. In this chapter section, I will closely read the film in precisely these terms, with a special focus on the ambivalent signification of its extreme gross-out gags and its articulation of radical, antisocial regression.

In all the Hollywood Lowbrow films, as in the wider culture, regressiveness is closely aligned with dumbness. Adam Sandler's Billy Madison is a man-child among literal children, establishing a basic premise of incongruity humor, both between the adult body and the infantile behavior, and between the adult and the adolescent spaces he occupies. Like *Animal House*'s Delta Tau Chi, Billy shows a keen taste for alcohol and mischief, but his pranks are firmly in the antisocial realm of teenage suburbia, such as when he delivers a flaming bag of dog feces to his cranky neighbor's doorstep early in the film. When the neighbor dutifully stomps out the fire, grumbling, "Eck, poop again," Billy, hiding in a nearby shrub with his similarly regressed adult male coconspirators, cries out incredulously at the novelty of "call[ing] the shit poop." Billy – and by extension Sandler, according to the intertextual logic of comedian comedy– is thus situated linguistically in the uniquely adolescent position of aspiring to the foul oaths of

adulthood and disavowing the euphemisms of childhood while retaining its scatological fixation.[34] Similarly, Harry and Lloyd, the dim bulb heroes of *Dumb and Dumber*, are distinguished by a juvenile sensibility continually at odds with the caper plot in which they inadvertently find themselves, in classic comedian comedy fashion. Consider, for example, the scene in which they preempt a contract killer by dousing his meal in hot sauce, unaware of both his intent to kill them and the ulcer that ends up rendering the prank fatal. Consider also Lloyd's relationship to sexuality. The starting gun for their cross-country odyssey is Lloyd's determination to return a briefcase left behind by Mary, a passenger in his limousine, with whom he develops an immediate infatuation. A revealing fantasy ensues. Lloyd imagines Mary welcoming him and the suitcase with open arms at her Aspen manse; amid their embrace, Lloyd mischievously lifts her skirt, very nearly addressing the camera directly as he does so. Later in the montage, Mary removes her shirt for Lloyd, revealing a set of blinking headlights, a literalization of schoolyard slang for breasts. Thus, through a series of comic misdirections, sexuality remains mystified in Lloyd's fantasy life, much as it would for a prepubescent whose hormonal drives far exceed his knowledge or concept of the sex act. Even his voyeurism manifests less as the gaze of sexual intention than the thrill of discovery. If the film's final moments, which find Harry and Lloyd turning away a bus of bikini models looking for "a couple of oil boys to grease us up," show the heroes' sexual destiny thwarted by their literal-minded inability to see themselves as the so-called "oil boys," earlier moments in the film suggest they

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[34] Davis, Tamra. *Billy Madison*, Universal Pictures, 1995.

might not have fully formed sexual appetites to begin with.[35] Like Jerry Lewis, Laurel and Hardy, and the Three Stooges, the '90s generation of comedian comedy stars thus embody a stunted, primarily (although not entirely) pre-sexual adolescence. Their deviation from normative standards of behavior, then, had less to do with the hedonistic commitments of their Animal Comedy forbears than with a more generalized failure to achieve any recognizably 'proper' manhood, hedonistic or otherwise.

No doubt greenlit by Fox with the intention of cashing in on the regressive comedian comedy craze, *Freddy Got Fingered* was conceived as a starring major studio vehicle for Tom Green's confrontational style of observational comedy. As both a talk show host and a public figure, Green staged stunts and pulled pranks on unwitting passersby, his audience, and in several cases, his own hapless parents. Shock tactics were fundamental to his lexicon of disruption. One typical segment of *The Tom Green Show* – which began on Canadian public access before moving to the Comedy Network in 1998 and then, finally, MTV, where it ended in 2000 – finds Green seeking condoms at corner stores and vocalizing to the hapless and agitated clerks how he plans to put them to use.[36] When Green appeared as a guest on *Open Mike with Mike Bullard*, he brought fresh roadkill with him, showing off his recent acquisition with apparent obliviousness to the disgust it inspired in the host, the other guest, and the studio audience.[37] Both examples exhibit Green's interest in subjecting the public to matters and matter

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[35] Farrelly, Peter. *Dumb & Dumber*, New Line Cinema, 1994.
[36] Green, Tom. "The Tom Green Show – Condoms." YouTube, uploaded by Tom Green, 6 Oct 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-mK62LJ9zg.
[37] Bullard, Mike. "Tom Green – Open Mike with Mike Bullard." YouTube, uploaded by Reuben Barker, 12 Oct 2014, https://youtu.be/pcP6bEt9pZM.

normally marginalized by public discourse. In the first case, Green says the quiet part loud of purchasing prophylactics: in complying with social standards that call for rigid boundaries between the private lives of strangers, the self-evident purpose of that purchase rarely calls for explicit acknowledgment. In the second, he forces those in his immediate vicinity into contact – via smell, presumably, if not touch – with rotting flesh, abject matter that would, like excrement, be cleared away from public and private space alike in most modern societies.

The main difference between Green and other contemporaneous comedians who transitioned from TV to film stardom is that Green lacked the sketch comedy bona fides of Murphy, Sandler, and Carrey. In other words, he lacked the experience in narrative comedy to justify his debut in a feature length narrative comedy. Yet the comic persona Green established on his talk show and in public was well-suited to the comedian comedy format. The credulity in both instances described above manifests the childishness that Seidman identifies as a key recurring formal trait of comedian comedy. The comedian's childish self forms a dialectic with the adult self, representing individual creativity and cultural assimilation, respectively. The tension that results generates much of the humor of comedian comedy, as previously discussed vis-à-vis Adam Sandler[38].

Freddy Got Fingered is in many ways both the *ne plus ultra* of the gross-out comedian comedy cycle and a bold deconstruction thereof.[39] It shares with genre kin such as *Billy Madison* (1995) and *Tommy Boy* (1995) the basic narrative premise of the wayward son reclaiming his

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[38] Seidman, Steve. *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film.* UMI Research Press, 1981.
[39] Green, Tom. *Freddy Got Fingered*, 20th Century Fox Studios, 2001.

father's esteem. It also at least begins as a road movie, like *Tommy Boy* and the Farrelly brothers films *Dumb and Dumber, Kingpin* (1996), and *Me, Myself, and Irene* (2000). It even features a motif of animalism, in a callback to the Animal Comedies, as Green interfaces with horses, deer, and elephants throughout the film. Yet the film's humor frequently exhibits the hyperbolic absurdity characteristic of anti-comedy, mobilizing its self-reflexive dimension in the process. Green plays Gord, an aspiring animator, who heads to Los Angeles from Oregon at the film's outset to pitch his cartoon to a network exec. This narrative thread quickly unspools, however, when Gord is soundly rejected and sent back home, setting off a sequence of escalating gross-out set-pieces within the film's first half-hour. The abrupt narrative derailment is symbolized twice during this passage. During the opening credits, Gord is shown skateboarding recklessly through a shopping mall, narrowly outpacing an exasperated security guard. To paraphrase Mike Stoklasa of Red Letter Media argues, if the mall is a metaphor for the plot's ostensibly conventional structure, then Gord's skateboarding represents an anarchistic, antisocial navigation of that structure as Green's film flouts the established generic order of gross-out comedian comedy[40]. Just a little later, Gord abruptly pulls over during his voyage down the west coast – visualized on a map superimposed over the montage – to masturbate a horse. He quite literally digresses from an established narrative path for a non sequitur gross-out performance. Green's gross-out indulgences represent symbolic repudiation of narrative unity, epitomizing the "calculated

[40] Bauman, Jay; Stoklasa, Mike. "Freddy Got Fingered." Video. Red Letter Media, 2018. http://redlettermedia.com/freddy-got-fingered-review/. Accessed 6 Apr 2018.

rupture" that Donald Crafton identifies with the bits of business in silent slapstick films and that also quite aptly describes the formal impact of gross-out gags.[41]

Freddy Got Fingered thus takes up gross-out comedy as a kind of vulgar modernism, intertwining shock value and deconstructive self-reflexivity. In the context of cinematic storytelling that frequently sabotages itself and calls attention to its own shambolic crudeness, Green's gross-out gags function as much on the 'lizard brain' level of lowbrow comic transgression as they do the more cerebral level of genre deconstruction, on which they are gross-out gags *about* gross-out gags. The extremity and peculiarity of the gags enhances this metalinguistic dimension. Much of the prerelease discourse proudly touted the film's unprecedented shock value as "the stupidest, most disgusting movie you've ever seen," to quote Green's breathless description to one reporter[42]. Green's declaration entailed a distinction from the gross-out strategies of *Freddy*'s genre kin: he also boasted of the film's digression from bog-standard gross-out comedy's favored terrain of toilet humor[43], opting instead for the uncharted symbolic frontier of elephant semen, human umbilici, and cervine innards. This envelope-pushing prompted *Variety* critic Robert Koehler to deem *Freddy* a "fitting end of the gross-out comedy cycle"[44]. Green echoed these sentiments, albeit in a far more self-congratulatory tone, by declaring to one of the film's producers that by getting it past the ratings board and into wide

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[41] Crafton, Donald. "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy." *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 106-120. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins.
[42] Robischon, Noah. "Tom Green Is Back in Blecch with 'Freddy Got Fingered'." *Entertainment Weekly*, 2001, https://ew.com/article/2001/04/20/tom-green-back-blecch-freddy-got-fingered/.
[43] Scott, A.O. "Film Review; Shocking? Sure, If You Keep Your Eyes Open." *New York Times*, 2001, p. E18. https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/20/movies/film-review-shocking-sure-if-you-keep-your-eyes-open.html.
[44] Koehler, Robert. "Freddy Got Fingered." *Variety*, 2001, https://variety.com/2001/film/reviews/freddy-got-fingered-1200467854/.

release, they had "just killed the gross-out genre"[45]. Green's rhetoric reflects conventional wisdom about gross-out comedy's historical trajectory: like other spectacle-driven genres such as splatter-horror and high-concept action, gross-out comedy follows a logic of acceleration, progressing towards only further extremity, excess, and novelty until reaching an unsurpassable aesthetic threshold. *Freddy Got Fingered* thus signifies not only internally as a narrative text, but also within an intertextual exchange with other gross-out media. As Roger Ebert puts it in his review,

> It's been leading up to this all spring. When David Spade got buried in crap in *Joe Dirt*, and when three supermodels got buried in crap in *Head Over Heels*, and when human organs fell from a hot-air balloon in *Monkeybone* and were eaten by dogs, and when David Arquette rolled around in dog crap and a gangster had his testicles bitten off in *See Spot Run*, and when a testicle was eaten in *Tomcats* well, somehow the handwriting was on the wall. There had to be a movie like *Freddy Got Fingered* coming along.[46]

Writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, Owen Gleiberman connects Green's escalations to his television origins as "Ernie Kovacs with the soul of Butt-head":

> …the misanthrope as scalawag prankster, perpetually standing outside of himself, staring, with conspiratorial glee, at the 'America's sickest home video' gags that he reams up and performs in order to tweak, jolt, and command our increasingly jaded attention

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[45] Robischon.
[46] Ebert, Roger. "Freddy Got Fingered." *Chicago Sun-Times*, 20 Apr 2001. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/freddy-got-fingered-2001.

> spans…always saying, implicitly, Look at what the hell I'm getting away with! Look at what we're all watching on television![47]

Gleiberman's comments about Green "standing outside of himself" suggest the critical distance of modernist art, and indeed, his film has been taken up as a work of potentially accidental avant-gardism, both contemporaneously and retrospectively. At the time of *Freddy's* release, A.O. Scott of the *New York Times,* Jeff Wells of Reel.com, and Lisa Alspector of the *Chicago Reader* all gave the film positive notices, with Wells calling it "a piece of genuine self-expression"[48]. Scott's defense of the film is perhaps the most notorious, not just for its appearance in the national paper of record but also for its high-minded comparisons of Green to Conceptual artists such as Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci. Scott writes,

> The movie's comic heart consists of a series of indescribably loopy, elaborately conceived happenings that are at once rigorous and chaotic, idiotic and brilliant. Some of these -- the "backwards man" bit, the sausage-piano concert and the fake cell phone in the restaurant scene -- might have qualified for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts if MTV and studio money hadn't been forthcoming and may show up some day at the Museum of Modern Art.[49]

Recent reviews laud the film more openly, bearing such headlines as "In defense of *Freddy Got Fingered"* on *IFC.com*, "*Freddy Got Fingered* Is the Most Underrated Film of All Time" in

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[47] Gleiberman, Owen. "Freddy Got Fingered." *Entertainment Weekly*, 2001, https://ew.com/article/2001/04/20/freddy-got-fingered-2/.
[48] Caro, Mark. "Is It Art or Just Really Bad? 'Freddy' Speaks for Itself." *Los Angeles Times*, 2001. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-may-01-ca-57735-story.html.
[49] Scott.

Vice, and "15 Years Later, Is *Freddy Got Fingered* a Secret Masterpiece?" on *ScreenCrush.* Matt Singer's comments for *ScreenCrush* synopsize the film's defenses well:

> As a straight-forward Hollywood gross-out comedy, *Freddy Got Fingered* is a borderline disaster. As a mockery of the rules of Hollywood gross-out comedies where idiot man-children find love, happiness, and success, and as a work of audience provocation, it's kind of a secret masterpiece.[50]

The film's retrospective redemption as ersatz avant-gardism follows a common just-so story of cult films, by which a small but devoted audience extols the unappreciated virtues of a commercial and critical underperformer to anyone within earshot. If cult appreciation is an assertion of cultural capital – the cultural authority that distinguishes the cult fan's taste as uniquely and eccentrically refined – then championing *Freddy Got Fingered* can be especially so by expressing the sophistication necessary to see formal distantiation and defamiliarization in what appears to the untutored eye as simply more regressive Hollywood product. Pierre Bourdieu defines such sophistication as the "pure gaze," the ability to appreciate the "product of an artistic intention which asserts the primacy of the mode of representation over the object of representation" [51]. Whether Green intended *Freddy* as a metatext is certainly up for debate: while Green's assertion of having "killed the gross-out genre" suggests that he knew what he was doing, the critics of Red Letter Media likely echo the sentiments of much of the general populace when they argue that assuming as much would be giving Green too much credit.[52] What is clear

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[50] Singer, Matt. "15 Years Later, Is *Freddy Got Fingered* a Secret Masterpiece?" *ScreenCrush*, vol. 2019, 2016. https://screencrush.com/freddy-got-fingered-15th-anniversary-appreciation/.
[51] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Harvard University Press, 1984.
[52] Bauman.

is that fans who assign this metatextual dimension to Green's film form a distinctive taste public who, versed in the purely formal considerations demanded by high art, engage in "downward straddling," applying their distinctly aesthetic disposition to the ostensibly uncomplicated functions of popular cinema.[53] In other words, they take a "smart" approach to "dumb" comedy. As a manifestation of cultural capital, this smart/dumb gesture is at once rarefied and transgressive: expressive of cultural competence while also flippant towards the established aesthetic standards that would typically disqualify *Freddy* from serious discussion. For Bourdieu, such gestures represent a pursuit of social difference via consumption of cultural goods, or distinction.[54] Bourdieu observes that cultivating distinction is often an aggressive act insofar as "tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance … of the taste of others" as representing an "unnatural" break from 'legitimate' aesthetic norms.[55] In an interview with podcaster Joe Rogan, Green characterizes the split in his film's audience as similarly contentious by design:

> It was done in a way where I think that 50% of the people who watch it are definitely going to hate it more than anything they've ever seen in their entire life, and that was the goal, to, you know, then the joke is obviously that the other 50% of the people are laughing at the 50% of people that hate it and that's the joke.[56]

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[53] Gans, Herbert. *Popular Culture & High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste.* Basic Books, 1999.
[54] Bourdieu, 226.
[55] Ibid, 56.
[56] PowerfulJRE. "Tom Green Talks About Freddy Got Fingered (from Joe Rogan Experience #45)." Online video. YouTube, 2013. https://youtu.be/ZkyaPebJEqI. Accessed 4 Jun 2019.

To the degree that laughter is aggressive, to echo Aristotle's superiority theory of humor, "visceral intolerance" of the film's detractors is thus encoded into its comedy.

Green's gross-outs literalize the disgust at the heart of distinction: physical disgust at corporeal spectacle stands in for moral disgust at the taste of others. Furthermore, if the "distastes" are mutual in Bourdieu's formulation, so, too, are the gross-outs that dramatize them. On the one hand, the disgust provoked by Gord licking his friend's compound fracture in close-up after a skateboarding mishap is, for the "50% of people that hate" the film, also disgust at Green and the entire enterprise of committing such an image to film, much less posing it as comedic. On the other, provoking that disgust could be read as a belligerent expression of "visceral intolerance" towards the man-child comedian comedy Green purports to kill off as well as the audiences who came to his film expecting the same. It's significant in this regard that several of the key gross-outs in *Freddy Got Fingered* involve bloody slapstick violence: in addition to the aforementioned skateboarding injury, a running gag of the film concerns the brutal misfortunes endured by Gord's wide-eyed adolescent neighbor, culminating in the final shot of blood dousing bystanders as the poor boy gets sucked into a jet turbine offscreen. Green himself has credited the vicious tenor of these gags to the physical pain he was in during pre-production, following a fight with testicular cancer.[57] Indeed, by actively avoiding the familiar scatology of the more normative films of the Hollywood Lowbrow, *Freddy* evacuates the genre of its sympathetic aspect: while it's easy to envision audiences sharing the hero's embarrassment

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[57] Schilling, Dave. "'Freddy Got Fingered' Is the Most Underrated Film of All Time." *Vice*, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w7npm/tom-green-freddy-got-fingered-interview.

when, say, his romantic dalliances are compromised by intestinal distress, it's a bit harder to imagine anyone relating directly to Gord's experience of knocking his father off his feet with a firehose blast of elephant semen, straight from the source. As A.O. Scott notes, *Freddy* "forsakes the muddy field of infantile narcissism for the fertile, frightening ground of middle childhood. It's less about the dangers and pleasures of the unchained id than the giddy anarchy of the unbound imagination."[58] Bourdieu writes that the "popular aesthetic" is "based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function."[59] If the established logics and iconography of gross-out comedy emphasize a "continuity between art and life," whereby the viewer is meant to relate on some level to the raunchy predicaments onscreen, then *Freddy* emphasizes discontinuity, thus subordinating, to some extent, function to form – again, whether intentionally or otherwise.

As established earlier, much of Gord/Green's behavior throughout the film represents surrealist interventions into conventional comedian comedy narrative form. The logic by which the childish comic figure "literalizes metaphors or takes vernacular phrases at their face value," such as Buster Keaton literally punching a clock in *The Playhouse*[60], appears throughout *Freddy Got Fingered.* Recalling the network executive's advice to "get inside" his anthropomorphic cartoon characters, Gord encounters a felled stag on his way home and proceeds to cut it open and drape himself in its carcass. Gord's credulous childishness also manifests in several

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[58] Scott.
[59] Bourdieu, 4.
[60] Seidman, 111.

instances of playful identity confusion. Combined with "basic stupidity"[61] and "physical uncoordination" characteristic of the diegetic comedian comedy persona, this identity confusion sometimes results in "inadvertent destructive tendencies, even when [the comic figure] is trying to be helpful."[62] Nowhere is this clearer in the film then when Gord pretends to be a doctor and delivers a baby, with nearly disastrous results. In grisly, protracted close-up, Gord severs the cord with his teeth, and then, when the distressed mother notices the newborn isn't breathing, twirls it around his head like a lasso until it begins to cry. As Gord hands the baby to her, the mother, once livid, now mouths, "Thank you," as sentimental strings swell on the soundtrack. The scene closes on Gord proclaiming, "I saved the day!" before fainting. The sequence is one of several in *Freddy* that call back to comedian comedy history: though Green's apparent homages to Woody Allen walking backwards in *Sleeper* (1973) and Buster Keaton nearly getting crushed by a house in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) are more overt, Gord's adventure in amateur obstetrics vaguely recalls Harry Langdon helping a woman give birth in *Three's a Crowd* (1927). Seidman writes that the comic figure's powers of imagination allows him "to inhabit a desired, idealized world, free from the trauma which results from coping with objective reality, from confronting the realities of growing up in a culture demanded by adults."[63] Accordingly, Langdon's intervention is an instance of an imaginatively life-saving performance that allows the comic figure finally to reconcile flights of fancy with the "objective reality" of adulthood[64]. Gord's, on the other hand, ironizes the redemption arc – signified, as in *Billy Madison*'s climax, by an

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[61] Ibid., 107.
[62] Ibid., 100.
[63] Ibid., 101.
[64] 83.

abrupt emotional shift to comic mawkishness – considering the crisis he resolves was the result of his own unforced meddling. The childbirth sequence is, in this way, emblematic of Green/Gord's failed assimilation into the "real" world of adulthood. Analogously, the sequence is also cited as causing the most walkouts from the film's theatrical premiere, which Green has noted proudly, promoting the comedian's metanarrative of pushing gross-out comedy past the point of no return.[65] Disgust, irony, and alienation thus converge on Green's comedian comedy performance, which departs the normative symbolic terrain of gross-out comedy to use disgust as a metalanguage and invert the aesthetic primacy of function over form, implying a "social break"[66].

II. The Unreal Body of Gross-out Comedy

[65] Robischon, Noah. "Tom Green Is Back in Blecch with 'Freddy Got Fingered'." *Entertainment Weekly*, 2001, https://ew.com/article/2001/04/20/tom-green-back-blecch-freddy-got-fingered/.
[66] Bourdieu, 31.

Spectacular Materiality and the Comic Perils of Flooding Out

We return now to the destination forecasted at the beginning of this chapter and the alienating ironic effect of, among other extreme gross-out gags, Eric getting spiritually cleansed by liquid feces.[67] As an intertextual response to the "group diarrhea jokes" of *Bridesmaids*, it echoes an emblematic trope of the gross-out comedy cycle examined over the course of this dissertation: the explosive diarrhea gag. This gag is emblematic for several reasons. First and foremost, it typifies the investment in transgressive comedic spectacle that has been central to Hollywood lowbrow comedy since the era of silent slapstick two-reelers, revived anew during the Animal Comedy cycle, and intensified even further from the early 1990s onward. It furthermore reflects a turn towards the raw materiality of the bodily lower stratum, to borrow Bakhtin's term, and its associated products, that distinguishes this second wave of gross-out comedy from the first. Certainly there is abundant taboo subject matter and imagery among the films of the Animal Comedy cycle, as well as the concurrent cycle of parody films such as Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* and *History of the World, Part 1* (1981) and Zucker-Abraham-Zucker's *Airplane!* and *Top Secret!* (1984), but even at their most ardently, spectacularly vulgar, their transgressions of normative good taste are more thematically than aesthetically or stylistically determined; consider the contrast, for example, between the climax of the R-rated *Porky's* rip-off *Screwballs* (1983), in which the horny teen heroes (and the audience) finally get to gaze upon the

[67] Heidecker, Tim; Wareheim, Eric. *Tim & Eric's Billion Dollar Movie*, Magnet Releasing, 2012.

school ice queen's exposed breasts,[68] and an early sight gag of the PG-13 *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* (1995),[69] in which a fully nude Ace appears to emerge from a rhinoceros' birth canal. This contrast could also plausibly be credited simply to the inexorable march of progress, according to the conventional if not infallible wisdom that cultural standards inevitably relax over time, as well as the more dependable assumption that genre filmmaking is always bound up in an intertextual *potlatch*, required always to surpass the novelty and intensity of cinematic spectacle past.

The major flaw of the linear theory of history in the case of the explosive diarrhea gag is also emblematic of a general, if not categorical, regression in sensibility relative to the Animal Comedy cycle. The centrality of the man-child archetype to gross-out comedian comedy of the 1990s and then spiritual successors such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) and *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, as I discuss at length in the first chapter, has rebalanced the symbolic repertoire of gross-out comedy in favor of the bathroom fixations of early childhood over the vibrant genital stage of late puberty and early adulthood. That's not to say that the stunted male heroes of gross-out's second wave don't lust after women, sometimes single-mindedly. Rather, as I've discussed in Chapter One vis-à-vis *There's Something About Mary* (1998), genital sexuality is figured as a source of grotesquery and ambivalence: a pleasurable but messy and humbling ordeal at best, and at worst, an abyss of abjection, degradation, and overflowing bodily fluids. Even *American Pie* and its sequels (2001, 2003, 2012), a revival of the Animal Comedy

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[68] Zielinski, Rafal. *Screwballs*, New World Pictures, 1983.
[69] Oedekerk, Steve. *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*, Warner Bros., 1995.

ethos for the Millennial generation of teenagers, offsets a considerable degree of coming-of-age sentimentality regarding sex with gross-out humiliations that might, in the real world, inflict long-term trauma: the namesake scene of Jim's parents walking in on him *in flagrante delicto* with a freshly-baked pie, for example; or a later moment when Stifler, the film's all-purpose frenemy, unknowingly consumes a beer spiked with fugitive ejaculate.[70]

Such a potent combination of disgust, spectacle, and embarrassment within the context of popular narrative media is, finally, what makes the explosive diarrhea gag so exemplary of the post-1990 gross-out comedy; fittingly, *American Pie* includes one of the best-known instances of this gag. Moreso than simply the fact of the scatological event being depicted, the explosive diarrhea gag entails a gleefully belligerent manipulation of the viewer through cinematic style. The gag's Platonic form demands precise formal strategies to maximize the visceral impact of the onscreen comic spectacle, particularly techniques intended to minimize the illusion of distance and prolong duration as discussed vis-à-vis the poetics of gross-out in chapter one, thus amplifying the emotional experience not only of disgust, but also the similarly direct anxiety of suspense and, in many cases, sympathetic embarrassment and discomfort. Thematically, the explosive diarrhea gag – much like the fatsuit performances discussed in the previous chapter – addresses our subconscious fears of our bodies going rogue, staging cathartically a worst-case-scenario of losing control so completely as to regress to an infantile state and jeopardize our hard-won sense of selfhood within the prevailing social order. As I will argue, the explosive diarrhea gag consistently, conspicuously articulates this threatened social identity as a gendered

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[70] Weitz, Paul. *American Pie*, Universal Pictures, 1999.

identity, defined narratively by the desire of or for a gendered Other. To elaborate further on this point, I will now use the remainder of this subsection to define and describe the stylistic, narrative, sociological, extratextual, and thematic correlates comprising the explosive diarrhea gag, using *Dumb and Dumber*'s prototypical version as my main example. My intention here is to model a yet-unwritten taxonomy of gross-out gags, inspired by Donato Totaro's taxonomy of gore gags represented in *Dead Alive* (1992) and, by extension, Noël Carroll's "Notes on the Sight Gag," which inspired Totaro. Doing so sets the stylistic and thematic foundation for the extended discussion of the radical scatological innovations of *Tim and Eric* that occupies the final subsection of this chapter.

Dramatic motivation. A common charge leveled against gross-out gags, and the explosive diarrhea gag in particular, is that they depend heavily upon plot contrivance. This is a variation on the objection to any spectacular element of a narrative film or television show that is deemed "gratuitous," i.e., that it has been included solely to pander to prurient interests and serves no discernible purpose for pushing the narrative forward. In the case of erotic spectacle in a film, for example, this objection polices the boundary between a "legitimate" form – narrative cinema – and its "illegitimate" counterpart – pornography – and reaffirms the objector's "legitimate" taste in the process. Considering pornography satisfies universal, perfectly ordinary media appetites, yet still routinely provokes charges of extraneousness, it's even harder to imagine there would be much of an audience for the voyeuristic depiction of someone in severe gastrointestinal distress in and of itself. This is likely why this quintessential scatological gag is almost always dramatically motivated by an external cause. In the case of Harry's upset bowels in *Dumb and Dumber,* the culprit is a laxative slipped into his tea by Lloyd to sabotage Harry's date with

Mary. The gag is also dramatized as an act of deliberate mischief in *3 Ninjas* (1992), *American Pie*, and *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (2002),[71] and *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (2014)[72] as well as comedies that decline to depict the aftermath such as *Bringing Down the House* (2003) and *Wedding Crashers* (2005), and even the non-comedies *Mission: Impossible* (1996) and *My Iron Giant* (1999). Otherwise, the stricken characters have ingested toxins either unknowingly or foolishly. One common theme is dodgy 'ethnic' food, as in *Bridesmaids*, and "The Restaurant," an episode of *The Detour* (2016); another is impaired digestion, such as the impact of North African cuisine on Reuben's IBS in *Along Came Polly* (2004),[73] and of a cheese hors d'oeuvre on Kevin Anthony's lactose intolerance in *White Chicks* (2004).[74] The irony here is that, as I've argued, the explosive diarrhea gag provides a stylized catharsis for the fear of losing bodily control, part of a broader anxiety about regressing into a helpless, infantile state, subjected to the whims of an indifferent cosmos; yet the gag has been conventionalized to confer clear psychological and behavioral causality upon the mundane event of shitting. Insofar as the gag articulates the material bodily principle of grotesque realism, coordinating a triumph of corporeal functions over the high-minded aspirations of the ego, it affirms the principle to varying degrees delimited by the nature of its external dramatic motivation. By insistently spectacularizing the body's subordination to the prerogatives of the bowels, coercing the viewer into a gaze of scatological voyeurism, and inviting festive laughter, the gag undeniably expresses a subtext of inescapably universal animality: there, but for the grace of God, go I. The

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[71] Becker, Walt. *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, Artisan Entertainment, 2002.
[72] MacFarlane, Seth. *A Million Ways to Die in the West*, Universal Pictures, 2014.
[73] Hamburg, John. *Along Came Polly*, Universal Pictures, 2004.
[74] Wayans, Keenan Ivory. *White Chicks*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2004.

excessiveness of the defecation, however, frames the event as a departure from normalcy that, in the cause-effect chain of 'classical' narrative structure, demands a clearly defined cause.

Situational variables. Explosive diarrhea gags often introduce additional factors to make an already unenviable situation even worse, either to generate tension, escalate the gag, establish comic incongruity, or motivate a normative transgression, discussed below. In *Dumb and Dumber*, the variable is that, as Harry learns too late, the toilet he happened to choose at Mary's house doesn't flush, a conundrum he resolves by detaching the bowl from the floor and dumping its contents out the window. A common theme of the situational variables is the unavailability of an actual toilet, motivating desperate carnivalesque improvisations: In *A Million Ways to Die in the West*, Foy uses a hat, and then another when just one proves insufficient; in *Van Wilder*, Dick is rerouted from the bathroom by a medical school dean strongarming him into gladhanding with the admissions committee, forcing Dick to evacuate in front of them in a nearby wastebin; and in *Bridesmaids*,[75] since Rita and Becca are already using the bridal boutique's lone toilet to vomit, Megan hops into the sink. Other examples include Finch unknowingly ending up in the girl's bathroom in his rush to find a toilet, only to find the seat cover dispenser empty, forcing the germaphobe to delay his urgent bowel movement and use toilet paper to cover the seat instead; and the lack of toilet paper in *Along Came Polly*, forcing Reuben to use Polly's keepsake facecloth instead, which then clogs the toilet and floods the bathroom.

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[75] Feig, Paul. *Bridesmaids*, Universal Pictures, 2011.

Aesthetic conventions. Several conventionalized formal patterns consistently emerge from the panoply of explosive diarrhea gags. As discussed previously, the organizing principle is maximum impact. Accordingly, the staging and the editing choices emphasize temporal continuity and duration, to best immerse us in a credible impression of reality. We never join the afflicted *in media res,* nor is time at all compressed. On the contrary, the scene tends to begin just prior to the first sign of trouble ahead, then stays with them during their mad dash for the toilet and into the throes of evacuation. The framing of shots tends toward head-to-toe medium-long shots, so that we feel that we are witnessing the abject, scatological performance in its physical totality. The exceptions to this rule of full visibility are genitals and, in the majority of instances, any waste matter. To compensate for this structuring absence, the sound design is heightened and stylized, often to a hyperbolic degree. This sonic spectacle is synchronized to an equally stylized physical performance conveying the agony and ecstasy of violent defecation as a frenzy of convulsions, perspiration, moans, groans, and hyperventilation. The commitment of these gags to visceral spectacle straddles the real and the hyperreal, the 'more real than real,' echoing the ambivalence of gross-out comedy more broadly. More than any other example, *Dumb and Dumber* established the aesthetic prototype for the indirect sonic spectacle of explosive diarrhea gags.

Normative transgression. Finally, the explosive diarrhea gag is characterized by consistent social meaning across its many varied instances. This meaning pertains to the staging of defecation as a transgression of conventional social norms. Obviously, evacuation in and of itself is a fact of life, and thus doesn't inherently undermine the established social order. Its transgressive potential emerge once the boundary of private and public is crossed and this

normatively private event is exposed to public view. Hence the need for external dramatic motivation to endow the diarrhea with sufficient extraordinary urgency to as to sabotage any attempts to maintain privacy. Hence also their frequent setting in public restrooms, where the presence of an unwitting audience can be most plausibly motivated. Even where there aren't any firsthand witnesses in the narrative diegesis, as is the case in *Dumb and Dumber* and *Along Came Polly,* the inherently voyeuristic process of representing someone using the toilet, to say nothing of its vivid spectacularization, can itself be read as a transgression that the explosive diarrhea gag encourages – or rather, coerces – the extradiegetic audience to indulge. Moreover, the threat of 'exposure' hangs over both of these exceptions: specifically, the exposure of the shame of shit to the protagonists' prospective love interests. This represents another significant tendency of the explosive diarrhea gag, which is that it constitutes a *gendered* normative transgression. Specifically, the eruption of unruly bowels is posed as an immutable biological 'truth' that is fundamentally incompatible with the feminine as normatively defined. This pertains to women's desirability, which is compromised for the male scatological voyeurs of *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004)[76] and *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001)[77], as well as the ability to successfully 'pass' as a woman, which underscores the gag's function in *White Chicks* and – in an instance of the series' lamentable pattern of transphobia – the *South Park* episode "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New Vagina" (2005), in which the eponymous schoolteacher celebrates her vaginoplasty by noisily defecating in a well-populated women's restroom. The

[76] Leiner, Danny. *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, New Line Cinema, 2004.
[77] Gallen, Joel. *Not Another Teen Movie*, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2001.

comic incongruity is that Garrison accosts the other patrons upon entering with proclamations of his inauguration into womanhood, whereas her cacophonous shitting reveals the masculine 'essence' that supposedly prevents her full transition into a 'real' woman.[78]

The prevailing theme of the biological intruding upon the social warrants another appropriation of Erving Goffman's concept of "flooding out." As explained in the second chapter vis-à-vis the anxiety of physical excess in fatsuit performances, Goffman defines flooding out as the instance when a social actor is taken "momentarily 'out of play'" from the 'performance' of conformity to a given social encounter, due to the involuntary eruption of a "flow of affect."[79] I propose a literalization of Goffman's metaphor to describe the social dynamics endemic to explosive diarrhea gags. Indeed, gross-out gags in general often follow this logic. Projectile vomit gags, in particular, are similarly staged as involuntary intrusions upon the social, with the added resonance with Goffman of materializing the affect of disgust. Accordingly, projectile vomit gags often escalate into a 'contagious' spread of emesis, just as flooding out with laughter often causes others to similarly lose their poise, as in "The Autumn Years" segment of *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983),[80] the pie-eating contest scene of *Stand By Me* (1986),[81] the funeral scene of *Jane Austen's Mafia!* (1998), and the ill-fated beauty pageant at the end of *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999).[82] In all these cases, the normative transgression effected by flooding out affronts the rigorous codes of the given social milieus. Explosive diarrhea gags function

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[78] "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New Vagina." *South Park*, Comedy Central, 2005.
[79] Erving Goffman. *Encounters*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961. 55.
[80] Jones, Terry. *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, Universal Pictures, 1983.
[81] Reiner, Rob. *Stand By Me*, Columbia Pictures, 1986.
[82] Jann, Michael Patrick. *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, New Line Cinema, 1999.

similarly, though they tend to signify more strongly in terms of individual self-conception than social context. In *American Pie,* Finch's travails deflate the elevated self-image he's cultivated of precocious sophistication; in *National Lampoon's Van Wilder,* Dick's blue-blood superiority complex experiences the same. The social meaning of explosive diarrhea gags thus fulfills the grotesque realist principle of subverting bourgeois morality and inverting the priority of mind over body, of high-minded aspiration over earthly materiality. What results, however, is ideological ambiguity and ambivalence: Do these gags affirm or critique the response of shame and embarrassment they so willingly exploit for comedic effect? In the section that follows, I analyze the work of Tim and Eric, whose hyperbolic engagement with the explosive diarrhea gag – among other standard (and not-so-standard) gross-out gags – articulates both an abject, hyper-regressive vision of masculinity in the digital age and a resolutely ironic position towards the medium of comedy itself, as a way of exploring this question further.

Anti-comedy and *Tim and Eric's* Abject Masculinity

We return to the central question animating this chapter's inquiries. On one hand, the prevalence of gross-out spectacles in American popular culture from the '90s through the '00s reflects a return to the body as a site of social and political agency in the popular imagination during an era of hypermediation, digitization, and atomization – all forces that precisely threaten the unity and cohesion of human subjectivity. As Bonila writes,

> In Hollywood Lowbrow, the subjugation of the individual biological body to the body social engenders in Hollywood Lowbrow recursive gestures to bodily functions such as evacuation. The gestures then function as touchstones for the turn-of- the-millennium audiences to vicariously authenticate their beings-as-bodied, in a world becoming more and more 'virtual.' Put simply, the more dispersed a subject, the more grossly his body rises as the subject's reified absence.[83]

By Bonila's account, then, the Hollywood Lowbrow foregrounds an embodied universality in a sociopolitical context that seeks to dissolve the collectivity so central to the carnivalesque aesthetic. On the other hand, as I have argued thus far, these very same "recursive gestures to bodily functions" are shot through with dynamics of individuality and exclusion: the elevation of the creative individual in gross-out comedian comedy; the foregrounding of irony and disgust as a strategy of position-taking in the context of taste distinction; and the use of proximity and duration to retrench the primacy of the masculine. Will Leitch's objections to *Tim & Eric*'s gross-out gags as "aggressively nihilistic" certainly resonate here. While *Tim and Eric*'s grotesque shock tactics satisfy Hollywood Lowbrow's psychological and sociological imperatives, insofar as they violate conventional standards of polite society, they do so in a way that maximizes the viewer's alienation via aesthetic disgust. Still, cultivation of a distancing effect is not necessarily sufficient to threaten comedy's mass appeal. As Paul's notion of gross-out films' fundamental ambivalence makes clear, part of what makes the genre so pleasurable is

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[83] Bonila, Paul C. "Is There More to Hollywood Lowbrow Than Meets the Eye?" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2005, pp. 17-24. 20.

being able to imagine that its gross-out spectacles may, like *Tim & Eric's Billion Dollar Movie,* inspire the urge to run for the exits. The audience thus laughs both in superiority over this urge, especially if they feel it themselves, as well as those who succumb to it. Leitch's criticism, then, suggests an upset balance rather than a strict binary: at some point, gross-out gags become so outlandish and so disgusting that they fail to speak to a common experience of the body, leaving only the most hardened audience members to laugh in superiority over anyone unable (or unwilling) to "get" the joke.

To consider further the evolution of a consciously niche formalist sensibility from gross-out comedy's conventionally populist ethos, I will conclude with a discussion of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* (2007-10), a television series that emblematizes the confrontation of "beings-as-bodied" with a "world becoming more and more 'virtual'" both in its content of surrealist gross-out anticomedy and its context of the dual processes of media conglomeration and cablecast niche marketing. I will devote special attention to its depiction of masculinity as subjugated and infantilized by consumer capitalism in the age of digital hypermediation,

The basic premise of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* is a parody of televisual 'flow,' with a strong emphasis on campy green screen videographics, awkward performances, and absurdist scatological humor. Any discussion of *Tim and Eric* would be remiss to bypass the layered irony that distinguishes their comedy; likewise the reflexivity and avant-garde strategies that sustain the tension of giddy displeasure and uneasy laughter throughout. My focus here, however, is on a perhaps more prosaic, yet curiously underexamined, aspect of the show: its eccentric depiction of masculinity. *Tim and Eric* stars a heady mix of the show's namesakes, well-known performers, and unknown near-amateurs, ostensibly central casting's rejects whose

status of being "in on the joke" is never quite certain. One consistency, however, is the dearth of women, usually limited to Tim and Eric in drag, which, while hardly an uncommon affliction for comedy as recently as ten years ago (and certainly not for the notoriously phallocentric Adult Swim), contributes to an unmistakably homosocial imaginative space, one that constantly, if parodically, emphasizes the maintenance of emotional bonds between men and the boundaries of masculinity itself – including what, exactly, that category even means. In this regard, *Awesome Show* is a crucial adjunct to discussions of troubled masculinity and particularly the so-called "bromance" phenomenon in contemporary culture, in which platonic male friendships take structural cues from romantic relationships, fostering emotional and sometimes physical intimacy that rides perilously close to, but adamantly disavows, homoerotic consummation.

At least when looking at film and TV comedy, these critiques tend to level their gaze at dominant narrative forms. In part this surely reflects a cultural studies ethos of prioritizing the popular as a site for hegemonic struggle: in the case of homosocial comedy, the shifting tides of 'legitimate' masculinities. Narrative genre film and TV furthermore tends towards a structure of destabilization followed by recuperation that lends itself to the vernacular interrogation of cultural norms. As we have seen, even the non-narrative hijinks of *Jackass* can be seen to incorporate such a structure. By contrast, *Awesome Show*'s sketch comedy format suspends meaning into a fractured, perpetual state of play, lurching freely between the real and the surreal, often implanting its vast array of vaguely-linked live-action characters into digitally-rendered two-dimensional spaces – not unlike Nickelodeon's *Blue's Clues* (1996-2006) – both blessing and cursing them with the metaphysical flexibility animation affords. *Awesome Show* thus frustrates analytic frameworks that presume narrative cohesion, even within individual sketches. It's perhaps inevitable that Tim and Eric would find a home on Adult Swim, first with the

similarly themed but far less abrasive *Tom Goes to the Mayor* in 2004, then with *Awesome Show* in 2007, followed by the spinoff series *Check it Out!, with Dr. Steve Brule* in 2010 and the horror-comedy anthology series *Tim and Eric's Bedtime Stories* in 2013. Adult Swim has actively cultivated a brand identity as the late-night clearinghouse for highly aesthetic, edgy, achingly postmodern programming. As Hye Jin Lee argues, this marketing strategy is consistent with the shift from mass to niche marketing in the post-network TV era, in which "networks that have a clear brand identification reap greater rewards" than those that cast a wide net over a loosely defined audience.[84] Accordingly, Adult Swim has constructed a very specific taste public in its crosshairs: young, predominantly male, and media savvy that affords them an inexhaustible appetite for pop ephemera and transgressive, psychedelic imagery. Ironically, however, Adult Swim now ranks among the most-watched cable networks which has actively cultivated a hip, transgressive brand identity. Lee observes, however, that this type of niche marketing has overtaken mass marketing as the dominant business logic in the post-network TV era[85], and Adult Swim, like MTV and Nickelodeon before it, has become immensely popular not despite but because of its rhetoric of nonconformity and taste distinction, regularly surpassing Comedy Central and ESPN's ability to capture the much-coveted eyeballs of young men aged 18-34. To position *Awesome Show* as ancillary to the popular, then, is not quite right. On the contrary, in many ways, Tim and Eric's comedy is part of the same cultural current as its conventional narrative counterparts among comedies of homosociality, and indeed, several of the star

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[84] Lee, Hye Jin. "All Kids out of the Pool!: Brand Identity, Television Animations, and Adult Audience of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim." *Mass Communications*, edited by University of Iowa, vol. Doctor of Philosophy, Dissertation, Iowa Research Online, May 2013 2013. general editor, Meenakshi Gigi Durham. 53-54.
[85] Ibid. 53.

performers of this genre, including Will Ferrell, Jonah Hill, and Paul Rudd, make appearances throughout *Awesome Show.*

My aim here, then, is to apply the optics of masculine representation to the surrealist anti-comedy of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!,* specifically through the lens of the show's satirical take on consumer culture, which at once infantilizes, feminizes, and brutalizes its overwhelmingly male subjects. Rather than totally bracket off questions of irony and reflexivity that commonly attend *Awesome Show,* I ultimately wish to open up space for their synthesis with a more straightforward reading of what I'm going to provisionally term the show's "abject masculinity," which, I argue, is central to an overarching vision of a homosocial consumerist dystopia.

Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job! is, broadly speaking, a patchwork of simulated televisual ephemera, filtered through a tonally erratic idiolect of verbal regression and visual non-sequiturs. Visually, the show comprises grotesque imagery, hyperreal sound design, spastic editing, outdated videographics, and garish color schemes that invite dialogue with contemporary artists like Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman, Tony Oursler, and Mike Kelley. *Awesome Show,* and Adult Swim more broadly, thus exhibits a "trash" aesthetic, a key feature of postmodern culture, particularly television. Discussing *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* (1986-1990), a spiritual forebear of *Tim and Eric,* John Caldwell describes trash aesthetics as an indiscriminate mix of high and low signifiers that seek "to overwhelm the viewer not with narrative or history, but with physical stuff and frenetic action" and describes the aesthetic as "dominated by informational noise" and

"spatial overload" that reward the savvy, insatiable media appetites of "discriminating viewers."[86]

Prominently featured in the trash aesthetic of Adult Swim and *Awesome Show* especially are parodies of the kind of emphatic, artless infomercials that once saturated the late-night airwaves. Most of these hawk the wares of the fictional Cinco Corporation, whose products span a range from sleep aids and children's toys to encyclopedias and insurance policies, but share a common convoluted uselessness. One product line in particular, Cinco Men, purports to serve the grooming needs of middle-aged males, the demographic most well-represented by *Awesome Show*'s cast of regressed misfits. At their helm stand Tim and Eric themselves. Paunchy and awkward, their trainers paired with pleated khakis, they seem to anticipate the proudly corny father figure that would come to embody an entire category of nostalgic internet humor unto itself in the form of the so-called "dad joke."

Of the Cinco Men ads, a three-part series starring best friends Kent and Rudy are emblematic. Played by Bob Ross and Jay Mawhinney respectively, Kent serves as pitchman to Rudy, repeatedly rescuing him from grievous errors of couture and decorum. The first ad finds Rudy afflicted with "raccoon eyes" after wearing sunglasses while sunbathing, prompting Kent to recommend the Cinco Eye Tanning System to achieve the perfect, even tan.[87] Given the vast array of products and services peddled toward this end in reality, an "eye tanning system" is

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[86] Caldwell, John T. *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television.* Rutgers University Press, 1995. 193.
[87] "C.O.R.B.S." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!,* Adult Swim, 2008.

hardly unlikely, but Cinco's is spectacularly elaborate. The second in the series pushes the theme of middle-aged male vanity further while also expanding our view into Kent and Rudy's private lives with the aphrodisiacal Bro-oche System, which fastens a bejeweled broach into the sternum of the wearer.[88] By incorporating mass-produced, feminized kitsch into normative masculine style, the Bro-oche System echoes the Cinco Mouth Decorator, a do-it-yourself kit for bejeweling your face.[89] Notwithstanding the absence of aspirant alphas Kent and Rudy, the spot similarly sets the pursuit of manliness off its well-worn path, first investing bushy beards with youthful vigor and athletic prowess, then, when the viewer proxy frets that his beardless face will make him "look ridiculous" at an upcoming job interview, offers glued-on plastic jewels as a sufficient beard substitute.

At the level of joke structure, both Bro-oche System and Mouth Decorator enlist comedy of incongruity plainly in their hybrid of masculine and feminine iconographies; as if to deliberately belabor the point, Kent assures Rudy, "Now you're ready for your manly Bro-oche System" and identifies the "decorative masculine flower" as his favorite, while the Mouth Decorator's slogan hails "A New Generation of Masculine Décor." At another level, the parodies read as literal-minded variations of "straight camp." Ken Feil describes straight camp as an aesthetic sensibility arising in the 1990s that "aimed to reappropriate popular style and reinscribe it as macho and heterosexual."[90] Efforts to absorb the emancipatory hedonism and inverted

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[88] "Lucky." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2010.
[89] "Origins." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2009.
[90] Feil, Ken. "From *Batman* to *I Love You, Man:* Queer Taste, Vulgarity, and the Bromance as Sensibility and Film Genre." *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, edited by Michael DeAngelis, Wayne State University Press, 2014, pp. 165-190. 171.

cultural hierarchies of queer aesthetics into mainstream hetero culture have existed at least since Susan Sontag famously observed the phenomenon in her 1964 "Notes on Camp"; what distinguished straight camp was that its "litany of kitsch and shlock" proceeded according to hetero-masculine values asserted with renewed urgency in the face of queer identity's political visibility in the 1990s. By similar logic, the Mouth Decorator and Bro-oche System imagine cheap, chintzy ornamentation – the domain of craft shops and home shopping networks, historically figured as feminine, infantile and thus the lowest of low culture, ripe for camp revaluation – as signs of worth in explicitly hetero-masculine terms. Both the Eye Tanning System and the Bro-oche System find Kent and Rudy grooming for dates with women, and in the Mouth Decorator ad, our hero is revealed to be interviewing for a janitorial position, a punchline that draws upon trenchant associations, at least in the American context, between blue-collar labor and authentic masculinity.

The choice of janitor from among the pantheon of blue-collar jobs is additionally significant in light of another symbolic burden it bears in classist ideology: the categorical lowness of cleaning up others' messes; of continual contact with filth; of, in short, abjection, another constitutive feature of Tim and Eric's comedic method. Kristeva's taxonomy of the abject – human waste, open wounds, gender hybridity – is of use here, as is the term's more colloquial definition as degradation more broadly. In the Cinco ads, abjection manifests as sadomasochistic excess, in which incongruity isn't just established between masculine and feminine iconographies, but also between the products' claims of convenience and the elaborate demands they place upon the consumer's body. The running gag of total tooth removal for Eye-Tanning and Bro-oche Systems is only the most comically superfluous of these demands. In the world of *Awesome Show,* the male body is rendered fundamentally masochistic by consumerism

as it willingly subjects itself to humiliation and pain and exchanges its bodily integrity for diminishing returns of campy glamor.

The third and final entry of the Kent and Rudy saga elaborates on the theme of abject prosthesis while digressing from masculine décor per se with the Cinco Foodtube Consumption Apparatus, a plastic tube installed between the mouth and stomach that allows you to avoid injuring yourself with tableware by having your food liquified and delivered to your bowels instantaneously.[91] Once again, Cinco answers an exceedingly minor problem with a complex and labor-intensive solution, requiring irreversible alterations to the body, including, of course, another round of tooth removal. By allowing you to reduce eating time to an instant and thus spend more time socializing, the Foodtube, like the Cinco Men products, purports to optimize the male body for social presentation while actually subjecting it to abject abuse. Multiple, overlapping layers of satire are visible here. First and foremost, the Cinco spots lambaste the snake-oil rhetoric of infomercials and their wholesale fabrication of consumer needs. Moreover, they exaggerate the turn towards disciplinary prosthesis and cyborgification in commodity culture. The Foodtube is, in this sense, the cracked mirror image of protein shakes, Soylent, and postwar sci-fi visions of meals reduced to tiny capsules, while the Bro-oche System, Mouth Decorator, and Eye Tanning System test the limits of suffering for beauty.

The gendered nature of the latter furthermore contributes to *Tim and Eric*'s burlesque of contemporary masculinity. Cinco Men's overt integration of camp style into an ostensibly

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[91] "Chrimbus Special." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2010.

heterosexual address invokes the so-called metrosexual sensibility, an evolution of straight camp that relaxed its forebear's overcompensating machismo and broadened the terms of legibly heteromasculine appearance, inverting what Mark Simpson, who authored the term "metrosexual," deems the "basic premise of traditional heterosexuality – that only women are looked at and only men do the looking."[92] As Feil notes, the sensibility reached its zenith with Bravo's reality series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-07), revived on Netflix as simply *Queer Eye* (2018-), in which five stewards of gay male style took hapless breeders under their collective wing. (Incidentally, the original run of *Queer Eye* ended the year *Awesome Show* premiered.) Predictably, the very premise of *Queer Eye* structured criticism of the metrosexual movement more generally: that queer visibility could only be countenanced as a means of improving heterosexuality. Read against this phenomenon, Cinco Men then appears to lay bare the counterhegemonic aesthetics at the root of edicts to exfoliate one's face and tailor one's shirts on Bravo and the pages of *GQ* and *Esquire.*

Bromance is also visible here in the way the ads prioritize the bond between Kent and Rudy. The Cinco Tanning System's tagline describes a "must-tan for all tanning friends," emphasizing its function for their friendship rather than Rudy's stated need to look good for his upcoming date. Similarly, the ad for the Bro-oche System barely speaks of the women they're getting ready to meet and leaves them completely offscreen. Instead, they submit themselves to each other's gaze, a fact underscored by Kent's hand mirror. When the women finally do appear

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[92] Feil, Ken. "From *Batman* to *I Love You, Man:* Queer Taste, Vulgarity, and the Bromance as Sensibility and Film Genre." *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, edited by Michael DeAngelis, Wayne State University Press, 2014, pp. 165-190. 172.

in the Foodtube ad, they've given no speaking lines, and one spends the date in a state of apparent shellshock. Discourses of bromance proliferates elsewhere throughout *Awesome Show* as well: in the *Business Hugs* sketch, for example, in which Ray Wise instructs men on elaborate methods for proper homosocial intimacy in the office.[93]

So far, Tim and Eric's sendup of masculinity resonates with R. Colin Tait's concept of "absurd masculinity." Borrowing from Martin Esslin's formulation of the "theatre of the absurd," Tait uses absurd masculinity to analyze how Will Ferrell's performance of "gender hysteria" in films such as *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004) and *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006) destabilizes masculine norms by triggering "moments when the rigidity of gender identity breaks down, opening up fissures for new ideas to spill in."[94] I propose here a slight revision of this concept into *abject* masculinity, however, for the simple yet significant lack in *Awesome Show* of any mechanism of recuperation. Whereas the narrative comedy of homosociality constitutes, in Peter Alulinas' words, "celebration[s] of failure" by allowing average, unremarkable men the pleasures of triumph, often simultaneously over institutional power *and* women writ large,[95] *Awesome Show,* unencumbered by the strictures of narrative resolution, offers no such triumph. On one hand, the world that emerges hazily from the flow of trash TV aesthetics is nearly devoid of women, bringing to fruition a paradise of bromance. On the other, that paradise is no paradise at all. Even the notion of "business hugs,"

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[93] "C.O.R.B.S." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!,* Adult Swim, 2008.
[94] Tait, R. Colin. "Absurd Masculinity: Will Ferrells Time-Bending Comic Persona." *The Communication Review The Communication Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2014, pp. 166-182, /z-wcorg/. 167-68.
[95] Alulinas, Peter. "Male Masculinity as the Celebration of Failure: The Frat Pack, Women, and the Trauma of Victimization in the "Dude Flick"." *Mediascape*, no. Spring, 2008.

coaching men to seek out intimacy from their coworkers, seems rather bleak. The men here are constantly degraded and dominated, less with the ecstasy of submissives than the resignation of serfs. They appear to owe their souls to the Cinco company store, first and foremost. When they're not being subjected to the apparently pointless tribulations of Cinco's products, they're being betrayed by their own unruly bodily functions, particularly uncontrollable diarrhea, a condition that takes pride of place in *Tim and Eric*'s scatological imagination and can indeed only be resolved with the help of more Cinco products, such as the D-Pants[96] and the Diarrheaphragm.[97] Men are given expanded reproductive functions in the world as well, with dismal results: Steve Schirripa of *The Sopranos* defecates edible eggs with the help of Cinco MyEggs,[98] while Tim and Eric, upon discovering their ability to lactate, gift bottles of their "man milk" to their friends, only to accidentally poison and kill them all.[99] If amidst their torrent of gross-out provocations, semiotic clutter, and ironic layering, Tim and Eric wished to suggest that a homosocial future governed by hypermediated consumer culture was no future at all, they could not be clearer.

At the level of content, then, *Tim and Eric* presents spectacles of abject masculinity that fall short of recuperation into a 'proper' masculinity. At the level of spectatorship, an ambivalent dynamic emerges from the show's heavy trafficking of irony, reflexivity, and intertextuality. Jeffrey Sconce argues that this signifying environment of hermeneutic uncertainty provides ideal

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[96] "Snow." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2009.
[97] "Comedy." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2010.
[98] "Spagett." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2008.
[99] "Man Milk." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2010.

conditions for meta-comedy, that is, the more explicitly self-critical twin of anti-comedy. Analyzing yet another one of the show's many fake commercials for a product called the Poop Tube, Sconce observes that:

> What is usually approached obliquely in such humor is made crudely explicit – the sights and sounds of shitting; the juvenile punning typical of excretion humor (the commercial's pitchman is B. M. Farts, son of Whetty Farts); the revulsion of contamination (a boy is seen with liquefied feces dripping down his face); and even the infantile rebellion of missing the toilet (a man attempts to aim his spout at a public urinal, but unfortunately the device does not allow for great accuracy)…as a metacomedic gag, the bit works…to call out the existence and conventions of shit humor generally, taking a usually simple joke and making it both overly graphic and overly complex.[100]

In the Poop Tube sketch,[101] Sconce sees an instance of lowbrow humor deconstructing itself, suggesting that *Awesome Show* "seems to take populist innovations in toilet humor as a challenge."[102] Significantly it's the very extremity of the gag's execution, unimpeded by what Freud calls "joke-work" – the condensation, modification, and substitution of repressed appetites and unconscious thoughts into the pleasure of laughter – that triggers a detached, formalist reading.[103]

What's striking here is that we're prompted to adopt the "aesthetic disposition" not only precisely when the text makes a visceral, direct appeal to our emotions, but also *because* it is

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[100] Sconce, Jeffrey. "Metacomedy: "Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!"." *How to Watch Television,* New York University Press, 2013, Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell. 78-79.
[101] "Vacation." *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, Adult Swim, 2007.
[102] Sconce, Jeffrey. "Metacomedy: "Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!"." *How to Watch Television,* New York University Press, 2013, Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell. 78.
[103] Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious.* Norton, 1960. 41-42.

making that appeal. The camerawork and sound design bring the viewer into simulated proximity with matter out-of-place. Obviously, the apparatus of moving image media deactivates the three most powerful conduits of disgust - taste, touch, and smell – but the image offered of "Poop Tube for Kids" sending liquid feces down a child's face takes their place, even promising that its discharge "smells better than it used to smell." As Sconce observes, the sketch functions in the mode of much of Tim and Eric's comedy in that it confers subtle self-reflexive logic upon unsubtle lowbrow terrain, availing itself to "easy" laughs while at the same time enlisting and rewarding the viewer's fluency in comedy conventions.[104] What distinguishes their gross-out gags in particular, in my view, is that they push the tension between the low and the high to its breaking point. Carolyn Korsmeyer's proposition that disgust facilitates, rather than impedes, contemplation and appreciation of art is clearly at work here.[105] So, too, is a pattern of escalation: once the scatological premise is established, each passing moment builds upon the last in terms of the absurd intensity of its regressive spectacle.

As the critical response and audience walkouts from their film suggest, *Tim and Eric* appeals to a taste public that polices its boundaries aggressively through the provocation of disgust. Nevertheless, as I have suggested regarding the show's construction of masculinity, ghettoizing *Tim and Eric* as a cult object would be to elide its exhibition of dynamics that permeate popular culture more generally. Clearly, the intertwining of disgust, irony, and taste distinction has only been on the ascent in film and TV comedy during gross-out's second wave.

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[104] Sconce, 79.
[105] Korsmeyer.

Gross-out gags appeal to the divisions of atomization as much as the universality of the grotesque body. Any account of this era of comedy that emphasizes only the latter is only telling half the story.

Conclusion

During the second season of the HBO series *Girls*, satirical news outlet the Onion took a swipe at showrunner Lena Dunham's ribald aesthetic approach. The Onion's story, titled "Next Episode Of *Girls* To Feature Lena Dunham Shitting Herself During Gyno Exam While Eating A Burrito," reads:

> According to numerous critics' reports, an upcoming episode of HBO's hit comedy *Girls* features the show's star, Lena Dunham, losing control of her bowels during a routine gynecological exam while eating a large burrito. "The scene is raw, it's brave, and it's the boldest thing we've seen Dunham do yet: a smart, unsanitized comedy of errors that perfectly captures the experience of being at the ob-gyn," said *Huffington Post* television critic Kia Makarechi of the envelope-pushing episode, wherein the burrito-eating Dunham elects to be examined completely nude because hospital gowns make her "feel like she's dying of bone cancer or something" and awkwardly flirts with the 55-year-old gynecologist before violently shitting herself and then asking if the doctor can prescribe her anything for her anxiety. "When a naked Hannah dribbled hot sauce all over herself in front of the doctor, shit in every corner of the office, cried, became angry with the doctor, had sex with the doctor, finished her burrito, had sex with the doctor again, shit herself again, and then realized who she was really angry at and sexually attracted to was Adam, I just closed my eyes and said, 'Thank you.' These are real girls with real bodies doing things that real girls do." At press time, fans were abuzz after a tweet from Dunham hinted at an all-nude third season.[1]

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[1] "Next Episode of 'Girls' to Feature Lena Dunham Shitting Herself During Gyno Exam While Eating a Burrito." *The Onion*, 14 Mar 2013. https://www.theonion.com/next-episode-of-girls-to-feature-lena-dunham-shitting-h-1819574677.

Key to the satire here isn't just the litany of scatological signifiers. The quoted fictional TV critic's gushing response mirrors the praise heaped upon the series by the real-world critical community. Specifically, Dunham's spectacular self-abasement, imagined by the Onion as an exaggeration of Dunham's semifrequent nudity and public evacuation on *Girls,* is framed as the nodal point for the series' claims to realism. The satirical irony is, of course, supposed to be that the Dunham's theatrics far exceed the baseline of signifying "real girls with real bodies doing things that real girls do," thus critiquing the series and the critical discourse surrounding it for their alleged overreach. Perhaps the Onion's most perceptive observation here, regardless of the validity of its critique, is that the show's bodily spectacles are part and parcel of the naturalistic representation that has gained the show such consistent approbation from critics and audiences alike. Gross-out humor anchors *Girls* and its "smart, unsanitized comedy" kin in women's bodies, which, in turn, shores up credibility for these texts as comprising an uncompromisingly contemporary realist discourse.

Gross-out comedy as a realist signifying system takes on special resonance when centering the bodies of women. As a gatekeeper emotion in both evolutionary and ideological terms, disgust has long had a normative purpose, policing women's corporeal boundaries within the patriarchal body politic. Loosening inhibitions on the body's spectacular functions therefore transgresses not just the norms of polite society more generally, but also more specifically, the norms of proper feminine comportment. At least in the context of Western culture and society, the woman's body has long been invested with fetishized spiritual, aesthetic, and, of course, erotic value. William Ian Miller notes that early advocates of celibacy specifically foregrounded the presence of disgusting bodily fluids within women's bodies to caution against premarital sexual congress. John Chrysostom, a writer of the fourth century, wrote that

> If you consider carefully what things lie hidden under the skin of which seems so beautiful to you, what is concealed within nostrils and within the throat and the stomach, these seemly external features (filled within with all kinds of vileness) will proclaim the beauty of this body to be nothing else but a whited sepulcher.[2]

The fetishized image of woman as a font of transcendent beauty is thus contrasted with the reality of woman as just another corporeal presence, a vessel for all the unglamorous earthly functions that supposedly run counter to the satisfaction of carnal desire. This patriarchal framing – which gives women two binary options, either desirousness or repulsiveness – has persisted through even recent film and television comedy where it serves the normative function of reaffirming the heterosexual male gaze by transgressing it.

But the demystification of women's bodies has also been harnessed as a counterhegemonic technique. A central plank of feminist praxis in 1960s and '70s was a radical rethinking of women's relationship to their own bodies. A seminal text in this regard is *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* first published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective in 1973. With this book, the Collective took an explicitly holistic approach to women's well-being, asserting that women's alienation from their own bodies through generations of patriarchal conditioning – from the medical community and western culture more broadly – alienates them from a coherent sense of self-identity and personal autonomy that only perpetuates their sociocultural marginalization. The Collective urges the reader, in the preface to the book's first volume, to

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[2] Miller, William Ian. *The Anatomy of Disgust.* Harvard University Press, 1997. 93.

> Picture a woman trying to do work and to enter into equal and satisfying relationships with other people – when she feels physically weak because she has never tried to be strong; when she drains her energy trying to change her face, her figure, her hair, her smells, to match some ideal norm set by magazines, movies and TV; when she feels confused and ashamed of the menstrual blood that every month appears from some dark place in her body; when her internal body processes are a mystery to her and surface only to cause her trouble (an unplanned pregnancy, or cervical cancer); when she does no understand or enjoy sex and concentrates her sexual drives into aimless romantic fantasies, perverting and misusing a potential energy because she had been brought up to deny it.[3]

Pushing back against the shame, anxiety, and ignorance that have systematically attended women's bodies is thus set out as a feminist first principle. Any discussion of advances for women's equal rights and personal autonomy would therefore be remiss to ignore the less measurable, but no less real, normalization of women's bodily functions and sexual autonomy within the broader culture.

The cultural climate implied by the Onion article suggests that Boston Women's Health Book Collective's project of bodily liberation is gaining traction in the media culture. This owes no doubt no small part to the rise of premium cable and streaming networks as major players in television and, eventually, feature film production. Slack restrictions on what cable networks can broadcast to homes and personal devices has allowed a casual explicitness to flourish across major cable networks such as HBO, Showtime, and AMC, and major streaming networks like

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[3] Collective, The Boston Women's Health Book. *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women.* Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984. Xix.

Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. The overlap of cinema and streaming has clearly only been unfavorable for theatrical film; losing its monopoly on rated R-level content is one of several major consequences. Combined with the concurrent rise and expansion of social media and the internet at large, where effectively unlimited access to depictions of and discourses about the body and its functions persistently defies any attempts at regulation or consolidation, this technological context seems to be bringing us ever closer to the horizon of "total visibility" as prognosticated by Jean Baudrillard. Contemporary ideological conditions are similarly favorable to women's embrace of vulgarity and carnality onscreen. As Sarah Banet-Weiser describes it, insofar as the contemporary era is characterized by a "postfeminist" ethos, feminist theory and practice now occupies the cultural mainstream, albeit in the narrowly circumscribed and heavily diluted form demanded by the superstructure of neoliberal capitalism. Key features of this ethos include "an emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency" and "a renewed focus on a woman's body as a site of liberation."[4]

The purchase on gross-out comedy as a vernacular feminist realism in this historical context is fitting. If the genre's function as a popular repudiation of bourgeois inhibitions has lapsed into stasis, its potential for demystifying women's bodily experience still abounds. Indeed, attempts that have been made prior to the 2010s have consistently failed. In 2002, *The Sweetest Thing* sought to piggyback on the breakout success of *There's Something About Mary* by casting Cameron Diaz, along with Christina Applegate and Selma Blair, as the leads of a

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[4] Banet-Weiser, Sarah. "Postfeminism and Popular Feminism." *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018, pp. 152-156. 153.

similar gross-out rom-com hybrid, but the film was a commercial disappointment and a critical flop. Three years later, Jenny McCarthy attempted a similar project with *Dirty Love*, which featured, among other gross-out innovations, a menstrual variation on the flooding out gag; it also failed and slipped into obscurity. The massive commercial and critical success of *Bridesmaids* in 2011, then, followed by the popularity of *Girls* and Comedy Central's *Broad City* (2014-2019) with audiences and cultural commentators alike, suggests a significant, likely overdetermined shift. The aesthetic superiority of these latter, successful comedies over the former is, for one thing, hard to deny. Moreover, they benefit from the relative prestige now available to the gross-out comedy form thanks, at least in part, to Judd Apatow's lauded brand of 'grown-up' sex farce throughout the 2000s. Not incidentally, Apatow produced both *Bridesmaids* and *Girls.* Finally, and perhaps most significantly, *Girls* and *Broad City* are marketed and widely understood as auteur texts. Dunham's signifying authority as both creator and star of *Girls,* and Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson's as co-creators and co-stars of *Broad City,* in both cases playing variations of their 'real' selves, confer the gravitas of authenticity upon their sexually frank, often scatological, and sometimes – especially in *Broad City* – overtly gross narrative comedy. If there are frontiers of gross-out comedy remaining to be broached, the new gross-out realism, the comedy of whited sepulchers, is where they are.

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