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## THE CARNIVALESQUE IN WOMEN CENTRIC COMEDIES

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### Abstract

*The recently labelled genre of gross-out comedy has often been linked to the concept of carnivalesque. The films of this genre capture most of the elements that Bakhtin identifies as the characteristic features of carnival humour. Majority of gross-out comedies target male viewers and save for a few exceptions, the entire movie will adhere to a single pattern of humour. However, comedies centred on female friendships, relationships or featuring a female lead with minimal relevance to the male characters also carry humour of the carnivalesque variety albeit interspersed with other comedy types. A selected women-centric Hollywood comedy shall be analysed with reference to the concepts proposed by Bakhtin regarding carnival humour to bring out its presence in the film. The ambivalent nature of such humour can shed light on the cultural undercurrents of comedies focusing on female characters and aiming primarily at a female audience. Furthermore, studying the employment of carnivalesque humour can raise pertinent questions about its relevance as a means of expression.*

**Key words:** comedy, women-centric, carnival, humour

### Carnival Humour

Baudelaire had raised the question regarding the source of laughter in the seventeenth century while discussing the concept of the grotesque, which he called 'absolute comedy' however, it was not until Bakhtin's work, *Rabelais and His World*, that came out over a century later that this source contemplated by Baudelaire was studied analytically albeit in a different context. Bakhtin correlates the humour in the works of Rabelais to folk culture and the carnival.

The comic spectacle in carnival such as the 'feast of fools' and 'Easter laughter' mimicked serious rituals by shedding off the religious associations, piety and magic; relocating it outside the church with elements of play and spectacle made dominant. Comic forms use images true to the spirit of the carnival such as parodies of liturgies or prayers, secular parodies on the feudal system or even parodies of religious treatise by clerics or monks. Throughout the comic spectacle of carnival one finds

a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out", of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and un-crownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed: it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out (Bakhtin 11).

Carnival is unofficial, non-canonical and marks "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 10), more so with the use of language of the marketplace which decidedly allows no formality or etiquette to create distance between the people. It often possesses a profusion of insults, abusive

language, profanities and oaths. The peculiar feature of the carnival laughter, attuned to its general aversion to hierarchy, is its ambivalence. It is festive laughter directed at everyone, universal in nature. Whatever is exalted by the carnival is that which is condemned by the social binaries. The conventional ideas or images of beauty/ugliness, truth/lie, right/wrong, and superior/inferior are challenged in the carnival's inversive current.

In Rabelais' works, Bakhtin identifies 'images of material bodily principle' and 'grotesque realism' as the comic tools with its roots in folk humour. "Images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation and sexual life" (18) are part of the bodily principle and these form a predominant part of the comical imagery. Grotesque realism, loyal to the true 'inside-out' logic of the carnival, lowers 'all that is high, spirit, ideal, abstract' (19) to the material level. It is a celebration of those elements of the human body and life that have been decreed as inferior by conventional institutions. It also depicts the body in terms of its oneness with the world; stressing those parts that permits the interaction and flow of elements to and from the body. "This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities. . . the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (26). Similar to the carnival laughter the grotesque body also acquires universality, a collective human representation rather than individual manifestation. When individualisation occur body is privatised, shrouded in negation, shame and devoid of its positive power of regeneration.

Bakhtin however emphasizes that unlike the negative nature of the modern satire, carnival comedy, in all its humour retains an ambivalent, rejuvenating nature.

Material bodily principle in grotesque realism is positive and it is not derision rooted in ego or belief of superiority, where it is not laughter that reigns supreme but cold humour. He traces the presence of carnival humour from Rabelais to Cervantes where it slowly declines and finally goes into hiatus with the rise of Romanticism.

### Twenty First Century Descendants

Gross-out comedy is a new age coinage for a genre that treads the thin line between arousing disgust and eliciting laughter. According to Geoff King gross out is "comedy based on crude and deliberate transgressions of the bounds of 'normal' everyday taste" (63). King connects this to other instances where there are transgressions of social norms, namely the carnival. Although he argues that gross-out is secular and commercial while the carnival implies a belief in the institution, it is not entirely acceptable as a modicum of belief either conscious or subconscious in conventional institutions is required for the gross-out to incite laughter. The emphasis on bodily openings and lower body found in the carnival is also visible in gross-out comedy and in addition to this, the carnivalesque inversion of various hierarchies ranging from religious and feudal to the physical is an important aspect of this genre.

The target demographic of gross out is the teenage or young-adult male. This is perhaps why many such films revolve around college life. On the other hand, romantic comedies target women in particular but the comic elements rarely broach the gross out terrain. The exceptions for this are films that focus on female friendships or relationship between two or more women that give relatively less importance to the male characters in the movie. Romance is often an expendable sub plot in them. Films like *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (1997), *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *The Help* (2011) to name a few are examples for this. This paper analyses the movie *Bridesmaids* as a sample to establish the presence of carnival humour in it and to raise the possibility of establishing a pattern amongst other films of this type.

Annie (Kristen Wiig) is an erstwhile bakery owner who is works as a sales girl at a jewellery shop after her business failed. Her friend Lillian's (Maya Rudolph) engagement and events until her marriage are covered in the movie. Annie's experience as the maid of honour, her rivalry with one of the other bridesmaids and the collective experiences and friendship of the bridesmaids makes up the story. Annie's relationship with a police officer is the sub plot of the film. The other bridesmaids are Melissa

McCarthy as Megan, Wendi McLendon-Covey as Rita, Rose Byrne as Helen and Ellie Kemper as Becca. Most of them are misfits whether it be Rita, the mother of two who curses her kids and describes marriage and motherhood as nightmares; or Helen, the rich wife of groom's boss, who wants to prove that she is the better choice to be maid of honour and tries to please everyone because she has no friends; Megan, the overweight sister of the groom who tends to share extremely personal information or Annie, with her unsatisfactory personal and professional lives.

Many of the instances that are subject to discussion here are not unique to this film but also found in other gross out comedies. The difference lies in the female centred plot that reverses the masculine associations to raunchy humour with no attempt to reduce the femininity of the women to fit the usual nature of the jokes. Although the character of Megan is given tomboyish attire, there is no repression of sexuality. The following scenes from the movie are examples of how inversion of norms becomes source of laughter and the carnival nature of humour in the movie.

The opening scene shows a large modern house and then moves into its bedroom where the audience is given close shots of the faces of Annie and Ted (a handsome but selfish man) as they engage in sexual intercourse. The only reaction expected from the audience is laughter at the expressions and mannerisms of the actors and not romance or emotions as is the case in romantic comedies. Sex is detached from marriage, procreation, affection or even libido and made into a source of laughter. This incident becomes the topic of conversation the next day between friends Lillian and Annie as they have breakfast. Lillian points out the negative impact of Ted in Annie's life giving the example of how he once criticized Annie's teeth. In reaction, they both put dark food particles on to their teeth and admire each other, saying how beautiful they look. Lillian tells Annie that she looks beautiful and asks Annie to marry her. This scene exalts what is conventionally considered ugly while implying that the ugliness seen by the male is not visible or is unworthy of consideration in female friendship. Another instance that exemplifies grotesque realism takes place in Annie's apartment when one of her roommates exposes her flabby back and shows an infected tattoo to Annie. It arouses disgust in others but she is proud of her tattoo.

There are a few analogies found occasionally in the movie that compares an ordinary situation or person with taboo topics. For instance, Annie's store manager compares her 'love is eternal' face, which is supposed to entice the customer to buy wedding rings, to menstrual

cramps. Annie's mother somehow finds her daughter's penniless loveless similar to that of some man who became a gay prostitute to feed his cocaine habit. During the bridal shower Annie uses the metaphor of 'a\*\*hole bleaching' to indicate all upper class rich people. There are also repeated use of food metaphors for sex. These comparisons bring in those elements that do not find their way into what is normally considered a civilised conversation.

The film also goes on to break the stereotype that assumes women naturally enjoy and appreciate motherhood through Rita, the bride's cousin. A mother of young boys, she openly disillusiones everyone regarding the joys of motherhood. She describes children as smelly, sticky and disgusting and at one instance even quotes herself as having told her kids to shut their "filthy f\*\*\*ing mouth". She openly discusses her need for sexual gratification, the effect of parenthood on marriage and so forth. The nature of carnival is its permissiveness towards expressions or views that will not be tolerated in any other occasion. Rita's attitude without the veneer of humour can become offensive or indicative of character flaw.

The groom's sister Megan, played by Melissa McCarthy, is very open, dresses only to please herself, flirts aggressively and contrary to established pattern, Megan has depth that sets her apart from stock comic characters who serve the purpose of enhancing the heroines virtues and provide comic interludes. She is the one who helps Annie realise certain unpleasant truths and encourages her to reconcile with Lillian. Megan has insight into the situation that other characters lack. Another important series of scenes that she leads is the trip to a hole in the wall Brazilian restaurant and a subsequent visit to an exclusive bridal shop. All except Helen, who did not eat, get food poisoning. These scenes can be taken as a representation of the material body principle with the enthusiastic consumption of food followed by bouts of vomiting and diarrhoea in a high-class boutique and even in the middle of the road. Megan makes a burping sound in the store before the mayhem ensues and she excuses herself by saying that she was not sure from which end that came out. She also uses the sink as a toilet with graphic description of her diarrhoea. Two notable things in these scenes are Lillian excreting in her wedding gown and Annie pretending that the reason everyone was having stomach trouble was that they were all pregnant. Both desecrate two conventionally sanctified matters- white bridal gown that represents purity and pregnancy. As previously mentioned, it is the tag of comedy that permits such degradation.

Two other examples of degradation or lowering pertain to masculinity and distinctions based on wealth. Annie's love interest Officer Rhodes is not cast into a mould of stereotypical male. Although a police officer, he is not portrayed as a tough physically superior man rather one who is seen defending his lack of toughness. The officer does not overpower the heroine physically whereas the men who appear macho are given unpleasant personalities. Secondly, the film derides snobbery and the pomp of wealth. Annie, a broke, later homeless friend is valued more than Helen, the rich friend who spent lavishly on the bride. Lillian has her bridal gown by a famous designer, who has been pointedly given a facetious name, flown in from France courtesy of Helen, the rich friend. This gown ultimately turns out to be a disaster that Annie had to salvage so that the bride could wear it. Stripping off of those cluttering layers from the dress almost signifies the removal of all the trappings piled upon the wedding by Helen. The bride almost calls off the wedding because she fears that her father cannot afford the wedding after all the upper class paraphernalia is attached to it. Thus money and its exorbitant display is shown as a distraction from the true core values of friendship and love.

Gross-out comedies centring women's lives uses laughter to challenge many existing norms regarding the female body, relationships, speech and expression. The culturally sanctioned when, where and how of women's expressions are breached in gross out comedies. Moreover, it contains many elements of carnival humour, which succeed in breaking down binaries that act as the root of stereotypes. It would be a mistaken generalisation to consider that all gross-out comedies contain traces of the carnivalesque. However, in the light of the analysis of *Bridesmaids*, other women centric comedies can be studied to bring out their carnival nature.

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