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One of Us? From Bad Taste to Empathy. Otherness in Contemporary Hollywood Movies

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One of the essential principles of "care" lies in admitting the fact that vulnerability, and thereby dependency, are not exceptions to the rule, but universal characteristics of the human self. This also implies an ability to empathize with an other, and consider other people's pain and emotions, however different from our own, as deserving of attention and understanding. Very recently, in American mainstream cinema, a new genre of comedy – "gross out" comedies, reputed for their vulgar humor and overall bad taste – have clearly attempted to tackle the problem of alterity, and to question the distinction between normality and monstrosity. The question raised by these films is : how is mainstream cinema supposed to "deal" with the subject of alterity, and especially, physical deformity?

The *gross out* movie genre in contemporary American cinema offers a different vision of the body than can be found in other genres of mainstream cinema – an aesthetics, or rather a counter aesthetics – of bad taste, aiming at provoking disgust in the minds – and bodies – of its viewers, and claiming a vision of the body that is heavily physiological. The genre thus allows explorations and representations that are hard to find anywhere else in Hollywood cinema, constituting a space of freedom and an alternative. What has been most interesting in the evolution of the genre, especially under the influence of the Farrelly brothers, from the 1990s on, is the way this aesthetics of bad taste has been used, even in the mainstream, to question and play with categories defined as requirring sensitivity by the codes of political correctness. This

irreverent approach, walking a fine line between the acceptable and the shocking, might, as we will try to argue here, be seen as a way to question the inherent limits of Hollywood's traditional approach to alterity, and thereby as a means towards recognizing a form of the vulnerability in the other, which is usually denied.

1. Hollywood Norm, Between Performance and *Révérence* – Denial or Caring?

Let us begin by recalling the various tacit rules that regulate the representation of physical "otherness" in recent mainstream American films.

1.1. Martyr Actors and Performances : The Virtuoso Actor Facing a Handicap

The first "trick" used by Hollywood to "frame" alterity – that is, to make it more palatable for a large audience – has been to privilege mental or intellectual alterity over physical deformities. Mental disabilities or diseases – madness, or slight intellectual deficiencies – seem easier to approach than physical deficiencies, which raise the issue of visual depiction. The portrayal of mental disabilities has often constituted a way to bring out great performances from actors, seizing this opportunity to push the boundaries of "method acting" by embodying a radical form of otherness. The impersonation of disability – or madness – thus becomes a display of mastery, of brilliant skill, on the part of the actor. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman 1975), is, for instance, widely known for the spectacular performance given by Jack Nicholson. This particular movie also constituted an empathic immersion into the inner world of a disturbed mind, thus blurring the boundaries between rationality and madness. Jim Carrey's performance in *Me, Myself and Irene* (Farrelly brothers 2000) can also be read as a demonstration of his chameleon-esque plasticity – though in a much lighter tone since in this case schizophrenia loses any disturbing connotation, and reduces it to comedy.

Equally spectacular are Dustin Hoffman's performance in *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson 1989), and Tom Hanks' in *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis 1994). Both make up for their respective main character's disability by two means : first, the virtuosity of the actors performing them, and second, the secret "talent" of their character, which is later revealed. Mental disability thus appears to be played, performed, while "real" disabled persons appear in those films as mere extras, briefly granting these works a touch of authenticity before being swiftly relegated to the background. This is indeed what happens in *Rain Man*, which tells the story of the encounter between a yuppie (Tom Cruise) and his autistic brother. Only one brief scene at a clinic features people that are truly mentally disabled, and consequently the rest of film takes Raymond (Hoffman) – and the viewer – on a road trip, far away from

his fellow patients.

Moreover, both movies tend to sidestep as much as possible more disturbing issues, as for instance those pertaining to intimacy and sexuality. Their main characters appear relatively sexless. Conversely, Hollywood directors walk a much thinner line when it comes to representing *physical* disability.

1.2. Reverence and Denial : The Bone Collector

The norm in Hollywood seems to be to represent disability with reverence, which tends to limit the options for filmmakers willing to operate whitin the boundaries of mainstream cinema. From a strictly narrative perspective, plots tend to present disabled bodies within the fiction as resulting from an accident rather than from birth, probably to facilitate identification on the part of the viewer. Moreover, such a narrative pattern implies that disability could happen to anyone, and therefore reiterates a fundamental principle underlying the ethics of "care" : the universality of vulnerability and of dependency, which are seen as a general condition, and not as something exceptional. This is the case in *The Bone Collector* (Phillip Noyce 1999) and, more obviously, in *Men of Honor* (George Tillman Jr. 2000) which connects the question of disability to racial issues. However, this vulnerability is also, in both movies, somehow denied, as disability is integrated into the arch of an optimistic narrative exploring the infinite possibilities of the will and the importance of determination.

The Bone Collector tells the story a tetraplegic detective who has been paralyzed from the neck down following an accident and has to rely on machines and on his nurse to perform his professional duties and for his daily life. Although the film clearly exposes the character's disability, it also emphasizes the way his dependency is compensated by technological devices – among which is a powerful computer. He also has a very helpful assistant, played by Angelina Jolie, whom he uses more or less as a living prosthesis at his service. Moreover, his sharpness of mind clearly makes up for his reduced physical condition, and, although the possibility of his becoming a "vegetable" often arises in the dialogue, this horrifying contingency, and the "temptation" of assisted suicide, is only briefly considered. Most of the time, the camera focuses on his face, whose expressions are intense and also convey his quiet-wittedness. The rest of his body only appears through poetic inserts – for instance when, thinking he is asleep, Angelina Jolie's character softly caresses his hand – thereby bringing about his sarcastic retort : "There are laws against molesting the handicapped!". As can be seen by this example, the main character is the only one who refers directly to his condition, and is entitled to joke about it – except for the two *villains*, who take pleasure in reminding him of his disability in nasty terms, purposely using derogatory language. An unfriendly police officer thus calls him

a "fucking crippled". The movie, however, clearly distances itself from any condescension towards disabled people. When the body becomes prominent again in the story – when, for instance, the character suffers from suffocation – only his face appears in the frame, while the rest of the body is once again conveniently left off-screen.

Only in one specific scene is this cautious reverence, which arguably verges on denial, briefly forgotten, as the character's disabled body becomes part of the suspense. In this key scene, the serial killer pays a visit to the hero, bed bound and left alone in his apartment, with no one to take care of him. Here the disability of the character is used, both narratively and visually, as a suspense ploy, emphasizing his fragility and dependency, and therefore increasing the anticipation and the thrill of the fight to come, between the two patently mismatched opponents. The villain takes advantage of the vulnerability of the character, thus clearly violating a taboo. He first unplugs the main technological device (*i.e.* the computer), and then, proceeding to assault the real body of his victim, breaks the latter's finger – the one used to activate the computer; after which he violently manipulates the device used to control the hero's blood pressure, causing him to jump, while asking him "what sort of vegetable [he] would rather be, carrot or zucchini". The hero nevertheless manages to keep fighting, at least until the most transgressive moment of the film – when the narrative abandons its strategies of "denial" and briefly shows, in full shot, the hero falling out of his bed. All is well that ends well, however, and soon enough he will be saved by the arrival of Angelina Jolie – but those few moments during which the "different body", instead of being treated with tact and deference, has been treated as *less* valuable than others, and its weakness shamelessly taken advantage of, are the most memorable of the movie. The next shot shows the character months later, having left his bed for a state-of-the-art wheelchair – very elegant, smiling, and once again framed in close-up, reinstated in society for good. The Hollywood movie thus "frames" the depiction of the disabled body, then briefly plays with the taboo of violence directed at this vulnerable body, before finally reverting to a narrower form of representation, emphasizing the hero's capacity for social integration and individual accomplishment. This is precisely what the gross out comedy questions in the 1990s by refusing to abide the aforementioned *reverence* toward disability.

2. Irreverence as a Weapon, Vulnerability as Universal Quality : Positive Action, Care, and Gross Out in the 1990s

In 1990s mainstream cinema, especially in the comedies written and directed by the Farrelly brothers, a new approach towards the representation of the disabled body began to develop, quite different from the alternation between reverence and absence, which had until then been dominant – without nonetheless reverting to anything approaching a *freak show* as seen in Tod Browning's famous 1932 film by that

title. In movies like *There's Something About Mary* (1998), or *Shallow Hal* (2001), among many others, disabled characters are often presented and treated in a way that is much more complicated than what has been analyzed earlier as the "Hollywood" way. The boldness of the Farrelly brothers consists of two precepts : firstly, they don't flinch from occasionally casting actors who are truly disabled, instead of always resorting to performers who feign disability; secondly, they generally avoid the usual sort of discreet reverence typical of most mainstream films which relegate the body of the disabled to the background and thus deny them any bodily specificity. When it comes to the disables, the Farrelly brothers' avoidance of the general conventions of representation has often caused their films to be labeled "bad taste comedies", the filmmakers even being accused of "exploiting" disabilities for the sake of cheap laughs. However, beyond the obvious desire to shock, a much more militant ambition exhibits itself : to emend the absence of disabled persons on screen, to give those "visible minorities" the visibility and audience of which they are otherwise deprived in Hollywood films. Indeed, against expectations, the films of the Farrelly brothers manage to open up a space within the genre of "gross out comedies" and "bathroom humor" for the different bodies of the disabled, bodies which bring with them a strange alterity which the Farrelly integrated to the "gross out comedy". As a result, the genre was turned into a means for affirmative action, allowing the different bodies of the disabled to be seen and recognized in their otherness. By the same token, these films offered disabled actors a much greater range of acting roles than previous films had ever done. The Farrelly achieved all this through shock and provocation as tool with which to question the viewers' implicit prejudices all the while helping them to overcome them.

2.1. Irreverence in Fiction

The Farrelly's provocations begin in the way disabled characters (either played by real disabled actors or by regular actors performing disability) are treated in their respective diegetic universe. Indeed, it is very frequent to see disabled characters being molested or verbally assaulted in their films. The fact that most of the time those assaults can be easily explained as a misunderstanding (Hollywood's old trick to make "transgressive" attitudes palatable for its viewers) doesn't make them any less scandalous in the eyes of viewers used to the customary "reverence" approach. *Me, Myself and Irene* (2000) contains a scene which shows its disabled character (Jim Carrey, here playing a schizophrenic man) violently assaulting a fancy car which has been inappropriately parked – or so he thinks – on a parking space reserved for the handicapped. It is only once he has urinated on the car that he discovers that its owner is a man wearing an orthopedic corset and is thus quite visibly disabled. Charlie (Jim Carrey) has therefore violated a taboo – the sensitivity with which one is expected to treat disabled individu-

als – just as the viewer has been led to question his usual prejudices : *i.e.*, why wouldn't a disabled man be the owner of a fancy sports car? Furthermore, the disabled character has been "normalized", becoming an acceptable target for bathroom humor, instead of being confined to the prevailing "reverential" role. Laughter works here as a factor of normalizing alterity – but it has to start with the transgression of a taboo.

The transgression is even more blunt when the villains in the plot, fully endorsing their "villainy", resort to using hurtful and insulting language when speaking of the disabled and their different bodies. For instance, the character of Healy, in *There's Something About Mary*, trying to show how tolerant and caring he is, is betrayed by his language when he describes one of his "friends" as having "a forehead like a drive-in movie theater", and calling them "goofy bastards". The device appears similar to what we saw in *The Bone Collector* where the villain becomes a pretext for derogatory language usually banished from civilized conversation. Yet, there is one difference : the Farrely's film lingers on the political incorrectness of the expressions, it seems to revel in the transgression of a taboo, using its villain as a way to expose the latter's prejudices, while at the same leading the viewer to question the slight feeling of shame he experiences as he laughs. The real butt of the joke is the villain and not the disabled person he is insulting, yet the hurtful langage isn't harmless either and some ambiguity persists. Things get worse when Healy takes advantage of his friends' disabilities to win, quite unfairly, at football and checkers. The scene is even more disturbing for, although the moral blame is once again on Healy, the target of the joke is more ambiguous, and it reminds the viewer of days when hardly anyone cringed at humour targetting the disabled. Thus, during the football game Healy violently tackles various disabled players as if they were but a bunch of skittles, before luring one into running towards him, only to watch him collapse at his feet. This is a revival of the law of the jungle, of the survival of the fittest at the expense of the physically and intellectually weak and the filmmakers do their best to underline the situation visually, constructing a mise-en-scène which accentuates the helplessness of the victims, and the absurdity of their behavior – during the game of checkers one of them is seen, wearing his orange overalls, throwing himself from a tall coconut tree, screaming, for no apparent reason (a diversion which enables Healy to cheat at checkers). Once more the viewer's laughter is double edged – both targeted at the pettiness of Healy who shamelessly uses his physical and intellectual "superiority", and, more ambiguously, at the clumsiness of the disabled characters around him. Half of the scene aims at discrediting Healy's heartlessness, and conversely at encouraging what could be accurately described as the impersonation of "care", through the "gentle" Mary who embodies empathy and sweet generosity. In fact, Mary perfectly fits the definition of "gentleness" as exposed by Annette Baier (1985 : 219), with her ability to be generous

without a hint of condescendence. But this model of good spirited gentleness is undermined by the obvious pleasure taken by the filmmakers in torturing – however inconsequently – the disabled characters, using them as comic props. And when the film stops using the mediation of the "villain" and starts using the disabled bodies directly as a source of classical slapstick humor – with its traditional *Schadenfreude* –, the double edgedness becomes even more disorienting.

3. Sadistic Narratives?

The most disquieting scene of *Mary* is built entirely on the nasty fun one gets from watching a misshapen man, Tucker (played by Lee Evans), walking on crutches, desperately trying to reach the floor where he has just dropped his keys, while his friend, next to him, the sweet Mary, pays no attention to his predicament. The scene is filmed in long shot, with Mary on one side of the frame, and, on the other, Ted, standing, with great difficulty, on his crutches, his vulnerability and dependency emphasized by the low-angle view. The mixture of laughter and unease increases, as the incident goes on, allowing the "victim" (who is, as we will find out later in the movie, in fact *performing* his disability, even in the fiction) to wriggle about like a worm, leaning forwards, then backwards, squirming like a slapstick actor, while softly whining. It takes some time before Mary eventually gets up and comes to help him, in two stages : first, she brings his keys closer; and then, seeing he is still unable to pick up the keys, she puts them directly in his hands, as he exclaims : "See? I knew I could do it". The running joke is not over, however, but continues in typical "slow burn" fashion, as Mary asks Tucker if he needs her to open the door for him, and we thereafter see poor Tucker, during one more excruciating minute, move to the next room, and collapse once more on his crutches, as Mary finally shuts the door, leaving him to his unhappy fate.

The scene, besides its undeniable comedic efficiency, raises a number of issues, without having to solve them – such being the privilege of the comedic form. The first one involves the presence of Mary as figure of caring sollicitude and questions what, if any, should be the limit in treating disabled individuals as "regular" people – *i.e.*, regardless of their disability – in denying whatever special needs they may have. Secondly, the scene also points to how contradictory Mary's sollicitude and generosity can be : despite all her good intentions, she ends up shutting the door on Tucker, as if he had exhausted all her generous resources. When – and how – should one "shut the door"? When should one hep (or, in this stance, "pick up the keys")? – and, more importantly for the viewer : when can one laugh? All are questions not so easily answered. Even the rhythm of the scene, the choice to extent beyond the comedic requirements of the gag, can be seen as an attempt to question the viewers' attitude towards vulnerability and suffering. The slow burn, the painful insistence on the physical efforts of the character, the refusal to

put an end to the situation by way of a cut to the next scene is both a comedic device and a way to force viewers into experiencing the physical limitation of the character. The boldness of the scene, and also its possible depth, lie both in this unexpected duration, and in the simple extension of the slapstick comic device to everybody, without any discrimination – disabled or not. To conclude, we will now focus on this singular, non-discriminatory and egalitarian "affirmative action" that can be seen to manifest itself in the Farrelly brothers' films.

4. From Realistic Performances to Real Bodies

As mentioned above, the Farrellys frequently use real disabled actors, sometimes alternating with "regular" non-disabled actors who then perform handicaps or deformities as realistically as possible. In *Shallow Hal*, René Kirby, who, like his character 'Walt' suffers, from *spina bifida*, plays a ladies' man – always seen dating beautiful women – thereby avoiding the status of laughable victim. Unlike what happens in most mainstream films, the plot and dialogue don't hide the fact that his appearance might give rise to instinctive feelings of estrangement, or even disgust. Rather, in a way that is very typical of the Farrellys' approach, the film tackles the problem head-on, even expressing a repulsed reaction through the attitude of another character. Once it has been directly confronted, however, the disgust and strangeness are quickly defused and even inverted. Thus, instead of accepting the role of "freak", Walt is quick to self-appropriate the bathroom humor and to turn it onto others, as a weapon. For instance, we see Walt (who has to walk everywhere on all fours) put on a pair of plastic gloves as he is about to enter a men's bathroom; when asked why he needs the gloves, he answers : "You ever walked through a truck-stop men's room on your hands?". The bathroom humor is here used not against but by the disabled character, as a tool, eventually bringing him back to normality – like others he can joke about himself. Bad taste, bodily humour, and affirmative action all work together towards a normalization of the body, which was otherwise rejected.

5. "One of Us"? Normalcy in Question

To fully grasp the mechanism of normalization that takes place in recent gross out comedies, one might compare their representation of physical deformity with a famous classical-era film about otherness : Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932). This film, as is well known, uses a moral reversal : the "real" monsters are not the freaks, but the "normal" human beings who behave without any sense of morality or human tenderness. Although it plays on the voyeuristic fascination spectacular deformities elicit, the film nonetheless offers a moral parable underlining the way appearances can be misleading, all the while questioning the very dichotomy of normalcy and monstrosity.

Writing about *Freaks*, Serge Daney noted that "since 'men' and 'monsters' can share a frame, they cease to be [men or monsters]; what unites them becomes stronger than what separates them" (1983 : 20). Similarly, although in a much lighter mood, plot in the Farrelly's comedies constantly resorts to reversals that displace the positions of normalcy and monstrosity. *There's Something About Mary*'s perfectly exemplifies such carnivalesque shifts : immediately after the scene described earlier, with Mary and Tucker on his crutches, we learn that Tucker was a "fake", that he was only pretending to need crutches in order to attract Mary's pity and affection – thus shamelessly taking advantage of her good heart. Conversely, "normal" people in the film will soon be found secretly suffering from quite a diverse range of bodily symptoms. The most spectacular of these shift involves a character who was supposed to personify normalcy : Dom (played by Chris Elliott), who will, in the middle of the film, start showing a slight rash on his face – which, little by little, will come to invade his face and transform him into a "monster", disfigured by huge red patches. If the monster is one of "us",then we are well exposed, it would seem, to becoming "one of them" – a fact that we tend to forget whenever, through prejudice or patronizing attitudes, we matter-of-factly separate normalcy and monstrosity. Rather than conceiving them simply as exceptions, we ought to see such reversals as opportunities to reconsider our outlook on so-called "monsters".

Horrifying shifts such as Dom's in *Something About Mary* are living reminders of the fundamental principle of the ethics of care, namely universal vulnerability, or as the Farrelly would have it, the fact that at any moment each of us could become the monster from which we previously felt estranged. By helping us experience this strange alterity – through both laughter and empathy, instead of trying to contain it, or to frame it within the comfortable boundaries of good taste –, gross out comedies can remind us of the bonds that tie us to others, even if it implies that one day we might all become the butt of a bad joke.

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the way contemporary Hollywood cinema deals with the topic and the visual representation of disability. Its goal is to highlight the way social recognition of vulnerability and the requisite sensitivity involved in dealing with vulnerable bodies, have influenced recent "gross-out" comedies. In a way that is very different from the famous drama *Freaks*, recent comedies take into account the fine line between normality and difference, and use disability as a comic trick to question the viewer's automatic responses to physical difference. Thus, what at first appears to be bad taste, both on an aesthetic and on an ethical level, turns out to be a clever attempt to get past the boundaries between normality and disability,

and present vulnerability as a universal condition. The use of gross-out humor, and of vulgar body genres, therefore works as a trigger, calculated to disrupt boundaries and challenge classical representations of physical otherness.

Résumé

Cet article se propose d'examiner la manière dont le cinéma américain contemporain représente le handicap. Il vise à mettre en lumière la manière dont la prise en compte, par la société, de la vulnérabilité physique, et de la nécessité de traiter certains corps avec délicatesse, a joué un rôle dans l'élaboration de comédies sorties récemment. D'une manière très différente du célèbre *Freaks*, des films comiques récents prennent en compte la porosité entre normalité et différence, et utilisent le handicap comme un procédé comique, afin de mettre en cause les réactions automatiques du spectateur face à l'altérité physique. Ainsi ce qu'on pourrait considérer d'abord comme du mauvais goût, à la fois sur les plans esthétique et éthique, s'avère être en réalité un outil ingénieux permettant de dépasser la répartition entre normalité et handicap, et de représenter la vulnérabilité comme un état partagé par tous. Le recours à l'humour au dessous de la ceinture vise alors à perturber les oppositions, et à dépasser les représentations classiques de l'altérité physique.

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