

The contemporary Hollywood lowbrow comedy film greatly emphasises the human body. Essentially, these films are designed to make the audience laugh at the verbal jokes and cringe as features of the body are used in humorous and disgusting ways. Common traits of lowbrow comedy include the emphasis on bodily waste, sexual themes, and the embarrassment and shame the characters go through. Even though these films focus on the pleasures of the body, some of the jokes require our thinking and understanding of popular culture and what is being parodied. This essay will argue that although contemporary Hollywood lowbrow comedy primarily offers pleasures for the body, they also offer pleasures for the mind. This cognitive function can be seen through the use of intertextuality and parody. I will reinforce my argument by analysing three contemporary Hollywood lowbrow comedy films: *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002), and *Scary Movie 4* (2006). All three films clearly make use of the human body to make us respond in a physical manner, but also use intertextual references to reward knowledgeable viewers.

Lowbrow comedy can be compared to “gross-out” comedy. Paul refers to this as “Animal Comedy” which uses slapstick comedy and grotesque scenes (86). Paul explains these types of films as follows:

“At their best, these films offer a real sense of exhilaration, not without its disturbing quality, 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 that is pleasurable to call out” (20).

What Paul is saying here is that these films are exciting because they address subject matters that are somewhat reserved in everyday society. In other words, by exploiting sensitive issues, these films give people a chance to enjoy themselves by letting go of their senses.

Bonila argues that lowbrow comedy films have a sociological imperative because they portray “the breaking of norms” (20). Bonila goes on to mention that lowbrow comedy films contort causality; are fractured, disjointed, alogical, and typically have an “anti-narrative” (21). In other words, the stories in lowbrow comedy films are not coherently structured and are sometimes unrealistic. *Austin Powers in Austin Powers In Goldmember* travels back and forth through time (Bonila 21). Along with *Scary Movie 4*, both films are formally episodic and contain many scenes that are unrelated to the narrative. By not using complex storylines, it means that viewers can enjoy the physical pleasures of watching these films as opposed to puzzling over the formal elements.

One reoccurring theme among lowbrow comedy is the emphasis on the lower body. According to King, slapstick and gag based comedy films have a tendency to “assault” the lower regions of the body (26). Mini-Me and Austin Powers in *Austin Powers in Goldmember* unknowingly act out a pregnancy scene in the film. While in Dr. Evil’s submarine Austin and Mini-Me – under the disguise as one of Dr. Evil’s henchmen with Austin on Mini-Me’s shoulders – are asked by one of Dr. Evil’s henchmen to take their clothes off for a physical examination. We are then presented with point-of-view shots as one of the henchmen sees a shadow performance where it looks like Austin is giving birth to Mini-Me. The expression on his face is one of disgust and confusion. Although we know that Austin is not actually giving birth, we can be amused by this because we know more than the henchman. Also, we can take pleasure in seeing a situation that is slightly off limits in society being performed in a fictitious way.

Bonila points out that lowbrow comedy emphasises the human body and its various functions (19-20). Bonila also believes that sexual themes are taboo subjects and when mentioned can cause viewers to “release nervous energy as laughter” (19). *Scary Movie 4* makes frequent references to sexual themes. In one scene, Cindy walks into a room to find Brenda on her knees with her back facing Cindy, in front of her new boyfriend, Jeremiah. A churning sound is heard and Brenda’s hand can be seen moving up and down while Jeremiah says: “Oh Brenda! Yes!” However all is not what it seems, as the next shot reveals that Brenda is actually mixing butter. Jeremiah, proud of what Brenda has done, asks her: “Are you sure you’ve not churned before?” Sexual themes and reproductive organs are at the centre of *Austin Powers in Goldmember*. Johan van der Smut (Goldmember), explains that he lost his genitalia is an “unfortunate smelting accident” and his “private parts” are now made of gold. There are also constant penis jokes in the film. In one scene, Nigel Powers convinces Mini-Me to show him his private parts. Upon seeing them, Nigel tells Mini-Me: “You’re a tripod ... it’s like a baby’s arm holding an apple.” Bonila points out that the “preoccupation with sex is further evident in the names of characters” (19). When Austin travels back to the year 1975, he meets Japanese twin sisters: Fook Mi and Fook Yu, then pulls out a “things to do before I die” list and crosses off: “have threesome with Japanese twins.” Both *Scary Movie 4* and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* reinforce that sexual references are a common theme in lowbrow comedy films. These films can give us a chance to enjoy a subject matter that is somewhat reserved to being discussed in everyday society. These films allow us to free ourselves from this reservation and, as a result, express our amusement at what is on screen.

The role of the human body is further highlighted in lowbrow comedy through the usage of bodily waste. Paul argues that bodily functions can “remind us of our physical and animal state” (297). The presence of bodily waste in my chosen films is purposely exaggerated to provide us with constant humour. In *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, Austin is trying to sneak around the Roboto building, but accidentally trips over a plug that controls water coming out of a statue’s body. Before a guard can see this disruption, Austin quickly hides behind the fountain statue and urinates into the pool of water to keep the status quo. Exaggeration of bodily waste is also made evident in *Dumb and Dumber*. While on their way to Aspen, Lloyd tells Harry he needs “to go.” While driving, Harry tells Lloyd to “piss” in one of the empty beer bottles. Later on, the two are pulled over by a policeman who questions if they have been “boozing.” We then see a shot of five beer bottles under Lloyd’s seat. We are expected to respond with laughter to this situation because it is not possible for someone to fill up five bottles of urine in one “go.”

Another way that lowbrow comedy films offer corporeal pleasures through the use bodily waste is by inflicting physical pain and embarrassment on their characters. In the scene described above, the policeman asks for one of the beer bottles after Harry and Lloyd tell him they have not been drinking. He then takes a sip, twitches his mouth and starts coughing. Essentially, he is the object of embarrassment. King notes that an inability to control anal excretions is a key source of gross-out comedy and then mentions the “laxative-induced toilet explosion” in *Dumb and Dumber* (65). This is referring to when Lloyd puts laxative in Harry’s drink before he goes to meet Mary at night. Upon his arrival at Mary’s house, Harry’s bowel can be heard grumbling. He then rushes into the toilet, has a bowel motion with loud fart noises. Just when Harry feels relieved, Mary knocks on the door only to tell him: “I hope you’re not using the toilet, it’s broken.” At this moment, we imagine what it must be like to be in this awful situation and ask ourselves: How would we feel if this happened to us? But still, we can laugh at Harry, and also the policeman earlier on in the film, because they are the objects of humiliation.

Olsen distinguishes between ridiculous and ludicrous situations in comic moments: Where the agent is at fault the actions is ridiculous, but where the agent is not to blame (because of ignorance or chance) the action is ludicrous (15-16). There is one scene in *Scary Movie 4* that involves the ludicrous usage of bodily waste. This scene also uses a convention of gross-out comedy identified by King: fluid associated with the lower region of the body is brought up to the top of the body (66). When Cindy is giving Mrs. Norris (a paralysed old lady) a wash, she first dips the sponge into the soap bucket. Then, without looking down, accidentally dips the sponge into

Mrs. Norris' urine bucket and washes her with her own urine. Mrs. Norris spits and mumbles as Cindy uses the sponge to drizzle the urine over her head and pat her face. Mrs. Norris is essentially helpless and we can imagine what it must be like to be washed in your own urine. Another ludicrous scene involves Holly (a blind lady) thinking she has walked into her bathroom, but has actually walked into a courtroom full of people. She takes off her dress, lifts up a seat, and has a loud bowel motion. Her father, Henry, clears his throat and Holly, now realising she is not in her house, accepts her mistake and leaves. This scene and the scene involving Mrs. Norris, reinforce the fact that lowbrow comedy films make us cringe in disgust as well as laugh at the characters involved in such repulsive and embarrassing situations.

Lowbrow comedy films also provide humour in exaggerated scenes involving the human body; by emphasising various parts of the body or the body as a whole. There are many examples of this in *Austin Powers In Goldmember*. Number 3 has a large, obvious mole on his upper lip. When Austin first meets Number 3, he tries to hide his astonishment but accidentally says "mole" a few times. Later on in the film, Number 3 tells Austin to just "let it out of your system." Austin then proceeds on a tirade: "Mole! Bloody mole! ... There's a bloody mole winking me in the face!" Fat Bastard and Mini-Me are two of the main characters in the film. Their names are rather self-explanatory. Described by Cross as a "grossly obese Scot," the disgusting nature of Fat Bastard's character is reinforced during the scenes at the sumo wrestling arena (173). Here, we can see his ginger-haired, oversized body including his stomach and breasts. Mini-Me is a clone and one-eighth the size of Dr. Evil (Brummett 40). We are able to laugh at these characters because they all push the boundaries of size for our own pleasure. It would be inappropriate to laugh at these sorts of people in reality.

Lowbrow comedy films do contain violence. However, we know that this violence is fictional and is only used for comic effect. At the beginning of *Scary Movie 4*, Dr. Phil accidentally saws off his foot that is not chained up. When Cindy has a flashback to her boxing fight her opponent can be seen biting off the ears of all who are present. We then see a shot of a pile of ears outside the boxing ring. In *Austin Powers In Goldmember*, Austin meets up with Mini-Me. Still thinking that Mini-Me is an enemy, Austin kicks him into a fridge, puts a bag over his head, and throws him into a glass cabinet. When Lloyd has a dream in *Dumb and Dumber*, he literally pulls the heart out of an Asian chef with his hand. Violence in the context of lowbrow comedy is used to entertain us, not frighten us like in some other genres. Therefore, we can laugh at the characters that are being exposed to violence.

Laughter is also provided to us through dialogue. Neale and Krutnik point out that comic events contain verbal humour in the form of wisecracks: “a bright, smart, witty or sarcastic remark” (47). *Austin Powers In Goldmember* is full of wisecracks in the form of penis jokes. Dr. Evil describes his submarine lair as “long, hard and full of seamen [semen].” In one scene Nigel Powers says: “Took a Viagra. Got stuck in my throat. I’ve had a stiff neck for hours.” In *Dumb and Dumber*, Harry unknowingly confuses Mary when he approaches her and says: “Nice set of hooters you got there.” Mary replies: “Excuse me?” To which Harry replies: “The owls, they’re beautiful.” When Harry tells Mary he breeds dogs, Mary asks him: “Any unusual breeding?” Only for Harry to tell her: “No mostly just doggie-style.” Harry’s ignorance to the somewhat rude nature of his comments means that we are able to laugh at him and also at the bewildered expression on Mary’s face.

So far I have analysed how lowbrow comedy films can cause viewers to respond physically: by laughing and cringing at the verbal jokes and especially the human body. However, Bonila argues that lowbrow comedy films have a cognitive imperative. Bonila refers to Grodal, who writes: “Film and television cue mental and bodily states in the viewer by means of representations that have some relation to their experiences away from the film” (Grodal 9). In other words, viewers can come into a film with prior knowledge from, for example, news stories. Just before Lloyd leaves a bar in *Dumb and Dumber*, his attention is caught by a framed newspaper article on the wall: “Man Walks On The Moon.” Lloyd turns around to the barman and says: “No way. Oh that’s great. We landed on the moon!” It would be safe to say that almost everyone in today’s society knows this. Therefore, we can all laugh at the stupidity of Lloyd’s ignorance.

However, all three of my chosen films involve knowledge at a deeper level than in the above scene from *Dumb and Dumber*. Gehring defines parody as “a comic... and distorted imitation of a given genre, auteur, or specific work” (1). *Austin Powers In Goldmember* is a parody of the *James Bond* film series (1962-), especially *Goldfinger* (1964), which are based on the novels by Ian Fleming. Austin himself is an imitation of James Bond: a British spy who works for a secret intelligence service. Basil Exposition, Austin’s superior, is a parody of the character “M” from the James Bond films. *Goldmember* is a parody of Auric Goldfinger from *Goldfinger*. Both characters have a love for gold. Elements of *You Only Live Twice* (1967) are also incorporated into *Austin Powers In Goldmember* when Austin visits a sumo wrestling arena in Tokyo. Another intertextual reference occurs at the arena when Fat Bastard is wrestling. He grabs his opponent’s testicles and says: “Do you know what my favourite Helen Hunt movie is? *Twister!*” If we have seen *Twister* (1996) before

then we can predict what Fat Bastard is going to do next. Put simply, *Austin Powers In Goldmember* assumes we have prior knowledge of films.

Gehring argues that parody in film is “more entertaining the greater one’s familiarity with the subject being spoofed” (2). In other words, parts of a film can be somewhat confusing, and even less comic, for viewers who are unaware of what is being parodied. When an attractive woman walks past Lloyd and Harry in *Dumb and Dumber*, Lloyd tells Harry: “I’d like to eat her liver with some fava beans and a nice bottle of Chianti.” Harry then simultaneously joins Lloyd in making a “fuf fuf fuf” sound as if he knew what sound Lloyd was going to make. For a viewer who is not familiar of the famous quote from Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence Of The Lambs* (1991), these actions would seem insignificant. But for a viewer who is aware of Hannibal Lecter’s quote, the scene is amusing. Therefore, lowbrow comedy rewards its viewers with humour that is based on other texts.

Nearly all of *Scary Movie 4* is based on intertextual references. Again, the entertainment value of this film depends on our prior knowledge. In Cindy’s flashback sequence, she is involved in a boxing match. Cindy’s opponent, Tiffany, a dark skinned, masculine-looking female, throws a punch to her face and knocks her down. When the referee tells Tiffany she cannot do that, Tiffany bites the referee’s ear off and later goes on to bite the ears off many people. We soon see, literally, a pile of ears. For those of us who are familiar with the Mike Tyson-Evander Holyfield ear biting incident in 1997, this is an entertaining exaggeration. Also in this scene, Cindy throws an air punch at Tiffany and loses her balance. Before she falls on to a chair, her husband jumps in to save her but breaks his neck in the process. This causes a chain reaction where several people break their necks. This is an exaggeration and alteration of the film *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), where a women boxer becomes a quadriplegic after falling on a chair.

CJ and Mahalik have a flashback of their camping trip. They are lying down inside a tent and seem awkward with each other’s company. At first they are unsure about their homosexuality, but soon express their love for each other. One shot shows the tent shaking and we presume they are making love. For those unfamiliar with the 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*, this scene can seem pointless. Therefore, lowbrow comedy films can create curiosity. Those viewers unaware to what is being referenced can ask themselves: What is the meaning of this? Some viewers might go and research *Scary Movie 4* because, for example, they heard other audience members laughing. Put simply, they want to understand the joke.

In the epilogue of *Scary Movie 4*, Tom Ryan appears on a parody of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-2011). Tom acts completely insane. Among other things, he breaks into laughter, snaps Oprah's wrists, jumps on the couch and eats the couch pillow. This is an absurd exaggeration of a 2005 episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, where Tom Cruise dramatically expressed his love for his new girlfriend, Katie Holmes. This example reinforces the cognitive imperative in Hollywood lowbrow comedy. Viewers will identify, for example, certain characters or storylines that they have previously seen. They will then make a comparison with the film they are currently watching.

In conclusion, the contemporary Hollywood lowbrow comedy places great emphasis on the body by addressing sexual themes, placing emphasis on the lower human body and its reproductive organs, and exaggerating the use of bodily waste. All of these elements, combined with the many verbal jokes, provide us with continuous bodily pleasures as we laugh and cringe at what is on screen. However, lowbrow comedy also has a cognitive function as argued by Bonilla (2005). *Dumb and Dumber*, *Austin Powers In Goldmember* and *Scary Movie 4*, all use intertextual references by referring to previous films or well-known incidents in society. Therefore, lowbrow comedy does reward the educated and conscious viewer. The more knowledge a viewer has of the world around them, the more entertainment they can get out of watching a contemporary Hollywood lowbrow comedy film.

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