

RAUNCHY, FEMALE-LED COMEDIES: CHALLENGING THE COMEDIC TRADITION

By

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## Abstract

Due to the rise of women-led comedies focused on female friendship and homosocial bonding in the past decade, I am interested in studying this emerging subgenre of film. In this time frame, multiple comedies starring two or more women in lead roles have been released, but I will mainly discuss *Rough Night* and *Girls Trip* to identify the properties of comedy they make use of and how. *Bridesmaids* is also an important film to discuss because it is the touchstone to which all other raunchy female led comedies are compared to. I will contextualize these films in terms of the general comedic properties they repurpose and the cultural ideologies of the time. Comedy generally uses cultural codes to position itself to the audience and because of this, it has always demanded a relationship with culture. Therefore, comedic films require audience participation or understanding of cultural movements to successfully convey their messages. Analyzing comedy through a cultural lens to identify aspects of female driven comedy that result in financial success, audience enjoyment and markers of social change seems to best fit the confines of addressing a genre in a moment in time. To establish the conversations the comedy subgenre is having with our culture, I'll be collecting demographic data from The United States Census Bureau, as well as data from PostTrak Surveys and other film industry studies.

## The *Bridesmaids* Phenomenon

In an interview with Paper Magazine, Kristen Wiig commented on being labeled a torchbearer for women in comedy. “It’s unfortunate that this is only now being talked about, because women have been present in comedy for so long,” she says. “There have been tons of movies with lots of women in them before ‘*Bridesmaids*.’ It’s just a confusing thing to me. But you know, if more movies are getting green-lit, and writers are getting a chance because of this movie, I couldn’t be happier. That’s such a great thing, because the fact that they weren’t is kind of awful.” When *Bridesmaids* first hit theaters, Wiig spoke about *Bridesmaids* as a “revolution” with Newsweek. “When we were writing it, [Annie Mumolo and I] weren’t like, ‘Oh, yeah! Now it’s the ladies’ turn! It’s 2011; I don’t even know why it’s an issue. There are so many funny women in the world, and there has (sic) been for so many years, so I’ll be happy when people can just move on from that, and things can just be ‘comedies’ and not ‘female’ or ‘male,’ and everyone gets an equal opportunity.”

Women have been making and starring in comedies since the film medium was invented, though comedy has an implication of being a “boys club.” When you talk about the comedy greats, it’s usually a list of men with Mae West and Lucille Ball haphazardly thrown in the mix. However, in the 1930’s, Thelma Todd and Zasu Pitts starred in 17 films, averaging \$71,139 in revenue for each. Like most women in comedy, and the comedy genre in general, this duo was rarely discussed by film historians. Many critics, like Kate Erbland of IndieWire, identify *Bridesmaids* (2012) as the first successful, R-rated, female led comedy and often use this film as a touchstone for all other female-led comedies which came after. Erbland wrote an article in 2018 titled “Female-Led Comedies Are Finally Fulfilling the R-Rated Promise of ‘*Bridesmaids*.’” Grossing over 288 million, *Bridesmaids* was an indication to studios that these

stories had an audience, however as Erbland and others have noted, it's been several years since Hollywood has been able to reproduce the "*Bridesmaids* formula."

Since *Bridesmaids*' success in 2012, there have been a plethora of R-rated comedies starring groups of women hitting the box office. David Rooney from the Hollywood Reporter noted the need for these comedies to deliver more than the appeal of a female led cast, the characters need to incite investment and nonstop laughs. While films with all male casts rarely get this gendered criticism, Rooney makes a point: pandering to women with films "just for them" without putting effort into the plot or characters of these films won't do. "From Rebel Wilson in *How to Be Single* through Anna Kendrick and Aubrey Plaza in *Mike and Dave Need Wedding Dates*; from Amy Schumer in *Trainwreck* to Mila Kunis, Kristen Bell and, all hail, Kathryn Hahn in *Bad Moms*, to name just a few — the glass ceiling has long been shattered in terms of women getting in on the once traditionally male domain of unrepentantly orgiastic bad behavior and gross-out humor." While Wiig and Rooney seem to agree that women have successfully entered the comedy sphere, San Diego University's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film reported the percentage of women featured as protagonists only rose to 31% in 2018 from 24% in 2017. This growth hasn't been steadily increasing either; in 2016, 29% of films featured a female protagonist.

By implementing a familiar subgenre, the raunchy comedy and replacing a group of men with women, the formula and social commentary seem to change. Roger Ebert, the late film critic, said *Bridesmaids* "seems to be a more or less deliberate attempt to cross the Chick Flick with the Raunch (sic) Comedy." Erbland also identifies this blend of "raunch and heart" in such films as *Bridesmaids*, *Rough Night* and *Girls Trip*. It seems this type of film has inadvertently carved out a new subgenre of comedy instead of integrating with the male driven "raunchy

comedy.” Not quite a chick flick, not quite a raunchy comedy, but something in-between.

Comedies starring men never need to have gendered identifiers, but fit perfectly into formulaic subgenres. This partitioning of “comedy for women” speaks to the gate-keeping happening in the world of comedy. Regardless of the implications, this new subgenre has been growing exponentially since *Bridesmaids*’ debut, so much so that *Rough Night* and *Girls Trip*, along with Amy Schumer’s *Snatched*, were all released during the summer of 2017. The focus of these comedies is bonding between groups of women, instead of heterosexual romances.

By analyzing *Bridesmaids*, *Girls Trip* and *Rough Night*, I’ll identify the properties of comedy this subgenre is adopting and transforming. Once I have established the distinct formula of this subgenre, I’ll contextualize the changes against possible cultural influences. I’m interested in investigating the qualities these films share with each other, and understanding why these films have gained such sudden popularity. *Bridesmaids* must be included in this discussion due to its function as a model these films are compared to. I chose *Rough Night* and *Girls Trip* due to their proximity in release and content. These films were being compared to each other before they were released due to their similar premise of a group of college girlfriends reuniting to party. *Rough Night* grossed around 47.3 million at the box office and received little praise from critics while *Girls Trip* was immensely popular, earning 140.9 million dollars. Before diving further into these films and the qualities of this subgenre, I need to discuss some general properties of comedy in order to establish the departures from the traditional formula this genre utilizes.

### Comedy: Formula, History and Implications

Comedy has been a part of film since the inception of the medium because comedy has been engrained in our society since the practice of storytelling began. Comedy and tragedy are

rooted in the Greek tradition of storytelling and have persisted throughout the ages in some form or another (Rowe, 100). While tragedy focuses on separation and an individualistic hero, comedy celebrates connection, usually in the form of marriage or family bonding. The notion of heterosexual coupling has been a cultural expectation in most Western societies, which was reinforced through storytelling. In comedy, heterosexual relationships are almost necessary, but the same could be said for tragedy. Comedy works to form these heterosexual unions, tragedy needs to separate an existing relationship, usually in the form of death, to isolate its hero. These themes or myths have continued to be socially relevant and therefore retold in new ways, because death and coupling are universally familiar to humanity. By inventing new ways of presenting these concepts, the material continues to be entertaining and familiar. Rowe explains that comedy breaks some social conventions while enforcing others, like heterosexual marriage (104).

Comedy focuses on the social and allows members of society the chance to break social taboo. This escapist or rebellious quality of comedy and its ability to act as a safety valve for social tensions makes for an effective form of entertainment. In this way, comedy is accessible to most members of society, granted the individuals engage in the predominant culture. John Cawelti's definition of convention seems to indicate there are some cultural activities universally shared. "Conventions represent familiar shared images and meanings and they assert an ongoing continuity of values"; these conventions, like revenge, love, and death can be perceived differently depending on the time and place, but always remain accessible to individuals (204). This accessibility to a convention does not mean each individual experiences each idea, or experiences them in the same way, but they are familiar with the ways in which their culture deals with and represents these ideas. The familiarization and conditioning of individuals to these

ideas happens in and through popular forms. Cawelti states that individuals must encounter conventionalized experiences and situations or “the strain on his [or her] sense of continuity and identity will lead to great tensions and even to neurotic breakdowns (204).” So, to be a member of a society, individuals must participate, at least in some degree, with the predominant culture, which means they are aware of the social order comedy seeks to disrupt.

Throughout film history, comedies have attracted production companies due to their low production costs and generally high returns. Making small tweaks to tried and true formulas, or conventions, has kept audiences entertained and the studios’ pockets lined. Comedies are generally safe in terms of content because the criticisms and satire found in these films are rarely taken seriously by political powers or critics. Rowe suggests comedy has been neglected by critics due to its “enormous and enduring popularity” (100). Rather than being categorized as art, comedy is “confined to the realm of amusement... because of its popular accessibility and its connections with gossip, intrigue and the everyday” which Rowe notes are associated with women and femininity (100).

In the early years of cinema, plots needed to be communicated physically, due to the lack of sound technology and limitations of early sound technology. Physical humor, like slapstick and farce, manifests in non-narrative gags designed to disrupt without much dialogue or character development according to Donald Crafton (106). These gags were dependent on exaggerated physical movements, but still need to be simple in order for the audience to understand. The results of these gags were intended to be extreme, violent, and embarrassing (Crafton 55). In Charlie Chaplin’s 1914 film, *Dough and Dynamite*, Chaplin and the other bakery workers slap each other with dough, chase Chaplin around the shop, and get an up-close look at a dynamite explosion. The shop owner is bested by Chaplin and other scorned

employees, physically and mentally. Christopher Beach states that silent era film characters represented social types and were involved in situations that were “immediately familiar to their audiences” so the filmmakers could degrade or rework these conventions (1). The birth of sound technology made more complex social codes easier to depict, and also made it necessary for filmmakers to supplement physical comedy with verbal humor such as witty repartee, double entendre, puns, and more in film comedy (Marx and Sienkiewicz, 8). These verbal modes of comedy allowed for more eloquent critiques of society, and more sexually explicit suggestions. For example, *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) starring Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant, showcases the main characters’ sexual chemistry in the form of fast-paced banter full of thinly disguised references to penises, vaginas and sex. Elements of slapstick comedy played heavily into the plot as well; in one scene Hepburn and Grant’s characters, Susan and David, accidentally tear each other’s clothes, resulting in David attempting to conceal Susan’s dress-less rear in a crowded and formal dining room. David holds Susan closely from behind as the two leave the room front to rear, and it looks almost like David is humping Susan. This tradition of mixing physical and verbal humor is still prevalent in most comedies today, much like the use of Classical Hollywood style narratives and mundane plots.

Comedy is generally focused on character development in daily life while adding elements of the absurd and exaggerating reactions. By implementing character-driven narratives, comedy makes sure audiences are invested in the growth of the characters and satisfies them with happy endings and neatly resolving conflicts. Low-stakes plots focus on relationships, reasonably achievable goals, and mundane aspects of life rather than life-or-death missions and saving the world. Comedy has been a vehicle for actors to lend their character more showmanship than other classical genres due to its carnivalesque nature and theatrical roots. The

tradition of carnivalesque “contests the institutions and structures of authority through inversion, mockery, and other forms of travesty” (Rowe 32). John Fiske insists the collision of low and high languages resulted in the carnivalesque, the low being bad taste, offensiveness and degradation, the high relates to religious and political power (66). Rowe refers to the carnivalesque as “the purest expression of popular culture” because it utilizes elements of the dominant culture to dismantle customs of high culture (32). Rather than lean heavily on plot to drive audience engagement, a comedy is free to exaggerate its characters and social rules in simple situations. By simple, I’m referring to Cawelti’s idea of convention, the universally understood experiences most individuals will be familiar with. For example, marriage or coupling is a universal convention or experience, but the way in which a particular culture represents marriage is not universal. These more specified cultural conventions are used in film and depict some social requirements of the experience in question. In the U.S., marriages require legal documents, applications, fees, and an officiant but many of these necessary steps aren’t depicted in films. What is shown in films is the ceremony, the dancing, exchanging of rings, and the social interactions. The importance of marriage in these films is not of the binding legal contract, but the tradition of festival, communities merging, and of unification are central. The social protocol for a marriage needed to be simplified in order to keep the story accessible to those outside of the culture. However, these experiences can be oversimplified in the way that they seem to neglect areas of the spectrum of human relationships.

Relationships, especially romantic heterosexual relationships, have been an integral plot device for comedy since the inception of film. From Buster Keaton pining over ‘the girl’ in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), to the screwball comedies of the 1930’s and 40’s which focus on characters’ verbal synchronization to make up for the lack of physical chemistry denied by censorship

boards, to the modern romantic comedy, a majority of comedy has been focused on a heterosexual romance. To be fair, most Classical Hollywood films relied on heterosexual romance as either a primary or secondary plotline, according to David Bordwell in his study of the period (21). The obsession with heterosexual coupling in the form of marriage identifies a cultural attitude that seeks to contain sexual expression to monogamous, heterosexual married couples. Morality was enforced by religious and political forces in an attempt to impose their values and beliefs on the population as a whole. The Production Code, a set of censorship guidelines established in the 1930's which policed sexuality, language, political and religious criticisms, ensured sexual desire was drastically limited on screen, and the primary goal of this was to promote morally contrived stories in the hopes society would uphold the same moral code depicted in films.

In the 1930s, Romantic comedy leaned heavily on screwball characters and sexual innuendo due to the limitations the Production Code placed on physical sexual expression. Rowe argues these films were "comedies of equality" because of the shared, and often matched power of the men and women in conflict. Rowe states "for such conflict to be dramatic, the sides must be well matched, at least temporarily" (118). By changing power dynamics away from male dominance and female submissiveness in heterosexual relationships, socially acceptable gender roles are destabilized, even when this change is intended to be humorous (Rowe 118). The man and woman tend to start out as adversaries in conflict, sometimes in competition or through opposing qualities, and as the narrative progresses, the competition resolves into harmony. This harmony is signaled by the formation of the unlikely relationship during the films happy resolution. In 1930's screwball comedies, this harmony could take the form of a profession of love and a chaste kiss, as in *Bringing Up Baby*, or it could be in the form of a marriage. In any

form, the struggle for power has ceased in the advent of the couple and all friction ceases to create conflict between the two protagonists. Tension between men and women and the subsequent reconciliation of this tension is a longstanding tradition in storytelling. Geoff King explains these reconciliations imply social differences, mainly class, race and power can be “stripped away to reveal an essential common humanity underneath” (55). This means the conflict between the two protagonists usually takes the form of social differences, like in *Bringing Up Baby*, David is an uptight intellectual, while Susan is a carefree socialite. The differences between the two character seem insurmountable in the beginning, but as the two get to know each other the social discrepancies become less and less prevalent. The marriage of the two protagonists lends itself to the notion of festival, or a celebration of social bonds.

So, heterosexual romances were pervasive in most Hollywood films, but these relationships were not limited to the romantic comedy subgenre; they also exist in comedian and clown comedy films. These types of comedy revolve around an individual, the comedian or clown, who is involved in a low-stakes plot and sometimes a romantic plot. The “comedian” depends on social integration and affiliation, the comedy associated with this this sub-genre “stems from mistakes and mishaps arising from efforts to conform to social roles (Jenkins and Karnick 156). Rowe notes that comedian comedy often features a small, androgynous male who mocks typically masculine males (104). While this brand of comedy seems to invite feminine attributes and has seen a history of female leads, Jenkins and Karnick suggest clown comedy has featured more female leads than comedian comedy. Clown comedy is similar to comedian comedy, but resists social integration and seeks to disrupt cultural constraints (Jenkins and Karnick 156). Women such as Mae West and Lucille Ball fall under this category, and their performances often challenged constructs of femininity. These female-lead clown comedies

often feature romantic love, or lust, but often challenged the underlying social constructs demanding this coupling. *Bridesmaids*, *Rough Night*, and *Girls Trip* all seem to bear markers of these women's comedic careers. It seems that women leading a comedy, no matter the time, deviates from male driven comedy in terms of rejecting social norms.

In *Film Comedy*, Geoff King attempts to articulate the characteristics of comedy and suggests comedies work on a cultural and universal level. "A comedy might initially be defined as a work that is designed in some way to provoke laughter or humor on part of the viewer" (2). However, to understand the ways in which comedy works, it is necessary for the consumption of comedy to be analyzed. Achieving the intended reaction of the audience or the consumer is the indication the comedy is effective or is indeed a comedy. Cultural reflection is required due to comedy's use of societal expectations and cultural assumptions; the audience must understand the predominant ideology to recognize the subversions comedy implements. Comedy is dependent on culture in the sense of content, but the modes or conventions of comedy are universal. For example, recall *Bringing Up Baby*, Susan and David's talk of cats, boxes and bones wouldn't be humorous without the knowledge that vaginas are often referred to as cats and boxes, or that 'looking for a bone' can mean wanting sex. Scenes in *Bringing Up Baby* that deal with physical humor, like the ending where Susan makes David's Brontosaurus come crashing to the ground, are more universal, meaning you don't need prior knowledge of dinosaurs or gravity to find it funny.

So, we must consider the two layers of interpretation needed to fully grasp comedy. First, the universal layer: modes or techniques which are traditionally implemented in comedy. These elements do not require cultural inspection and can be easily translated through actions as well as words. Some of the most common modes of comedy are imitation, misunderstanding,

incongruity, and exaggeration. Physical humor, like slapstick chases and pies to the face, fall under this layer. In silent comedy, this layer worked alone, granted basic cultural stereotypes and conventions were implemented as well. As comedy has progressed, the combination of verbal and physical humor requires more social understanding, whether it be of language or culture. The second layer of interpretation, cultural participation, involves aspects of comedy which need further knowledge to be considered humorous; political jokes, references to pop culture, and specific cultural markers require the audience to engage in a particular aspect of a society in order to appreciate them. These markers could also be identified as conventions, Cawelti's idea of universal themes or ideas any member of society would be familiar with; however, this need for social participation goes beyond ancient themes of life and death, and a lifetime of taking in popular culture could not fully prepare audiences for every niche reference or subtle parody. This interconnectedness between text and culture is dependent on the audiences' willingness to participate in the two. Even then, 'getting' or understanding a reference or parody does not necessarily mean the audience will react in the intended form.

Modes of comedy such as incongruity and exaggeration, are essentially deviations from the normal routines or behaviors of society portrayed through juxtapositions, confusion, and misbehavior. Kathleen Rowe expresses comedy's need to attack authority or societal expectations in *The Unruly Woman*. Comedy seeks to disrupt the hierarchy by breaking taboos; however, the departure from normal behavior may be extreme, but ultimately social conventions still limit the extent of the deviation (Rowe 101-2). In *Bringing Up Baby* Susan steals David's clothes, forcing David to don a feminine bathrobe. When he meets Susan's aunt in this attire he remarks that he "just went gay all of a sudden," which broke social conventions of the time deviating from heterosexual exclusivity; however, David and Susan become a couple at the end

of the film, so the taboo of homosexuality was masked by the social norm of a heterosexual union. This masking of homosexual language was attempting to reestablish the dominance of heterosexuality, but members of the LGBTQ community who know Cary Grant was bisexual still derive pleasure from Grant's on-screen gayness and may ignore the heterosexual resolution.

By bringing attention to the tensions of the social order, comedy can seem like it's challenging traditional social expectations. However, comedy's critiques are subject to scrutiny themselves, since the deviation is intended to be laughed at. Since comedy generally requires the audience to laugh at the expense of someone or something, it engages a sense of superiority. This feeling of superiority targets a victim the audience sees as "beneath them" which invokes power structures "with such determining factors as gender, ethnicity, race, religion, education, and geography" (Beach 5). Aristotle noted comedic characters usually bear some "mark of the ridiculous" in the form of a mistake or distortion (Scheide 4). This "mark of the ridiculous" allows the viewer to feel superior to the comic character. This feeling of superiority also derives from the social satisfaction of understanding the references and messages of the comedic material. These responses to certain references are ingrained in individual members of society; learning these shared meaning of a stimulus happens through media, education, and social conditioning.

The tradition of comedy is not set in stone. Modes and themes of comedy change over time and each text utilizes different traits of the genre to attract more viewers and remain culturally attuned. So, the features this newly emerging subgenre rework can inform us to what the film industry understands to be culturally prevalent today. The subgenre of raunchy, female-lead comedies about homosocial bonding, especially *Bridesmaids*, *Girls Trip*, and *Rough Night* use traditional elements of comedy, like physical and verbal humor. These films also heavily

utilize superiority and inferiority, and feature heterosexual romance, though not as the main plot. Instead of focusing mainly on a heterosexual romance, these film value female bonding, and even romanticize it. An emphasis on homosocial bonding over romantic love signals a cultural change; it is socially acceptable to be single, as long as the individual is still socially involved in some way. With the #metoo movement gaining traction in late 2017 and early 2018, these films, which were released before the breaking of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, punctuated the cultural rejection of sexual harassment and signaled a larger social change in the U.S.

### Raunchy, Female-Led Comedies: Ushering in a New Era of Comedy

Heterosexual romances are prevalent in most Hollywood studio films, not just comedies, but raunchy comedies like *Bridesmaids*, *Girls Trip* and *Rough Night*, which focus on homosocial bonding time between groups of women still seem to be about heterosexual union at first glance. In each of these films, a heterosexual union is necessary for the group of women to have time together at all. However, these unions never taken center stage; they sometimes provide plot points, but mostly reside in the background. In *Bridesmaids*, all of the activities we see the group of women do together are oriented on planning or celebrating Lillian's wedding. The traditional cultural activities leading up to a wedding are markers of significant plot points in the film; the engagement party introduces the group of bridesmaids; the bachelorette party is derailed by Annie's prescription drug meltdown on their flight, and the bridal shower is the site of the main conflict between Annie, Lillian, and Helen. Outside of these wedding activities, we rarely see members of the group together in more than pairs. The Flossy Posse's wild weekend in New Orleans in *Girls Trip* is only made possible because of Ryan and Stewart's shared success and invitation to The Essence Festival. *Rough Night* is about a bachelorette party gone wrong; the plot itself is sporadically interrupted by Jess's fiancé's drive to Miami to save their relationship.

So, instead of the heterosexual romance progressing through the plot and presenting itself as the main point of action, these comedies challenge this. The female bonding becomes the main plot point while the heterosexual romances are in the background or even ignored. This major reworking of comedy gives women the chance to be center stage without being supported by a man.

Another aspect of heterosexual coupling these comedies adapt in their own way is the trade of a partner who devalues and/or betrays the main character for a less toxic, new partner. The exposure of manipulative male partners further deromanticizes heterosexual union; by revealing the unpleasantness of seemingly “perfect” heterosexual relationships, the notion of romantic coupling is devalued. In *Girls Trip*, Ryan trades her cheating, manipulative husband in for a sensitive musician. Her new love interest gives her his hotel room, backstage passes, and takes care of her when she’s intoxicated; however, these two never form a couple. Their mutual interest is alluded to, but in the spirit of rejecting heterosexual coupling, Ryan never commits to another relationship, other than with her female friends, during the film. In her speech at Essence Fest, Ryan shares she feared being alone, and put up with being disrespected and betrayed. As the camera pans over the crowd, black women are shown nodding in support. Ryan muses that many of them probably have put up with similar treatment, but rediscovering their voice is worth leaving the person treating them poorly. Annie also trades “up” her man in *Bridesmaids*; the film opens up to Annie and Ted (John Hamm) having very awkward and unsynchronized sex. The next morning, Ted tells her, “I really want you to leave but I don’t know how to say it without sounding like a dick.” Lillian comments on Ted’s treatment of Annie and reminds her that he often makes Annie feel bad about herself. Every encounter Annie has with Ted is sexual and/or demeaning. Later in the film when Annie gets to know officer Rhoades (Chris O’Dowd), he

proves to be a kind, and good person. Rhoades helps Annie get her car fixed, genuinely wants to get to know her, and won't even litter.

In both cases, these films show a rejection of sex-centric, selfish men and instead, value sensitive men. *Girls Trip* takes this devaluation of the heterosexual couple further by focusing on finding power in rediscovering yourself over having a man. *Bridesmaids* does emphasize friendship and careers as a path to self-worth, and uses Annie's relationship with Rhoades as an indicator of her growth into a mature, socially responsible human. In *Rough Night*, however, Jess's fiancé is already sensitive and caring; he doesn't exhibit these toxic traits so there's no need to "trade-up." A rejection of these traits happens when the stripper says, "I know you want it you little slut" and Jess pushes him away with an "ew, no." This is immediately followed by Alice jumping on and killing the stripper, seemingly cementing the death of the acceptability of his words. The fact that all three films utilize this rejection and acceptance of certain behaviors exhibited by men could be highlighting the cultural disapproval of men degrading women, or could be attempting to condition the audience into this way of thinking. Age-old ideals of coupling are still identified in these films, but the cultural push to be successful and socially recognized is much more prevalent. Success in these films is dependent on each character's economic standing, and their social status is scaled by the cohesiveness of the group. Like the idea of the carnivalesque which deals with play and matters of social importance, these films balance the groups' play with a fine attunement to economic and social factors.

During the Great Depression, films like *It Happened One Night* (1934) and other romantic comedies, used superiority and inferiority as a means to create tension between a man and a woman of different economic groups. When the two reconcile their differences at the end of the film, the struggle between classes has been mediated. These films worked as social

commentary but negated any real critique after the unification of social classes (Beach 49).

Beach suggests that the majority of theater-goers during this time, mainly members of the middle and working classes, “would have rejected overly flattering depictions of the rich (49).” The conflict between the man and woman usually served as criticism of the upper classes’ disregard for the struggles of the working class. But, the mediation of any class conflict serves to reinforce an idealized “classless society” and social harmony.

In today’s films, rather than depict the equality between men and women of different socio-economic groups, we see conflict and then “equality” between two women of different socio-economic groups in the form of friendship, and we see a negotiation of wealth or social status to mitigate any tensions that arise between these women. In all of these films, we see groups of women with drastically different lifestyles and careers, and the films all identify the work these women do. The main action revolves around the leisure and play these women engage in, but the audience is made aware of the livelihood of each woman almost immediately after they’re introduced. In *Bridesmaids* and *Girls Trip*, the main conflicts between members of the group of women are tied to economic stability. In *Girls Trip*, Sasha (Queen Latifah) is a tabloid journalist struggling to make ends meet, and she feels like Ryan (Regina Hall) and the others look down on her because of her job. Ryan is extremely successful and is on the verge of signing a multi-million-dollar contract while Sasha is about to lose her job and home. The tensions between extremely the wealthy and the financially unstable are mediated after the transfer of power from the rich to the poor. Unlike earlier comedies which dealt with power struggles between a couple from differing socioeconomic groups, this transfer of power doesn’t happen with the formation of a heterosexual couple. In this subgenre, this transfer is depicted in

many different ways but always happens between two women, usually in the form of new-found respect and friendship.

This power transfer manifests differently in each film, but in *Bridesmaids* this transfer happens when Helen has to ask Annie for help to find Lillian on her wedding day. Helen, who flaunts her wealth and status whenever she can, can't buy her way out of this situation and therefore relinquishes her power to Annie when she agrees to help. In *Girls Trip* this power transfer happens when Ryan accuses Sasha of posting a photo of Stewart with another woman, which tears the group apart. Sasha has the moral high ground, and after seeing the error in her ways, Ryan apologizes and offers Sasha a partnership, so there is a physical transfer of wealth that mediates the tensions between Sasha and Ryan. There is a similar power struggle and subsequent formation of friendship in *Rough Night*, though socio-economic standing has little to do with the tensions between the women. Alice (Jillian Bell) sees Pippa (Kate McKinnon) as a threat to her friendship with Jess (Scarlett Johansson) and attempts to undermine and isolate Pippa in the bachelorette party. Alice lacks a sort of social currency rather than an actual monetary deficit. Her inability to connect with other women, aside from her old college roommates, threatens her social standing. The other women are all socially successful outside and within the group, but Alice seems to be the pariah; she's too clingy, overbearing, and odd to be socially equal to the others. By the end of the film, the group of women learns about Alice's insecurities and her fear of being left out of the group, and they dismantle the group's social hierarchy to ease those tensions. The women essentially accept Alice as she is with the caveat Alice tones down her excessive nature; Pippa and Alice become friends, and Alice's social status improves.

As much as *Bridesmaids* deals with female friendship and bonding, the power dynamic between Annie and Helen drives the majority of the plot. Immediately, Annie feels inferior to Lillian's elegant friend Helen, and these characters fight over Lillian's attention and friendship. Their differences are mainly economic, Anne is struggling financially, while Helen is the epitome of wealth and social status. Helen engages her superiority regularly, one-upping Annie's ideas with more expensive alternatives. For example, when Annie suggests a bachelorette party at Lillian's family lake house, Helen rallies the other bridesmaids around a trip to Las Vegas. While everyone sets out to enjoy their flight to Vegas in first class, Annie is alone in coach. Helen offers to pay for Annie to sit in first class, but Annie refuses. Although Helen is able to maintain her financial superiority, Annie engages a different form of superiority. By mocking Helen's attitudes, extravagance and by being the main character, the audience sides with Annie; we sympathize with her shortcomings and frustrations. *Bridesmaids* is set during the 2008 recession where nearly 8.4 million Americans lost their jobs, so Annie's financial situation was highly relatable. Annie's economic status plummets throughout the film and is never improved; however, her social status is regained, and even improved at the end of the film. This acceptance of economic standing was realistic for its time. Viewers in positions similar to Annie could identify with leaning on a support system of friends and family during hard times. *Bridesmaids* doesn't pander to audiences with messages like "you can be successful, too" or utilize a pick yourself up by your bootstraps and make yourself a career trope. Instead of criticizing Annie for not becoming successful, *Bridesmaids* highlights the areas of Annie's life that are successful. Economic issues are on center stage for other R-Rated comedies, *The Hangover* (2009) especially. The opening minutes of this film introduces the main characters' economic status, and spends ample time addressing Alan's (Zach Galifianakis) lack of financial independence.

Alan lives at home with his parents; he is childish, chubby, and awkward. The rest of the group is embarrassed of him and constantly degrades Alan. One of the main plot points in the film revolves around finding \$80,000 the group owes a drug dealer. Alan earns this money by counting cards, and with this act of economic dominance, earns the respect of the group. This respect could also be seen as friendship, the group, who at first did not want Alan to join them, now accepts Alan, even though he was at fault for most of the group's problems. While Alan seems to be similar to Megan and Alice in terms of social rejection, the implication of men being breadwinners gives this depiction a drastically different implication.

Rowe's idea of a comedy of equality is depicted in *Bridesmaids*, but instead of a heterosexual couple in conflict and their subsequent harmonious union, we see Annie and Helen's struggle for power dissolve into a friendship. When, the two begrudgingly team up to find Lillian, Annie discovers Helen has almost no one in her lavish life, and Helen apologizes for her hostile treatment of Annie. As the two begin to relate to each other and respect their differences they form a friendship and repair their relationships with Lillian as well. So, while the film ends with Lillian's wedding, that is not the important union. The formation of a new friendship, and the strengthening of an existing friendship signal the harmony Rowe identifies in "comedy of equality."

This reformation of friendship happens in *Girls Trip* as well, but this film also depicts a heterosexual power struggle. While conflicts between friends and their time together are important to the story, the plot is driven by the power struggle between Ryan and her cheating husband Stewart (Mike Colter). Ryan and Stewart have made a successful brand out of their relationship and lifestyle, but everything is threatened when news of Stewart's affair is leaked. Ryan fears losing her brand and disappointing her followers if she leaves Stewart, so she tries to

justify and cope with her husband's infidelity. Stewart holds the power, and he can do as he pleases because of this fear and control he has over Ryan. When Ryan finally tells the truth to her fans and leaves Stewart, she regains her power. This is a subversion of the typical comedy of equality. Instead of the struggle for power leading to matched or shared power, *Girls Trip* begins with an appearance of shared power between Ryan and Stewart. As Stewart's affair is discovered by Ryan's friends, the power struggle begins; Stewart promises he won't cheat again, but reminds Ryan that he is an integral part of their brand. Ryan wants to leave, and when she finally does, she has the power. The destruction of the heterosexual relationship, usually a component of tragedy, allows Ryan to become wealthy independently. Ryan is supported by her group of friends and the reformation of the friend group signals the harmony and union indicative of comedy. There is a romanticized quality to this groups' bond, the Flossy Posse, when together, are like a family unit. The final scene in *Girls Trip* shows the four women in bed together laughing and talking about their hijinks; this is the ultimate indication that female friendship has replaced romantic love. These four single women are rejecting heterosexual relationships, but still participating in the notion of coupling, albeit, a more familial sense of coupling.

While these films deal with superiority between characters within the plot, they also engage a sense of superiority in the audience. Like Annie's financial troubles in *Bridesmaids*, the audience positions themselves within the film, sympathizing or feeling superior to the characters and situations. Like marriage and death, work and economic status are universal conventions most members of a given society are attuned to. Labor and leisure are differentiated, and these films identify work and play, each of these films addresses each woman's career, usually in the beginning of the film. After identifying each member of the groups economic status, then the women can participate in the group activities, like binge drinking, sports, or event hiring a

stripper. The only exception to this rule of identifying work before the individual can participate in the play, is Megan (Melissa McCarthy) in *Bridesmaids*. Her career is alluded to during the film, but not revealed until Megan is trying to help Annie get out of her funk. The entirety of the film, Megan is goofy, messy, and loud, but when Megan tells Annie about her high-ranking, high-paying government job and the work it took to get it, Annie listens to her. Megan earns respect from her pay-grade and employment status, and she would not be listened to without it. The leisurely activities these characters engage in provide humor, while the identification of economic status grounds the films and causes friction between the characters. The identification of economic status is important beyond these film's plots; the shift from depicting women as wives and homemakers to women with careers lives outside of relationships has allowed films about women's play to be created. Work, at least in terms of these comedies, is a precondition for play. Gender roles have been shifting for decades, women have been entering the workforce exponentially and today women account for 58.2% of the civilian workforce according to the United States Census Bureau. By accentuating these women's careers, and leaving outdated gender roles in the past, this subgenre works to redefine societies' expectations of women.

By establishing each character's work, they are able to participate in play. To engage in play requires capital, the characters need money to buy plane tickets, drugs, strippers, and any other product they may need. Without work, there is no capital for the characters to spend, and therefore, the leisure activities cannot be achieved. In most of the leisure activities the women participate in, they end up misbehaving. The carnivalesque nature of comedy stems from mocking social conventions and heavily utilizes elements of the grotesque. Rowe suggests that women behaving badly encapsulates this grotesque nature of comedy. Each film alludes to the misbehavior to come early on. In *Rough Night* and *Girls Trip* specifically, the group of women

recall how long it's been since they were all together and reminisce on college parties where they were able to let loose. These films use flashbacks to show the bonding time the younger versions of the characters had, and contrasts the present reality of work, families, and relationships. The mundane lives of these women are shown, and set up the need for a return to the glory days. These flashbacks serve as a promise of the depravity to come, based on the groups' misbehaviors in the past. Youthful defiance, like college parties and sexual experimentation, is expected. But when career women in the thirties exhibit these behaviors, this defiance is more unexpected and extreme. Binge-drinking, drugs and dance-offs appear throughout the films; these women are behaving badly, and having a great time. *Bridesmaids* does not utilize flashbacks, mainly because this rag-tag group of women are just now starting to bond. Annie and Lillian do start off with mild misbehavior, they spend their breakfast together imitating penises and joking about oral sex. Later, the group of bridesmaids and Lillian do behave badly, but not in the same way the Flossy Posse or the girls from *Rough Night* do. The bad behavior in *Bridesmaids* is less about partying and more about defying social rules; for instance, Helen and Annie play tennis together and end up aiming exclusively for each other's breasts. They ignore the standard rules of tennis and instead seek to hurt each other in a more passive aggressive way than just physically fighting. This aggression relates to popular culture theorist John Fiske's idea that out of control bodies produce a sense of pleasure, so releasing this aggression gives Annie and Helen pleasure, as well as giving the audience pleasure in the form of humor (Fiske 56).

In *Bridesmaids*, there are many other displays physical violence, though most of these violent outbursts are indirectly aimed at another person, like the tennis scene, or directed towards objects, like when Annie destroys Lillian's giant engagement shower cookie. Megan suggests a fight club bachelorette party and slaps Annie around to motivate her later in the film. All of these

violent outbursts and acts of aggression are directed towards other women in the group, usually Annie against Helen. In *Girls Trip*, fighting and violent outbursts occur throughout the film. Dina (Tiffany Haddish) assaults a coworker for eating her food in the first few minutes of the film, and loses her job because of the altercation. The girls, especially Dina, get in to several more altercations throughout the film, and these acts of violence are all projected outside of the group. The violence in these films calls back to the excessive nature of comedy, the slapstick tradition, and also the element of grotesque. This violence also taps into the pleasure we derive from being out of control. Most of all, the violent behavior of these women defies cultural expectations of women as peacemakers and men as aggressors. By depicting aggressive, violent women, these films signal social acceptance of women partaking in a typically masculine activity.

The physical and cultural layers of these films are apparent; the physical aspects of these comedies-- the sex, excrement, fighting, and drinking-- lend to the idea of the grotesque. In each of these films, the audience is bombarded with elements of the grotesque; whether it be in *Bridesmaids* when the group has to deal with the effects of food poisoning at a high end bridal boutique with one toilet, or in *Girls Trip* when Lisa (Jada Pinkett-Smith) urinates on a crowd of party-goers on Bourbon Street while zip lining. *Rough Night* deals with blood more than any other bodily fluid, but the penis themed everything constantly in frame reminds audience of the grotesque. These bodily functions signify a loss of control, but by choosing to participate in these acts, these women take control. When Lisa can't hold in her pee, she feels embarrassed, but when Dina (Tiffany Haddish) follows Lisa on the zip line and purposely urinates, she laughs. She is liberated by participating in this unseemly act, and helps Lisa feel less ashamed. The element of violence, the sight of women actively engaging in fights and violent outbursts seem to

show that these women are out of control. But, by breaking the social rules and willingly participating in these acts, the women in these films become powerful. They can threaten men with broken wine bottles, ruin wedding showers, and accidentally kill male strippers.

Comedy stems from this tradition of the carnivalesque, and Rowe states that “the grotesque body is above all the female body” (33). Rowe says women are so close to the grotesque because they menstruate, give birth, and lactate, as well as of the ability to engage in other forms of the grotesque that men are able to perform. While unruly women seem to embody the grotesque, Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz propose that the entertainment industry carefully picks who will tell the jokes in order to maximize its effectiveness (209). This process, which is dependent on appearance, gender, race and sexuality of the joke-teller, makes assumptions about who the audience will find funny. The films discussed above cast mostly thin, women with one curvy woman in each group. In *Bridesmaids* and *Rough Night*, Megan and Alice are big, loud and out of control. Megan is overtly sexual and dominating, she defies social rules left and right. While looking for bridesmaid dresses, Megan is the first to get sick. It starts with burps and farts that the other women chastise her for. Even when the other women are getting sick, they judge Megan for her sickness. Like her uncontrollable bodily functions, Megan’s sexuality is also intended to be laughed at. When Megan attempts to seduce Air Marshal John (Ben Falcone), she is overtly sexual in her bodily movements and her speech. But Megan’s appearance, her make-up free face, bowling shirts, wrist brace, and newsboy hats seemly contradict her sexual nature. Alice is similarly laughed at for her aggressively sexual commands she shouts at the stripper; she also tackles the stripper and accidentally kills him. Her “excessive” body, larger than any of the other women’s bodies was the only weapon that could be used against this image of masculinity. Both of these women are extremely self-confident and outspoken, but are intended to be the butt

of their own jokes. Megan is shown in her bridesmaid dress with her hair and make-up done at the end of the film, also accompanied by her new boyfriend. Her appearance is “fixed” and her sexuality is contained in a monogamous relationship. Alice’s social awkwardness is somewhat mediated at the end of *Rough Night*. By deviating from a traditional image of femininity and having these deviations scorned or corrected, these films seem to be policing femininity. As long as women who don’t subscribe to acceptable forms of femininity are characters to be laughed at, this deviation is tolerable, but must be corrected by the end of the film. In *Girls Trip*, Sasha is similarly confident and sexual, but is not more sexual or grotesque than the thinner women of the group. Her scenes are still funny, but the humor isn’t stemming from her appearance. In a film about empowering black women to love themselves and their friends, making Queen Latifah a character to be laughed at due to her size just wouldn’t have rang true. *Bridesmaids* and *Rough Night* seem to “get away” with their depictions of larger women because their plots are less dependent on female empowerment.

In an interview for Cinemax promoting *Bridesmaids*, Melissa McCarthy muses that “this is not a precious girl movie where we’re like fighting about nail polish or hair” (2011). Those involved in making these films are actively seeking to separate their films from romantic comedies and films about “women’s issues.” Raunchy, R-rated comedies are no longer a boy’s club, but these films haven’t fully integrated, mostly due to gatekeeping activities of film critics, so instead they’ve carved out a subgenre for themselves and are redefining the general regulations of comedy. While men-led raunchy comedies with mostly white casts, like *The House* (2017) and *Father Figures* (2017) and the mostly white and female-led *Rough Night*, are falling short at the box office, especially in the summer of 2017, *Girls Trip* prevailed. The opening weekend of *Girls Trip* saw an audience which was 52% African American and 60%

women over the age of 25 according to PostTrak surveys (2017). So, why is this subgenre so pervasive as of late, and why are some films breaking even while some achieve resounding success? It seems that films, like *Girls Trip*, which accurately represent American demographics are and will be more successful. The UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report for 2018 notes “America’s increasingly diverse audiences prefer diverse film and television content.” Also, critics praised *Bridesmaids* and *Girls Trip* for their depictions of fully fleshed out female characters. As for *Rough Night*, critics speculated this film didn’t live up to its potential due to the characters feeling like “types” instead of complex individuals. David Rooney of the Hollywood Reporter had high hopes for this film, “but all the talented women here are stuck playing types rather than characters, in a strained frolic in which both the verbal humor and the physical gags too often fall flat.” So, audiences are craving films depicting diverse, realistic women, and this subgenre can deliver this, just not with every film. This subgenre is about homosocial bonding between women, and if women in the audience don’t genuinely connect with the women on screen, the film cannot be successful.

This subgenre differentiates itself from most subgenres of comedy because these films identify the importance of female bonding over heterosexual romance. Also, by exploring the boundaries of what is socially acceptable in terms of femininity, this subgenre of comedy invokes the comedic tradition of defying social expectations and rules. Even when these films “correct” non-feminine character traits, the films still depict representations of women not commonly seen in media. Romanticizing female friendship and making heterosexual relationships peripheral plot points also work to negate cultural standards perpetuated through media. This radical defiance of social norms, or focusing on female friendship rather than heterosexual relationships, reflects the large percentage of American adults who are single. The

United States Census Bureau estimates there are 110.6 million unmarried or single adults, and that 53.2% are women. However, this subgenre doesn't always account for the growing number of Americans who are part of the LGBTQ community. *Rough Night* does feature a lesbian relationship between two of the main characters, but many of these films reject relationships of any kind in order to fully focus on the friendship between the group of women. This subgenre is reworking the traditional aspects of comedy to create films that represent changing cultural ideologies. These films could be seen as a precursor to the #metoo movement, a sign of cultural change before that change manifested.

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