

"Can We Get a Cleanup On Aisle 2?"

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"Can We Get a Cleanup On Aisle 2?":

How Film Critics Mopped Up the Transgressions of Jenny McCarthy's *Dirty Love*

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Introduction

Dirty Love (John Asher, 2005) is the consequence of Jenny McCarthy's fearless foray into the risky territory of the gross-out comedy. The film endured a long and laborious gestation period under the threat of financial ruin. The project began as a sitcom pilot that McCarthy had initially penned for Fox Television. Fox passed, deeming the project "too edgy and too controversial for TV" (qtd. in Kevin Williamson). But McCarthy and her production team could not be dissuaded. They bought the rights back from Fox and McCarthy

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went to work transforming the script into a feature film (Kates). She insists that she never wanted to be a writer but because of the dearth of onscreen comedic roles for women, she was forced to take matters into her own hands (qtd. in Sobczynski). *Dirty Love* eventually debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in late January 2005, where it was warmly received. John Cooper, the Festival's Programming Director, lauded the filmmakers in the program notes for so brazenly travelling "across a comic minefield where few dare to tread." Soon after the film was picked up for distribution. It finally opened domestically on a scant 44 screens, but its box-office performance was so disappointing after its first week that it was hastily pulled from all but 2 screens. In the end, the film was a commercial failure, garnering a dismal \$58,116 during the entirety of its theatrical run (*Box Office Mojo*). While Jenny McCarthy may have successfully crossed a "comic minefield" at Sundance, she triggered a landmine at the American box office.

One might expect that such a low budget underachiever would elude the scrutiny of critics as it quietly tiptoed into home video

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obscurity. But instead it generated a surprising barrage of acrimony from pop culture critics. What was it about *Dirty Love* that incited them so? “While individual popular press articles are imperfect indices of the complexities and contradictions of a broad and diverse culture,” Diane Negra contends that “they can be important and resonant snapshots of the state of play on key issues such as gender” (1). This is especially true when these articles, read together, unintentionally and consistently recapitulate certain themes and preoccupations. A survey of the backlash to *Dirty Love* illuminates a perennial anxiety around women in comedy, and betrays the presence of what Alessandra Stanley has coined a “crass ceiling,” which polices what women can and cannot joke about. In the case of *Dirty Love*, this culturally imposed limit prohibits women from participating in the demystification and debasement of their own bodies. In the end, in trying to contain the comic female body, critics inadvertently uncover *Dirty Love*’s disruptive, subversive power.

Roger Ebert likened the film to a crime, writing in his review for *The Chicago Sun* that “*Dirty Love* wasn’t written or directed, it was committed.” Rory L. Aronsky for *Film Threat* echoed this punitive stance, declaring that McCarthy “should be incriminated for the complete waste of time.” Meanwhile, Stephen Holden at *The New York Times* scoffed: “Even by the standards of its bottom-feeding genre, *Dirty Love* clings to the gutter like a rat in garbage.” This despised little movie even won four Golden Raspberries in 2005: one for worst screenplay, worst actress, worst director and finally, one for worst picture. Years later, the film *still* ranks an abysmal 2.9 out of 10 on the *Internet Movie Database*, a mere 9% on *Metacritic*, and a paltry 4% on *Rotten Tomatoes*. If its sizeable roster of scathing reviews is any indication, *Dirty Love* is ostensibly one of the worst movies ever made.

Of course, film comedies rarely ever steal the hearts of critics, and it is a wonder if they even register on their radars at all.

Gross-out comedies tend to be treated like badly behaved children—more often than not they are wearily ignored. If critics do take notice it is only to gently dismiss them with an impatient “boys will be boys” eye-rolling as they did with *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978), *Porky’s* (Bob Clark, 1982), *There’s Something About Mary* (Bobby and Peter Farrelly, 1998), or *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999) to name only a few. Since they break box office records as much as they do conventions of propriety, gross-out comedies possess an economic power that critics feel must be reckoned with (Paul 4). They are tolerated or endured, but rarely combatively rejected as in the case of *Dirty Love*.

Comedy, as Geoff King reminds us, “is not usually taken entirely seriously, a fact that sometimes gives it license to tread in areas that might otherwise be off-limits” (2). But for a comedy, *Dirty Love* is taken quite seriously. This is because McCarthy has trespassed into an area that is traditionally off-limits to women: that of the gross-out comedy, which is typically and more comfortably a realm for men. “In many ways” Ethan Alter wrote, “*Dirty Love* marks the culmination of the girls-can-be-gross-too act McCarthy first trotted out back in the mid-’90s when she was actually semi-famous.” Meanwhile David Cornelius surmised, “the idea, I suppose, is to show that women can do gross-out humor just like men can,” ultimately concluding, of course, that they cannot.

As relatively longstanding staples of the film industry, we can consider gross-out comedies as sanctioned spaces where certain norms can be safely transgressed. Because of this, they share an affinity with the carnival festivities Mikhail Bakhtin observes in the work of François Rabelais, where there is a permitted, temporary liberation from propriety and order.

For Bakhtin, carnival finds its closest textual expression in grotesque realism. Grotesque realism is a mode that operates through the grotesque body, a body that is permeable and

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excessive. There is a strong emphasis on the body’s lower stratum, “the parts of the body through which it engages with the world, including the bodily fluids and excretions by which that engagement is often manifested” (King 65). In grotesque realism, the body is extolled for its openness, as “not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (Bakhtin 26). This is ultimately what prompted Bakhtin to see the universal spirit of the carnival: a space where human beings were liberated from hierarchies and pretense, and were united by their common bodily materiality.

Dirty Love embraces the ethos of grotesque realism with reckless abandon, and critics retaliated by attempting to reinstate the oppressive hierarchies of propriety. Critics were unanimously disgusted with both McCarthy and the film. And, as King explains, “to be disgusted is to reject, viscerally, often violently, that which transgresses against the ordering structures of a particular culture” (68). *Dirty Love* incited the wrath of critics then, because McCarthy, a former Playboy Playmate, combines two traditionally antipodal qualities: sex appeal and humour—more importantly grotesque humour. She uses her position as an object of desire to invite spectators to look, only to frustrate their desire by making herself into an object of disgust. In putting the desirable female body at the crux of the gross-out comedy, *Dirty Love* has created a crucible in which to explore underlying anxieties about the uncontrollable female body that continue to persist in contemporary culture.

The Gross-Out Film

Disruption is comedy’s *raison d’être*. Comedy is built “on transgression and inversion, disguise and masquerade, sexual reversals, the deflation of ideals, and the leveling of hierarchies” (Rowe 9). But the gross-out is the epitome of comedy at its most disruptive because it provokes disgust and deliberately pushes the boundaries of taste (King 63). It revels in the

grotesque potential of the human body and its permeability, playing up projectile vomit, explosive diarrhea, roving streams of urine, and misplaced semen for laughs. Its most striking feature is “a gleeful uninhibitedness,” as William Paul suggests. These films offer a sense of exhilaration in “how much they can show without making us turn away, how far they can push the boundaries to provoke a cry of ‘Oh, gross!’” (20).

Typically the gross-out comedy is oriented towards a masculine sensibility. While the films may be concerned with heterosexual conquests, they are often just as (if not more) interested in male relationships and bonding. They function as a forum for masculine anxieties and regressions, and are preoccupied with oral, anal, and phallic fixations. In *Roadtrip* (Todd Phillips, 2000), for example, a man eats another man’s pubic hair on French toast. In *The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Jay Roach, 1999), Austin Powers (Mike Myers) inadvertently drinks diarrhea. Meanwhile, in *Tomcats* (Gregory Poirier, 2001) a doctor accidentally eats a stray testicle, and members of a rival fraternity in *National Lampoon’s Van Wilder* (Walt Becker, 2002) unknowingly eat éclairs filled with dog semen.

Women are either excluded from such films altogether or they are ancillary to the male characters (Rowe 44). They are relegated to attractive objects of desire who never knowingly do anything gross, like Cameron Diaz’s titular character in *There’s Something About Mary*. In the film’s most indelible scene, Mary unwittingly uses Ted’s semen as hair gel. The comic *frisson* is generated by the fact that while Ted (Ben Stiller) and the audience are aware of her transgression, she remains completely oblivious. Examples such as this also emphasize that female characters enacting transgressions are usually *objects* of comedy as opposed to subjects.

Genuinely “gross” female characters do exist in these films of course, but they are usually contained in some way (Paul 101). If a woman gets crass, it is usually manifested as a momentary

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transgression. When the main characters from *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (Danny Leiner, 2004) get stuck in a women’s public bathroom, they are delighted by the opportunity to spy on two attractive female students. Their pleasure quickly turns to disgust, however, when the girls have a defecation contest called “battleshits.” Instead of nudity and sensual girl talk, the boys are forced to witness a cacophony of laughter and flatulence, and compelled to cover their noses to block the foul odours. Yet this gross-out is only momentary: once the boys escape, they avoid the girls for the rest of the film. Such sequences remain but fleeting reminders of female abjection and are rarely sustained for the length of an entire movie like they are in *Dirty Love*.

Dirty Love

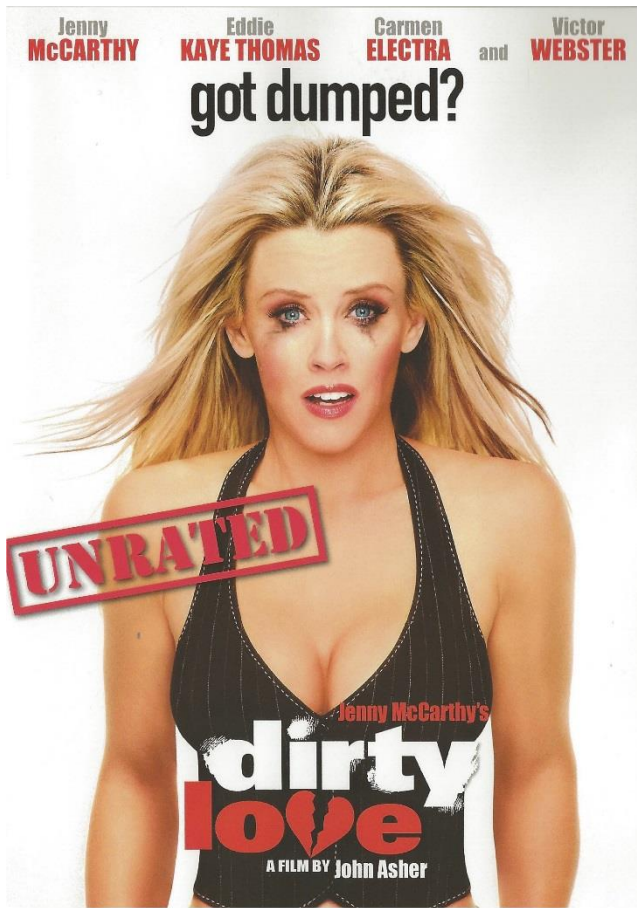
Dirty Love was penned and produced by its star, Playboy Bunny turned MTV personality and comedian, Jenny McCarthy. Though directed by her now estranged husband John Asher, it is fair to say this is McCarthy’s project. The film plainly builds on McCarthy’s particular brand of base, bawdy humour—one that she has been cultivating since her early television work on “Singled Out” (1995-97), “The Jenny McCarthy Show” (1997), and “Jenny” (1997-98). Not only does the film tout a mostly female cast, it also deals with the embodied experience of being female in an unrestrained and often unpalatable way.

In the film, McCarthy plays Rebecca, a Hollywood fashion photographer whose relationship with her model-lothario boyfriend Richard (former *Playgirl* model Victor Webster) ends abruptly when she discovers him having sex with another woman. She is completely distraught by Richard’s infidelity, and becomes even more upset when she realizes that she cannot return to their apartment. When her friends attempt to retrieve her things on her behalf, they discover Richard has also destroyed all of her professional photography equipment. Thus not only has Rebecca been betrayed and dumped by the man

she loves, she is also homeless, broke and unable to work. The rest of the film tracks Rebecca's attempts to cope with and move on from her break-up. This inevitably leads to some bad decisions with disastrous but comedic results. The film becomes a parade of embarrassing episodes that generate humour through the emergence of McCarthy's grotesque body.

The grotesque body is also a degraded body. Degradation is an essential component of grotesque realism, the gross-out comedy, and the comedic mode more generally. The grotesque avows: "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 19). What has been lowered here that has caused such a fuss is McCarthy herself. Aside from being an actor and a comedian, having posed for *Playboy* a number of times, Jenny McCarthy is also a revered sex symbol. As an object of a masculine gaze, she is already a spectacle. She uses this to her full advantage in *Dirty Love* where her attractiveness is aggressively and consistently undercut by her gags. The erotic charge of her idealized body is constantly undermined by the intermittent emergence of her grotesque body.

Take for example the film's theatrical poster (Fig. 1). It features Jenny McCarthy framed in a medium shot against a white background. She wears midrise jeans, which expose her taught waist, and a skimpy low-cut vest that just barely contains her ample cleavage. She looks longingly at the camera with her mouth provocatively agape. These details are all designed to emphasize McCarthy's position as a sexual object. And yet other elements of the poster actively undermine this position. The tagline reads "Got Dumped?" which refers to romantic rejection, but it also doubles as slang for defecation. The allusion to the elimination of waste resonates well with the "dirty" of the film's title (which is itself an allusion to the act of intercourse). In addition, the tagline is clearly a spoof of the popular "Got Milk?"



advertising campaign by the California Milk Processor Board. The evocation of milk plays up the permeability of McCarthy's breasts, their associations with motherhood and nursing, while her teary, mascara-streaked face is highly suggestive of uncontrollable emotions. Overall the poster art connotes unrestrained excess, a desirable but disorderly female body.

What the film's poster art intimates is only further developed in the film. Rebecca is always teetering on

Fig. 1: *Dirty Love* poster art (New Wave Creative, 2005)

the edge of chaos. One minute she is poised and elegant, articulating calmly and gently. The next minute she is twitching fitfully, gnawing on her fingernails, grimacing and distorting her face unattractively, or screeching maniacally. Her emotional and physical composure is always threatening to founder. One of the film's first scenes, for example, finds a freshly spurned Rebecca wailing incoherently and angrily punching the air in the middle of the iconic Sunset Boulevard. She crawls over the Hollywood Walk of Fame, her thong jutting out above the waist of her jeans. She asks sex workers about job openings, offers her body

to male passerbys, and commiserates with a homeless man after stealing a drag of his cigarette. Rebecca's uncontained rage and sadness literally bring her to her knees. This is a low point for her, and yet beneath her feet are the idealized "stars" of Hollywood and the glamour they represent. From very early on, *Dirty Love* promises to explore the volatile intimacy between the high and the low.

The Unruly Woman

Jenny McCarthy shares many characteristics with the trope of the unruly woman, as does Rebecca. By virtue of being a woman in a gross-out comedy, she "transgresses boundaries and steps out of her proper place" (Rowe 42). The unruly woman incites chaos by trying to prevail over men; her way of speaking is excessive; she plays the fool and is self-deprecating; she is sexually active, or even promiscuous; and she shares an affinity with filth, boundaries, and taboo (Rowe 31). However, unlike the unruly woman, McCarthy, and the character she plays, is not outwardly or obviously grotesque. Rowe claims the unruly woman exploits her visual power "as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle" (12). For Rowe, however, that visual power typically resides in her conventional unattractiveness: qualities such as "fatness, rebelliousness, a sharp tongue and an association with pigs" (20). Rowe describes the unruly woman's body as

excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her appetites ... She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender ... She may be old or a masculinized crone. (31)

Rowe nominates Roseanne Barr and Miss Piggy as exemplary icons of the unruly woman. However, McCarthy's visual power is situated in her role as a sex symbol. She conforms to idealized notions of femininity—blue eyes and golden hair, voluminous surgically enhanced breasts, and long, slender legs. Edward Havens claimed in his review of *Dirty Love* that she is "one of

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the most stunningly beautiful women to shine on the screen since the heydays of Marilyn Monroe.”

As a sex symbol, McCarthy invites the male gaze; as a comedian, she harnesses it in order to violate it. She makes her beautiful body grotesque. In doing so she creates a very powerful incongruity. The recurring preoccupation that plagued critics seemed to be their inability or unwillingness to reconcile the disparity between McCarthy’s attractiveness and the sheer vulgarity of her humour. Kim Williamson for *Box Office Magazine* insisted after all: “You can't really like a movie that features a beautiful young woman who sometimes is naked and you end up leaving the theatre wishing you could see less of her.”

Meanwhile, Frank Ochieng for *The World Journal* wondered: “When did looking at a piece of convincing eye candy in the curvaceous likes of Jenny McCarthy become an inexplicable eyesore?” Felix Velasquez Jr. reprovingly reminded her: “Hey Jenny McCarthy... You’re not hot when you’re farting everywhere.”

Sex appeal and physical humour have rarely combined in female comedians. In the early 20th century, Kristen Anderson Wagner observes, there was a

perceived incompatibility of femininity and humor ... women were viewed as either feminine or funny but seldom both. In order to engage in comic performances, women had to ‘sacrifice’ their feminine qualities, defined here as ‘looks and grace.’ (37)

Meanwhile, as Lynn Spigel writes, the representation of female comics in the postwar period was regulated so as to keep sex appeal and comedy apart. The female comedians at the time “were either the conventionally unattractive type such as ‘big mouth’ Martha Raye or else the more waifish Imogene Coca, who used excessive mugging and grotesque costuming to distort her femininity” (153). Spigel also remarks that while there was an abundance of female comedians in sitcoms of the period,

their “abrasive edges” were usually softened by “embedding their wild physical humor in domestic scenarios” (153). All of these were part of a general strategy to downplay the female comedian’s femininity as well as her erotic charge (Spigel 154).

Thus what McCarthy illustrates is another way in which the grotesque can be used “affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire” (Russo 221). McCarthy generates humour by comparing the graphic, lived experience of the female body with its more idealized image. As Wagner observes, a more mannish or excessive woman’s performance can be seen as less transgressive because it features a woman who is already outside of conventional femininity (37). A more conventionally feminine comedian then has greater potential for dissonance since she forces the audience to reconcile her outward feminine grace with a decidedly un-feminine performance (Wagner 37). And McCarthy does indeed create dissonance. Her strategy here is twofold: she demystifies the female body and debases it.

Demystification

Dirty Love uses Rebecca and her friends to make a comic spectacle of the practices and performances required to maintain the seemingly effortless perfection of the conventional feminine body. The unruly woman “‘makes visible’ what is supposed to remain concealed: the artifice of femininity, the gap between an impossible role and the woman playing it” (Rowe 6). The film takes place in Los Angeles, a city known for its obsession with surface and pretense. All three of the main characters are part of professions that are concerned with representation: Rebecca is a fashion photographer, Carrie (Kim Heskinn) is an actor (though a discernibly bad one), and Michelle (Carmen Electra) is a sadistic aesthetician who tears the hair off of her clients’ bodies with unadulterated glee. Furthermore, Michelle also deliberately speaks Ebonics, and presents herself using aggressive feminine posturing. This affectation is a source

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of humour, but it also serves to highlight the artificiality of her persona and illuminate the underlying performances that animate identity more generally.

The film focuses on the masochistic labour that goes into creating the female body in order to expose its artifice. In an early scene Rebecca bounces up and down while grunting as she tries to fit a pair of tight jeans up over her thighs. As she prepares for a blind date, we see McCarthy in a point-of-view shot in the mirror, wearing a cleansing facemask. She reads the instructions that tell her to remove the mask “with one smooth motion.” Only she finds it coming off in pieces, one painful bit at a time. She yelps “ow!” repeatedly, contorting her face into absurd expressions of agony. Later, as Rebecca and her friends are preening before a night out, all three are seen in the mirror applying make-up in various states of undress, with their hair in rollers, clips, and clamps. Rebecca shaves her armpits, and then proceeds to trim her facial hair. Carrie obsessively pinches her belly “fat,” squeezes a pimple on her face, and places a pair of silicon inserts into her bra. Michelle douses her hair with hair spray, and admiring her reflection then comments: “I may be hungry but at least I look good!” All of these gestures and performances make it abundantly clear that their looks are achieved after a labour intensive process of disciplining their bodies in order to make them conventionally attractive.

In his review for the *Village Voice* Mike Holcomb interpreted such scenes as evidence of the film’s “clichéd, self-loathing misogyny.” Cultural constructions of femininity do traditionally take on what Mary Ann Doane calls “the pathology of the feminine,” which include qualities such as “masochism, narcissism, hysteria, and intensification of affect or ‘emotionalism’” (176). But rather than simply rejecting a film because of its outward misogyny, Doane insists instead that we analyze such tropes “in relation to processes of representation and meaning” (176). So while *Dirty Love* certainly riffs on the

“pathology of the feminine,” it is taken up in a nuanced and humorous way. In fact, it is done to such excess as to make it appear ridiculous.

Debasement

Jenny McCarthy is known for her ample breasts. They were prominently featured and exalted during her career as a *Playboy* model. They make an unforgettable appearance here under very different circumstances. Hoping to make her ex-boyfriend Richard jealous at his fashion show, Rebecca pushes her drunken date’s head into her cleavage, only to have him vomit all over her chest. Mortified, Rebecca rushes outside the building and has a very public meltdown on the red carpet. As she flails her arms around violently and apoplectically stomps her feet, one of her breasts falls out of her dress. After she is alerted to the fact, she takes them both out, grabbing at them and yelling maniacally: “What’s the big deal? They’re just fucking globs of fat!” This scene compelled Ebert to accuse *Dirty Love* of being an affront to breasts: “Jenny McCarthy has a technologically splendid bosom that should in my opinion, be put to a better use than being vomited on.”

Rebecca not only has her breasts vomited on, she has an entire table of food dumped on her, and is subjected to a number of sexual humiliations—one involving an encounter with a partner who cajoles her into using a frozen sea bass as a prop. The residual fishy odor persists on Rebecca’s body the following day. As the girls attempt to rouse Rebecca from her bed, they lift the bed sheets only to recoil in horror. Covering her nose, Michelle asks, “Did you sleep with Charlie the Tuna last night or do you need to douche?”

But McCarthy takes degradation to an even lower level in what is the film’s most derided scene, and its most squirm-inducing protracted gag: she bleeds menstrual fluid all over the floor of a supermarket. A surprise visit from “Aunt Flo” makes Rebecca realize that she is out of sanitary supplies and forces her to

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make a trip to the supermarket. As she hovers in the personal hygiene aisle, frantically scanning the shelves for a box of affordable tampons, she realizes she is unable to buy any of them. Much to her dismay the only kind in her price range are elephantine maximum absorbency pads. Just as she sighs in frustration, she begins to leak blood all over the floor. Panicked, she grabs the pads and races to the washroom. Finding it occupied, she runs towards the checkout only to spot her ex, Richard, nearby. To avoid him, she sprints across the supermarket all the while gasping and making a myriad of comical grimaces. In a perversion of the proverbial banana peel gag, an elderly woman creeping along the meat aisle accidentally slips on Rebecca’s bloody trail. She drops her grocery basket and falls on her back, crying “Help! I’ve fallen...” She tries to sit up, only to notice the blood on the arm of her blue cardigan, “...and I’m bleeding. Oh no!” While this moment is played up for ultimate slapstick effect, Rebecca’s menstrual mire is quickly turned into dangerous territory in more ways than one.



Fig. 2: The unforgettable supermarket scene in *Dirty Love*

Rebecca makes her way to the produce section where she crouches behind a fruit display. Framed in a medium shot, her eyes dart around expectantly waiting for an opportune moment to flee. A pinched female voice complains over the PA system, "Irv, we need a cleanup in produce" just as the camera zooms out to reveal Rebecca in a veritable lake of her own menstrual blood. Wailing in horror, Rebecca attempts to sop up the liquid with the large pads, but her frenzied circular motions only serve to spread the blood around further. She stands up and tries to regain her balance. While flailing her limbs in frustration, she inadvertently splatters blood everywhere. Grumbling, she lurches towards the checkout, revealing a blossoming bright red stain on the back of her white skirt.

The checkout presents another obstacle. Now that the maxi pads are out of their package, the cashier is unable to scan them. "Irv," the cashier asks over the PA system, "can we get a price check on the supersize maxi pads for the woman who keeps bleeding all over the store?" Rebecca's eyes widen in shock then narrow in rage. She begins slapping the cashier with the two fistfuls of maxi pads she is maniacally clutching in her hands. Wild with shame and frustration, she then dashes out the door with the store's security guard in pursuit. She eventually outraces him, but not before running a near marathon through the streets of Los Angeles, jumping in and out of bushes, the large blood stain at her back getting smaller in the distance.

This is the most graphic depiction of menstruation to ever be committed to the screen. It certainly generates disgust, but the sheer volume of blood brings it into the realm of the absurd. It dramatizes the fear of both discovery and contamination that undergird typical narratives of menstruation, and brings them to levels of operatic and comedic excess. And yet it inspired nothing but vitriol from critics.

Eric Snider described this particular scene as awful, and explained "it's a prime example of the difficulty of gross-out

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humor: if it's not funny, it's just gross." And Ebert sermonized that: "Yes, it takes nerve to star in a scene where you plop down in a supermarket aisle surrounded by a lake of your own menstrual blood. But to expect an audience to find that funny verges on dementia." But the backlash from critics says less about *Dirty Love* than it does about latent cultural anxieties about the female body.

A Fine (Panty) Line

Gross-out comedies "seek to evoke a response based on transgression of what is usually allowed in 'normal' or 'polite' society. They test how far they can go" (King 67). However the gross-out comedy also aims to achieve a *balance* between disgust and comic pleasure (King 68). Food, sex, excrement, blasphemy are all fair game if they are "presented obliquely enough to be socially acceptable" (Rowe 44). But when something is deemed more disgusting than comical, it reveals the existence of a strongly policed cultural boundary (King 68). Clearly the female body is one such boundary, and menstruation is still very much taboo. Menstrual fluid is out of place—it is a transgression that is clearly prohibited, even in jest.

Geoff King prophesized in 2002 that while gross-out comedies deal with taboos, he would be hard pressed

to imagine a mainstream 'gross-out' comedy of the near future including projectile menstrual bleeding among its comic attraction ... The depiction of menstruation is more likely to be associated in film with horror ... a fact that speaks volumes about male fears of supposedly 'monstrous' aspects of female bodily processes. (77)

It is no wonder, then, that *Dirty Love's* "money shot" was met with such consternation. Bakhtin was wrong: not all the base products of the body exist equally. As Julia Kristeva and others have pointed out, menstrual blood has more polluting value

than any other fluid and as such, it is much more dangerous to the established order. Defensibly

all forms of human bloodshed may be coded as polluting ... but menstruation is generally found especially so.

Menstrual blood does not issue randomly or accidentally, as does the blood of wounds, but from a single source and to some extent regularly and predictably—if unlike other products of elimination, uncontrollably. (Buckley & Gottlieb 26)

Menstrual blood troubles the boundaries of the female body specifically, and it becomes symbolic of its undisciplined, irrational wildness.

Furthermore, in conventional gross-out comedies, a secondary or unsympathetic character usually carries out extreme gross-outs, “so that they present a spectacle of transgression and the audience is not invited to identify with them too intimately” (King 69). In *Dirty Love* this excessive gross-out is sustained for an entire scene by the film’s main character. Watching it involves intimate identification with McCarthy’s Rebecca. Thus the spectator is both confronted with and implicated in a sublime spectacle of menstruation. Menstruation is usually a surreptitious affair limited to abstract verbal accounts; it is rarely displayed outside of euphemistic advertising by the menstrual management industry. This same industry is entrenched in the myths of hygiene and secrecy. Sanitary products themselves are often chlorine bleached to imply sterilization and purity. They are over-packaged to emphasize discretion, and the promotion of their absorptive properties serves to increase the perceived distance between the body and the fluid that it produces. In fact, the fluid in most advertisements for menstrual products is never red, but a preternatural blue. To see menstruation represented in such explicit terms is rare, shocking, and most importantly, not funny.

Containment Strategies

While Jenny McCarthy was creating a magnificent mess in *Dirty Love*, critics were busy mopping it up. All their reviews tried to mitigate her many bodily infractions in some way, either by offering up patronizing pity or dishing out personal insults as punishment (or both). Critics claimed to be baffled by McCarthy’s willingness to subject herself to so many humiliations and offered her their grief for the degradation that she undergoes.

“Here is a film so pitiful,” Ebert wrote, “it doesn’t even rise to the level of badness.” He deemed McCarthy to be “completely lacking in common sense or any instinct of self-preservation.” He then woefully added that “it’s painful to see a pretty girl, who seems nice enough, humiliating herself on the screen. I feel sorry for her.” Meanwhile, Holcomb wondered with vexing hubris: “Should we be worried about Jenny McCarthy?” He concluded that “[i]t’s impossible not to read this post-post-feminist atrocity as a cry for help.” Holden, *The New York Times* critic, described the film as the “pitiful shambles of a sex farce,” called McCarthy’s character pathetic and denigrated her personally as “a self-abasing exhibitionist who would do anything to be noticed.” Snider confessed “in many cases, it is McCarthy the actress and not Rebecca the character for whom I am most embarrassed” because, he claimed, “she seems to wallow in the debasement of herself.” Alter for *Film Journal* patronizingly wrote that even as her film was “going up in flames all around her, [she] soldiers on, willingly putting herself in the most extreme situations to try to score a laugh. Her die-hard commitment to that shtick and to this movie is almost noble.”

These declarations of pity and feigned sympathy are rife with barbed condescension. They appear as a strategy to render McCarthy less threatening by depicting her as victim of her own irrationality, an object of comedy and not the subject of

comedy that she clearly also is. This is nothing new: as Rowe remarks, seeing deviant women as victims instead of rebels has long been a way to diminish their disruptive power (214).

But other critics moved beyond patronizing platitudes to contempt, offering punishments thinly disguised as constructive criticism. And they got personal. *TV Guide's* Maitland McDonagh observed that "the lighting and makeup are exceptionally harsh; all the women look shockingly rough beneath their garish make-up" while spitefully insinuating that the film contributed to the failure of McCarthy's marriage. Cornelius for *eFilmCritic* confessed "I want to like Jenny McCarthy, *I really, really do*" but insisted that *Dirty Love* makes it impossible. Meanwhile other critics proffered McCarthy career advice, like Havens from *Film Jerk* who told her to "stop trying to be a star and start taking small supporting roles in movies with bigger stars where success or failure does not rest on her shoulders." Of course he did this while also remarking condescendingly that she still has a lot to learn about screenwriting. On top of that, Ebert made McCarthy out to be completely incompetent:

I am not certain that anyone involved has ever seen a movie, or knows what one is. I would like to invite poor Jenny McCarthy up here to the Toronto Film Festival, where I am writing this review while wonderful films are playing all over town, and get her a pass, and require her to go to four movies a day until she gets the idea.

And if critics were not pitying McCarthy or demonstrating contempt for her and her female castmates, they were sympathizing with Eddie Kaye Thomas, the film's male lead. They maintained that he deserved better (Aronsky). They insisted that he was the "lone voice of sanity and talent in this mess" (Cornelius). And finally, they applauded him for "giving his all to something that did not deserve the effort" (Havens). Curiously, there is no mention of his turn in *American Pie*. He

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played the precocious Paul Finch who suffers through explosive diarrhea after a prank involving coffee spiked with laxatives. A male character making a spectacle of his anal excretions (or simulating intercourse with an apple pie, or accidentally drinking a glass of semen) is “refreshingly unabashed”—as Alter called it in his favourable review of *American Pie*. Gross-out comedies are all about the comic *frisson* inspired by insufficiently controlled boundaries or inappropriate emissions (King 65). However, this only holds for men; audiences have far loftier expectations for women.

The Crass Ceiling

In his 2007 piece for *Vanity Fair*, the late provocateur Christopher Hitchens explains that women are not funny because,

women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is. Jokes about calamitous visits to the doctor or the shrink or the bathroom, or the venting of sexual frustration on furry domestic animals, are a male province. (54)

It is likely that Hitchens had never seen *Dirty Love*, with its jokes about pap smears, douching, sea bass sex, and menstrual flooding. But would it have mattered? While the article is maddeningly titled “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” “Why Women Are Not Allowed to Make Dirty Jokes” would be a more accurate headline. “It’s a pervasive conceit,” Mary Elizabeth Williams remarks, “this idea that ladies ... should not sully themselves in the muck of fart jokes.” Of course, it is a groundless notion, she argues, since “to be female is to be deeply enmeshed in the viscera of life ... Womanhood (and motherhood in particular) is all about having people puke and poop and blow their noses on you, about bleeding for a week every month.”

In an interview in the *New Yorker*, Stacey Snider, a partner in and CEO of Dreamworks Studios admits: "In my experience girls revealing themselves as candid and raunchy doesn't appeal to guys at all. And girls aren't that into it, either" (qtd. in Friend 52). This prompts Tad Friend to conclude that Hollywood studio executives "believe that male moviegoers would rather prep for a colonoscopy than experience a woman's point of view, particularly if that woman drinks or swears or has a great job or an orgasm" (52). After all this is hardly a novel concept; a similar sentiment was published in a newspaper as early as 1905 that "a woman was made to be loved and fondled ... [S]he certainly was not made to be laughed at" (qtd. in Martin and Seagrave 13). To be laughed at "requires a willingness to put oneself on display and demand attention, to be 'a little ridiculous'" (Wagner 42). This is why comic showiness is largely read as aggressive and confrontational.

The comic hero is "the patron of everything real, physical, material, enjoyable, and the enemy of all abstractions, moral principles, seriousness and joylessness" (Charney 160-1). And while the female comic hero can be all of these things, she can only go so far. There are limits on what women can joke about; what Alessandra Stanley calls "the crass ceiling." Those limits may not always be explicitly stated, however they are nonetheless felt. When female-centered comedies get made, Friend explains, "studios eye its receipts to gauge whether the trenches in the gender war have moved. If as expected, they haven't, the transgressors are roundly punished" (52). This was most certainly the case with *Dirty Love*.

But have "the trenches in the gender war" moved since 2005? The success of the 2011 female-ensemble comedy *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig) certainly suggests so. A sizeable congregation of zealous revelers greeted the film as it made its way down the theatrical aisle on May 13, 2011. The film, scripted by Kristin

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Wiig and her partner Annie Mumolo, was generously lauded as the “first black president of female driven comedies” (Williams). After a triumphant twenty-week run, *Bridesmaids* made a staggering \$169,106,725 domestically (*Box Office Mojo*). The film was nominated for two Academy Awards and won a number of critics’ awards. Ostensibly the success of *Bridesmaids* might be taken, as critic A.O. Scott suggests, as “a vindication of the rights and abilities of all women ... to make jokes” and as evidence that audiences are genuinely warming up to women in comedy, even gross-out comedy.

And yet, traces of that “crass ceiling” remain. In *Bridesmaids*’ most notorious scene the leading ladies are all struck by a sudden onset of food poisoning while trying on dresses in an upscale bridal boutique. After retreating to the boutique’s deluxe bathroom, Becca (Ellie Kemper) vomits in Rita’s (Wendi McLendon-Covey) hair as they both lean in over the only toilet. Barely two feet away Megan (Melissa McCarthy) hikes up her burgundy taffeta dress and defecates in a pristine marble sink. Lillian (Maya Rudolph), the bride-to-be, leaves the boutique in a frantic search for the nearest available bathroom. However, her quest is for naught. “It’s happening! It’s happening!” she declares in disbelief. She stops suddenly, and bending into a crude curtsy, surrenders to her body’s most primal urge. She evacuates her bowels in the middle of the street amongst blaring car horns and whirring traffic. While the act itself is concealed under her billowing white chiffon dress, the satiated, sheepish expression on her face confirms that she has in fact done the dirty deed.

The scarce critics who panned the film selected this scene in particular as its biggest blunder. For June Thomas at *Slate* there was nothing funny about “a beautiful woman taking a crap in the street.” She insisted that while humiliation might be par for the course in male buddy movies, it was “different for women than for men” (“Episode 139”). Critic Stephen Himes

complained that there was “a giant poop scene where great dialogue should be.” Stephanie Zacharek argued that the film too often “mistakes crassness for freshness.” Leonard Maltin observed that *Bridesmaids* forced us to “confront the question of whether audiences want to see women acting as crudely as men often do in gross-out comedies.” Maltin, for his part, voted a resounding no. Lou Lumenick reiterated this, balking at *Bridesmaids*’ notion that when women are together, they behave as grossly as men. He confessed: “Maybe it’s the romantic in me, but I’d sure like to think this is not really true.”

Even amongst the critics who favored the film, there was a perceptible ambivalence around this scene. Ella Taylor of *NPR* took the scene as evidence of co-producer Judd Apatow’s “atonal meddling.” She saw it as a not-so-subtle attempt to appeal to male viewers. Had it been cut, she stresses *Bridesmaids* would have been one of the “most groundbreaking mainstream movies of the past decade.” Apatow did in fact, as Taylor claimed, inspire the scene. And Apatow himself alleged having some misgivings about including it in the final cut: “We certainly had real debates about whether we were drifting into territory we should leave to the men” (qtd. in Angelo). While women in comedy may have gained new ground on the terrain of pop culture, the “crass ceiling” remains. Society persistently has different expectations for women.

Conclusion: Plunging from the Pedestal

Dirty Love never achieved the box-office credibility or the critical accolades that *Bridesmaids* did. However, it generously volunteered a genuine gross-out comedy about women and the hyperbolic embodied experience of being female. In doing so the film has inadvertently tapped into comedy’s radical liberating potential to be anti-authoritarian and disruptive. In her corporeal unruliness Jenny McCarthy has demonstrated the power of the female grotesque to challenge the social and

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symbolic systems that keep women in their place. In light of this, *Dirty Love* should at the most be credited for being transgressive, controversial, edgy, or “refreshingly unabashed.” At the very least, its poor reception should illuminate that there remains a prevailing ambivalence about women in comedy, an ambivalence that is inherently connected to the proper place and tolerable perimeters of the female body. This betrays a deeper distrust of the feminine more generally.

For Paul, the very “grossness” of gross-out films is salutary. They are valuable “because of their willingness to confront things we normally feel compelled to look away from” (20). *Dirty Love*’s hostile reception is indicative of our inability to wholeheartedly embrace women making spectacles of themselves on screen. The film serves as a reminder that laughter is conditional upon shifting constellations of social and cultural values. These values have and will continue to change over time. As Stanley observes: “It used to be that women were not funny. Then they couldn’t be funny if they were pretty. Now a female comedian has to be pretty—even sexy—to get a laugh.” The current passel of attractive female comedians on the cultural roster certainly attests to this. They include the likes of Tina Fey, Chelsea Handler, Amy Poehler, Sarah Silverman, and Kristin Wiig. Rosie White remarks that their “language, behaviours, and dress employ stereotypes of femininity to fuel a comedy which is dark and challenging, provoking discomfort as much as laughter” (357). Stanley’s assertion, though it is a premature conclusion and a precarious oversimplification of the issue, rightly points to the fact that whatever the pattern, “it is still about how the woman in comedy looks” (White 357).

McCarthy is distinct from her peers in that she is primarily known for her erotic desirability. While the sexualized female body can be used to stir up trouble, Janet Wolff is skeptical of

its power. She argues that its erotic appeal makes it vulnerable to re-appropriation by the male gaze, “despite the intentions of the woman herself” (415). McCarthy’s body is indeed a cathexis: a highly charged site where desires are invested and dramatized. But her comedy generates a rift between her idealized body and its more grotesque dimensions. Though expressively repulsed by this chasm, critics are nevertheless transfixed. For there, in the irreconcilable gulf between the object of desire and its undesirable excess, is the potent and uncanny reminder of the ultimate incommensurability of human beings. The emergence of the grotesque body makes manifest the felt insufficiencies of the female fantasy object. This is why Wolff counters that the grotesque body is “immune from incorporation into the objectifying gaze” (418). By oscillating between both the ideal and the grotesque, McCarthy eludes capture. As Williams remarks: “Women, in movies as well as real life, frequently have to fight their way off the pedestal.” The reception of *Dirty Love* reveals the higher the pedestal the greater the fall. But the film itself serves as a reminder of the rare, unrivaled delight of letting go of inhibitions and expectations and leaping unbounded through the air. ●

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