HEATED HUMOR: GENDER SUBVERSION THROUGH BEHAVIOR AND JOKES IN *THE HEAT*

SAVANNAH MUDD

"Whether categorized as road movies, Westerns, comedies, or cop action films, all buddy films embrace the same premise: two men of differing personalities and/or backgrounds are thrown together, and their initial lack of understanding of one another is eventually transformed into friendship and mutual respect" (Gates 73-74). Before the two contrasting leads arrive at that mutual respect, in most buddy films "the comedy comes from pure aggravation" (Goldstein). The 2013 film *The Heat* follows this traditional buddy-cop action comedy formula: brash, lewd, hilarious Boston cop Shannon Mullins (Melissa McCarthy) is reluctantly forced to work with uptight FBI agent Sarah Ashburn (Sandra Bullock) on a critical Boston drug case. The twist? Both cops are women.

One does not need to read past titles of reviews to see that *The Heat* was immediately hailed by critics for being feminist precisely because the only shift in the buddy-cop paradigm was the use of female leads. Monika Bartyzel titles her review in *The Week* "*The Heat* Breaks New Ground by *Not* Being Groundbreaking"; NPR reviewer Linda Holmes claims "*The Heat* is Absolutely Revolutionary, for Being Mostly Ordinary." These reviews and others argue that all *The Heat* had to do to be feminist was to genderswap the main characters of the buddy cop genre, thus "combating the idea that having a vagina requires an entirely distinct set of behaviors and expectations than having a penis" (Bartyzel). But is simply replacing the male characters with females truly subversive? And is this the only subversion *The Heat* accomplishes—or is there a shift in the humor as well that benefits feminist theory? Linguistics professor Janet Bing believes that "the most empowering feminist jokes are not those that frame males as oppressive and females as victims, but those that celebrate the values and perspectives of feminist women" (22). Does *The Heat* reach this ideal feminist humor, or does it remain trapped in buddy-cop comedy paradigms?

When considering the film's plot, it is undeniable that *The Heat* breaks ground in terms of female representation in cop action films. Virginia Tech sociology professor Neal King undertook a survey of 291 cop action films (every Hollywood film from 1967-2006 categorized via his method, detailed on pages 245-246, as "cop action") to analyze patterns of gender representation in the genre. Of the 291 films, just twenty-four had female cop action heroes, whereas 267 starred only men (King 238). If even twenty-four out of 291 sounds surprisingly high, consider this: Women were "four times as likely as men to be rookies" (246), "more than three times as likely to hunt serial killers" (248), and killed or maimed half the number of people that men did

© 2020 Savannah Mudd

(250), among various other distinctions (246-52). Taken as a whole, the data lead King to announce:

> We hear, from Hollywood storytellers, of women who can excel at certain forms of a historically masculine job. But those women work as heroes in small numbers, mostly excluding women of color, rarely in solidarity, still in constrained, nonviolent ways, and far from the crucible in which men forge and break bonds of state power. (258)

The Heat breaks many of these gendered conventions in cop action cinemas. The case Mullins and Ashburn work on is a drug case. Neither of the women is a rookie, and in fact Ashburn takes the case in the hopes of gaining a large promotion. The many interrogation and confrontation scenes, such as when Mullins uses a game of Russian Roulette to threaten her detainee with castration during interrogation, are a change from King's findings that "women never work cases that mainly require such approaches as interrogation, surveillance, witness protection, or repeated confrontation and sabotage of criminals" (248). As for women being excluded from combat, *The Heat* raised concerns in reviews about its exceedingly "high body count" (O'Hehir).

The violent techniques of *The Heat's* leading ladies, while a break from stereotypical portrayals, were seen not as a feminist triumph by some critics but instead as a troubling continuation of the problems of the buddy-cop genre. In his *Salon* review, Andrew O'Hehir says, "[*The Heat* screenwriter] Dippold's screenplay seems driven by a confused machismo, as if she feels the need to assert that women on the screen, behind the camera and in the audience can be just as morally reckless as men. Well, OK, they can!" O'Hehir mocks the idea that it is groundbreaking to show women being violent, yet his choice of the word "machismo" conflates violence with masculinity. He undermines his own claim that it's unnecessary for the screenwriter to assert that women can be as morally reckless; he is part of the audience that, Bartyzel argues, is "still applying gendered expectations to women behind and on the screen." She believes "*The Heat* strives to level the playing field and abolish the notion that women are so different than men" (Bartyzel), but many critics such as O'Hehir indicate, overtly or otherwise, that violence is the domain of men and thus *The Heat* only inserts women into a male experience, as opposed to centering around women in a true feminist fashion.

The last film accused of simply placing women in the roles of men was the female-driven smash hit *Bridesmaids* (2011), directed by Paul Feig, who also directed *The Heat*. The infamous food poisoning scene, during which the bride-to-be comically defecates in the street in a bridal gown, caused critic Lou Lumenick to wince at the idea that "women among themselves behave every bit as grossly as men. Maybe it's the romantic in me, but I'd sure like to think this is not really true." Yet as Mary Elizabeth Williams

reminds us in her review, "to be female is to be deeply enmeshed in the viscera of life" both through the human bodily functions of vomiting and defecating as well as through the blood of motherhood. Thus, "*Bridesmaids* isn't a comedy cross-dresser. It's a movie that succeeds, often beautifully, not by forcing its characters to be as naughty and gross and pathetic as men are. It soars by letting them be as naughty and gross and pathetic as women are" (Williams).

Still, radical female feminists as well as male movie reviewers question the worth of putting women in traditionally male roles. In Jeffrey Brown's article on the rise of "hardbody heroines," he analyzes those "hardbody, hardware, hard-as-nails heroines who can take it, and give it, with the biggest and baddest men of the action cinema" (52). Though neither of the leads is truly a "hardbody heroine"—Ashburn is lithe but not overly muscular, while Mullins is quite overweight—both can give and take it with the biggest and baddest men in the film. In one of the earliest scenes, Mullins chases down and tackles a drug dealer; her size and "softbody" physique do not prevent her from being an action heroine. In fact, at first, she uses her physicality more often and more violently than Ashburn, though Ashburn looks to be a more traditional action heroine.

Brown explores how traditional action heroines have been viewed by feminist critics. Contrary to what one might assume, many were not enthused by the rise of female action protagonists but instead were suspicious that "the action heroine is just a sheep in wolf's clothing, rather than a legitimate role for women" (53). He analyzes the response to the action movie *Terminator 2,* which featured hardbody heroine Sarah Connors (Linda Hamilton) as the main aggressor and the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) as the main caretaker of the child John Connors. The critical reactions to these characterizations baffled Brown, because "rather than aggressiveness being deemed legitimate for women and compassion acceptable for men, both Sarah Connors and [the Terminator] are suspected of transvestitism" (60). The Terminator, a cyborg killing machine, inverts audience expectation by acting not as a violent, emotionless robot but instead by forming an attachment to John Connors and serving as a compassionate, caring father figure. Brown claims that the fact "that a cyborg Schwarzenegger can be read as the more feminine role is an indication of how overdetermined our cultural notions of appropriate gender behavior are" (60). *Terminator 2* was released in 1991, and more than two decades later, some reviewers harbor similar suspicions about *The Heat* embodying "machismo." However, the large number of reviews celebrating the film as feminist at least partially because it shows women as violent indicates that perhaps people's views of gender expression and behavior are beginning to shift.

The fact that *The Heat* replaces men with women in a buddy-cop film clearly challenges stereotypes such as women's exclusion from violence and aggression or their status as rookies, justifying the reviews of Holmes and Bartyzel. It is feminist and groundbreaking to replicate the buddy-cop formula with women. This feat is not

"comedy cross-dressing" (Williams), but a step towards undermining our "overdetermined . . . cultural notions" (Brown 60) of women's behavior and showcasing the diversity of the women's experiences. But though this is true, analysis of *The Heat* cannot simply stop at this conclusion.

Yes, the genderswapping and genderbending are feminist, but is the humor? *The Heat* does not just challenge ideas of women in the police force, it challenges ideas of women as comedians. Rosie White asserts in her short essay *Funny Women* that

> a comedian is like a surgeon—while the word is ostensibly unmarked by gender it contains the traces of learned prejudices about male and female behaviours. The comedian is presumed to be a masculine figure, with certain forms of comedy such as stand-up predicated on an aggressive, confident style of delivery deemed unlikely to suit female performers, as if to be aggressive and confident is unfeminine. (355)

The Heat already challenges ideas about aggression and confidence among women by showing Mullins and Ashburn's violent actions, among them breaking an adulterer's hand, dropping a man off a balcony, and shooting head villain Larkin in the crotch. The film further challenges these ideas in a subtler way as well, by centering Mullins and Ashburn not just as cops but as hilarious cops. The three above-mentioned violent moments are supposed to be comedic. Film critic Laura Holmes asserts that the "real feat" of *The Heat* is that "about 95 percent of *The Heat* could be made *and would still be considered comedy* if both of the protagonists were (1) men, and (2) thin." Though Holmes focuses on and is intrigued by the ninety-five percent, her claim leaves room for the five percent of comedy that is changed by the fact that the leads are women. The true distinction to be made is not whether the comedy would still be present if men were the leads—the scenes listed above would still be funny if men enacted them—but rather if the comedy would be the same. If a male cop broke the adulterer's hand, the joke based around the man's pleading and the cop's violent reactions wouldn't fall flat, but because Mullins is a woman the joke takes on the added connotation of a female avenger. Similarly, Larkin's demise from a crotch shot would be hilarious no matter who shot him. However, because Ashburn—who throughout the movie has faced sexism from her male colleagues—shoots him, the funny finale becomes a symbolic takedown of the patriarchal institutions. She defeats the villain by defeating his manhood. Though *The Heat* uses the same physical humor as male buddy-cop movies, the female leads do not just re-enact this humor but further it, lending it a gendered nuance that transcends the simple slapstick buddy comedy.

Gendered nuance is present in all comedy humor created by women, according to American culture professor Sevda Caliskan. She writes in her frequently cited piece "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?" that

> Comedy and humor are perhaps more gender-specific than anything else because of their social foundations. If it is at all possible to talk and write about "universals," humor is a field where they do not apply. As Joanna Russ points out, a woman writer who sticks to male myths and male cultural values betrays herself and falsifies her experience. "Part of life is obviously common to both sexes—we all eat, we all get stomach-aches, and we all grow old and die—but a great deal of life is not shared by men and women," she writes. (53)

Interestingly enough, the part of life that Joanna Russ and Sevda Caliskan highlight as "common to both sexes" is the physiological part, the realm of the body, which traditionally has been a kind of humor accessible only by men. Women are still supposed to pretend we don't get sick or shit or age (another progressive part of *The Heat*: both lead actresses are over 40); we're not supposed to discuss sex openly. While *Bridesmaids* tackles these issues of women's body humor more broadly, *The Heat*, too, incorporates jokes about bodies that extend far beyond the trope of the "funny fat person" and avoid the sexist jokes of many buddy cops. When an ex-lover confronts Mullins, she irritatedly brushes him off; when he doesn't leave her alone, she tries to deflect him to Ashburn. Mullins tells her ex-lover that "[Ashburn's] lady business is like an old dirty attic full of broken Christmas lights and like doll shoes and shit. Why don't you clean that out for her?" Ashburn stands stunned, then, before quickly escaping, mutters, "That's a misrepresentation of my vagina." This kind of lewd body humor expresses truths about the body, yet it also centers on the female experience. Women-made jokes about their vaginas are fundamentally different from male ones; while both are crass, women discussing their own anatomy openly is still revolutionary, even if it is couched in a joke. Though the joke is insulting, and directed as a throwaway line to a man, it does not center his desire or give him the chance to respond through a comment or further advances. Ashburn literally does not let a man define her vagina. Thus, the joke centered on female anatomy is centered on women as a whole, and Caliskan's assertion that humor is gender-specific goes further than she even claimed, for even jokes about supposedly shared bodily experiences of men and women can revolve around the "viscera of life" (Williams) that women are enmeshed in.

Since Mullins is defending herself against a man's verbal attack, this joke is not exactly in line with Janet Bing's idea of "feminist humor" as one that "is not the humor of the oppressed, but empowering humor that recognizes the value of the female experience" (22), yet it approaches this concept. Bing wants to challenge "the assumption that males should always be central and females peripheral" (30). Thus, she contradicts Caliskan, because Bing argues that it is rare for jokes to center on women and thus comedy is not inherently gender specific. This joke fits Bing and Caliskan's ideas of feminist humor, because it does not entertain the thoughts or response of the man but instead focuses on the lewdness of Mullins and the shock of Ashburn.

Oftentimes, *The Heat* fails to reach Bing's criteria of "feminist humor," not, as one might expect, because it employs a "masculine" humor of lewdness, but because it still employs the "humor of the oppressed," a female humor that focuses on the position of women as oppressed by men, instead of on female experiences without men. Garrett Craig, the misogynistic albino DEA agent who fights Mullins and Ashburn for the lead on the drug case, often tries to deter their work through his sexist insults; his horrific statements like "shave above the knee next time" are met with anger and equally cruel comments from Ashburn and Mullins. Ashburn retorts that women naturally grow hair, and though she stammers it out, most people would consider this comedic moment to be feminist humor as she defends women's bodies. Again, Bing would disagree: though it is empowering for women to discuss their bodies openly, here they are doing it in a way that frames women as victims and men as oppressors. The comedy in this scene is centered around a man being oppressive, and the scene escalates into a verbal battle of the sexes. This "divisive humor" can "reinforce assumptions about males and females being essentially and categorically different" (Bing 27). The divisive humor around sexism in the workplace reappears again when Ashburn storms into a meeting of officers who are mocking Mullins. She defends Mullins in a moment of solidarity, then yells "Fuck you" followed by a string of ever increasing and odd curse words at the officers while frantically waving her middle fingers around. The scene is hilarious, but it relies on tropes of women being discriminated against in the workforce, and thus revolves around the men making the joke about Mullins rather than around Ashburn's righteous rage.

The divisive humor employed throughout much of *The Heat* undercuts its progressive plotlines and the handful of female-centered jokes. The "revolutionary" aspects of its gender swapping do not always translate to a revolution in the humor used, yet this does not mean that feminist critics should disregard the movie. Bartyzel points out that "For some, it's not enough for a film like *The Heat* to treat and display women equally; it must also infuse its story with added social responsibility . . . a movie like *The Heat* is expected to transcend its genre, be a feminist icon, right other imbalances, and fix any perceived thematic weaknesses of the past." This "unfair expectation of activism" (Bartyzel) burdens *The Heat*, *Bridesmaids*, and similar female-centric films, while male films are usually not held to the same level of scrutiny. Despite *The Heat*'s failings, in particular its moments of humor that, according to Bing, could reinforce the gender essentialism that the film tries so hard to undermine, it still significantly advances female representation in comedy and action. As more feminist films are made, the undue burden of activism, no longer tied to a small handful of films, will dissipate, and female film representation, less hindered by sexist institutions and incredibly high feminist standards, will truly progress.

WORKS CITED

Bartyzel, Monika. "Girls on Film: The Heat Breaks New Ground by Not Being Groundbreaking." *The Week*. 5 July 2013. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.

Bing, Janet. "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?" *Women and Language* 27.1 (2004): 22-33. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

Brown, Jeffrey A. "Gender and the Action Heroine: Hardbodies and the 'Point of No Return.'" *Cinema Journal* 35.3 (1996): 52–71. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

Caliskan, Sevda. "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?" *American Studies International* 33.2 (1995): 49–59. Print.

Gates, Philippa. "Buddy Films." *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2004. *CrossRef*. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

Goldstein, Patrick. "It's Still a Guy Thing: The Evolution of Buddy Movies." *Los Angeles Times* 9 Oct. 2001. Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

Holmes, Linda. "'The Heat' Is Absolutely Revolutionary, For Being Mostly Ordinary." *NPR.org*. NPR, 28 June 2013. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

King, Neal. "GENERIC WOMANHOOD: Gendered Depictions in Cop Action Cinema." *Gender and Society* 22.2 (2008): 238–260. Print.

Lumenick, Lou. "Wedding Trashers." *New York Post* 13 May 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2014.

O'Hehir, Andrew. "'The Heat': Police Misconduct as Feminism." *Salon* 28 June 2013. Web. 5 Nov. 2014.

White, Rosie. "Funny Women." *Feminist Media Studies* 10.3 (2010): 355–58. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*. Web. 11 Nov. 2014.

Williams, Mary Elizabeth. "'Bridesmaids': A Triumph for Vomit, and Feminism." *Salon* 10 May 2011. Web. 8 Nov. 2014.

SAVANNAH MUDD '18CC is a Human Rights major specializing in Women's Studies. She is passionate about sexual and reproductive rights, including LGBT issues, abortion, and comprehensive sexuality education. In addition to her advocacy, she loves to sing, read, swing dance, jump in fountains, and spend hours exploring museums, parks, bookstores, and hidden nooks in New York City.