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The Homosexual Subtext

Bruce La Bruce

An examination of contemporary issues of comedy would be incomplete without taking into consideration the meaning behind Pee Wee Herman, a comedian who, amid the macho posturing of the current male Hollywood stars, has somehow managed to generate a phenomenal mystique around his unique reworking of the classic ninety-eight-pound weakling image. In direct opposition to the despicably hypermasculine bravado of the other comedy superstar of the present era, Eddie Murphy, whose notorious homophobia, rivaling Anita Bryant's, has become an obligatory part of his screen persona (his annoying, mimicking fag imitations), Pee Wee champions the milquetoast quarter, providing a hero who's not afraid to cry when his bike gets stolen, and who actually uses his pantywaist status to the utmost advantage, outsmarting any number of lumbering hulks with his wacky, unpredictable, and, most importantly, "sexually suspect" antics. Pee Wee is the new underdog whose sexual ambivalence both places him squarely in this position, and serves as his greatest strength, his secret, naughty world penetrating the unconscious of a rigid and repressed popular audience that doesn't quite grasp the insurrectionary purposes behind the Pee Wee pose.

I want to concentrate mostly on the sexual significance of the Pee Wee Herman persona, a dimension largely avoided (or altogether missed) by "serious" critics and pop reviewers alike, and the way he uses comedy as a strategy of rebellion. To this end, Freud's *Win and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, a work, itself, not without a sense of humor, will provide a useful theoretical background for the analysis of Pee Wee.

The failure of critics to come to terms with Pee Wee Herman can be partly attributed to a reluctance to deal with the implications of an implicitly gay icon

who is adored by children, and whose appeal cuts across a surprisingly wide range of youth subcultures—punks, skateboard and BMX kids, even the black rap faction, rappers Joeski Love immortalizing him in their "Pee Wee's Dance" record and video. Pee Wee makes parents (and critics) nervous because he is strange, perverse, aberrant—not only an adult who acts, resolutely, like a smart alecky kid, but an androgynous one as well, who wears pancake makeup, rouge, and a hint of lipstick, and talks in a weird falsetto—hardly a role model for the sensible youth of today. Critics shy away from acknowledging the homosexual connotations; a typical response from *Film Comment* suggests that "... if Pee Wee has to have an inordinate number of handsome young men on the show, that's his business. You just have to take *Pee Wee's Playhouse* [his Saturday morning kid's show] at face value."¹ Most accounts of Pee Wee I've read² restrict themselves to describing the comedian's crazy behavior and the décor of his television show set, or digress into a nostalgia about the writer's own childhood, expressing relief that Pee Wee's silliness permits them to forgo any ideological analysis. There is also an aspect of resentment at work over not having access to the lexicon that Pee Wee has developed—an aggressive mixture of childpeak and gay references that confounds critical reading—a good measure of the success of Pee Wee's radical project.

It should be made clear that when I speak of Pee Wee Herman's "gayness," it's not the actual sexual status of Paul Reubens, the comedian behind the persona, that is, particularly, at issue (or Pee Wee's, either, for that matter), but rather the "homosexual subtext," the disguised allusions to a gay sensibility that inform both Pee Wee's television show and his first big screen vehicle, *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*. In the tradition of classical Hollywood, Reubens maintains his star image (as Pee Wee) whenever he is in the public eye (talk shows, interviews, etc.), never allowing the private person to emerge, a "strategy" that has, itself, become a subject of controversy and promoted much conjecture. It might be assumed, then, that Reubens (like Rock Hudson, e.g.) is concealing something (like homosexuality) that might impede his career, or jeopardize his popular acceptance, particularly as the host of a nationally broadcast children's show. This does not, however, prevent the hidden personality, or the significance of its "repression," from making itself felt in the constructed persona, the split between the private and the public becoming, in fact, an important aspect of it. Reubens has chosen to have both his own sexuality, and that of his comic creation, remain ambiguous; the proof of a gay point of reference lies in the images he presents us with.

As the reviewer from *Film Comment* nervously points out, Pee Wee does surround himself with attractive men on his show, a fact not necessarily revealing in itself until one realizes that each represents a specific gay male icon, prominent

fantasy figures in homosexual pornography (although in the context of the Playhouse, made human and friendly), including the sailor (Captain Carl), the black cowboy (Cowboy Curtis), and the muscular, scantily clad lifeguard (Tito), not to mention the escaped con (Mickey) in *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*. The latter example in particular provides an explicit reference to gay fantasy as Pee Wee, hitchhiking on a deserted highway, is picked up by the handsome, swartzy Mickey, reckless and ready for anything after a long stretch in the big-house. The two quickly establish a complicity in their contempt for the law before a police roadblock conveniently provides Pee Wee with the opportunity to dress up as Mickey's girlfriend to confound the authorities. This instance of drag, along with his brief appearance as a nun near the end of the film, takes Pee Wee's sexual ambivalence to its logical extreme, the nun, in particular, a dead giveaway in its appeal to the irreverent gay camp aesthetic. That the character, in the context of the narrative, is a "boy" named Pee Wee who uses drag to retrieve his stolen bike, his most precious possession, adds a disturbing twist to the "conventional" campiness of cross-dressing, presenting it, instead, as another aspect of Pee Wee's rebellion against authority. For those who think the idea of a homosexual subtext in Pee Wee Herman is an instance of "reading into" the material, consider Mickey's lascivious smile, looking him up and down, as Pee Wee flounces in his "cute little outfit" (as the policeman calls it) long after the roadblock has been passed, or Pee Wee, at the end of the film, giving Mickey, behind bars once more, a hotdog, saying "one footlong," and winking coyly. Sure, there's a file in it, but the double entendre is unmistakable.

The camp sensibility extends beyond these small but significant instances of drag, encompassing, also, Pee Wee's love of the world of retro objects and extraneous gizmos (which fill his Playhouse and his home in the *Big Adventure*) and the Pee Wee persona itself. Camp, according to Susan Sontag, relies on the extravagant, the exaggerated, and the theatrical, all of which apply to Pee Wee and his playthings, and on a certain innocence, such that it "discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it."²³ This quality is essential to Pee Wee, behind whose naivety and ingenuousness always lurks a naughty understanding of his own seductive behavior. Sontag also points to androgyny and a lack of character development as standard earmarks of the camp icon, both of which apply to Pee Wee, and to the predominantly gay impetus behind camp in general, a tradition from which Pee Wee/Reubens borrows strongly. And, of course, one can't overlook Jamb, the fey genie-in-a-box on the "Playhouse," who camps it up for kids to an alarming extreme. So although Pee Wee transcends the apolitical restrictions of camp, which I'll get to shortly, his affinity with the sensibility is an important dimension of the gay subtext.

Pee Wee's problematic relationship with "girls" in *Big Adventure* presents

another gay reference, his identification with the boy or teen role becoming probably his most outrageous and disquieting characteristic. In one of his "Playhouse" episodes, on receiving a present from his many friends, Pee Wee blurts out, "I'm the luckiest boy in the whole world." It's shocking to hear not merely a fully grown man, but an epicure dandy, refer to himself as a boy; one can imagine parents' eyebrows raising all across the country. In his movie, Pee Wee is confronted with the necessity, according to cinematic convention, of having a love interest, forcing him into the position of dealing with the reality of girls, more specifically Dottie, the one who works at Chuck's Bike-o-rama. Here his boy pose dictates the classic behavior of male adolescents who dislike girls interested in romance; but consistent with the double-edged meaning of his persona, Pee Wee's lack of interest in this area also signifies something "different." When Dottie tries to get Pee Wee to take her to the drive-in, he announces "I like you, Dottie," then yells "*Like*," emphasizing his preference for a platonic relationship. Next he tells her, "There's a lot of things you don't know about me. Things you wouldn't understand. Things you couldn't understand," then, adding cryptically, "Things you *shouldn't* understand." The reference is obvious, something that, like much of Pee Wee Herman, is lost on kids, but can't be avoided by adults. Finally, Pee Wee gets out of the proposed date by parodying his own rebellious stance: "You don't want to get mixed up with a guy like me. I'm a loner, Dottie, a rebel." That these exact words are used later on by Mickey, the escaped con, to dump Pee Wee, and delivered by James Brolin, playing Pee Wee Herman to Morgan Fairchild's Dottie, in the final film within a film based on Pee Wee's adventure, suggests how absurd the idea of Pee Wee Herman conforming to conventional notions of romantic, heterosexual love really is. His relationship in the film with Dottie, and with Simone, the sexy French waitress, remains one strictly between good friends, and is not, incidentally, characterized by the misogyne one might expect from a camp figure.

Some other indications of a homosexual significance to Pee Wee take the form of classic gay "jokes" or stereotypes. For example, in *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, the hero steps on a scale which points, automatically, to the ninety-eight-pound mark, a sure sign of the "sissy." Then there's Pee Wee's sarcastic mincing that causes him to knock over the row of motorcycles, putting him in hot water with the bike gang. Or on an episode of the "Playhouse," Pee Wee cuts in on a couple on the dance floor and starts dancing with the man before laughing it off and setting things straight by turning to the woman. It's significant that in most of these instances of humor based on a kind of sexual transgression, Pee Wee places himself in the self-acknowledged "rebel" position, as the bratty kid who refuses to play by the rules of adult conduct. The connection, for kids, is profound.

Of course Pee Wee couldn't get away with any of this if it wasn't all in the name

of comedy. In *Wii and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud discusses how humor "makes use of a means of connection which is rejected by, and carefully avoided in serious thinking,"⁴ exactly the dynamic that gives Pee Wee the room to be so abnormal. As the grown man in a suit and bow tie who acts childish, even, at times, infantile, Pee Wee eludes reason, returning us to a state of mind where anything goes. Freud describes how play is stopped by the advent of reason, so that the only access to such release in adulthood is through humor; the purpose of jokes, then, is "to remove inhibitions and thereby, render productive those pleasure-sources which have become inaccessible."⁵ Pee Wee is all about this kind of "regression," encouraging a living out of fantasies, impulsive behavior, and the pleasure of pure nonsense that stimulates us through confusion.⁶ This freedom from logic and "alleviation from the pressure of reason"⁷ induced by Pee Wee's playworld (which will soon become, from all reports, an actual geographical site, like Disney's, such is the popularity of Pee Wee), a state in which contradictions can be easily accommodated, may also explain the acceptance of his "sexual difference," situated, as it is, before the constraints of a repressed, adult sexual identity.

Freud also points to a more "sinister" side of the comic impulse coming out of this uninhibited play state, a manifestation of humor "in the service of hostile aggression."⁸ There is definitely an edge to Pee Wee, as when, in both television show and movie, he wraps scotch tape around his face in front of a mirror, then rips it off, watching his own startled expression of pain, delighted by the sensation and his naughtiness. What are parents to make of this kind of onanistic, masochistic act performed in the privacy of the bathroom? The secret word of the "Playhouse," which children must greet with screaming and yelling at its mention all day long (Pee Wee enlisting children in his schemes for far more than the thirty minutes of air time) serves a similarly antagonistic purpose, promoting a rebellion against authority that Freud describes as another function of humor.⁹ This strategy of comedy, then, aggressively confounding reason and seriousness, combined with the playful elusiveness of camp and the sexual ambiguity it entails, constitutes a veiled attack on the conventional values kids are supposed to assume: Pee Wee attempts to intervene before the big package is bought. As in "Penny," the animated short seen on each "Playhouse" episode, the message is, unequivocally, kids have rights too.

There is one more gap in the critical appraisal of Pee Wee Herman that I want to address: little, if anything, has been made of the obvious affinities between Pee Wee and Jerry Lewis, a connection that puts the comedian in a more meaningful context. To begin with, Lewis, like Herman, appealed to children as much as adults, his sublimely silly and juvenile character even picked up by the comics.

Lewis's ape-like caricature as a comic book hero presented a more masculine, sexualized figure than Pee Wee, but both have the same quality of a grown-up masquerading as a kid, adopting similarly irritating voices and crazy, spastic dances. Both personas also tend to undercut masculinity, Pee Wee by feminizing it, Lewis by parodying the he-man role, particularly in *The Nutty Professor* as the intellectual wimp who makes a Jekyll and Hyde transformation into the virile crooner, Buddy Love (a travesty of the swaggering, lady-killer persona of Lewis's former partner, Dean Martin), and in *The Ladies Man*, as Herbert, playing a shy, innocent houseboy in a thinly disguised bordello. Both also use drag to this end, Lewis, for example, playing his own female back-up trio in *The Patsy*.

Pee Wee consciously plays on his identification with Jerry Lewis, to the extent that *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* is designed very much as a Lewis vehicle of the sixties. Like the self-directed Lewis films, *Big Adventure* (although not directed, and only co-written, by Paul Reubens) is composed of a series of loosely connected and uneven gags, some working, some misfiring, providing the hero with scenarios in which he can adopt various disguises. The other most obvious quality shared by the films is that both are full of self-conscious filmic references, their own star images wackily breaking out of the diegesis for shock value. In *The Bellboy*, Jerry Lewis plays himself as a big star arriving at the hotel where, within the context of the "plot," he is employed as a bellboy. To complicate things, Milton Berle, in a cameo, plays himself as another star registered at the same hotel, as well as another bellboy. In the *Big Adventure*, Pee Wee pays homage to this exact joke, playing a bellboy himself in the film within a film that stars James Brolin as Pee Wee, the film proper also featuring a cameo by Milton Berle. The end of Lewis's *The Patsy* provides a similar reference point, in which Lewis as Stanley Belt, the failed "King of Comedy" (as he is referred to in the film), steps out of character to undermine the traditional cinematic union of the couple. After falling out the window that he is backed up to by his love interest, Ellen/Ina Balin, Stanley/Lewis pops up to reveal the entire set as merely a Hollywood sound stage, saying, "I can't die. I have to make more movies," and asking "Miss Balin" to join him for lunch. It's the same kind of send-up of filmic convention that Pee Wee Herman appropriates for his first starring vehicle, spoofing the romantic coupling of himself and Dottie by having them embodied by two somewhat sleazy television personalities in the final drive-in movie within a movie.

This tentative comparison of the two comedians is meant to indicate that Pee Wee Herman is very aware of his comic project, engaging the same kind of techniques and strategies that Jerry Lewis pioneered in the sixties. *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* is certainly nowhere as complex and accomplished as any of the Lewis films of that period; it remains to be seen whether Pee Wee/Reubens, with future

films (the next to be set at the circus) will produce works as exciting and brilliant as *The Nutty Professor*, *The Ladies' Man*, and *The Patsy*. He has already asserted a different kind of genius with *Pee Wee's Playhouse*.

The most exciting aspect of Pee Wee Herman, so far, remains his role as vindicator of the sissies, the reluctant hero who outsmarts bullies and worms his way out of impossible situations. In *Big Adventure*, the weird ritual of his "T-quila dance," performed in vintage camp seventies platform shoes, so impresses the surly bikers that they make him an honorary member of their gang. And in his most heroic act, the rescue of all the animals in the pet shop fire, he even saves the snakes that boys are supposed to like, but which Pee Wee finds loathsome and disgusting. That's exactly the kind of hero we need to see more of.

Notes

- 1 Jack Barth, "Pee Wee TV," *Film Comment* 22, no. 6 (November–December 1986), 79.
- 2 *Rolling Stone*, Graffiti, *Impulse*, etc.
- 3 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta, 1981), 283.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, from *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1966), 713.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 721.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 727.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 719.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 698.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 699.

Toms, Coons, Mammies, Faggots, and Bucks

Essex Hemphill

"Homey don't play that!"

On a recent trip to Washington, D.C., to participate as a panelist in a public forum regarding the issues of "sex, politics and art," I came face-to-face with the dangerous consequences of misrepresentation.

As I entered Union Station from the train platform, I was immediately approached by a white man. He was an officer of the law. I was questioned and harassed by him as I headed through the station to the taxi stand. I was in no mood to be toyed with, particularly by a white man with a badge and a gun. I refused to stop and answer his questions, and I told him that if he wanted to question me he would have to do so as we walked. His suspicion—that I was a drug courier—was aroused because I was dressed in jeans, a down jacket and a Raiders baseball cap—the standard attire of what we call the "bitch queen" look, the home-boy look, the look of the ghetto. I refused to cooperate with the officer because I knew it was my *look* that made him feel he could single me out to receive his intimidating tactics. I angrily suggested that if he wanted to search me, then he would also have to search some of the white women and men who were on the train with me because they could be smuggling cocaine, guns, and bombs in the linings of their fur coats or in the pockets of their suits and briefcases. The officer then said that I could be a wanted man, and I snidely said, "I am wanted by most men and some women." This only caused him to escalate his aggression. He then said, "I stop people everyday who are carrying automatic weapons and illegal firearms." I then added, "Unfortunately, I'm not carrying weapons today."

When we reached the taxi stand, I really kicked into my resistance by raising my voice and generally drawing attention to the harassment that I was being