

Paging Mr. Herman: The Carnavalesque and Rejecting Adulthood in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*

The 1985 film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* portrays Paul Reubens' man-child character on a journey to find his stolen bicycle, a clear symbol for childhood. Many of the adults Pee-wee meets on the road, from Madame Ruby to Jack the hobo, are ultimately unhelpful in his journey. It's not until he gets picked up by Large Marge—a truck driver who is also a ghost—that Pee-wee find himself propelled into adulthood. His brush with death has a profound effect on him; after this scene, he finds the maturity to help Simone the waitress, the ingenuity to retrieve his bike, the courage to save animals from a fire, and the physical skills to successfully land his bike in front of a group of BMX kids (contrasting his earlier disastrous landing experience).

The Large Marge incident in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* represents the film's essence: adulthood is frightening and overpowering. Pee-wee rejects the idea of growing up, preferring to remain in his man-child state. He is a grotesque personification of old and young; he is, as Mikhail Bakhtin said of the grotesque body, "a comic figure of profound ambivalence." Pee-wee's dualism and grotesqueness are part of Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, in which the normal state of the world or self is subverted and liberated, and where chaos and satire reign.

This presentation explores how *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* uses Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to reinforce childhood as a sacred space and to deny the numerous anxieties of adulthood. Furthermore, this presentation contemplates Pee-wee as a trickster character within the carnivalesque, using childhood and adulthood to his advantage when challenged by authoritative or overwhelming people or events.