

**“There’s no basement in the Alamo!”: Turbulent Self-Conscious Emotions in
*Pee-wee’s Big Adventure***

Those familiar with Pee-wee Herman’s character understand how his popularity as a man-child is revealed through his sassy wit, banter, and dialogue. While Bruce LaBruce calls him “an adult who acts, resolutely, like a smart alecky kid” (383), Herman’s words matter just as equally as his physical actions, especially when establishing his child-like superiority on the proverbial playground. A classic example of his verbal dominance in *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* (1985) comes during his “I know you are, but what am I?” repartee with his man-child nemesis, Francis. However, little critical focus has been given to Herman’s self-conscious emotional responses within this movie to instances of turbulent social interactions where matters do not go his way.

Michael Lewis, Director of The Institute for the Study of Child Development, distinguishes four different self-conscious emotions: embarrassment, pride, shame, and guilt, noting that the “elicitation of self-conscious emotions involves elaborate cognitive processes that have, at their heart, the notion of self” (742). In *Big Adventure*, Herman’s series of unfortunate social interactions can be applied to Lewis’ paradigm, especially with how embarrassment, shame, and guilt shape Herman’s sense of identity.

For example, early in *Big Adventure*, while riding his beloved bike in the local park, Herman unsuccessfully mimics nearby professional bikers and manages to dramatically crash his bike in the presence of his peers—children on bikes. To save face, Herman dusts himself off and haughtily says, “I meant to do that,” before riding away. Thus, Herman reduces his public embarrassment through the use of wit. But Herman’s wit cannot rescue him from all the film’s negative experiences: his quest to recover his bike requires emotional maturation when faced with shame and guilt while visiting the historical landmark, The Alamo, where he discovers he has been gravely deceived.

In my presentation, I use Lewis’s paradigm about self-conscious emotions to demonstrate how Herman’s negative social interactions reveal his evolving emotional state, culminating in his visit to The Alamo and his subsequent maturation as a more nuanced man-child.