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# Benny & Joon's "Alternative Philosophies" of Emotional (Dis)ability, Class, Gender, and Sexuality

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## *Benny & Joon's "Alternative Philosophies" of Emotional (Dis)ability, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*

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**“Mad**, *adj.* Affected with a high degree of intellectual independence; not conforming to standards of thought, speech and action derived by the conformants from study of themselves; at odds with the majority; in short, unusual. It is noteworthy that persons are pronounced mad by officials destitute of evidence that themselves are sane.” –Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (excerpt, 77)<sup>1</sup>

Watching *Benny & Joon* (1993) multiple times since its release, and reading many reviews about it, I am still not convinced that the film is simply committed to demonstrating complicity with standard American ideas about deviance or pathology, and normalcy or health, as some of its reviewers have implied. I also do not believe that the film only highlights a paradigmatically blissful heterosexual union that hinges on domesticity. Instead, I perceive that *Benny & Joon* confounds commonly received notions of “madness,” and questions class, gender and sexual norms, by presenting complex relationships between characters who defy easy categorization.<sup>1</sup>

Below, I present a deconstructive and “queer” reading of the film. My intention is to offer “alternative” interpretations of *Benny & Joon's* psychiatric, class, gender and sexuality stereotypes, in order to examine how these stereotypes are played out but are also questioned by the film. I wish to imply that the film therefore provides viewers with an opportunity to consider “alternative philosophies” of emotional (dis)ability, class, gender, and sexuality, while it likewise reifies normative understandings of these very same sociocultural categories of identity.

In my reading stance toward this film, I join and hopefully add to what I see as ongoing conversations about “madness” and cinema, film as an ideological state apparatus, queer interpretation, and feminist theory. My contention is that while *Benny & Joon* seems at first glance to privilege heteronormative, misogynistic, psychiatry-as-powerful views, with a closer look, the film can be interpreted to be ambivalent about, and even critical of these convictions. I am less curious about whether or not the film's director and producers intended to participate in a set of discursive practices that both reify and undermine these beliefs than I am intrigued by the possibilities of multiple readings.

*Benny & Joon* is the story of a young woman, Juniper, or “Joon” (Mary Stuart Masterson) who suffers from emotional “difficulties” and ostensibly cannot live without the ongoing supervision provided by her guardian, her older brother Benny (Aidan Quinn). Joon's “illness” is not clearly labeled or diagnosed within the film.<sup>2</sup>

She takes medication and sometimes hears voices. Joon receives psychiatric care because her brother and fellow community members are uncomfortable with her rage and what they perceive to be her seemingly uncontrollable outbursts. These outbursts sometimes lead her to set fires or cause property damage, or otherwise place her at risk. In one scene, she stops traffic while wearing a snorkeling mask and wielding a ping pong racket.

Benny has been taking care of his sister since their parents died in a car accident when she was a child and he was a young man. Joon's psychiatrist Dr. Garvey (C. C. H. Pounder) thinks Benny should put Joon in a group home and get on with his own life. Benny is a car mechanic who runs his own shop. He is a workhorse whose promises of a wholesome life and sexual fulfillment are continuously interrupted by his ongoing need to intervene in his sister's life - in his view, he must rescue her from danger and risk, and protect her from herself. Joon's illness etiology is mysterious and vague; as viewers we are not sure if her parents' traumatic deaths precipitated her many problems, or if she was deemed "mentally ill" while they were still alive.

Benny's one ongoing pleasure is regularly playing poker with his working class chums. Before one of his poker nights, he comes home from work and learns from Joon that their housekeeper has quit, and she is only the latest in a long line of fed up part-time caregivers who tend to become overwhelmed by Joon's unique behaviors. Frustrated and disappointed, Benny drags Joon along to his friends' gathering, and when he leaves her alone for a little while with the guys, she joins the game. Joon acquires a player's cousin, Sam (Johnny Depp), as a consequence of her losing hand. Sam cannot read, likes to sit high up in trees, has no job, pretends to be Buster Keaton, and is obsessed with silent movies. Sam's cousin took him in under family pressure and is delighted to be given the opportunity to be rid of his weird relative by placing him as a poker bet, an action unquestioned by undersocialized and impulsive Joon. By the time Benny finds out the extent of his sister's losses, the game is long over. Benny argues with his friend about not wanting to take Sam home, and ineffectually deliberates the absurdity of Sam having been placed as a bet in the first place.

Sam waits outside while the game takes place, and Benny and Joon don't meet him until it is over. Joon recognizes him as the man who stared at her from a tree that she and Benny drove past on their way to a previous poker game. During that game, Joon and Benny first hear that Benny's friend has a relative to dump. Aware of Joon's history of "scaring away" all of the housekeepers he hires who attempt to watch over her when he is at the garage, Benny decides Sam can stay with them, as long as Sam cooperates with Benny by acting as Benny's surrogate, and agrees to be Joon's new caregiver. Sam and Joon become entranced with each other, and the film depicts their love story and its repercussions in their and Benny's lives.

This is a cursory, seemingly up-front presentation of the film's main narrative. I have deliberately set up unabashed parallels with the heterosexual, comedic story told about the cutesy, "loony" film on its own videocassette box, in order to question these simplified presentations and under-analyzed assumptions. Here are some highlights from the video box:

Johnny Depp (*Edward Scissorhands*), Mary Stuart Masterson (*Fried Green Tomatoes*) and Aidan Quinn (*Avalon*) star in this unique romantic comedy, hailed as "the best date movie since *The Cutting Edge*" (Joe Leyden, *Houston Post*).





Benny is a mostly gentle working class guy who spends more time under the hood than between the sheets. He is committed to embodying values of fairness and integrity. Benny isn't tough enough to prevent Sam's cousin from winning the poker game, but more than not being tough enough, he knows he must take Sam home because he understands that this behavior is morally correct: in some odd way, Sam was "won," fair and square. Benny believes he is ethically obligated to honor his friend's bet according to their social codes.

Benny's history of not getting much between-the-sheets action is changed by Sam. By trusting Sam with Joon, Benny participates in an exchange. He "trades" his protective (or, over-protective) control over Joon for the opportunity to go out on dates, and Sam and Joon have sex while Benny is out of the house. In his controlling big brother role, Benny symbolically evokes a form of impotence that is somewhat curable, but that can never be totally resolved. If he upholds his self-appointed task as Joon's supervisor, Benny will always be at least partially celibate since he cannot have constant access to sex. His erotic impotence is contingent upon his far from complete power in overseeing his sister's life.

Initially, Benny doesn't imagine Sam will become physically intimate with Joon, and when he discovers they are having sex, he feels angry and betrayed. Benny kicks Sam out, and Joon has a severe tantrum. Feeling guilty after their fight, Benny drives off at night to get Joon her favorite dessert (which he winds up getting wrong). While he is gone, Sam appears at the door. Joon and Sam leave together on a bus. She behaves in a way that a psychiatrist might call a "decompensation," and Sam winds up riding with Joon in the ambulance that takes her to the hospital. Later, Benny forgives Sam, and asks for his help to gain access to Joon, who in her anger at Benny refuses to see him while she is a patient in the hospital.

Sam and Benny devise a scheme to sneak into the locked psychiatric ward - they cannot legitimately visit Joon because she tells Dr. Garvey that she does not want to see anyone. Benny realizes that Joon needs to be on her own, and tells her this when he accesses her hospital room. Dr. Garvey chooses to offer a consultation instead of having Benny arrested, and the trio decides that Joon is ready to have her own apartment. Benny is no longer willing to relinquish his freedom to be a sacrificial brother. If he resumes his over-protective role, and succeeds in making Sam and Joon abandon their sexual alliance, he would have to give up the increased possibility of sex that he now has with Ruthie (Julianne Moore). More importantly, Benny admits to himself that Joon is a grown woman who can make independent decisions about her own body. In this way, the film advocates for "mentally ill" and other "marginal" people's rights to express their sexuality freely. This view is notably in direct opposition to those mental health residential program policies dictating the typical (and heterocentric) separation of "the sexes" to avoid fraternization of any kind after hours.<sup>4</sup>

Joon and Sam can be called "queer" because they resist banal labeling practices, and frequently transgress gender and sexuality norms. In addition to referencing "queer" as it is often deployed in queer theory scholarship, here I also take up an older meaning of the term "queer" to mean strange or different, and am using it to describe "madness" and eccentricity as queer, too. Sam and Joon are multiply queer, by virtue of their anti-normativity and nonconformity. In "Tremble, Hetero Swine!" queer theorist Cindy Patton describes "[the] problem of messy analytic categories" (175) within her discussion of identity, strategic essentialism, and politics. My use of the term queer participates in

“messy analytic categor[y]” making, for what I hope are beneficial or at least provocative effects.

According to Patton, postmodernist rejections of subjectivity and questions of identity at times magnify the difficulty of creating interventions that disrupt the heterosexist status quo. Patton states, “If deconstructive readings of identities have produced anxiety for those who need them in order to make practical political claims, then reinterpreting identities as strategic systems with pragmatic purposes and unintended effects may make it easier to forge new strategies (with or without ‘identities’), and certainly make easier alliances between styles of queer practice” (175). I believe that “reinterpreting [the] identities” of atypical Hollywood representations like Joon and Sam, and evaluating *Benny & Joon*’s media deployments, including actor interviews, video box commentaries, and film reviews, can help “forge new strategies” that potentially “make easier alliances between styles of queer practice.”

Although I have highlighted the film’s counterhegemonic promise, *Benny & Joon* cannot be read as utterly emancipatory. There are important reasons to reflect simultaneously upon (and perhaps to recenter) the rather normative considerations that are presented by the film, especially since the film, as a commodity, is typically “sold” as a “love story.” Keeping these simultaneous discourses in mind while analyzing the film may serve to situate further the “promise” for critical, politicized reflection. Put differently, merely romanticizing the film’s liberatory potential would deny its vivid sympathy with hegemonic logics. Specifically, the vague usage of and complicity with psychiatric discourses - in the film’s explanatory absences regarding Joon’s “illness” etiology and diagnosis while showing her “treatment” - evidence a fraught agreement with conventional psychiatric ideology as naturalized and right. Yet, the film’s uncertainties could also be viewed as a critique of this ideology’s truth claims. In my reading, the film therefore communicates in both of these “directions,” simultaneously, and this layering may have both positive and negative consequences for its potential to educate or otherwise influence a viewing public about emotional difference.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the questions mentioned above, the film conjures others, including: “Who has permission to be eccentric versus ‘mad’ in mainstream society?” and “Who carries the cultural cachet of eccentricity versus the stigmatizing burden of lived ‘madness’?” Clearly, there are gendered messages within the film. Sam’s public displays are seen as the work of an odd but talented street performer, and he is rewarded with applause. Joon’s public displays are seen as disorderly and socially unacceptable, and she is either rescued, arrested, or sent to the hospital against her will. Sam plays at being “crazy” on the psychiatric ward, as a distracting device to help Benny get to Joon’s room. Curiously, however, even in this extreme situation (inside a hospital, playing at being “crazy,” to break into the locked ward), Sam is not institutionalized.

Before she moves into her own apartment, Joon’s supervision in Benny’s and her home can be considered an enactment of domestic institutionalization. While her limited freedoms are surely better than the life she would likely lead as a perpetual psychiatric inpatient, my “alternative,” anti-heteronormative reading of the film does not alter Joon’s inability to be wholly free, nor does it change the fact that Joon’s gender, despite its bent qualities, incriminates her as “mad” within the film *and* extradiegetically (in other words, she would likely be similarly incriminated if she existed as a real person outside of the film).

While Benny and Sam parent Joon, Joon also participates in a mutually constitutive bond with the





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## Notes

1. The author wishes to thank the Issue Editor for her helpful observations and suggestions in response to an earlier version of this essay. The author also thanks Christine Smith for her insightful and supportive feedback.
2. Although the film is quite vague about Joon’s “actual” diagnosis, some of the film’s reviewers nevertheless diagnose her with “schizophrenia.” Oddly enough, even Gabbard and Gabbard (who ought to know better, I think, given the scope of their project – an analysis of psychiatry and the cinema) participate in this curious and disturbing convention. Moreover, the Gabbards make the slippery error of saying that the actor who plays Joon has this condition, not Joon. Discussing the rarity of black mental health providers being depicted in mainstream films, they remark, “An occasional exception appears, such as a sympathetic black female psychiatrist who treats Mary Stuart Masterson’s schizophrenia in *Benny & Joon*” (143).
3. I am grateful to Barbara Babcock and Victor Turner for this turn-of-phrase.
4. These forms of sexual “prevention,” forcible separation, and their historical legacies, often conveyed in the falsified guise of “for your [and *our*] own good” epithets, may be interpreted in part as extensions of a longstanding eugenics and social control orientation that frowns upon, severely discourages, and even at times punishes mating and reproduction between stigmatized, socially “deviant,” or otherwise “undesirable” individuals. The scholarly literature on this subject is extensive. For a notable example, see Briggs (2000).
5. Elsewhere in the author’s scholarship is a discussion of some of the debates concerning the “impact” that films and television programs are often said to have upon their audiences, including those stigmatized and “othered” people represented by the stories that are imaged and otherwise told about “them.” A significant amount of attention has been paid along these lines to representations of “mentally ill” individuals—and “deviance” more broadly—in the media.