

Cinematic Portrayals of Conventionally Unattractive Body Types

Honors Capstone

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Introduction

Over the last 25 years, American cinema has influenced how society acts, talks, and thinks. Cinematic media has been so integrated into American culture that it holds the power to reveal society's deepest fears and desires. Fears about death, disease, corruptness and desires of power, control, and belonging. Looking deeper into films can reveal what society truly thinks about people, whether they be male, female, short, tall, young, old, slim or fat. One of these - fatness - has been gaining a great amount of media attention in recent years. In 2022, 2.5 billion adults worldwide were overweight, including over 890 million adults who were living with obesity (*Obesity and Overweight*). America has largely been seen as the fat nation and the "war on obesity" has become a staple in news headlines. Children and adults all over the U.S. are being diagnosed with obesity and are being told to change their diet, exercise more, lose weight, and in extreme cases, undergo surgery. Yet the obesity rates have been climbing since 2000 and still continue to climb. Many people blame the individual for their obesity, but it goes beyond self-control and willpower. Obesity is a psychological disease and a physical battle that has these individuals struggling to re-invent their lives.

Weight Bias, Media, and the Construction of Fatness

This medicalized "war against obesity" has become a cover for anti-fatness rhetoric present in American media over the last twenty-five years. 'Fatphobia' rises out of a discourse of obesity, despite the fact that there is no standard definition for what the "fat body" should be. Who counts as fat and who doesn't can vary over time and from one nation to another. Even with the medicalized body mass index (BMI) categories, there is inconsistencies regarding health risk and can vary with age, sex and ethnicity. BMI also does not always accurately assess disease risk related to body fat distribution (National Academies of Sciences et al.). Overall, bias and

stigmatization directed at people with obesity contributes to poor health and can impair treatments. Since 'obesity' is a highly medicalized term that expresses fatness coupled with a disease and 'overweight' implies that there is an ideal weight, this author will be using the terms 'fat' and 'fatness' to reclaim and de-stigmatize the term. If the term 'obesity' is used, then it refers to the medicalized definition, not the appearance of fatness.

These underlying weight biases also make an appearance for thin people. Thin privilege is the systemic reduction of people to their clothing size, hip measurement and waist size only to grant favors and opportunities to those whose conform to the slender body type (Wittezaele). Examples of this include how easily thin people can make friends, secure jobs, or find clothes that fit. This isn't necessarily something thin people ask for, it is assigned by others. Thin people also may not have to worry about limited clothing sizes or the seats in restaurants, planes, or theaters that do not accommodate fat people. This may make it seem that people who are assigned thin privilege don't struggle with body image, which is incorrect. Thin people can also struggle with body image dissatisfaction and a fear of becoming fat, in which case they can be both the oppressor and the oppressed (Wittezaele).

In addition to poor health outcomes, stigmatization of obesity and fatness contributes to body-image dissatisfaction. Body image may be understood as a multidimensional construct that represents how individuals think, feel, and behave with regards to their own physical attributes (Morrison and Halton). Body image is made up of two elements: evaluation and investment. Evaluation refers to the self-appraisal of one's appearance, which entails body-image satisfaction or dissatisfaction in relation to one's internalized physical ideals. Investment refers to the cognitive and behavioral importance placed on one's appearance (Morrison and Halton). Low body esteem can have negative effects on one's health. As such, body image has been a topic of

conversation in public health discussions because body image has been linked to the messages provided by various socialization agents within one's culture, and may affect both the evaluation and investment elements of body image (Morrison and Halton).

One of these socialization agents is the media, including TV shows, movies, and books. The media holds a special kind of influence over how society thinks and acts. Therefore, the media is a prevalent breeding ground for harmful stereotypes to spread. "Fattertainment" refers to popular media that perpetuates harmful stereotypes about fat people, often through mockery or ridicule ("Fattertainment" - Obesity in the Media"). Media that engage in fattertainment may use clichéd slapstick or fat suits to use fat people as a source of humor. This harmful practice continues to perpetuate weight bias in the media. But why is this so culturally acceptable? It could be due to the fact that most Americans feel that people who are fat are responsible for their condition, which they believe is caused by laziness and gluttony ("Fattertainment" - Obesity in the Media"). This belief can be traced back to traditional American values of people being in control of what happens to them and people getting what they deserve. Overall, the media takes on a victim-blaming approach, attributing America's overweight problems to poor choices and laziness.

One prime example of fattertainment in media is the TV show *Friends* and the character Monica, played by Courtney Cox. A younger version of the character, "fat Monica", is an over-exaggerated caricature of a fat person. She perpetuates harmful stereotypes about fat people, ranging from having an unhealthy lifestyle, lacking self-discipline, to not being worthy of love (Laiti). In multiple of the flashback episodes that fat Monica is portrayed in, she is seen indulging in food or talking about food in some way, often as a source of comedy. This perpetuates the harmful stereotype that fat people are gluttonous and only care about food (Laiti).

The viewers also learn that the only reason Monica lost weight was because she overheard Chandler making fun of her weight and decides to spite him by rigorously dieting and exercising to lose weight. Later in the series, Monica and Chandler fall in love and get married, which reinforces the stereotype that fat people are not worthy of love and are sexually undesirable (Laiti). Overall, fat Monica is used as a comedic scapegoat to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and is an example of why weight bias in the media is so successful.

Fat humor and fattertainment in the media is favorable because of long-standing prejudices about fat people. Many Americans may somehow feel that making fun of fat people is not only justifiable, but beneficial, because it provides motivation to lose weight (“Fattertainment’ - Obesity in the Media”). However, in practice, this is not true. Fat people or people with obesity who experience weight bias may become depressed, anxious, and have low self-esteem (“Fattertainment’ - Obesity in the Media”). Weight bias can also create barriers to losing weight. People with obesity who experienced weight bias report having a harder time losing weight than those who did not experience weight bias. Therefore, weight bias and stigmatizing experiences may actually lead to more health problems for those with obesity (“Fattertainment’ - Obesity in the Media”). Weight bias in the media continues to perpetrate harmful stereotypes and make it seem acceptable to make fun of fat people, even though these biases have been proven to be harmful.

Othering, Monstrosity, and Cultural Fears

Harmful stereotypes contribute the “othering” of fat people. “Othering” can be defined as “a process of dehumanization that involves labeling individuals or groups as ‘other’ as relation to dominant societal groups, which affects their social relationships and spatial interactions, often driven by anxieties related to those perceived as different,” (*Othering - an Overview* |

ScienceDirect Topics). This results from a process in which a dominant in-group (“Us”) constructs one or many out-groups (“Them”) by stigmatizing difference – real or imagined – presented as a lack of identity and therefore a motive for discrimination (*Othering - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics*). The in-group sets itself apart from the others and gives themselves an identity. Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin because the “other” only exists relative to the self (*Othering - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics*). Throughout history, humans have defined themselves in relation to the “other” and this can reinforce marginalization and social persecution. Anything different is interpreted as “other”, which continues to reinforce our constructs, aesthetics, and ideals as the norm. This can manifest into oppression and problematic ideas if the “other” is seen as a threat. While one group may be the in-group during a specific time and place, they may also be the out-group and threaten the norm for another group of people. Humans engage in this behavior of othering based upon difference, and what is a better example of this than monsters?

Monsters have been around for centuries. Characters like Dracula, Frankenstein, or Beowulf tend to bring forth feelings of fear or repulsion, signifying evil to come. The word “monster” originates from the Latin word *monstrum* which means “that which warns” and “that which reveals” (Anderson). But monsters are more than scary bedtime stories, monsters can teach us about the fears and anxieties of the culture in which they were created. Monstrosity is socially constructed, and monsters themselves are the embodiment of their culture’s fears. Society creates its own monsters and embeds them with meanings, such as what is good and bad, making the monsters “other”. Monsters are different from what society considers normal and society engages in othering based on that difference. This is best described by monster theory.

In his 1996 book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen presents seven theses as a guide to examining monsters and therefore the cultures they both shape and are shaped by (Anderson). Cohen is credited with naming the field of monster theory, but the field itself is not new, dating back to ancient cultures who were obsessed with deciphering meaning from monsters. Cohen offers his seven theses as a method for understanding cultures through the monsters they bear. His first thesis states that the monster is an embodiment of the cultural moment in which it was created. He claims that the monstrous body is a cultural body (Cohen 4). The monster does not and cannot exist without cultural significance because its very function is to represent the fears, anxieties, desires, and values of the people within that culture (Anderson). It is important to note that a culture's fears and values can change over time, and as the culture changes, so does the monster.

Perhaps the scariest thing about a monster is that it is unkillable. Cohen writes "the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else," (Cohen 4). Even if the monster is defeated, it will reappear, because the underlying fear the monstrous body represents still remains in that culture. The monster's body is both "corporeal and incorporeal" because it demonstrates what it's like to inhabit a body and how to live amongst other bodies (Anderson). Its ability to shift and change is its biggest threat. In Cohen's third thesis, he argues that the monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorizations (Cohen 6). Cohen calls them "disturbing hybrids" and says they are dangerous because their form is suspended between forms and threatens to smash distinctions. The monster appears at moments of cultural crisis and violates the laws the society has established. The monster only exists because humans created it, yet it challenges the very categories that make it real (Anderson).

Cohen's fourth thesis says that "the monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us," and is the physical embodiment of difference (Cohen 7). The monster reveals that difference is arbitrary and threatens to destroy the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted (Cohen 12). Since the monster demands to be seen, it also demands an explanation for its monstrosity from its makers. In Cohen's fifth thesis, he claims that the monster polices the borders of the possible (Cohen 12). This mostly describes the locations in which monsters reside and if a non-monstrous body were to step inside a monster's domain, then they would risk becoming monstrous themselves, suggesting that monstrosity can be spread.

Cohen's sixth thesis describes why monsters have continued to retain popularity in different cultures for some time. Cohen states that the fear of the monster is really a type of desire, and the forbidden monstrosity is what makes it that much more appealing (Cohen 16). He says, "This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity," (Cohen 17). For audiences to be fully entranced by the monster, they must believe that they are physically safe from the monster. In the cinema, the monster is fully controlled, and audiences know that any fear or desire felt there is only temporary. This also may be accomplished by the neutralization of potentially threatening aspects through comedy (Cohen 18). This simultaneous fear and desire allows the audience to confront what they are concerned is "monstrous" within themselves, yet monsters are no different than us (Anderson). In Cohen's final thesis, he states that the monster stands at the threshold of becoming (Cohen 20). Monsters are no different from us because they are our children. The monster tells us more about ourselves than it does the "other" because they reflect us in every possible way. The cultural codes that we have tied to the monster represent the

society that created the monster, and not the monster itself. They possess uniquely human knowledge and the self-awareness to ask why they have been created (Cohen 20).

Monstrous Bodies in American Cinema

Monsters have been created by cultures, so if we want to learn more about our culture, monsters provide a window into society's biggest fears. By engaging with the "othering" of those who are different from the in-group, society creates its own monsters based on race, ethnicity, and yes, even body size. Cinema provides a means for which we are able to analyze the "othering" of out-groups and what this says about our culture's fears. Through the lens of Cohen's monster theory, I have analyzed two films, *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *The Whale* (2022), to decipher how American society has painted fat people as having monstrous bodies throughout time and what this says about American culture. These cinematic portrayals of conventionally unattractive body types, more specifically a fat body type, contribute to the othering of fat people and demonstrate cultural fears about control, disease, and death.

***Shallow Hal* (2001): Fat Slapstick and the Comedic Monster**

Released in 2001, *Shallow Hal* provides a model for how fat stereotypes were expressed through the use of slapstick comedy presenting fat characters as clumsy, physically unfit, and highlighting the weight, size, and volume of the body. *Shallow Hal* stars Jack Black as Hal and Gwyneth Paltrow as Rosemary in this comedy about a shallow man falling in love with a 300-pound woman because of her inner beauty. The film starts with Hal's father on his deathbed, where he advises young Hal to never marry for love because it ends in disaster. Instead, he tells Hal to never settle for average girls and to find a classic beauty with a great rack and a perfect behind (*Shallow Hal*). Years later, Hal has grown up only focusing on outward beauty. He is

superficial man, and his fixation on the physical beauty of women gets in the way of seeing them for their inner beauty.

Hal and his equally shallow friend spend their nights obnoxiously hitting on beautiful women in nightclubs and getting rejected. One day, Hal gets stuck in an elevator with psychologist and life coach, Tony Robbins. Hal tells Tony about his troubles dating, and Tony quickly realizes that Hal is only chasing physical beauty and fails to see the personality of a person as a result. Tony hypnotizes him into only seeing the physical manifestations of a person's inner beauty and Hal is unaware that this has taken place. This becomes relevant later when Hal meets Rosemary who is, in reality, very fat, yet appears slender and beautiful to Hal. Hal is instantly smitten with her and proceeds to woo her.

In its opening weekend at the U.S. box office, *Shallow Hal* grossed \$22.5 million, opening at number 2 behind *Monsters Inc.* It grossed a total of \$141.1 million of which \$70.7 million was in the United States ("Shallow Hal"). The film received mixed reviews from critics, with the consensus being the movie was sweet and warm-hearted for a Farrelly movie, but it was less funny and bland ("Shallow Hal"). Rotten Tomatoes gives the film a rating of 50% based on 129 reviews and an average rating of 5.5/10 ("Shallow Hal"). With the Farrellys most popular movies being gross-out comedies, most critics found this movie to be tame in comparison.

While *Shallow Hal* was tame for the Farrellys' usual gross-out comedy, some critics found the movie struggled with reclaiming fat as a positive image because of its use of fat slapstick gags such as Rosemary's cannonball dive that empties a swimming pool, or chairs breaking when she sits down (Kehr). Consequently, the film was denounced at the time by the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, a lobbying group, which called it "an insult to the 55% of Americans who are deemed overweight," (Kehr). Kehr argues that unfortunately, the

use of fat as a metaphor is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. He remarks about ways in which fatness is associated with both childishness and gluttony, and how films use fatness as a way to convey these traits. Fatness can be used as an image of childish innocence, where the character's weight can be used as an emblem of their inability to fit into an adult world. It can also be used as an image of gluttony, denoting an inordinate desire to eat beyond the order of reason (Kehr). While fatness may be used in a metaphorical sense, it does not excuse the harmful stereotypes these movies can perpetuate.

Such stereotypes have a wider reach than people might think. Ivy Snitzer was the body double for Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shallow Hal* and although she had a positive experience working on the film, she had people harassing her for promoting fatness after the movie came out (Segarra). Despite the fact that Snitzer was only filmed for the close-ups of Rosemary's arms, torso, and thighs, she had strangers angry at her for saying, "It's not the worst thing in the world to be fat." Snitzer said, "It didn't occur to me that the film would be seen by millions of people. It was like the worst parts about being fat were magnified," (Tait). Snitzer went on to develop an eating disorder after the film and eventually had a weight-loss surgery that went wrong, causing her to almost starve to death before it was remedied. Looking back, Snitzer says she doesn't regret her work in *Shallow Hal*, it was the reaction afterwards that made her feel back about herself (Segarra). While this review of the film by Segarra doesn't explicitly state the merits of the film itself, it highlights the impact films can have on people's mindsets and the potential consequences of perpetuating harmful fat stereotypes.

Though *Shallow Hal* does aspire to emphasize "inner beauty" rather than body size, it unfortunately falls short and instead fortifies the American prejudice against fat people. Alex Kuczynski's review argues that the notion of beauty being represented by thinness is consistent

throughout the film (Kuczynski). In one instance, Hal and his friend visit a bar and see a group of fat women in poorly applied makeup, yet Hal only sees thin, beautiful women (Kuczynski).

These representations of the fat girls' "inner beauty" being thin only reinforces the belief that fat people are not beautiful. This era of moviemaking reflects this notion, with *Shrek* being another notable example, with Fiona's ugliness being her more plus-size, monstrous form than their beautiful, thin, human form (Kehr). Kuczynski uses a quote from the president of the International Size Acceptance Association that says, "It is as if Hollywood had developed this obsession with fat because it is the epitome of everything that is feared and repulsive in Hollywood," (Kuczynski). Indeed, this is true, because fat people have become the monsters of Hollywood, the harbingers of the fears we don't allow ourselves to look too deep into.

Fat Slapstick and the Comic Spectacle

To analyze the way films "monsterize" fat people, it is important to understand how these films can use comedy to portray fat people as "other". Comedy is the most prevalent genre that features fat characters because of its propensity to ridicule and mock othered social groups (Plotz 129). This is because comedy can act as a safety net, permitting the use of material that might be otherwise considered offensive. Through the use of slapstick comedy, films emphasize the physicality of the fat body, specifically through the emphasis of the weight, size, or volume of the fat body. Fat slapstick comedy is based on the *fatness* of the fat body and the fatness itself is turned into a comedic spectacle (Plotz 136). A technique used to employ this fat slapstick comedy is the choreography of the fat body. This can consist of any type of movement that emphasizes the weight of the body such as falling, crashing, or crushing other characters.

There are a few instances in *Shallow Hal* where this technique is used. In one scene, Rosemary cannonballs into a swimming pool, sending a cascade of water down onto the people

surrounding the pool, not only extinguishing a barbecue, but also catapulting a young boy into a tree (*Shallow Hal*). This highly exaggerated splash due to the weight and size of the fat body is at odds with the slim woman Hal sees having been hypnotized earlier in the movie. This gap between her actual body and his perception of her adds an extra layer of comedy beyond the fat slapstick used (Plotz 138). This is added to by the fact that the audience sees Rosemary through Hal's eyes for much of the film.

Similarly, two other scenes involve fat slapstick that highlight Rosemary's weight, both taking place in restaurants. In one instance, Rosemary crushes the chair beneath her while having lunch with Hal. Later in the movie, she crashes to the floor after tipping over a booth in a restaurant (*Shallow Hal*). Once again, attention is drawn to her weight because it is clearly her weight causing the pratfall. In addition, Hal's reaction even further highlights her weight because once again, he doesn't know she is fat. This incongruity between what the audience sees and the havoc her body causes exaggerates Rosemary's weight and further adds to the effect of the fat slapstick (Plotz 138).

Gender Role Inversion and De-feminization

The highlighting of the weight of a fat female character can also be connected to the character's lack of sexual desirability or their inability to fulfill traditional gender roles, as in the case of this particular film (Plotz 148). Near the end of the film, Rosemary and Hal have resolved their relationship issues and he attempts to lift her up into his arms. Since Hal knows by now that Rosemary is fat, he sees her as such and the audience with him. Therefore, the audience watches as Hal tries to unsuccessfully lift up Rosemary by putting one arm beneath her knee and the other around her waist. After this fails, he tries to lift her by putting both of his arms underneath her butt. The resulting shot shows Hal's face grimacing, indicating the physical

exertion this causes, and also highlights Rosemary's fat butt and midsection while cutting off her face. The following shot shows Rosemary carrying Hal bridal-style as a solution to the problem (*Shallow Hal*). She therefore takes the role usually reserved for the male partner. The comedy here calls attention to Rosemary's fatness and how it prevents her from fulfilling traditional gender roles as the one being carried by a partner (Plotz 152). However, the tone of this scene is one of happiness, as Rosemary and Hal's friends are cheering and clapping while Rosemary carries Hal to the car. This allows the film to employ irony and allow multiple meanings to be coded into this scene. The audience is given permission to cheer and enjoy the happy ending while also participating in the fatphobic mockery of a fat women having to carry her partner because she is too heavy to be carried by him (Plotz 152).

The medium shot of Hal attempting to lift Rosemary also serves another purpose. The fatness of her body is highlighted by cutting her head and feet out of the shot, showcasing her fat torso. This also contributes to the "thingness" of her body with the parts that would mark it as human- her head and feet- being cut off by the camera angle. The presentation of the human body as a thing is often the basis of physical comedy: "We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing," (Plotz 146). The physicality of bodies can be perceived as comedic and as an extension of that, fat bodies are seen as hyper-physical, lending them well to the genre of physical comedy. In addition, the presentation of a fat body as a thing further contributes to the othering of fat people. As mentioned earlier, stigmatizing difference contributes to the othering of social groups and those "others" are considered to have broken relevant social rules. Fatness violates contemporary body image norms and certain behaviors associated with fatness, such as overeating and physical inertness, have become more and more deviant in the eyes of

society. In *Shallow Hal* Rosemary is deemed “other” because she is not considered desirable by society’s standards and engages in behaviors that are therefore considered deviant.

Fear, Desire, and the Fat Romantic Monster

Furthermore, it is because Rosemary is deemed “other” that she can also be seen as monstrous according to Cohen’s theses. Fat characters in films are the physical embodiment of difference and their bodies and mannerisms are visually encoded as deviant. This is exactly how Cohen describes monsters in his fourth thesis. He also describes in his third thesis how monsters are hybrids that refuse easy categorization (Cohen 6). This particular notion can be seen in *Shallow Hal* especially because of the film’s portrayal of Rosemary as a source of both mockery and desirability. Most of the film’s jokes come at the expense of Rosemary’s fatness or her behaviors associated with it, yet there is a dichotomy between her being seen as a mockery and her being a source of romantic attraction for Hal. Rosemary is not so easily categorized into simply a romantic interest nor simply the comedic fat side character. She smashes these categorizations in favor of the third option; one where she is both the love interest and mocked for her fatness. And so, she becomes dangerous, because she does not fit into one neat box.

Rosemary’s portrayal as the romantic interest and the mocked fat character creates this forbidden other that is the source of the audience’s simultaneous fear and desire. In Cohen’s sixth thesis, he describes how monsters are capable of both terrifying the audience and allowing them to indulge in escapist fantasies that make them all the more desirable (Cohen 17). Rosemary allows the audience to do just that in *Shallow Hal*. The audience is invited to be afraid of Rosemary, not because she is scary, but because she represents everything they do not want to be. They fear the lack of control she has around food. They fear their own bodies being as out of control as Rosemary’s, with her smashing chairs and creating splashes with the force to send a

young boy up a tree. Yet, the audience is also invited to desire her. They desire the freedom she has to not count calories because it doesn't matter anyway, and they end up rooting for her to find love in the end with Hal. In addition, Cohen says that "The co-optation of the monster into a symbol of the desirable is often accomplished through the neutralization of potentially threatening aspects with a liberal dose of comedy," (Cohen 18). The only reason the audience is permitted to also desire Rosemary is because of the comedy neutralizing the fears that her fat body evokes. The comedy of *Shallow Hal* draws the audience away from thinking too deeply about the fatphobia that Rosemary's fat body represents. However, by engaging with the fears Rosemary's fat body evokes, we also engage with Cohen's final thesis. Monsters reveal truths about human identity and by confronting the monster, we confront our own fears. Instead of being distracted by the comedy meant to neutralize these thoughts, diving deeper into why society fears a lack of control over our own bodies can reveal more about the value American culture places on control.

Cohen states that the monster is both repulsive and alluring for cultural fear hides cultural longing. The fat body has become a site where society can both reject and secretly desire an escape from discipline, restraint, and the pressure to conform to the same beauty standards society itself has created. *Shallow Hal* attempts to comment on these standards by showing how a fat woman is able to be loved yet still perpetuates harmful stereotypes. The only reason Hal even talked to Rosemary in the first place was because he saw her as a thin, stereotypically beautiful woman. He would never have approached her if he had seen her fat body to begin with, which still perpetuates the stereotype that fat people are not attractive. Rosemary is still an outsider because she is not considered desirable by society's standards.

Overall, *Shallow Hal* contains highly contradictory messages on fatness and the desirability of women. It others Rosemary and perpetuates the stereotypes of fatness on several levels: it employs fat slapstick for the sake of comedy, it constantly conflates fatness with ugliness and overall equates beauty with conventional beauty standards, it builds on the notion that within every fat person lies a thin person- their true self- inside, it visually erases the fat person by presenting her as slim for most of the film, and if it does show her in her fat form, it is in “chopped up, fetishized chunks” that convey her “thingness” to the audience (Plotz 227). Conversely, the film also presents some surprisingly fat-positive messages. The film condemns society’s adherence to narrow beauty ideals, shows what difference being fat can make for a woman in the way people treat her, and has a happy ending where Hal realizes he still loves Rosemary and finds her desirable even after seeing her in her true, fat form (Plotz 227). Yet the connection between Cohen’s monster theory and the portrayal of Rosemary in the film make the messaging of this film even more convoluted. Society simultaneously praises and condemns the fat character because of her freedom to be other. She exists outside the boundaries of normal, yet is still an object of desire, and society envies that freedom. Much like a monster, Rosemary exists outside the boundaries society has placed, while the audience is given permission to desire her because of this. It is because of simultaneous fear and desire that Hollywood keeps returning to these tropes of the fat outsider, ensuring that the monster never dies. Many years later, *The Whale* becomes another example of the fat monster.

***The Whale* (2022): Grotesque Bodies, Control, and Death**

In the film *The Whale* released in 2022, the fat body is portrayed in a darker, more grotesque manner than previously seen before. The two-time Oscar winning film stars Brendan Fraser as Charlie- a morbidly obese, reclusive English teacher who teaches online. Charlie is

scarred by profound wounds of grief and guilt and is desperately trying to reconnect with his estranged teenage daughter Ellie, played by Sadie Sink. Due to complications with his heart, Charlie only has days to live and wants to prove to Ellie that he can do one thing right in his life. Ellie resents her father for abandoning her eight years ago when he left her mother Mary to be with his lover, Alan. Since then, Alan has committed suicide, leaving Charlie to wallow in his grief and turn to emotional eating as a coping mechanism which has now resulted in his morbid obesity.

In its opening weekend at the box office, *The Whale* only made \$332,152. The indie film ended up grossing \$17 million domestically and \$57 million worldwide due to its critical acclamations (“The Whale”). Worldwide, *The Whale* picked up 122 nominations and 50 wins for different awards in multiple countries. Most notably, it won the Oscar for Best Achievement in Makeup and Hairstyling and Brendan Fraser won Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role (*The Whale (2022) - IMDb*). Despite its critical achievements, the film only rates 64% on Rotten Tomatoes and critic reviews provide mixed messages. Some praise Fraser’s performance and call it a lesson on empathy, while others say the film de-humanizes fat people (*The Whale (2022) | Rotten Tomatoes*).

When Brendan Fraser was interviewed for Brian Truitt’s article in USA Today, he said that he realizes that *The Whale* is a polarizing film and will command attention. He said that he hopes that people will “change the dialogue surrounding how we discuss and how we refer to people who live with obesity,” (Truitt). Fraser wanted to avoid what had happened in the past with portrayals of fat characters in movies being the side characters who are the butt of the joke. In order to prepare himself for his role as Charlie, Fraser took calls from almost a dozen people who gave him testimonials for what living with obesity is like. Filmmakers also worked with the

Obesity Action Coalition, who helped with sensitivity issues (Truitt). Filming *The Whale* was very taxing for Fraser, both emotionally and physically. The prosthetics he wore were so cumbersome that Fraser had to be wheeled in and off of set, and the suit itself had a cooling mechanism built into it. Fraser would often feel vertigo when he removed the suit at the end of the day. He told Truitt, “I had a pretty close sensory understanding of what it is like to live with obesity. It did change me and it did make me feel for those who live in that body that they need to be incredibly strong. I learned a respect I was not anticipating,” (Truitt).

While Fraser may have learned empathy from making this film, some critics do not see this movie as one provoking empathy- quite the opposite, in fact. Lindy West writes a scathing review in *The Guardian*, calling it a shallow and stigmatizing reflection of thin people’s assumptions about fat bodies (West). Although the filmmakers intentions were to “humanize” fat people, West says that *The Whale* is how thin people talk about fat people when they are not around. She says that if *The Whale* didn’t reflect and validate society’s real opinion of fat people, there is no way society would like the film this much (West). She even goes as far as saying “People respond positively to *The Whale* because it confirms their biases about what fat people are like (gross, sad) and why people are fat (trauma, munchies) and allows them to feel benevolent yet superior,” (West). Unfortunately, because movies have such an effect on body image and society’s beauty standards, she is correct in saying that *The Whale* confirms biases that people have against fatness. West says, “Fat people are already trapped, suffocating, inside the stories the rest of you tell yourselves about us,” (West). She argues that fat people should be able to have the space to forge untainted relationships with food and their own bodies, without society’s standards breathing down their necks. She advocates for a chance for fat people to

speak honestly about their lives without being misunderstood or abused. Unfortunately, the rhetoric surrounding fat people has grown to be something that will not be remedied easily.

Beth Younger, the author of a Straits Times review of *The Whale*, says that fatness has become its own monster in a thin-obsessed culture. Despite the body positivity movement, fat people are still viewed as unattractive and abnormal (Younger). Younger goes even further to suggest that *The Whale* is a body-horror film that exploits the fear and disgust people feel towards fatness. Body horror is a subset of the horror genre that depicts the destruction, degeneration, or mutation of the human body (Younger). Films like *The Fly* and *Tusk* are designed to gross out viewers as the protagonist becomes the monster of the story as their body becomes more repulsive. In body horror films, there is something viscerally disturbing about watching the human body be distorted and this is also the case in *The Whale*. Charlie loses his ability to perform basic tasks, like picking something off the floor or even walking without help. The camera shows his distended gut, his swollen calves, or his sweat-soaked clothes, inviting the audience to be repulsed (Younger). Body horror often ends with the transformed body horror character dying and this is also the case with Charlie. His body ends up destroying him. Younger uses this quote from Robin Wood saying, “the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses and oppresses,” (Younger). This quote perfectly describes how fat people can be considered monsters in films such as *The Whale*. Younger even describes how the film made her feel monstrous in her own fat body, further enforcing society’s hurtful biases.

The Grotesque and Open Body

The Whale employs a number of techniques to portray the fat body as “other”, confirming society’s biases against fat people. One of these techniques is the depiction of the fat body as a

grotesque body. The fat body in modern society is constructed as a grotesque body because it is a body associated with eating and digestion, weight gain and weight loss, and disease and death. It is therefore associated with overall physical change (Plotz 131). It is a consuming body, incorporating what it consumes into itself and is thereby open to and connected with the world. Grotesque bodies are open bodies and are “not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects,” (Plotz 130). Open bodies make people uncomfortable because they reveal a certain physicality that humans are ingrained to forget. People move through a rational society as if we have very few biological needs and any reminders that we are organisms that must be biologically maintained make us uncomfortable (Owen). Skin forms a tangible barrier between the outside and inside the body. It is the largest and most obvious bodily organ and it is regarded as the boundary between self and world. Our innards are contained within our skins. Furthermore, it can be argued that our own *selves* are contained within skin. Anytime skin is stretched, punctured, burned, colored, or permanently altered, this all-important barrier is compromised (Owen). In stretching the skin in a way that is different from “normal” bodies, fat bodies become grotesque. They become monstrous.

The Whale portrays Charlie in a way that exhibits his grotesque and open body. The camera often frames Charlie’s massive body in a way that emphasizes his unnatural proportions, framing him as “other”. Camera shots linger on his bulging midsection, swollen thighs, and sweat-soaked skin (*The Whale*). As Younger described in her review, the film employs techniques similar to the body horror genre, focusing on close-ups of Charlie’s distended gut and swollen limbs to elicit a visceral sense of revulsion from the audience (Younger). These camera techniques specifically focus on his bulging gut, which is stretching that tangible barrier of skin

and compromising it. The stretching of skin pushes the boundary between Charlie's insides and the outside world, causing the audience to feel fear and revulsion at the sight.

Eating, Control, and the Omnivore's Paradox

Another example of how Charlie's grotesque body is represented lies within the use of sound effects. The sound design of this film grotesquely exaggerates the sounds of Charlie eating. During the binge-eating scene, filmmakers amplified the sounds of chewing and crunching, accompanied by loud, somber music to underscore the tragic and repulsive nature of his addiction (*The Whale*). These sound effects, in addition to the grotesque shots of Charlie with crumbs down his shirt, grease smeared all over his face, and even him vomiting onto himself, frame the binge-eating scene as a gluttonous spectacle. This scene is intended to illustrate Charlie's use of food as a weapon of self-destruction, eliciting feelings of revulsion and pity from the audience. This scene is easily one of the hardest to watch in this film, yet it is difficult to look away from. Plotz describes this phenomenon being effective because "We are drawn to the gross-out at the same time we are repulsed by it, or rather precisely because we are repulsed by it," (Plotz 155).

There is another factor that adds to the grotesque spectacle of the binge-eating scene. The categorization of a fat body as an open body means that food and the act of eating becomes an act that is synonymous with the open body. While eating is an essential, life-sustaining activity, it is also a potential cause for a number of anxieties. Because the body and self are considered separate from the rest of the world, eating is an action that breaches the boundary of inside and outside the body. Sending food across the barrier between the world and self leads to the outside becoming a part of our inside. Plotz describes food as "something made to be become part of

who we are,” (Plotz 175) This breaching of the barrier between inside and outside the body can be cause for a number of anxieties, as discussed earlier.

There is also the matter of the omnivores paradox. This paradox is based on the fact that, as omnivores, humans have a lot of freedom in their food intake. This also means that they require a certain amount of variety in their diet, forcing them to engage in unknown, potentially harmful foods (Plotz 176). This contributes to a lot of the anxieties surrounding food intake: food is necessary to maintain energy and health but it can also cause illness or disease, and without food the body cannot continue to exist but at the same time the food consumed is in and of itself a dead organism (Plotz 176-177). The binge-eating scene in *The Whale* plays on these anxieties surrounding food as a paradoxical item. Charlie is using food as a self-destruction mechanism, essentially eating himself to death in order to drown out his grief and anger towards his life circumstances. This causes disgust in the audience because that is not the inherent purpose of food. Charlie engages with food in a way that is harmful to him and this creates further anxiety in the audience during the binge-eating scene.

De-Masculinization and Hybrid Monstrosity

Charlie is suffering from a lack of control in his life and is reacting to the resulting emotional turmoil by overeating. Emotional overeating is defined as “the reliance on food as a major way of regulating affect which is frequently present in both binge-eating disorder and compulsive eating,” (Plotz 203). Every time the audience sees Charlie in an emotional situation, he turns to food to regulate himself, like for example, the binge-eating scene. Charlie usually stays out of sight when he has food delivered and just leaves money in his mailbox for the delivery guy. But one time, he is seen by the delivery guy who ends up turning away in fear and disgust at seeing Charlie. This triggers one of Charlie’s most gruesome binge-eating episodes in

the movie (*The Whale*). While this scene contributes to the grotesque body that Charlie has, it also de-masculinizes him. Emotional eating and eating disorders are typically associated with women, yet the audience sees Charlie engaging in these behaviors, characterizing him as less than masculine. While a “hearty appetite” is in general considered appropriate for men, the lack of control observable in this scene is not. Being in control is one of the pillars of normative masculinity, therefore the lack of emotional control over his own urges and over other aspects of his life de-masculinizes Charlie (Plotz 204).

This de-masculinization is further amplified by the fact that Charlie is gay, which stereotypically is considered to be a very feminine characteristic. The de-masculinization of Charlie serves to push him even further into the categorization of “other” because he is blurring the line between masculinity and femininity. This can also be connected with the portrayal of monsters as disturbing hybrids that refuse easy categorization in Cohen’s third monster theory thesis (Cohen 6). The refusal to participate in the classic order of society makes Charlie a monster and therefore makes him dangerous to society.

While Charlie’s emotional eating de-masculinizes him, it is also symbolic of the lack of control Charlie has in his life. Additionally, his fatness itself is synonymous with a lack of control. Plotz describes fatness as “discursively constructed as a symptom of a lack of bodily control, of an inability to control the urge to eat and an inability to discipline the body into its socially accepted, normative shape,” (Plotz 131). Fatness can result from a number of different factors, like genetics or environmental factors, yet society continues to push the narrative that fatness is the direct fault of the individual. *The Whale* also pushes this narrative with a singular line from Charlie, “I was always big. I just let it get out of control,” (*The Whale*). The phrase “letting oneself go” and not being in control of one’s own body have become synonymous with

being fat. In a different publication by Barbara Plotz, she draws associations between the softness of the body and a lack of control. Even on thin bodies, any kind of bulge or flab needs to be erased to ensure “a body whose internal processes are under control,” (Plotz, “Why Is Your Body a Different Shape?”). The phrase “letting oneself go” is a warning not to succumb to bodily appetites and risk gaining weight, therefore losing one’s visual appeal. “Letting oneself go” implies gaining freedom from some kind of imprisonment, like for example, the imprisonment of oppressive beauty ideals (Owen). At its core, society seeks to escape the beauty ideals it has set, yet the irony lies within society being the one to create these ideals in the first place. Yet again, parallels can be drawn between this and monster theory. The simultaneous desire for freedom and disgust at those that achieve freedom follows Cohen’s sixth thesis (Cohen 16). People desire freedom from society’s oppressive ideals, yet they mock the fat people that do not conform to body ideals. They desire the freedom fat people have, so they are deemed monstrous.

As fatness becomes synonymous with a lack of control, the fat individual is often blamed for the unbecoming state of their body. Yet, fatness is not singularly the fault of the individual. It can result from a number of different factors, many of which the individual has little to no control over. Even so, society is scared of the things that are out of control and therefore places blame on fat individuals. The continuation of the stigmatization of fat people and anti-fatness rhetoric seems to stem from the justification that fat people “have themselves to blame for their deviant fat bodies,” (van Amsterdam). *The Whale* is just one in a long line of many films that has contributed to this justification. However, *The Whale* is unique in the way that Charlie is very clearly to blame for his fat body because he is using it as a method of self-destruction.

Fatness as a Cultural Warning

Because *The Whale* specifically highlights Charlie's disordered eating and the end of his life, it serves as a message, warning how fatness becomes a path to death. His monstrous, fat body becomes a vessel for the cultural fear of death. In Cohen's first thesis, he describes how the monstrous body is a cultural body, one that incorporates fear and gives it life (Cohen 4). Charlie represents how society is afraid of disease and anything that brings death, which in this case, is his fatness. So, it becomes acceptable to portray him as grotesque and pitiful, in a way that makes it hard to look away. The film wants you to see this display of fat squalor because it warns you away from what fatness can only bring: disease and death.

There is this need to warn people away from fatness because there is this inherent fear of fatness. Van Amsterdam argues that because of the idea that everyone is at risk of becoming fat, slenderness as the normal position is not effortless (van Amsterdam). Slenderness is considered normal, yet it requires effort and self-discipline to be maintained. There is also the fact because of the lack of distinction, the word 'fat' can reference any body and therefore exposes all people to discrimination (van Amsterdam). This ambiguity causes a blurring of boundaries between the in-group (slender) and out-group (fat) in people's self-identification. "Many people- even those others would consider slender- often question whether they are fat or not," (van Amsterdam). Blurring the boundaries between what is considered fat and slender continues to perpetuate this ability for fat people to be categorized as monstrous because they are considered not of the norm. As stated in Cohen's fourth thesis, any kind of otherness has the potential to be monstrous (Cohen 7). Charlie has been portrayed as "other" through the portrayal of his grotesque body, emotional overeating, and overall lack of control. His fat body becomes a monstrous vessel in which the cultural fears of disease and death are represented. Charlie's ultimate demise resulting

from his self-destructive habits warn onlookers away from fatness because of the cultural fear of death is coded into fatness itself.

Discussion: Gender, Genre, and the Persistence of the Fat Monster

Shallow Hal and *The Whale* both use differing cinematic techniques to convey social attitudes towards fatness. *Shallow Hal* highlights Rosemary's weight through slapstick comedy, the switching of traditionally male and female gender roles, and the "thingness" of her fat body. *The Whale* portrays Charlie's fat body as a grotesque body, de-masculinizes him due to his emotional overeating, and overall associates a lack of control with his fat body. All of these techniques convey the "othering" of fat bodies and subsequently contribute to the fat character being portrayed as a monster. While most of the techniques differ between the two films, there is one technique used in contrasting ways in both of the films. Rosemary participates in the switching of traditionally male and female roles, resulting in her de-feminization. Similarly, Charlie is de-masculinized by his emotional overeating and queerness. Both fat characters are pushed from their gender stereotypes into the opposite direction, leading to a categorization crisis. This aligns with Cohen's third thesis, as monsters refuse easy categorization and that's what makes them "other".

The other techniques used to "otherize" the fat characters may differ due to the genre of the two films. *Shallow Hal* is better suited to the use of slapstick comedy because of its light-hearted, rom-com genre. On the other hand, *The Whale* uses grotesque body technique because the film's tone is more somber and dramatic. These techniques' also communicate a different message based on the gender of the fat character. For example, because emotional overeating is often associated with women, its impact is felt more fully when used in *The Whale* because of Charlie's male gender. Using the emotional overeater trope with a fat female character only

reinforces stereotypes, but if used with a fat male character, it serves as a tool to de-masculinize him and push him further into the “other” category, which is what happens in *The Whale*.

Both Rosemary and Charlie are depicted as “other” and labeling fat people as such is conducive to the systemic discrimination and bias facing this group. While the cultural stereotypes surrounding fat people may have shifted over time, internalized biases about the monstrous nature of fat people have not. This can be seen through their depictions in cinematic media. Although *Shallow Hal* seems to condemn traditional beauty standards, it ends up perpetuating the stereotype of fat people not being attractive and they have a thin person within them. In comparison to *The Whale*, *Shallow Hal* seems lighthearted, yet both movies reflect society’s internalized fatphobia. *The Whale* takes this in an even darker direction, showcasing the true reason why society condemns fat people: a fear of disease, death, and lack of control.

These depictions of fat people in movies continue to be mirrors of what society fears. The fact that there are as many movies as there are about fat characters signals the continuation of underlying biases. This is in accordance with Cohen’s second thesis; the monster always escapes. The monster cannot be killed because the social anxieties connected to its physical body are still alive. Even if it may seem that society has become more accepting of fat bodies, underlying biases will always resurface. Cinema showcasing fat bodies as monstrous will always be around as long as society fears them. That is why engaging in conversations about these movies can help with perceiving how the world works as Cohen states in his final thesis. Analyzing more films exhibiting fat characters spanning across different genres and time periods through the lens of monster theory can bring more clarity to this topic. More research can be done about fat characters in films and monster theory. This is a limitation of this analysis, as its narrow scope

only covered two movies in different decades and genres. It also only used the one major theoretical framework of monster theory.

Conclusion: Cinema and the Cultural Production of Fat Monstrosity

Films like *Shallow Hal* and *The Whale* categorize the fat body as monstrous and this can have consequences in society. Fat people are already predisposed to body image issues, and their portrayal in the media has a lot to do with this. Portraying them in this way contributes to further body image issues, eating disorders, and body dysmorphia in the population. Fatness becomes a moral failing instead of a result of social, genetic, or environmental factors. Categorization of the fat body as monstrous can also contribute to the further discrimination of fat people in jobs, clothing and public space design, and even in relationships. Even in the film industry itself, fat characters continue to function in one-dimensional roles that exclude fat actors from certain roles and creates a reliance on fat suits, which both *Shallow Hal* and *The Whale* utilize. These one-dimensional roles turn fat people into objects of visual consumption, reinforcing the idea that fatness is a spectacle rather than a human experience, which further contributes to othering. Categorizing fat bodies as monstrous reduces them to a single exaggerated trait, erasing nuance in the film industry. When films repeatedly engage with fatphobia, it normalizes stigma and shapes cultural ideals. In essence, this becomes a loop of cinema portraying fat people as monstrous, which reinforces society's beliefs and so on. Categorizing fat bodies as monstrous reinforces stigma, shapes public perceptions, imposes moral judgements on body size, restricts narrative possibilities in films, and strips fat people of full humanity, ultimately functioning as a modern form of cultural monster-making.

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