

MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE OBESITY IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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# Prologue

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## Prologue

The earliest known depiction of a human figure is a small carving of a voluptuous woman, known as the Venus of Willendorf. Dating over 25,000 years old, this 4 ½ inch statuette marks the beginning of a long history of representations of women. Created in the harsh conditions of the Ice Age, in which an abundance of food and fat bodies were scarce, the Venus of Willendorf was revered for its exaggerated breasts, hips, and buttocks as a symbol of fertility and fatness. Considering the reigning anti-fat attitude in contemporary North American culture, it is difficult to imagine fat and fat individuals occupying a privileged or sacred status in society. The fact that communities from various geographical locations and historical eras have regarded fatness in this way provides supporting evidence for the theory that fat-as-bad is indeed a cultural construction (LeBesco, 2004). For example, in many poverty-stricken South Pacific nations, extra fat on one's body symbolizes "wealth and power" (BBC.co.uk, 2001); this is quite a contrast to North American stereotype of the fat, lazy slob (LeBesco, 2004). The angular bodies of our current "Venuses," such as Sarah Jessica Parker, Katie Holmes and Kate Moss, stand in stark opposition to the Woman of Willendorf's large and valorized body. The problem is not that fat itself has changed over the past 25,000 years, but that North Americans' cultural attitudes and beliefs surrounding the fat body have.

Numerous representations of women have appeared in artistic, literary and cinematic productions in the span between the Venus of Willendorf's creation and the appearance of Kate Moss's naked, protruding spine in the Calvin Klein advertisements from the 1990s. The fat female body in cultural productions, however, remains, for the most part, liminal, silently exceeding corporeal boundaries on the margins of society. Of

course, there are exceptions to all rules and some artists have forced society to see that from which it is apt to shield its eyes. During the seventeenth century, the Flemish painter, Peter Paul Rubens, often painted his second wife, Helene Fourment, in the nude, her young body dripping with layers of fat. Hence, the term “Rubenesque,” which is a popular adjective used to describe fleshier female figures. The contemporary, Columbian sculptor Fernando Botero frequently uses the nude, obese, female body as his subject matter. Lucian Freud, a German-born, English painter and grandson of Sigmund Freud, also finds a muse in overweight women. His paintings often feature his subject, Big Sue, in the nude, her body defiantly draped over sofas or sprawled, unrestrained, on beds. These artists represent fat women as vulnerable, beautiful, sexual beings without resorting to the stigmatization that often belies mainstream depictions of fatness.

With the emergence of the thin ideal as the fashionable aesthetic in 1960s America, the size of women in advertising and films began to creep closer and closer to the zero (0) mark. As a result, the standard size for a Hollywood actress has also decreased throughout the twentieth century. Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Marlene Dietrich are all iconic actresses from the 1930s and ‘40s who were hailed as pivotal images of femininity. These former starlets’ shapelier physiques, however, would look much more ample compared to the boney, emaciated look of Hollywood’s leading ladies of the early twenty-first century. Nearly every week the tabloids accuse yet another young actress of self-starvation: Kate Bosworth, Nicole Ritchie, and Angelina Jolie are on the press’s radar and when their weights plummet, the tabloids turn it into a cover story. It seems the ideal female weight in Hollywood is a very narrow range and whether a star exceeds the maximum or drops below the minimum, she is condemned. Who is to

fault? The young famous women who promote an unhealthy ideal through minimal caloric intake, or Hollywood as an institution that demands rigorous, impossible standards from the bodies of its female talent. Since the actresses themselves are so thin, the majority of stories in Hollywood are about thin women.

Since the early 1990s, some Hollywood films have attempted to shed light on the lives of fat people. The Australian movie *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) captures the overweight Muriel's disappointing wedding night when her new husband – a handsome South African swimmer needing asylum – refuses to sleep with her because he is disgusted by her body. *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) focuses on beauty pageants' young, sexualized participants to point out the dangers associated with exposing girls to hegemonic notions of femininity and female sexuality at a young age. *Bringing Down the House* (2003), *Why Did I Get Married?* (2007) and *Hairspray* (2007) also offer glimpses into the lives of female characters whose bodies do not conform to hegemonic standards of beauty and desirability. Although they are cartoons, Shrek and Fiona, the ogre lovebirds in *Shrek* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004) and *Shrek the Third* (2007), have humanlike qualities and characteristics to which viewers can relate. As a result, the film successfully broadcasts the age-old message that it is not what a person looks like on the outside that counts, but who they are on the inside. Princess Fiona forsakes her thin, "beautiful," porcelain-skinned body and permanently transforms into a giant green ogre in order to be with the man (rather, ogre) she loves. Although Shrek and Fiona's bodies are fat, dissimilar and "ugly," their creators blessed them with kind, fun-loving spirits and did not use tropes to depict their characters.

The gendered bias regarding body weight in Hollywood is a lamentable, undeniable reality. Although there are a handful of Hollywood actresses with more meat on their bones than Hollywood's size zero standard – for example America Ferrara, Queen Latifah and Jennifer Hudson – such actresses are rarely cast in lead romantic roles. For many, the thought of casting a fat woman as a film's love interest is horrifying. Indeed, former sexpot Kirstie Alley made splash in 2005 with her reality-based sitcom, *Fat Actress*, a show that takes this issue by the horns. Alley, whose weight-gain the tabloids documented with scathing headlines and unflattering photos, plays herself in the Showtime series and her goal in the sitcom is to land her own network show – and to be thin enough that Kid Rock will want to sleep with her (Franklin, 2005). Far from an appeal for viewers' sympathy, the show depicts the actress's desperation and frustration through blunt sarcasm and humour. Fat can be a discomforting subject for many, including those who believe it is wrong, and for those who suffer anti-fat discrimination due to their weight. Alley's humour and self-mockery gives the audience "permission" to laugh at a fat person and her struggles, something that might seem taboo were the audience not granted laughter to break the tension around a touchy subject. British cooking duo, Clarissa Dickson Wright and Jennifer Paterson, who hosted the cooking show *Two Fat Ladies* from 1996 to 1998 also used humour in a similar way to make something potentially unnerving – a pair of fat women preparing rich, indulgent food – easier to stomach.

It is a different story for overweight men in Hollywood, however. They do not need humour to deflect the shame of their "unsexy" bodies the way women do. Fat men are frequently hired to play the leading romantic roles without having to lose weight,

including Jack Black in *Shallow Hal* (2001) and *The Holiday* (2006) and Seth Rogen in *Knocked Up* (2007). John Goodman, Jason Alexander and Dan Akroyd are bankable Hollywood heavyweights who reached stardom without ever following a strict diet or exercise regiment. Unlike their female colleagues, male actors who have recently gained weight, such as Tom Cruise, John Travolta and Tom Hanks, did so without facing demoralizing scrutiny from the press. The gender ideology that links a woman's shape to her success and sexual attractiveness does not apply to men – fat male actors are presented as desirable even if they do not look like Brad Pitt or Matt Damon. This gendered double standard recurs in popular sitcoms, many of which “feature fat men who are married to knockouts” (Franklin, 2005). With the exception of Roseanne Barr in *Roseanne*, Mimi from *The Drew Carey Show* and Camryn Manheim in *The Practice*, sitcoms rarely feature overweight female characters. When fat women are cast in sitcoms, they are often single and certainly not married to gorgeous men. In the television programs, *According to Jim* and *The King of Queens*, the svelte, attractive, health-conscious Courtney Thorne-Smith and Leah Ramini respectively star opposite their fat male costars and onscreen husbands, Jim Belushi and Kevin James.

This essay will look at a particular aspect of the ongoing identity politics surrounding the representation of women and how fat females are commonly represented in Hollywood film in the late twentieth century. Although films are constructions that aim to reflect or depict reality, they often provide flattened characterizations of fat people, particularly fat women. Because no artistic production can escape the culture within which it is made, Hollywood movies, as well as independently funded and distributed “art house” films, often embed popular stereotypes or misconceptions in the



characterization of marginalized people, including the obese. There are many ways to “represent” fatness in film: through the script, cinematography, plot, and the whether it uses a real fat body or a rubber suit. This paper will investigate how one might negotiate representations of obesity in a society that perceives fat as a social evil and fat individuals as “agents of abhorrence and disgust” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 1).

The earliest film considered is Australian director Jane Campion’s 1989 debut, *Sweetie*. Campion often writes about women who do not conform the feminine ideal (Hopgood, 2002) and this is certainly true of *Sweetie*, the movie’s mad, monstrous fat girl who refuses to follow social norms. Within the film, *Sweetie* functions as an archetype of the self-destructive, grotesque fat woman. This film works as a foil to the 2006 film, *Fat Girls*, which depicts female fatness as a liberated state. For the Farrelly Brother’s 2001 comedy, *Shallow Hal*, Gwyneth Paltrow dons a fat suit in a dissembling portrayal of the 300 lb. Rosemary. Rather than being a pro-fat narrative, this film uses the actress’s real body to emphasize the absurd notion that a fat woman can be a sex object. 2001’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* offers a compromised depiction of curvier women, since the skinny Renee Zellweger packed on 28 lbs. to bring the film’s heroine to life. Eddie Murphy also slips into a rubber suit in his misogynistic, derogatory depiction of Rasputia in the 2007 flop, *Norbit* and relies on degrading stereotypes to construct this heinous image of African American womanhood. Finally, Queen Latifah’s *Beauty Shop* (2005) offers an empowering depiction of self-accepting fat women, but the film is rife with racial stereotypes that imply an essential black female identity.

Grounded in both feminist and film theory, this paper explores the ways in which gender ideology and the media’s perpetuation of the thin ideal work together as an

oppressive tool that makes the fat female body a site of disgust and shame. Naomi Wolf writes about the ways in which North American women's preoccupation with eating and body image keeps them from having lives that are as full and complex as those of men. Susan Bordo demonstrates how a woman's body shape symbolizes her social position and the degree to which she embodies the tenets of capitalism, such as restraint and self-mastery. Kathleen LeBesco argues that fatness is socially, historically and economically constructed and attempts to denaturalize fat's inherent badness, while also emphasizing that the meaning of fat changes from one community to another. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey discusses the power of the viewer's male gaze in cinema and the ways in which women onscreen satisfy viewing pleasure. The paper interrogates this notion of this gaze when a film's actress does not conform to hegemonic standards of beauty and femininity.

According to the culture industry, beautiful is thin; thin is beautiful. In contemporary society, fatness and thinness operate as "ultimate statements about people's worth rather than descriptions of the ratio of fat body tissue and lean body tissue" (Orbach, 1998, p.14). It is no surprise, then, that fat people, perceived as "both unattractive and unhealthy" and therefore "revolting" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 1), are marginalized in a society that values the tenets of the thin ideal: self-mastery, self-containment and control (Bordo, 1993). Because their bodies do not conform to the hegemonic norm, fat people's narratives are vastly underrepresented in mainstream Hollywood cinema. In fact, the obese body is absent in many artistic genres, including literature, painting, and art. In the rare instance that a film does feature a fat female character, it is often a contentious and problematic portrayal that relies on tired tropes and

cultural stereotypes about fatness and fat individuals. This is especially true in regards to the stories of overweight women. As a result, the media is saturated with images and stories whose female characters correspond to the exalted thin ideal and overweight women whose experiences are flattened through the depiction of an essentialist fat identity.

Defining the fat body can be difficult and a frequently question that arises in discussions of overweight individuals is “what does pass muster an authentically fat body?” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 105). Although the terms are often used interchangeably, “obesity” and “overweight” actually have distinct and separate meanings. Sociologist and anthropologist Kathleen LeBesco notes that obesity is “defined as 20 percent over [an individual’s] desirable weight” (2004, p.29). This, however, is an abstract and arbitrary parameter to say the least, since “desirable weight” differs from one individual to the next and depends on factors such as a person’s height and personal preferences. The World Health Organization (WHO) offers a more precise and medically accurate diagnosis for determining whether someone is either overweight or obese. Using the Body Mass Index (BMI), which “describes the relative body weight for height squared” (Svendsen, 2003, p. s250), WHO classifies “subjects with a BMI between 25.0 and 29.9 kg/m<sup>2</sup> ...as overweight and pre-obese, and subjects with a BMI of above 30.0 kg/m<sup>2</sup> ...as obese” (Svendsen, 2003, p. s250). Further, WHO defines obesity “not only as an excessive accumulation of fat, but also as an excessive accumulation of fat to an extent that health may be impaired” (Svendsen, 2003, p. s250).

If, as LeBesco argues, fat-as-bad is a social construct that is “framed by [a society’s] historical, social, and economic position” (2004, p. 16), then the opposite must

also be true; that is, that “the possibility that fat could be constructed as beautiful, ideal, or desirable” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 23). LeBesco’s analysis reaches back to antiquity and cites various examples of communities throughout history in which fat has been revered. Fat, she insists, “has metamorphosed from a flattering term used by the Greeks, and a Teutonic root meaning ‘to hold or contain like a precious vessel,’ to its unequivocally negative connotations today” (2004, p. 36). However, if we are to successfully denaturalize fat stigmatization and expose the constructed nature of fat-as-bad and accept it as a symptom of contemporary patriarchal, capitalist society, we must challenge the current stereotypes that peg fat as “repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene, and above all something to lose” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 16). A quick scan of the today’s media images reminds us of how very far we have to go in order to treat fat people in a more positive, humane fashion. Fat stigmatization, both in reality as well as on the silver screen, is rampant, and part of the problem is society’s failure to recognize it *as* a problem, since to date there is “very little in the way of public norms to keep people from expressing anti-fat sentiment” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 59).

It is important to question why the slender female figure became the desired aesthetic in North America. Feminist scholars, including LeBesco (2004), Susan Bordo, (1993), and Naomi Wolf (1999), theorize the emergence of the thin ideal throughout the second half of the twentieth century as a symbol of women’s emancipation from and disidentification with the maternal body. Women’s fashion in 1950s North America saw what Bordo calls an era of “resurgent Victorianism” (1993, p. 208). The look of “the cinch belt, the pushup bra, and Marilyn Monroe” (Bordo, 1993, p. 208) represented the Victorian ideal of femininity: a woman who was curvy, but whose tiny waist men

coveted and was a point of personal pride for the woman. Launching his “New Look” designs in 1947, French designer Christian Dior revitalized this nineteenth century look by replacing post-war flats with high heels and tailoring jackets with tapered waists that accentuated a woman’s hips and breasts. By the 1960s, however, the slender, elongated, more androgynous body type became the new vogue; lean muscles replaced curves and feminine characteristics, such as breasts and hips, were downplayed, rather than accentuated. According to Bordo, the lean, toned female physique disrupted expected female norms and symbolized a rejection of “a domestic, reproductive destiny” (1993, p. 209). A woman who was considered slim by 1950s standards was, by the 1960s, considered “full-figured” because she lacked the boniness and muscle definition exemplified in the body of “the new woman.” By refusing to conform to the look of the curvy, 1950s pin-up girl, women in the post-feminist era expressed their newfound freedom to *choose* – both in the personal and the professional domain – through their slim, managed bodies. The irony, of course, is that what might have begun as a rejection of the hegemonic feminine ideal quickly replaced the old model and became the modern, unattainable beauty standard.

Ironically, as slenderness and a toned body became the new feminine ideal during the second half of the twentieth century, North Americans in general got fatter. While teenage girls and women starved themselves or purged their dinners in order to achieve the thin ideal, the general public gorged on readily available, cheap, unhealthy fast food. It is generally agreed that changes in food preparation during this period account for the rise in American obesity (Cutler, Glaeser, and Shapiro, 2003). In early 1960s America, the average female weight was 143 lbs. and the average male weight was 168 lbs. (Cutler,

Glaeser, and Shapiro, 2003). Both of those figures skyrocketed throughout the twentieth century and by 2003, the average American woman weighed 155 lbs, the average American male, 180 lbs. Whether it was something to deliberately lose, or something that crept onto waistlines of Americans through the overindulgence of inexpensive, fatty foods, fat was certainly in the mind of the collective imagination during the second half of the twentieth and early part of the twenty first centuries. The cultural anxiety of fat crept its way into the content of popular films.

There is a politics surrounding both the fat and anorexic/bulimic body as corporeal forms of protest against hegemonic ideals of femininity, embodied in the figure of the curvaceous, sexually alluring, and confident woman. What these “subversive” bodies achieve in their refusal to conform, however, is a limited type of “freedom.” Eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, can emerge when a woman engages in the practices of conventional femininity (for example, dieting and exercising), but, going beyond the thin ideal, she takes those practices of restraint and self-mastery to the extreme. In this case, the anorectic’s emaciated body “immediately presents itself as a caricature of the contemporary ideal of hyperslenderness for women” (Bordo, 1993, p. 170). A psychoanalytic reading of anorexia and bulimia interprets the woman’s refusal to eat as her resistance to develop a female body, or a fear of femininity; she uses her body to express “anxieties and fantasies of a purely psycho-sexual nature, such as pregnancy or of attracting the sexual attention of men” (Bordo, 1993, p. 46). The anorectic loses her hips, breasts, and buttocks, thus ridding her body of its femininity and removing herself from the economy of sexual desire and the vulnerability that comes with being a sex object. Many theorists argue that interpreting anorexia as “a voiceless, unconscious, self-

destructive scream of protest” (Bordo, 1993, p. 64), however, is dangerous because it is a way of “‘romanticizing’ anorectics as ‘heroic’ freedom fighters” (Bordo, 1993, p. 64) when in reality they are headed towards early graves. Anorexia and bulimia are often also sparked by a woman’s desire to overcome her sense of powerlessness in a patriarchal, capitalist society by rejecting her femininity and embracing the “male” values of self-mastery, control, and detachment.

Both the fat and the anorexic/bulimic body are, according to LeBesco, considered “dissimilar.” She argues that “people who inhabit ‘dissimilar’ bodies are read as both inferior and threatening: inferior in terms of beauty and threatening in terms of the suggestion of downward mobility” (2004, p.54). She is referring here, to the dissimilar bodies of fat people, but, as outlined above, the anorectic/bulimic body is also dissimilar because it represents an extreme, rather than the ideal. Although both of these extremes are socially unacceptable, the fat body is more reviled than is the anorexic/bulimic body because the anorectic or bulimic body conforms to the rules surrounding the contemporary construction of femininity; that is, that “female hunger – for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification – be contained and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited” (Bordo, 1993, p. 171) Feminist theorist Susie Orbach interprets female fatness as yet another way to disrupt conventional stereotypes and representations of femininity and female sexuality. “Getting fat,” she argues, can be “understood as a definite and purposeful act; it is a directed, conscious, or unconscious, challenge to sex-role stereotyping and culturally defined experience of womanhood” (22). While this statement is problematic in its suggestion that all fat women gain weight in order to serve a political agenda, it also offers a gentler alternative

to the stereotype of the dangerous and reviled status that fat currently occupies in contemporary North American society.

The fact that obesity is stereotypically understood of as a lower- to middle-class condition further contributes to the negative connotations associated with fatness. Typically, wealthy women strive to keep their bodies thin in order to follow trends in fashion and to project an image of self-control. For example, the thin woman's lean body "codes the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self in which all is kept in order despite the contradictions of consumer culture" (Bordo, 1993, p. 201). The thin, wealthy female exudes the ultimate sign of restraint – a woman who can financially afford to eat the tempting and decadent food that consumer culture offers, but who restricts her intake and spends time, money and energy working to keep her body slim. Pierre Bordieu poignantly argues that the "more cultured bodies are those that are furthest from nature" (in LeBesco, 2004, p. 58) and the "gymrexic" physique of the stereotypical wealthy housewife accentuates this unnaturalness, for time and money are essential to maintain a sculpted body, a luxury not always available to working class women.

Through the dissemination of images that conform to the thin ideal, Hollywood and the media helped to entrench slenderness as the reigning beauty ideal. The visual reiteration of scrawny supermodels and actresses both normalizes and naturalizes a body type that is unattainable for most women. The perpetuation of these ideas leads to the relentless pursuit of thinness among women and girls who desperately cling to that part of gender ideology that equates success and beauty with thinness. Attempts to achieve this slender ideal can often lead to the onset of eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia (Wolf, 1999). Studies repeatedly show that women "do NOT feel very good about their

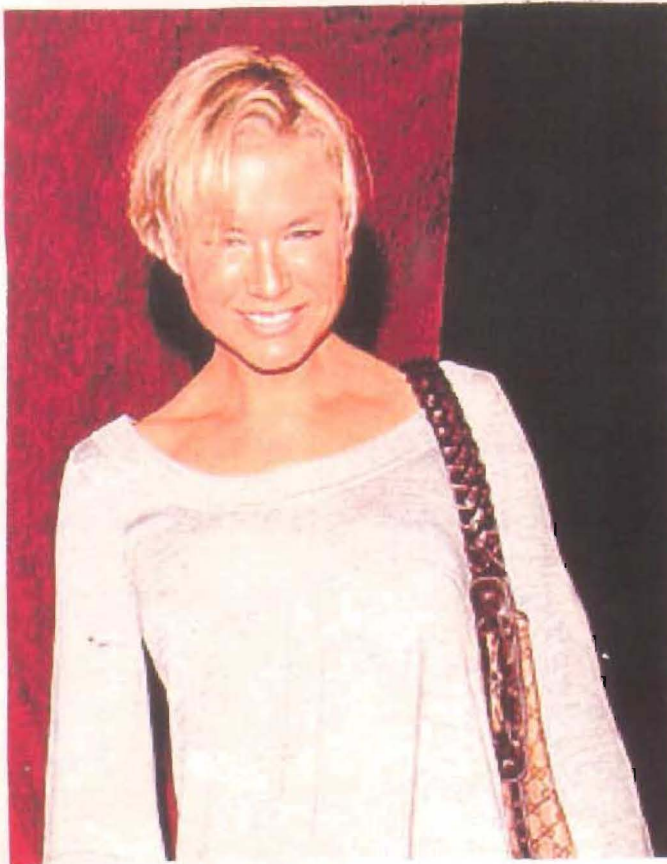


bodies” (Bordo, 1993, p. 57) and although not all women suffer from clinical eating disorders, most females in Western society are “‘disordered’ when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies” (Bordo, 1993, p.57). The fact that the industry standard for Hollywood actresses is a size zero (0) proves that the female characters seen in our popular films almost always conform to, and thus perpetuate, a narrow, hegemonic depiction of beauty. In fact, viewers have come to expect this version of beauty and femininity on the silver screen.

“History is long on representations of fat people,” writes LeBesco, “though their depiction is typically quite limited in scope” (2004, p. 75). And, although LeBesco does not explicitly allude to film, her research certainly speaks to the narrow representations of fat people in mainstream cinema. There is a maelstrom of cultural stereotypes surrounding fatness and many of these appear in mainstream films, including *Shallow Hal* (2001), *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), *Beauty Shop* (2005) and *Norbit* (2007). This paper will investigate the ways in which Hollywood representations of female fatness on screen perpetuate these stereotypes. It will also consider the attitudes that different communities cultivate towards body weight; for example, how fat-acceptance in white culture might differ from that of African American culture. Lastly, it will turn to two independent films, *Sweetie* (1989) and *Fat Girls* (2006), to determine whether non-Hollywood cinematic works offer more variety in terms of their representations of overweight women. This essay interrogates the stereotypical depiction of fat, particularly *female fat*, into contemporary cinema.

## Chapter I: Playing Fat

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## Chapter I: Playing Fat

North Americans' cultural fear of fat expresses itself in Hollywood's apparent refusal to hire fat actresses for overweight roles. Take, for example, the casting of Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shallow Hal* (2001) and Renee Zellweger in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001). LeBesco affirms that, "aesthetically, fat is the antithesis of the beauty ideal of the day: tight, lean, and toned" (2004, p. 1). In this way, female fatness, both on screen and in society at large, remains in what Katriina Kyrola calls "the closet of invisibility" (2005, p.100). Through the use of rubber suits and pre-production weight gain, respectively, these two films foster cultural anxieties and discomfort surrounding the fat body.

It is difficult to reconcile the portrayal of the 300 lb. Rosemary, played by Gwyneth Paltrow in a fat suit, in the Farrelly Brothers' comedy, *Shallow Hal*. This film perpetuates society's double standard concerning gender and body weight: although fat is culturally undesirable in both sexes, it seems that the public is willing to tolerate it as an acceptable aesthetic for men, but not for women. As Bordo argues, it is this sexist perception of fat-acceptance lies in the historically "dangerous" or threatening relationship between women, hunger, and fat. "Female hunger," she writes, is a "cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire" (1993, p.116). Whereas female indulgence is prohibited, mainstream advertisers (and this is at work in films as well) often use men as a strategic tool "for representing compulsive eating as 'natural' and even lovable" (Bordo, 1993, p. 108). When representing female eaters, however, advertisers play on the tendency for women to use food for purposes other than hunger, for example, as a coping mechanism for their uncontrolled or inexpressible emotions. The

female eater never indulges purely for pleasure – it is always an emotional act and one rife with guilt.

Although Rosemary is obese, the narcissistic and superficially eponymous character – played by Jack Black – does not perceive her as fat because self-help expert Tony Robbins “hypnotizes” him so that he will see a woman for what she is on the inside and not just for her physical appearance. However, the notion of inner beauty in the film is problematic because Hal’s initial attraction to Rosemary has nothing to do with her ontological being: it is her physical beauty (that is, Paltrow’s) that makes him grind to a halt in the middle of traffic upon seeing her. Unaware that his perception has been altered, Hal, who has, to date, been unsuccessful in love, cannot believe his luck when he meets Rosemary because what he *sees* – and what the spectators also see for most of the movie – is Paltrow’s stylish, Hollywood figure, or Rosemary’s “inner beauty” personified. Hal might see Rosemary’s inner beauty, but that “inner beauty” is also *physically* beautiful. Although Hal eventually falls in love with Rosemary’s intelligence, her sense of humour, and her giving spirit, it is her appearance that first attracts him to her and it is that about which he continuously raves.

Not only is there a gendered bias in terms of the actual fat body in this film, but there is also a discrepancy in the number of fat comments that men make versus the number that women make. Although there are currently more overweight male characters on television and in film than there are female, the fat men onscreen are “three times more likely to engage in fat commentary than female characters” (Himes & Thompson, 2007, p. 716) and there is evidence of this in *Shallow Hal*. There are three fat men in this film – Hal, his friend Mauricio (Jason Alexander), and Rosemary’s father (Joe Viterelli).

Unlike the fetishized and comedic representation of Rosemary's obesity, however, these overweight male bodies are not used as comedic devices in and of themselves. They are allowed to exist onscreen without apology or critique from within the film and they are not constructed in such a way that will make the audience laugh. After Hal has been happily dating Rosemary for some time, he refuses Mauricio's offer of a hot dog, claiming that he is watching his weight. "Since when do you care about your weight?" Mauricio retorts, thus drawing attention to the fact that caring about weight is a female concern and should not be an issue for heterosexual men. Moments after dismissing Hal's desire to watch his diet, Mauricio makes a condescending comment about Rosemary's size when Hal points out his new girlfriend (at this point in the film, Hal has no idea that his perception has been altered). These men are extremely critical of women's appearances and yet for most of the movie they fail to consider their own physical shortcomings.

The film perpetuates the "glamourization of slenderness" (Bordo, 1993, p.103) by showing us the bombshell version of Rosemary for most of the movie (instead of showing Paltrow in a fat suit) and this directorial decision undermines the film's potential to be a fat narrative. The audience quickly forgets that Rosemary is actually fat because of the constant reiteration of a thin Hollywood actress – a star whose strict macrobiotic diet keeps her extremely thin. The decision to show so much of Paltrow's svelte, sexualized figure emphasizes that "both" of Rosemary's bodies are illusions: the thin actress puts on the fat suit to portray the character (to *play* fatness), while Paltrow's body represents Hal's *imagined* perception of Rosemary. Thematically, Paltrow's body is as much an illusion as the fat suit is visually. The fat body in this film, therefore, is as

fictional as the character “Rosemary” and her body is only represented through a series of adding on or taking away. Because the fat female body does not actually exist in this film, one might hesitate to say that this is a movie about an obese woman. In this film, female fatness is suggested, or hinted at, it is “put on” and “taken off,” but it is also laughed at and is not represented in the flesh for a lead romantic role. Paltrow acts as the glamorous body double that makes Rosemary’s story more accessible for mainstream audiences. How might this movie be different if an obese woman played Rosemary, thus forcing the audience to imagine how Hal perceives Rosemary’s inner beauty?

The answer to this question lies in the realm of genre. The film’s comedic success depends on the viewers’ visual perception and the effect would not be nearly as powerful if the audience had to imagine Hal’s altered – or “beautiful” – version of Rosemary. As Meghan Sutherland points out, we laugh at the “incongruity between how [Hal] perceives Rosemary and how Rosemary actually looks.” Shots are constructed in such a way that we are meant to laugh when the camera cuts jarringly from Paltrow’s thin body (Hal’s point of view) to Rosemary’s obese body (how she really looks, or how Paltrow looks in a fat suit). It is meant to be hilarious when we see Hal enjoying himself dancing with a woman that he thinks is sexy, but whom we realize is actually obese (and, therefore, “not sexy”) when the camera cuts to Mauricio’s “unaltered” perception. Therefore, for the purposes of this film, the discrepancy between the rubber suit and Paltrow’s body was necessary to its overall success, but *Shallow Hal* remains guilty of perpetuating fat stigmatization and reinstating the thin ideal as the dominant symbol of female beauty and sexuality.

The role of the spectator is a much-theorized subject in film theory. In her pivotal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey analyzes the effect of the close-up in mainstream Hollywood cinema: "Conventional close-ups of legs (Dietrich, for instance) or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism" (1975, p. 34). She goes on to demonstrate how a woman's body, "stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and direct recipient of the spectator's look" (1975, p. 36). In Mulvey's example, the close-ups of Dietrich and Garbo are intentionally inserted into the film to disrupt the standard use of long- and medium-shots in order to evoke pleasure from the viewer. The Farrelly Brothers, however, use this convention ironically and capture close-ups of Rosemary's "cankles" and dimpled calves as parody – an effect that successfully provokes laughter rather than visual pleasure. Rosemary becomes the silent comedian: by inverting a classic cinematic convention, the filmmakers deconstruct Rosemary's body through the cut-outs and zoom-ins of her fat limbs, thus turning her into something ridiculous as opposed to sexy.

For Mulvey, visual pleasure in cinema is synonymous with male pleasure and she discusses how the spectator's "controlling male gaze" (1975, p. 36) objectifies the onscreen female. What happens to that gaze, however, when the woman onscreen is not, according to hegemonic standards, beautiful or pleasurable to look at? When she is not, in other words, a "perfect image of female beauty" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 37) as audiences have come to expect in film? According to Mulvey, there are two components to this male gaze. The first is the scopophilic instinct, which means that the viewer finds "pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object" (1975, p. 38). She calls the

second component “the ego libido,” which is essentially the viewer’s “identification process” (1975, p. 38) with the projected subject. For those audience members who are not fat admirers, the first process (the scopophilic instinct) is disrupted when the woman in the film waddles, has multiple chins, and weighs 300 lbs, as does Rosemary. This image of femininity is shocking for viewers who are accustomed to mainstream depictions of female sexual desirability because it is so drastically violates what a to expect from the female body in film. The filmmakers temper the shock of seeing such a fleshy woman in a lead role by showing Paltrow’s real body for most of the film and resorting to the rubber suit for moments of comic relief. Therefore, Paltrow’s portrayal of Rosemary’s inner beauty still satisfies the viewers’ scopophilic pleasure and reaffirms conventional viewing expectations, something that would be missing from the experience if we only saw Paltrow in fat suit or an obese actress for the entire film.

This movie is also problematic because it reduces women’s identity to one of two options or binaries. In his conversation with Mauricio, Tony Robbins points out that “everything [we] know about beauty has been programmed,” and while this movie attempts to deconstruct the absurdity of believing in a hegemonic definition of beauty, it also upholds some of these stereotypical notions. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Klein argues that “culture stereotypes women to fit the [beauty] myth by flattening the feminine into beauty-without-intelligence or intelligence-without-beauty” (1999, p. 59). This is the only type of woman that exists in the narrative of *Shallow Hal* and it is an extremely damaging message to convey to both male and female viewers. Mauricio emphasizes the limited options for women, that they can be either beautiful or intelligent, but not both, through an explanation of his absurd theory of the “ugly duckling syndrome.”



Mauricio explains the “ugly duckling syndrome” theory when Hal tells his friend that he has met a girl who is a knock-out but who is also funny, kind, and intelligent. Mauricio cannot fathom that a woman like the one Hal describes can be real and uses the “ugly duckling syndrome” theory to rationalize her existence. According to Mauricio’s philosophy, an “ugly duckling” is a woman who was an “ugly” adolescent, but who grew into her beauty as she aged. This theory assumes that, in the absence of beauty, the young woman made up for her “lack” by fulfilling other roles such as “the funny girl,” or “the smart girl.” Her late-blooming beauty allowed her to fully develop her personality before she started receiving attention for her looks. Therefore, she does not possess an air of entitlement or snobbery that girls who have always been praised for being “the pretty girl” for their whole lives might exude. Mauricio’s theory is problematic on many levels, but what is troubling within the narrative is that the type of woman he is referring to – one who is both beautiful and personable – is hinted at, but she never materializes. A woman this complex cannot exist according to the governing principles of this film and all women, including Rosemary, are reduced to binaries: they “are allowed a mind or a body but not both” (Wolf, 1999, p. 59).

Mauricio explains this “theory” when Hal says that he is surprised that “a girl who’s so pretty can have so much personality.” For Mauricio, “the ugly duckling” phenomenon is the only possible answer to the riddle that is Rosemary, that is, a girl who is pretty and not bitchy. As he states later in the movie, “pretty girls are not smart and they certainly aren’t nice.” Therefore, according to Mauricio’s reasoning, the only way for Rosemary to be both pretty and smart, is if she has been not-beautiful at one point in her life. Mauricio’s theory falls flat, however, once he meets Rosemary and he realizes

that she is not in fact pretty. Rather than being an “ugly duckling” she is simply and plainly “not pretty” (but beyond that, she is *also* fat) and therefore it is no surprise at all that she has personality, wit, and brains. In the end, Hal loves Rosemary for everything that she is on the inside and the outside, but because her outside does not correspond with the thin ideal, she does not represent that complex, layered woman that Mauricio hints at, but whom remains an abstract ideal in this movie.

While Rosemary seems to accept her obesity, she is nonetheless complacent about her body and rules out the possibility that she might also be sexy and desirable, as well as fat. Using the logic of Mauricio’s “ugly duckling syndrome,” Rosemary defines herself in terms of being either beautiful or intelligent and denies herself a whole, well-rounded personality: she believes that she is “not beautiful,” and that she is therefore “funny [and] smart”; because she is funny and smart she cannot be pretty. By labelling herself as either/or she establishes rigid boundaries around her identity and she actively perpetuates stereotypes about femininity, beauty, and weight: “I’m the girl who gets good grades and isn’t afraid to be funny.” This seems to be another slippery moment of in the movie’s message: physical beauty is not important. However, those who do not fit within the narrow confines of what society deems attractive will be limited in terms of achievements and experiences.

This Farrelly Brothers’ film claims to be a narrative about an overweight woman, but Rosemary’s corpulent body is seldom seen on camera. The fact that the fat body is absent for most of the film demonstrates (and this is Kyrola’s criticism of many contemporary depictions of fat women in film) how “fatness becomes a closet of fear, a dangerous shell that prevents the real person (woman) from being and being seen as her

‘true’ petite self” (2005, p. 99). This argument applies to *Shallow Hal* because the fact that Hal sees thin Rosemary played by Paltrow hidden deep within Rosemary suggests that a stunning woman actually exists at her core and is waiting patiently for Rosemary to take the necessary action to unleash her. The film naturalizes thinness by establishing this problematic dichotomy between the thin, “true” self and the fat self as what Kyrola calls a “non-person” (2005, p. 100), or a woman who is perceived as not being a whole while she waits for the thin woman inside to emerge at which point she will be considered a complete person. It suggests that Rosemary has not “come out” as fat and remains trapped within the closet of size. She is not, this film suggests, living up to her “full potential” because she *could* so easily be beautiful and look like Paltrow if reduced her caloric intake and started exercising.

Since most leading actresses in cinema look more like Paltrow than they do Rosemary, it seems safe to assume that there would be little room for the 300-pound female lead in this romantic-comedy if Hal had not first been hypnotized. In a 1999 study that analyzed the portrayal of overweight characters on television, results showed that, “heavier characters were more likely to be in minor roles [and] were less likely to be involved in romantic relationships” (Himes and Thompson, 2007, p. 713). This provides empirical evidence for conclusions we can arrive at through a rather shallow observation of the media and popular culture. Presumably, Hal would join the chorus of cacklers (for example, Mauricio and the audience) in laughing at Rosemary’s stigmatized figure, rather than considering her as a desirable mate. What, then, is this narrative really about: an overweight girl who finds true love despite society’s shallow obsession with appearances,

or the fact that an obese woman cannot be loved without first being perceived as something else – meaning, thin?

Despite its shortcomings, *Shallow Hal* successfully tackles common stereotypes surrounding the relationship between fatness and socio-economic status in North America. By writing Rosemary into an upper class family, the filmmakers challenge the commonly held belief that “fatness...marks one as a failure at attaining citizenship in the dominant socio-economic class” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 58). The toned, thin female body also acts as an “outer indication of the spiritual, moral, or emotional state of the individual” (Bordo, 1993, p.187) and many wealthy thin women use their bodies to express the state of their inner lives, to give the impression that their lives are ordered, in-control, and picture-perfect. As Bordo (1993) argues, the slender body reflects the appropriate attitudes of self-mastery and control in a patriarchal, consumer society, whereas the fat body symbolizes those values that threaten the tenets of capitalism: “laziness, lack of discipline, [and] unwillingness to conform” (Bordo, 1993, p.195). By keeping their bodies toned and managed, wealthy women’s bodies “indicate [their] social identity and ‘place’” (Bordo, 1993, p. 191). Rosemary, however, comes from a prominent family and while it may be true that obesity is less common among society’s elite, this film reminds us that it is wrong to assume that all wealthy people can easily achieve thinness (although Rosemary still desires it), and (more importantly) that not all fat people are poor, lazy slobs.

As the daughter of wealthy parents, Rosemary surpasses the dominant (middle) class in society. But more than this socio-economic transcendence, she also challenges the stereotypes cast the impression that a universal or essentialist fat identity exists.

Although contemporary rhetoric regards fat as a social evil – as something that is “repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene, and above all, something to lose” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 16) – Rosemary’s character represents a capable, intelligent and involved citizen who also happens to be obese. Fat women are often portrayed in film as “figures of fun, occasionally villanesses, often ‘bad examples’ of people with no self-control or low self-esteem” (Notkin in LeBesco, 2004, p. 41). Rosemary defies these archetypical fat roles and is active in the Peace Corps, passionate about helping underdeveloped countries, and volunteers with the children in the burn unit at the hospital. LeBesco argues that the television series, *Drew Carey Show* and *The Practice*, depict fatness in a positive light: “These are competent funny, interesting characters who, amazingly, have sexual relationships with (non-fat) others, say intelligent things, and generally lead full lives; they also just happen to be fat” (2004, p. 76). The same can be said of Rosemary, but it seems that for her, being fat is still the most “telling thing about [her] character” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 76) since it takes centre stage in the film.

Rosemary’s complacent feelings about her body strike a familiar note in terms of fat stigmatization. Rosemary tells Hal that her weight remains the same, regardless of what she eats and so she figures that she might as well eat whatever she wants. There is shame in her voice and she utters this confession directly after ordering nearly everything on the menu. In a sense, this scene might burst the myth, supported by public discourse that “suggests that fat people are the victims of their own undoing” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 111). On the other hand, it might be the filmmaker’s sarcastic commentary on the tendency for many fat people to adopt the “will to innocence”; that is, “a rhetoric of innocence which seeks to relieve [assimilationists] of responsibility for their much

maligned condition” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 112). Here, Rosemary is asking Hal and the audience to believe that no matter what passes through her lips, her hips remain the same size. This confession, along with what we know about Rosemary’s upstanding citizenship, might make it easier for the spectators to accept that Rosemary’s obesity might be genetic and not a symptom of her compulsive eating and under-activity. This is a convoluted declaration, however, since in a sense she excuses herself as responsible for her obesity, but because she does not even attempt to watch what she eats, she also perpetuates the cultural assumption “that the fat woman is at least partially to blame for her own fatness...and that the wider world need not change” (Kyrola, 2005, p. 101). It suggests that it is not the jerks that laugh at her when she exits the restaurant who must change, but Rosemary herself.

Although it does not rely on a rubber suit to bring its main character to life, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001) is another instance of “playing fat” in recent film history. Bridget (Renee Zellweger) is not obese, but her chubby body exceeds the rigid boundaries to which most of today’s female actresses’ bodies conform. The film triumphantly celebrates its heroine’s curvier silhouette, but there is some controversy surrounding the film’s casting: Zellweger is a svelte actress who had to *gain weight* for this role. Kyrola alludes to this film in her argument that “before-and-after images, fat suits, Charlize Theron and Renee Zellweger gaining and losing weight in ‘fatty’ roles...all repeat the same refusal to incorporate fatness into our bodies and into our society as a permanent part of us” (2005, p. 99). Hiring a waif to pig out on pizza and beer for a month prior to shooting in order that she may “pass” as chubby sends the tyrannous message that fat will be tolerated, but only temporarily and even then, only

within the fictional realm of cinema. Zellweger dropped her “Bridget weight” (just over 28 lbs.) remarkably quickly – documented, as it was in the tabloids and popular press – and this urgent transformation further emphasizes the latter point that fat is something one should strive to lose. After returning to her “natural” form (a rather unnatural size zero), Zellweger regained the weight three years later for a reprisal role in the film’s 2004 sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. Again, she lost her weight almost instantly once filming wrapped and conformed yet again to the dominant Hollywood norm of the thin ideal.

One wonders why the filmmakers did not hire an actress who naturally has Bridget’s body type to bring the character to life. Although Zellweger was presumably hired for her acting skills, choosing an actress who is clearly disciplined in terms of her eating and exercise regime to portray a curvier woman reminds us just how fearful a thing fat is. The surface of Zellweger’s lean, “contained” body symbolizes an ordered, morally upright inner life. As Bordo writes, the slender body embodies qualities such as “detachment, self-containment, self-mastery and control” (1993, p. 209). Bridget’s “loose,” flabby curves, on the other hand, are physical manifestations of her chaotic, disordered personal life – her failure to secure a man, her inability to accomplish goals (including losing twenty pounds) and her knack for making a fool of herself in public. Bridget’s repeated blunders are comedic and endearing, but there seems to be a definite link here between body type and personality. There exists only limited access to the specifics of Zellweger’s personal life, but her public persona is that of a disciplined and focused actress who takes her craft – as well as her body – very seriously. Having achieved the thin ideal, Zellweger contributes to popular rhetoric that conflates being

slender with the successful achievement of “empowerment, personal freedom, ‘having it all’” (Bordo, 1993, p. 184). Bridget, far from having it all, is the epitome of the goofball and her body seems to reflect her laid-back, haphazard approach to life. The obvious contradiction between the thin, “serious” actress and the chubby, “ridiculous” character supports the notion that “thinness has become the cultural symbol for competency” (Szekely, 1988, p. 38), as well as Bordo’s theory that the state of our interior lives are reflected in the tautness – or looseness – of our bodies.

This film celebrates a more voluptuous female physique, and although men in the film think Bridget is sexy and she has brief affairs with two male characters, she constantly loses out romantically to women who are thin. A couple of days into her blissful affair with her boss, Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant), Bridget catches him cheating on her with Lara (Lisa Barbuscia), a woman from the American branch of their publishing firm. Sitting naked on the edge of Daniel’s bathtub, Lara looks at Bridget and says to Daniel, “I thought you said she was thin.” Here, the skinny, successful, *serious* American woman beats out the freewheeling, ridiculous (she is dressed in a bunny costume), chubby English girl in terms of attracting a mate. Bridget also loses her second suitor, Mark Darcy (Colin Firth) – a man who tells Bridget he likes her “just as you are” – to Natasha, who, like Lara, is successful, conservative, and above all, *thin*. The fact that both of these women beat Bridget in the race for a man seems to reinforce the idea that “any mainstream discussion of sexy bodies typically excludes the fat body” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 40) and the hegemonic myth that all men desire slender women.

There is a sense of voyeuristic pleasure in reading about an actress who is given permission to indulge her food fantasies and the media certainly played its role in hyping



up Zellweger's weight-gain and documenting the juicy details of her transformation. To imagine the reserved, birdlike Zellweger stuffing her face with greasy, fattening foods is almost abject because it so violates our impression of her as a glamorous actress strutting down the red carpet in designer gowns. This image also contradicts our cultural expectations surrounding female eating in general. Zellweger's slender, almost androgynous figure, demonstrates her "ability to 'rise above' the need to eat" (Bordo, 1993, p. 62), something that has a different meaning for a wealthy woman who can afford, financially, to indulge in rich foods (Bordo, 1993). Zellweger is clearly able to resist overindulgence, a will that speaks through her thin body and which "imparts moral or aesthetic superiority" (Bordo, 1993, p. 62). Bordo argues that "female eating is virtually always represented as private, secretive, illicit" (1993, p. 129) in advertisements and the media at large – an image so deeply ingrained in the collective imagination that we have come to expect this guilty female relationship with food. Any representation that does not conform to this norm – for example, a woman who has a healthy attitude towards food and her body – seems out of the ordinary and unrealistic. In this case, Zellweger is permitted –*paid*, even – to break her rules (as well as those of society) surrounding (female) eating and the public wants to witness this transgression, not to mention the ways in which her body changes. It is as if the female readers live vicariously through her binges and experience a glimmer of what it might feel like to be allowed to satisfy one's hunger without suffering from post-indulgence guilt or shame.

## Chapter II: Cultural Inscriptions

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## Chapter II: Cultural Inscriptions – Fatness in African American Communities

Queen Latifah's 2005 highly successful film, *Beauty Shop*, and Eddie Murphy's 2007 flop, *Norbit*, provide a useful entry point for a discussion on the dynamics of female weight and race. While Queen Latifah portrays an empowered, successful image of an overweight black woman, Murphy's depiction of African American womanhood is rife with racist and sexist stereotypes.

*Beauty Shop*'s central message is that not only is "Black is Beautiful," an adage made popular during the 1960s when African American consciousness was on the rise throughout the United States (Leslie, 1995), but that big is beautiful. The film celebrates confident, overweight, self-accepting African American women, but in doing so, it perpetuates the cultural assumption that black women are more comfortable with fatness than white women are, a stereotype that contributes to essentialist notions of black female identity. Stereotypes that suggest that African American women do not foster anxieties about the shape of their bodies are also damaging because they "propel a fetishizing of black attitudes about fat bodies" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 61). According to LeBesco (2004), it is problematic for white women to put "black/African fat acceptance on a pedestal" (2004, p. 61) and there is evidence of differing racial attitudes towards weight throughout the film.

Queen Latifah plays Gina, a hair stylist and single mother, who works at a salon under the demanding and diva-like owner, Jorge (Kevin Bacon). In the opening scene, Gina and her young daughter, Vanessa, are getting ready to go to work and school respectively and Gina asks her daughter if her pants make her "butt look big?" Vanessa beams when she answers, "Yeah, they do!" Gina is equally as proud as she takes a second

glance at her reflection in the mirror and says, "Perfect!" Gina's unwavering confidence about her body contradicts the low-self esteem of her white clients at the salon, including Joanne (Mena Suvari), who declares, in the film's second scene, that she wants to get breast implants, and Teri (Andie MacDowell), who is obsessed with her weight. From the very start of the film, the audience understands that women's relationships to their own bodies are divided along racial lines: heavy black women are steadfast in their self-confidence and unapologetic about their bodies, whereas thin, white women are doomed to dissatisfaction concerning their appearance. This racist and stereotypical motif persists throughout the entire film.

Another cultural clash surrounding attitudes towards fat occurs over lunch hour one day at Gina's new shop, which she opens in Atlanta's ghetto (because rent is cheaper there) after quitting Jorge's downtown salon. The uptight housewife, Teri, comes to Gina's new salon during lunchtime and a local woman, Catfish Rita, is there selling fried greens and other greasy delicacies from her cart to the stylists and their customers. The audience is already aware of Teri's desire to lose weight after she tells Gina that her husband wants her to lose weight, even though she is slim. When she finally treats herself to a plateful of Catfish Rita's fried greens, she inquires about its caloric content. Rita brushes off Teri's concern, assuring her that there is loads of fat in all of her food; fat is good, Rita exclaims, and encourages Teri to join in: "Say it with me, fat is good!" Teri sings along with the "Fat is good!" mantra as she downs the greasy food on her plate. She feels a sense of elation and liberation in breaking the rules and she begins to accept that different rules apply in this African American space – that these black women have

emancipated themselves from the shackles of that part of gender ideology that says that successful, beautiful women must be thin.

In Gina's shop, Teri is far from her "real" reality. She is away from suburbia, her oppressive husband, and she feels she can safely indulge in fatty foods without feeling guilty or shameful about it directly after swallowing the last bite. In the salon, she asserts her agency over her body and does not seem to care about what her husband thinks. In this way she defies her husband's wish that she lose weight by listening to her own desires and allowing herself to indulge her appetite freely. Teri's guiltless surrender to fatty foods is problematic, however, because a black woman had to *tell* her to eat the food and to *reassure* her that fat is good. This coaching from the black women implies that this knowledge (that fat is *good*) is inherent, or innate, for African American women, but something that white females must be taught since they have been so successfully influenced by normalizing images of the thin ideal.

*Beauty Shop* also equates the fat, black female body with sexual confidence and a healthy, active sex life. The three white women in this film are all thinner than the black women, and they are all more sexually conservative, thus stereotyping black women as hypersexual; white women as ingénues. Teri tells the women at the shop that her husband is away on business, and all the women instantly assume that he is cheating on her. Teri's character operates as a foil to the black women and their uninhibited discussion about sex and men: the middle-aged woman acts like a giggly, squeamish schoolgirl when the stylists probe her with questions about her sex life with her husband. Throughout her visits, though, Teri begins to feel more at ease with the black stylists (as well as with herself) and loosens up about sex-talk, as well as her insecurity about her appearance. In

the film's finale, Teri struts into the shop and proudly announces that she and her husband have split up, then immediately shows off her new "booty" to the girls, who (predictably) validate her curviness with praise. Again, it is only through her contact with African American culture via the overweight, sexually liberated, self-accepting black women that she feels empowered enough to undergo a physical and emotional transformation and assert her self-worth. The empowered black women rescue this Southern damsel in (body image) distress and liberate her from the tyranny of slenderness, at least temporarily.

This correlation between race, sexuality, and self-acceptance is reinforced in the discussion at the salon surrounding Joanne's new breast implants. Chanel (Golden Brooks), a black stylist in Gina's shop, makes a sweeping statement in response to Joanne's new breasts by insisting that worrying about one's appearance and getting liposuction and plastic surgery is "more of a white girl thing." Lynn (Alicia Silverstone), the innocent, white Southern Belle and Gina's protégé from Jorge's salon, pipes in and contradicts Chanel, pointing out that black girls undergo similar treatments, as well. Chanel dismisses this counter-argument, however, and continues in her essentialist vein, saying that black women do not get "as crazy as white women do" about their appearances and that some women (black women) are naturally sexy and curvy. Ms. Josephine (Alfre Woodard), another black stylist at the salon, supports Chanel's argument and alludes to their African American heritage, proclaiming that "the motherland" is the original source of black women's curves. Ms. Josephine, therefore, perpetuates the assumption that *all* black women are curvy and that their weight does not negatively affect their experiences in life.

African American female spectators and consumers in the early twenty-first century have more options and alternatives to the ubiquitous (white) cookie-cutter image of beauty than did their ancestors prior to the 1960s. The image of the thin, blonde, blue-eyed woman, however, is still the dominant beauty ideal in North America and Gina's stylists' dialogue surrounding Afrocentric femininity reasserts the film's empowering message that black is indeed beautiful. This film is marketed to mainstream audiences, but its predominantly black cast suggests that it might attract many African American viewers, which accounts for its message that beauty comes in various shapes and colours. The film critiques the white characters' anxieties about their weight and their desire to conform to proscriptive notions of femininity, while emphasizing the black women's confidence in their bodies that might be "dissimilar," but beautiful. Black girls in mid-twentieth century America lacked cultural reference points that incorporated notions of African American femininity in the beauty industry; black girls were, therefore, were "the antithesis of American beauty" (Grier and Cobbs in Leslie, 1995, p. 427). This film celebrates alternative notions of beauty, femininity, and sexuality for all of its viewers, but particularly those who are African American.

In the media's sea of skinny, white women, Queen Latifah herself acts as a positive alternative to hegemonic beauty norms. Her role as a spokeswoman for the American weight loss clinic, Jenny Craig, however, seems to contradict the central message of most the films she stars in, which promote pro-fat attitudes and self-acceptance. According to LeBesco, overweight female celebrities fit into to one of three categories depending on their position "vis-à-vis their own fatness" (2004, p.95).

LeBesco's categories include those celebrities who, like actress Kathy Bates, are "Out

and About” (2004, p. 95); “The Silent Types,” or those public figures who are overweight but who do not openly discuss their weight in public (LeBesco, 2004); and, finally, the “Traitors” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 95). Because Queen Latifah has made her weight a topic that is open for public discussion, she falls into the third category, along with other traitors, such as Oprah Winfrey, Ricki Lake, and Rosie O’Donnell (LeBesco, 2004). Through her Jenny Craig role, Queen Latifah encourages her fans (as well as other overweight Americans in general) to join her in losing 5-10% of her body weight (Jenny Craig), rather than promoting unattainable ideals. She might seem like less of a “traitor” because she focuses on the benefits of increased overall health and a more confident self-image that come with weight loss, rather than equating it with looking better and thereby becoming a better, more successful woman. A traitor’s “drastic eating efforts or experience with weight-loss surgery front a devastatingly negative view of fatness” (LeBesco, 2004, p.93) and their often feel betrayed by these celebrities’ insistence that fat is something to lose. This is especially true if the fan identified with the celebrity in the first place because of her weight. These celebrities, LeBesco’s analysis concludes, fail to “come out” as fat. In other words, rather than choosing to “no longer pass as ‘on-the-way-to-thin’” (LeBesco, 2004, p.95), traitors continue their relentless pursuit of slenderness through fad diets, trendy exercise regimes, and, in extreme cases, surgery.

Knowing that Queen Latifah went under the knife for a breast reduction in 2003 (People.com, 2007) adds an ironic element to the stylists’ aforementioned conversation about the difference in racial attitudes towards plastic surgery. Queen Latifah claims that she underwent the procedure not for aesthetic reasons, but because after losing 25 lbs., her “breasts didn’t go anywhere” (People.com, 2007) and she was “still carrying that



load” (People.com, 2007). Queen Latifah provides sound justification for her surgery, but for a discussion on the fat female body in film, this physical alteration adds to the mainstreaming, or streamlining, of her body: her diminished bust gives her an overall smaller appearance and her body, therefore, comes closer to conforming to a thinner silhouette. Queen Latifah’s post-surgery body is now a very well-proportioned fat body and, beyond this, the film’s wardrobe crew stylize it in such a way to further diminish her size: her wardrobe makes her look curvy and shapely without exposing her rolls or lumps of fat. Her weight is contained and hidden under flowing shirts and dresses that drape her body and downplay her size. Threaded throughout the discussion of the black women’s “big is beautiful” discourse in the film, is the image of an actual fat body whose bulk is constantly concealed with “forgiving” clothing.

Although the filmmakers try to make Queen Latifah’s 200 lb. physique look slimmer through wardrobe choices, this film is, in many ways, a fat-positive narrative. Gina’s weight does not prevent her from being a successful entrepreneur or from raising her daughter on her own because her husband is dead (as opposed to the racial stereotype of the deadbeat, absentee black father). The fact that she has a romance with Joe, the attractive, physically fit, African American man who lives above her new shop, also challenges the stereotype that if fat people have intimate relationships, they are only with individuals who have similar bodies (LeBesco, 2004). Unlike Rosemary’s fat in *Shallow Hal*, Gina’s weight is not presented as the laughing stock of the film; her weight is not constructed in such a way to elicit laughter from the people in the film or from the audience. This film promotes a healthy body image and self-acceptance for all women,

whether they are fat or slim, large-breasted or small, white or black. Self-acceptance in this film is equated with a healthy and successful lifestyle.

This film might also be considered a pro-fat narrative because it addresses the aforementioned theory that fat-as-bad is socially and culturally constructed: “while women sized 16-22 are considered full-figured and desirable in African American communities...women of the same sizes are considered fat and undesirable in white middle-class communities” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 61). This film attempts to demonstrate that the black women’s pro-fat attitudes are products of a different cultural ideology than that of the white women, who willingly succumb to the tyranny of slenderness. A woman’s body, therefore, is seen as an object of disgust or desirability, depending upon the community to which she belongs. According to the above theory, it is not the race of the overweight woman that necessarily matters, but the race of her *peers* in terms of determining her place in society – as either a marginalized fatso, or a curvaceous, beautiful woman. Delineating white culture from black culture and assuming that different expectations of beauty are at work in either community, however, is problematic.

While no one would dispute the importance of self-acceptance, many critics argue that it is a racist and damaging myth that assumes that all black women are voluptuous and that they do not feel pressure to conform to the thin ideal. Bordo addresses the dangers of stereotypes, such as those perpetuated in *Beauty Shop*, that assume that black women are exempt from the pressure to be thin: “To imagine that African American women are immune to the standards of slenderness that reign today is...to come very close to the racist notion that the glamour – the culture – of femininity belongs to the

white woman alone. The black woman, by contrast, is woman in her earthy, ‘natural’ state, uncorseted by civilization” (1993, p. 63). Ms. Josephine’s reference to “the motherland” perpetuates the “racist ideology and imagery that construct the non-European ‘races’ as ‘primitive,’ ‘savage,’ sexually animalistic and indeed more *bodily* than the white ‘races’ [that] extends to black women as well as black men” (Bordo, 1993, p. 9). Ms. Josephine’s allusion to “the motherland” infers the damaging discourse surrounding African Americans’ promiscuity and sexual deviance and fails to be the empowering message she hoped it to be for the women in her shop and in the audience.

LeBesco (2004) argues that although studies have shown that African American girls are in fact more content with their weight and are less likely to start dieting than are white girls, these statistics should not be misinterpreted as empirical proof that eating disorders and Body Image Distortion Syndrome (BIDS) do not exist in black communities. To say that *most* black girls are *less likely* than white girls to start dieting does not mean that *all* black girls are comfortable with their bodies and do not feel pressure to conform to hegemonic beauty ideals. LeBesco argues that placing too much emphasis on these types of statistics can lead to “the fetishizing of black attitudes about fat bodies” (2004, p. 61) and the tendency for white women to put “black/African fat acceptance on a pedestal” (2004, p. 61) – a damaging and essentialist portrayal to which this film adheres. The fact that the media is increasingly promoting diet and exercise products to African American audiences provides further support for the argument that, despite what cultural rhetoric might have us believe, African American women do in fact feel pressure to conform to the thin ideal and films that fail to address these nuances flatten African American women’s experience.

There is a wide range of possible representations for women in general and African American womanhood has its own history of archetypal figures. If Queen Latifah's character in *Beauty Shop* embodies the positive attributes of African American femininity – strength, survival, self-confidence – then Eddie Murphy's portrayal of Rasputia in his 2007 film, *Norbit*, can be read as its polar opposite: a misogynistic melting-pot of the negative connotations associated with black womanhood. Popular representations of black womanhood include the asexual, obedient, self-sacrificing Mammy figure; Caldonia, the large, emasculating “matriarch”; and the hypersexualized, deviant “Jezebel” (Emerson, 2002). The morbidly obese Rasputia embodies many of these harmful cultural assumptions about black women and this narrative is rife with fat stigmatization. Because Murphy wears a rubber suit to portray the film's fat female, *Norbit*, like *Shallow Hal*, is yet another example of Hollywood's costumed depiction of fatness. Further, since it is a male actor under rubber suit, this film fails to use real fat and a real woman in its representation of female fatness. Murphy extends the misogyny of his stand-up comedy routines (for example, 1987's *Raw*) to this role and exploits common stereotypes about African American women.

Among the various depictions of African American womanhood, the figure of Caldonia (Foster, 1973) is a popular stereotype and in this film, Rasputia operates as a caricature of this racist representation. Caldonia is “the matriarch, fat, loud, and emasculating” (Foster, 1973, p. 433), and Rasputia's body, as well as her personality, represent hyperbolized characteristic of this archetypal black female figure. *Big Momma's House* (2000) and its sequel, *Big Momma's House 2* (2006) and *The Ladykillers* (2004), are other examples of contemporary films that feature this trope of

black femininity. Along with playing Rasputia, Murphy also plays the lead male character, Norbit, whom Rasputia keeps safe from bullies with her massive bulk from a young age. Years later, when Norbit hesitates to kiss his bride (Rasputia) during their wedding ceremony, she grabs him by the shoulders and says, "Open your mouth!" before opening her mouth as if to consume him. Here the image is unmistakable. As Mikhail Bakhtin has noted on the notion of the grotesque, "the gaping mouth is related to the image of swallowing, this most ancient symbol of death and destruction" (in Hole, 2000, p. 288) and this is precisely what Rasputia is: a devouring, destructive force that suffocates Norbit spiritually, emotionally, and at times physically. At the wedding reception, Norbit's friends make condescending comments about Rasputia's size: "You don't gotta worry about this brother not buying the milk," says one of Norbit's pimp friends, Pope Sweet Jesus, "'cause he just bought the whole damn cow." To which his friend, Lord Have Mercy, adds, "That's a special cow, too. That must be where buttermilk comes from." Mr. Wong, the owner of the orphanage in which Norbit grew up, and also the best man at the wedding, makes a toast to Norbit and his new "gorilla." While Norbit is trying to lift his new wife to carry her across the threshold of their home, she commands, "Be a man" after his first few attempts fail. Finally, she pushes him to the ground, says "You ain't no man. Pathetic!" and steps over Norbit's body to enter their new home. Norbit and Rasputia finally make it to the bedroom to consummate their marriage, and although they are both virgins, Rasputia displays a more dominant, confident role, compared to Norbit's nervousness. She appears in the doorway in skimpy lace negligee and black pleather boots before launching herself onto the bed where Norbit is waiting for her and is literally crushed by Rasputia's weight. Norbit is physically and

emotionally powerless in his fight to assert himself against the overweight and overbearing Caldonia figure.

*Norbit* was nominated for an Oscar at the 2008 Academy Awards for the make-up category, and, although the film lost to *La Vie En Rose*, Rick Baker and Kazuhiro Tsuji successfully recreate dimples and stretch marks on Rasputia's fat body. Rasputia's enormously accentuated breasts, hips and buttocks can be understood as a modern incarnation of the figure of the Hottentot Venus. Sara Baartman, known in nineteenth century Europe as the Hottentot Venus, was a black South African woman whose large buttocks and supposedly oversized labia "shaped prevalent ideas about black female deviance and hypersexuality" (Hobson, 2003, p. 88). And there is a long continuity of this representation of black women and their sexuality. Baartman was a foil to the reserved, conservative European notion of femininity and female sexuality and she became an eroticised figure of black female sexuality and exoticism. "The problematic fetishism of the Hottentot's rear end" (Hobson, 2003, p. 88) as a symbol of black women's loose sexual mores is reconstructed in many contemporary cultural artefacts. Rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot's 1992 hit, "Baby's Got Back" invokes the legacy of the Hottentot Venus and her accentuated rear-end with lyrics like, "I like big butts and I cannot lie/ You other brothers can't deny/ That when a girl walk in with an itty-bitty waist/ And a round thing in your face/ You get sprung." Just as the Venus's supposedly exaggerated sex organs represented her uninhibited sexuality in nineteenth century Europe, today an African American woman's eroticized "booty" operates as a signifier of her implied uninhibited sexuality. The figure of the sexually deviant, big-bottomed "Jezebel" seen in many hip-hop videos is yet another contemporary reification of the promiscuous,

lascivious black female. The African American, all-female R & B group, *Destiny's Child*, also make a contemporary reference to the Hottentot Venus in their hit, "Bootylicious," in which they question if men "can handle this" (meaning their "booties") and confidently answering their own question: "I don't think you're ready for this jelly." Since the late nineteenth century when the Hottentot Venus was put on display in London, the round, black "booty" has come to symbolize African American women's abundant sexuality and Rasputia is no exception since her enormous breasts, thighs, and buttocks signify her insatiable sexual desire. Norbit euphemizes Rasputia's sexual appetite by insisting, in a voiceover, that she is "so full of love" as a sequence unfolds of Rasputia attempting to seduce Norbit in her various skimpy outfits that accentuate her already enormous physique.

While Rasputia is a conflation of various sexist and racialized representations of African American women, Kate (Thandie Newton), Norbit's childhood crush, is thin and granted more personality than Rasputia's stock character. As is the case in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the thin woman beats the rotund Rasputia and wins Norbit's love at the end of the movie. One could persuasively argue that it is not just Rasputia's weight that prevents her from keeping Norbit, but rather her physical and emotional abuse, as well as her selfishness. It is important to note, however, the fact that the thin Kate is characterized as kind, caring, generous, a fact that reinforces the hegemonic notion that thin equals beauty which equals success, especially in terms of love.

In one scene, Rasputia openly discusses her weight (and women's concerns about their bodies in general) with Kate, while the two women are sitting in her bathing suits on chaise lounges at a water park. Rasputia begins the discussion with a comment on Kate's

“emaciated” frame: “You’re too damn skinny, look at you,” she says to Kate and then goes on to say that she “feels sorry for [her]” for being “just skin and bones.” When Kate defends herself and explains her belief that “we’re all made exactly how we’re supposed to be,” Rasputia objects: “Oh no, hell, no. I’m a Christian and you ain’t gonna sit there and blame God for how you look. Ok? You the one that push that plate away.” Unlike Rosemary in *Shallow Hal*, Rasputia accepts her weight and the space she takes up in the world and although we cannot treat this film as a fat-positive narrative, this moment of insight from Rasputia does point out the absurdity of the lengths to which some women will go in order to attain the thin ideal. She insults Kate for being slender and offers a counter-discourse to social norms by insisting that Kate’s hyper-thinness is in fact unattractive. Rasputia says that Norbit cannot keep his hands off her (although there is no verbal or visual evidence from Norbit to support this claim) and that she’s “thinking ‘bout goin’ on a little diet or somethin’ so I can get all emaciated looking like you [Kate] then he’ll think I look disgusting and I can get a rest or some sleep for a while cause he want it all the time.” In this way, Rasputia inverts the norm of anti-fat stigmatization at the expense of thin women.



## Chapter III: An Independent Alternative?



### Chapter III: Independent Films – A Suitable Alternative?

Thud far, this paper has dealt with problematic and stereotypical depictions of overweight women in mainstream film: a disappointing and damaging trend that leads to an important question. Might the independent film industry offer a more complex – meaning more realistic – portrayal of female fatness?

Since independent films do not receive funding from major Hollywood studios, not to mention that independent films have smaller distribution circles with particular audience cohorts, “indie” films have characteristically dealt with more provocative, edgier content, rarely conforming to the conventions of mainstream cinema. Australian filmmaker Jane Campion’s debut, *Sweetie* (Australia 1989), and Ash Christian’s *Fat Girls* (USA 2006), address the issues of female weight, sexuality, and identity. There is a span of seventeen years between the releases of these two films and they work well for comparison’s sake since they each offer polar opposite archetypal depictions of fatness. Each film treats female obesity differently and these variances seem to reflect a change in social attitudes towards obesity: in the 1980s, Campion portrayed female fatness as grotesque, filthy and self-destructive; by the mid-twenty-first century, being a “fat girl” means finding freedom through self-acceptance. Although both films use overweight actresses, as opposed to rubber suited ones, to portray their fat female characters, these films still depends on “fat girl” tropes that many mainstream films also incorporate in the characterization of their Rubenesque heroines. The independent film industry operates as a potentially subversive space in which filmmakers can challenge clichés about fat women. These indie films, however, do not necessarily portray more realistic or varied depictions of overweight women than do their big-budget Hollywood counterparts.

In *Sweetie*, Campion offers an archetypal depiction of the fat, polluting female body. Campion often uses her films to explore the psyche of destroying women who fail to conform to hegemonic feminine ideals. For example, Ada (Holly Hunter) in the Oscar-winning film, *The Piano*, and Isabel Archer (Nicole Kidman) in Campion's 1996 cinematic adaptation of Henry's James's novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, are abused by their husband's for their refusal to conform to societal expectations (Hopgood, 2002). "Sweetie" (Genevieve Lemon) is the nickname for Dawn, the film's psychotic, overweight female character who breaks into her sister Kay's (Karen Colson) home after having been gone for an undisclosed time span and resolves to stay there for a while with her boyfriend and "talent producer," Bob (Michael Lake). As the film's anti-heroine, Sweetie certainly fits the classic Campion mould of female rebellion and represents the archetypal character of a self-destructive life force, who, in her excessiveness, consumes everything (including, eventually, herself). She is a volatile renegade who comes tearing in from the margins of society, threatening to destroy and disrupt those who occupy its centre, for example, her thin, "sane" sister and her suburban parents. To an extent, she successfully shakes up the lives of her targets, but ultimately the only permanent damage her excessiveness causes is her own annihilation.

In her analysis of the excessive, fat body, LeBesco borrows from anthropologist Mary Douglas's notion of pollution to argue that, through "the trope of the 'fat slob' in modernity, dirt and fat go hand in hand" (2004, p. 23). Dirt and fat literally go hand in hand in Campion's film during the climactic scene in which the naked Sweetie covers herself in black paint and, after refusing to come down from her childhood tree house, or what she refers to earlier in the film as her "princess palace with lights in a tree,"

plummets to her death in the soil below. Sweetie's character, along with the film's death scene, provide supporting evidence for Douglas's claim that "dirt is disorder" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 23): everything in Sweetie's life is disordered, including her familial and romantic relationships, her failure to "make it big" as a famous entertainer, her psychological state, and her big, fat body. Even her surroundings in Kay's otherwise spotless home are askew: when she and her strung-out boyfriend take over Kay's guest room, the furniture is in disarray and the space is full of "rubbish," including pizza boxes and soiled undergarments. Through the character of Sweetie, this film completes the equation that fat equals dirt and dirt equals disorder; therefore, fat people are filthy and lead out-of-control, disordered lives. Even Sweetie's entrance – into the film; back into Kay's life – occurs through an act of violation and disruption: she smashes Kay's front window in order to break and enter into her sister's home while Kay Louie are out for the evening.

Sweetie's disruptive, disorderly body can be understood as an example of Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque. For Bakhtin, the grotesque occurs when order is disrupted; it is also understood as "a dimension of intense and exaggerated emotions" (Fingesten, 1984, p. 419) and Sweetie's inability (or refusal) to control her angry impulses speaks to this aspect of the grotesque. The grotesque body is "not an ugly body, but a non-conformist body, a body that exceeds its allotted space" (Carson and Pajaczowska, 2001, p. 286). Sweetie's large body is "loud" and non-conformist in its bulk and constant disruption of order in the lives of those around her – her body and her presence permeate the boundaries of Kay, Louie, and her parents' "allotted space." The grotesque is also associated with the lower stratum, or what Bakhtin calls the "bodily

underworld” (in Hole, 2001, p. 288) and Sweetie’s concern for her stomach is yet another example of her body as grotesque. As her father climbs up the ladder in a desperate plea to coax Sweetie to descend from the tree, Sweetie stands at the top of the ladder, sticks her butt in her father’s direction and farts. This is yet another example of her identification with the “lower stratum” and how the fat female body is constructed as grotesque and vulgar in the film. Sweetie’s body is also grotesque because it transgresses corporeal boundaries, which symbolizes its ability, or its attempt, to “break down constructed social boundaries” (Hole, 2001, p. 286). Screaming and slinging curses from suburbia’s treetops and stubbornly refusing to come down from her childhood “palace,” Sweetie defies hegemonic stereotypes of the docile, obedient, clean female. Bakhtin asserts that the grotesque body is a “body-without-end [that] symbolizes life-without-end” (Hole, 2001, p. 286), but, through her excessiveness and her continuous eradication of boundaries, Sweetie ends up destroying herself; in a sense, Sweetie swallows herself – her weight and explosive energy finally overcome her. Still refusing to budge from the tree house, Sweetie starts jumping up and down until the floorboards break and she plummets to the ground. Initially, she survives the fall and lays sprawled amidst the debris. Her mother scolds her, “Do you realize what could have happened” and Kay says, “You’re so selfish, Dawn.” The three family members circle round Sweetie’s body and blood starts seeping from the wound in Sweetie’s forehead. She spits up blood and within moments she is dead. Her death is a mixture of the macabre and the grotesque: naked and painted, Sweetie fades to black, amidst the dirt and the debris of her unrealized childhood dreams of stardom.

Continuing in the vein of the grotesque, Campion's film offers an interpretation of the fat female body as a vulgar sex object. Through the virgin/whore dichotomy, a classic binary used to label and categorize female sexuality (Wyman and Dionisopoulos, 2000), this film establishes a direct relationship between female body weight and sexuality and further stigmatizes obesity. The fat, selfish, lascivious Sweetie embodies the characteristics of the whore, whereas the thin, uptight, sexually reserved Kay represents the virgin, although she is not technically still "pure." Fat has been proven as a source of oestrogen and overweight women tend to have stronger libidos than thin women (Jones, 1998), but Sweetie's rampant sexuality is portrayed as vulgar and insatiable. The first time the audience sees Sweetie, she is in her bra; throughout their stay, Sweetie and Bob have sex in Kay's house and do not try to stifle their noise. Sweetie's sexual partner is thin, but this is not a positive portrayal of overweight female sexuality simply because it challenges the stereotype that fat women have fewer opportunities for heterosexual dating and intercourse than do thin women (Wiederman and Hurst, 1998). She has sex with a non-fat male, but Sweetie's promiscuity and sexual inhibition represent another aspect of her polluting presence. When Sweetie, Bob and Louie take a trip to the beach, Sweetie buries Bob in the sand and sticks a branch in his groin area to simulate an erection. She then goes over to Louie who is reading on a blanket nearby and tells him she is lonely. "Have you ever been licked all over?" she asks. "I'm a good lick. I licked Bob last night, even between his toes. I could show you what it feels like on your fingers." She then grabs Louie's hand and starts licking his fingers. After he refuses her offer to "lick his bum, too," Sweetie kisses her sister's boyfriend and they continue making out on the

beach. Her overt sexuality is constructed as vulgar in the film and she comes awfully close to the stereotype that overweight sexuality is perverse.

In contrast to the fat, sexually uninhibited Sweetie is her slender, uptight sister, Kay, who, in her abstinence, represents the virgin. Through these characters, Campion establishes two extremes of body types, models of human behaviour and degrees of sexual appetite. Sweetie represents the consequences of living according to one's desires and instincts, whereas Kay represents the dangers of being too repressed and constantly denying oneself corporeal pleasure. Neither of these extremes is ideal, but the fact that Sweetie's behaviour leads to her death suggests that the film deems the obese, excessive, and lascivious end of the spectrum more reprehensible. Kay might be wound up and tightly managed, but she is far less of a social threat than is her fat, psychotic sister. Kay decides, after living with her boyfriend for some time, that she is going to move into the spare bedroom in their rented house because she "has a cold." The couple stops having sex, despite Louie's attempts, and one night before going to their separate rooms for bed, he says, "Good night, big sister" and Kay is upset: "Don't call me that. I'm your girlfriend." She then proceeds to her own bedroom, leaving Louie alone and unsatisfied in the hallway. Toward the end of the film, Louie leaves Kay because she destroyed a little tree they planted together, superstitiously fearing that its death would be an omen for their relationship. In her distress after Louie's departure, Kay goes to a palm reader to see if she can bring him back using herbs. The psychic tells her this is impossible and asks Kay if she and Louie had been having sex. "Not really," Kay replies. "We're out of that phase." The palm reader objects, insisting that "you're never out of that phase. We're all animals, it doesn't pay to forget that." Kay's thin, ascetic body and her aversion to sex

express her discomfort with corporeal, bodily matters and her superstitious nature and belief in psychic powers suggest that she represents an extreme of human behaviour; that is, the spiritual.

The opposite of this extreme is the realm of the corporeal and the animalistic and through various characterization techniques Sweetie is aligned with this spectrum of behaviour. As suggested, she acts upon her sexual desires and the psychic's reminder that we are all animals and, therefore, sexual emphasizes the link between Sweetie's sexuality and her animalism. Sweetie's physical size also suggests that she gives into her gastronomic, bodily urges. Her "uncivilized" instinctive nature is expressed in the way she hisses at people when she fails to get her way. When she starts barking like a dog, her mother ignores the behaviour and says "If Dawn wants to be a dog, that's fine by me." Her father, on the other hand, affectionately plays along, cooing, "Hello little puppy" until Sweetie stops whimpering and actually bites at her father's outstretched hand. The film's horse motif also represents Sweetie's animalism. In one scene, Kay scolds Sweetie for ruining her shirt and tells her sister to leave the house. Sweetie gets upset and warns her sister that she is "really gonna do something now" and disappears off camera. Kay finds Sweetie in Kay's bedroom, her mouth stuffed with dismembered pieces from Kay's collection of glass horses. Sweetie's inhibition and irrational expression of her anger is aligned with the liberated, untamed horse. By eating the figurines, however, she actually consumes wildness and this scene foreshadows Sweetie's ultimate demise: the image of her bleeding mouth and the way in which the horses (a representation of freedom) actually harm Sweetie are repeated in the film's death scene when her own animalism



becomes destructive. In this film, being fat leads to dangerous and fatal behaviour and yet death seems to be Sweetie's only freedom.

By the mid twenty-first century, *Fat Girls* (2006) offers an alternative to Sweetie's destructive, repulsive character through the figure of its 300 lb. teenage heroine, Sabrina (Ashley Fink). Although Sabrina's body is "non-conformist" and, like Sweetie's, might therefore be associated with the grotesque, the filmmakers do not construct her identity in such a way that this term applies to her and the depiction of her obese body. Sabrina is physically fat, but she is also a "fat girl," a term that has a unique meaning in this film: rather than simply being a physical attribute, being a "fat girl" is something internal. It is an attitude, or, as Rodney (Ash Christian), the chubby, gay, theatre-geek protagonist explains, "You don't have to be fat to be a fat girl. You don't even have to be a girl – it's a state of mind." In his opening monologue, Rodney strips the term "fat girl" of its associations to a specific gender and body weight, and, rather than being a physical characteristic, it becomes a liberated state of being for those "outsiders" who refuse to conform to hegemonic norms. By re-appropriating and redefining the term "fat girl" as an acknowledgment of one's self-acceptance, this film challenges the tired trope often seen in mainstream movies, such as *Never Been Kissed* (USA 1999), of the hopelessly ungraceful and undesirable fat girl. In Rodney's world, the "cool" kids are not the typical elitist jocks and beauty queens seen in teen movies, such as *Mean Girls* (USA 2004), *Cruel Intentions* (USA 1999) and *Clueless* (USA 1995), but those counterculture individuals who embrace and express their own quirkiness.

This film works within a tradition of outsider films, a genre that uses predictable tropes to capture the lives and situations of its weird or strange characters. Some

mainstream films that also fit into this genre include *She's All That* (USA 1999), *American Beauty* (USA 1999), *Save the Last Dance* (USA 2001) and *Juno* (USA 2007). Although its title alludes to *Mean Girls* (USA 2004), a film that focuses the lives of rich, spoiled white girls (yet another cinematic trope), *Fat Girls* resituates the marginalized underdogs by positioning them in the centre of culture and exploring their struggle with identity. It is almost cliché, the extent to which the lower-class main characters in this film have non-traditional lives: Rodney is gay, loves Broadway, hates his religiously-zealous mother and cannot even shed a fake tear when his deadbeat father dies after suffering a heart attack during an affair with a midget. Sabrina is the school's token fat chick, who lives in a trailer park with her two mothers, the town's token lesbian couple. Sabrina's Cuban refugee boyfriend, Rudy, digs fat girls (subversive) and lives with the exuberant African American family who adopted him upon his arrival in the U.S. Rudy invites Rodney and Sabrina to his family reunion picnic and as the two friends approach the scene, they realize that Rudy's family is black. "We so don't fit in here," Sabrina whispers and Rodney answers, "We don't fit in anywhere." This is a direct allusion to Rodney and Sabrina's outsider status. Despite the film's references to other oppressed, or marginalized groups, such as homosexuals, the disabled, fundamental Christians, the lower-classes, racial minorities, and "refugees," the one term Rodney chooses to describe his fellow outsiders is "fat girl." While this could have been a problematic turn of phrase, his positive use of the term makes it a celebratory part of one's identity.

Through the use of a voiceover and a mise-en-scene, Rodney introduces the audience to his group of fellow "fat girls." All of the individuals that Rodney identifies as "fat girls" are marginalized citizens, due to either their weight (Rodney and Sabrina), or

their sexual orientation (Rodney, his crush Joey, and a teacher, Mr. Cox). Rodney does not explicitly define his use of the term “fat girl,” but it seems, from the brief character sketches he gives of those whom he identifies as “fat girls,” that he uses it as a derogatory blanket-term for loners and oddballs. For example, Rodney, a self-proclaimed “fat girl,” is, as mentioned, an outsider with deadbeat parents who dreams of moving to New York to find a boyfriend and pursue a career on Broadway, a desire that most of his small-town peers do not understand; his best friend Sabrina weighs 300 lbs. and is, as Rodney notes, a “fat girl. But not just on the outside, on the inside, too.” Rodney asserts that his crush, the edgy, blonde, effeminate, Joey, who recently moved to their small Texan town from England, is “a fat girl, too.” And finally, Rodney introduces Mr. Cox (Jonathan Caouette), his beloved drama teacher, who is “a total fat girl. He always has been. He’s a nice guy.” In this way, it does not seem that this film is a fat-positive narrative, but as the story unfolds, the viewers come to see that Rodney’s understanding of the term “fat girl” is more empowering than it seems at the outset of the film.

The figures in the film who are not, according to Rodney, “fat girls” are all successful, attractive (according to hegemonic standards) and confident. The “non-fat girl” characters include the all-around superstar Ted (Evan Miller), whom we see masturbating with Rodney in a backstage closet during the intermission of a production of their school play, *The Odd Couple*. Still in voiceover, Rodney explains that Ted is “the football QB, president of the National Honour Society, member of the chess club and VP of the theatre club, all while maintaining a 4.0 grade point average” and “totally not a fat girl.” Ted is good-looking, academic, and athletic and he dates Katie Chin, whom Rodney describes as “the Asian cunt that’s president of the Student Council.” But while

Ted claims heterosexuality, he sometimes comes to Rodney for sexual servicing because he “doesn’t get enough from her.” Rodney’s cousin, the assertive, devil-may-care Bobby is “not a fat girl. Never will be.” The beginning of the film is constructed in such a way that there is a perfect dichotomy between “fat girls” (for example, nice, marginalized, losers) and “non fat-girls” (for example, those who are blessed with good looks and mainstream values or mindsets).

What the audience realizes, however, and what makes this film so important as a pro-fat narrative, is that being a “fat girl” means learning to love and accept oneself, even if one’s body type, sexual orientation, or extra-curricular activities do not conform to mainstream expectations. Clues are dropped as the narrative unfolds as to Rodney’s use of the term “fat girl,” but it is only at the end of “his journey of finding [his] inner fat girl” that he divulges his interpretation of the term. At the beginning of the film, Rodney is a pushover: he knows that the “straight” Ted uses him for sexual favours and although Rodney confesses, “I don’t mind,” because he is attracted to Ted, he is still being used. As he roller skates home from the performance of the school play, a group of local bullies are drinking in a parking lot and call to Rodney to join them. Rodney reluctantly concedes and joins the crowd. They offer him a beer and he realizes, as soon as he takes a sip, that the bottle is full of piss. He spits it out and nearly faces physical abuse from the guys until his cousin Bobby shows up and intimidates them. Rodney makes a clean getaway, but only because of his cousin’s impeccable timing. This scene suggests that Rodney, physically meek and vulnerable in a pair of roller skates, would have been defenceless against his aggressors had the situation turned violent. Rodney is also

sexually rejected when he accompanies Joey to the town's gay bar, BJ's, and Joey abandons him after a hot guy hits on him almost as soon as the boys arrive.

As the narrative unfolds, however, the audience bears witness to Rodney's transformation: based on the narrative arch of the classic fairy tale trope of the frog who turns into Prince Charming, Rodney blossoms and unapologetically embraces his identity, his choices and his desires. He accepts his sexual orientation and even confides in his thirty-five year old teacher, Mr. Cox, who is also gay, and finally comes out the closet. He stands up to his cousin Bobby at the school dance after Bobby makes a derogatory comment about Sabrina's weight. Rodney takes Joey to the dance as his date and no longer hides his homosexuality from his peers. Rodney is honest about his goals and desires in life when he tells his guidance counsellor that he wants to get a boyfriend and be on Broadway. He is not embarrassed or ashamed when she offers him an "alternative lifestyle" pamphlet, but remains confident and aloof to the judgments of others. After graduation and at the end of the film, Rodney and Mr. Cox sleep together and Rodney it is once he has physically followed through with his sexual preferences that he comes to the revelation that he has unleashed his inner "fat girl": "I figured it out. Holy crap. Being a fat girl is being comfortable being yourself. I finally found my inner fat girl. And I like her. She is totally cool." The only way Rodney could have unearthed his inner fat girl was to stop worrying about what other people thought about him and having the courage to be his own unique, quirky, lovable self.

Like Rodney, the members of his "fat girl" posse also accept their "alternative" situations and embrace all aspects of their identity. Sabrina accepts her weight, as well as her lesbian parents (her mothers are also accepting of Sabrina's size). Joey is not

ashamed of his homosexuality, or of his beliefs in Satanism; in fact, when Rodney points out that Joey, contrary to what his big feet imply, actually has a small penis, Joey is not ashamed: “that’s how Satan made me” he says after exposing himself to Rodney in a stall in the men’s room of the roller-skating rink. Although Mr. Cox might try to “pass” as straight during his day job, he embraces and expresses his homosexual identity without shame or embarrassment: after Joey abandons Rodney at the gay club, Rodney is left alone to watch a performance of “Give My Regards to Broadway” and realizes it is in fact Mr. Cox dressed in drag. After the incident, Mr. Cox apologizes “for subjecting [Rodney] to that” in regards to his performance, but he does not apologize for who he is or his life outside school. This film offers many examples of oddballs who accept themselves and learn that being true to oneself is an important part of life.

Sabrina, the only “fat girl” who is also physically fat, is confident and seems comfortable in her skin and as the film’s heroine, she offers audiences a positive portrayal of female fatness. Through this character, *Fat Girls* challenges the assumptions of mainstream discourse surrounding beauty and sexuality, which do not generally incorporate the fat body as a potential participant (LeBesco, 2004). Rather than conforming to the common representations of obese individuals as “either asexual or perverse” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 40), Sabrina has a healthy and active sex-life and intimate relationship with Rudy, the puny Cuban guy who falls for Sabrina in the school cafeteria. Sabrina is neither asexual, nor engaged in what is considered a perverse sexual relationship and her lover Rudy is not fat. Although Orbach (2004) argues that some women get fat as a means to “desexualize” herself and avoid being perceived as sex object, Sabrina enjoys sex and the attention from Rudy. Unlike Sweetie, however, she is

not promiscuous. She and Rudy like each other, he treats her well and makes her happy and although many aspects of Sabrina's life are counter-hegemonic, her romantic relationship conforms to most mainstream notions of a successful partnership. Sabrina does not feel that because she is fat, she must be the funny girl or the villainess (LeBesco, 2004, p. 41) – she can have a boyfriend and she can be an object of desire even though she does not look like the typically “sexy” girls at school.

Sabrina is also more than just a caricature or stereotype of a fat woman. After an embarrassing incident happens to her because of her large size, the audience laughs, but it is with her (she makes light of the awkward situation) and not at her since she makes a joke about the ridiculous and unfortunate situation: while making-out with Rudy in the front seat of a Volkswagen Beetle, Sabrina gets stuck between the passenger seat and the dashboard. Rodney comes to her rescue on his way home from BJ's and helps her out of her tight spot with an offering of margarine. She is frustrated and embarrassed, but as she's rubbing the grease onto her behind in order to loosen herself from the windshield, she laughs and says, “That feels kinda good!” While she is able to make light of the situation, Sabrina's laughter might also serve a greater social purpose. In fact, this laughter might not be an expression of her delight at the humorous situation, but might function as permission to allow the audience to laugh at this enormous woman stuck in an awkward situation. Her laughter relieves the audience members' discomfort at seeing something taboo – a fat girl rubbing margarine on her exposed rear-end, while smothering Rudy, who is temporarily paralysed beneath her bulk – and this self-laughter acts as a social cue that allows audiences to break the awkward tension through laughter. It allows the audience to *laugh with*, rather than *laugh at* or else feel uneasy about the

situation. Sabrina understands the severity of this uncomfortable situation and understands that the way she handles it will affect the way in which Rodney and Rudy, and by extension the film's audience, will react to the situation.

Just as Rodney comes out about his homosexuality in the film, Sabrina also "comes out" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 95) about her weight. For many overweight individuals, "coming out" as fat means "mustering courage to engage in activities usually thought proper only for thin people, giving up futile diets and rebuilding [one's] self-esteem" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 95) and because Sabrina fits this definition, she successfully comes out as fat. She is aware of her size and does not try to euphemize her situation: in her discussion with Rodney about how "amazing" Rudy is, she says that "he's into fat chicks" and Rodney replies, "Sabrina, you're not fat." Rather than protesting, she says, very matter-of-factly, as opposed to pathetically, "Come on, Rodney. Three hundred pounds and above makes you fat." At lunch in the cafeteria, Sabrina mows down on a plateful of French fries and tells Rudy that she wants to go to community college after graduation to "study nutrition." If she sees the irony in this desire, she ignores it and does not think that because she is fat and perhaps considered unhealthy that she cannot pursue her interest in nutrition. Although many fat people often have a sense of ambivalence about their bodies (LeBesco, 2004), Sabrina's attitude toward her body seems to be in line with popular fat coming-out mantras, such as "We're here, we're spheres! Get used to it!" (LeBesco, 2004, 95).

It is one thing for fat people to "come out" about their size, but there is still a social stigma attached to men who have a preference for overweight women (LeBesco, 2004). The fact that Rudy admits his desire for fat women goes against mainstream



notions of desirability, since “being deliberately, happily fat disturbs mainstream notions of attractiveness (e.g. nobody would desire to be fat, nobody would desire someone who is fat)” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 68). Although most men prefer thinner women, some men do find overweight women attractive (Wiederman, 1998, p. 272). Male fat-admirers often repress their desires, however, because it is not socially acceptable to lust for a body type that does not conform to the hegemonic ideal; like a woman who fails to achieve the thin ideal and whose body is considered “dissimilar” (LeBesco, 2004), a man who desires fat women is considered perverse, according to prescriptive and normative notions of desire. As LeBesco acknowledges “the unspeakable desires of fat admirers are widely regarded suspiciously by fat feminists as controlling, deviant, and fetishistic” (2004, p. 92) and herein lies the conundrum for both fat admirers, as well as fat women themselves. If fat admirers are considered perverse or fetishist for desiring overweight women, then obesity continues to be unacceptable in terms of sexual desire and the thin ideal remains unchallenged as the hegemonic symbol of desirability. LeBesco points out that the social stigmatization of those who find overweight or obese women desirable “may account for the number of fat admirers who closet their preference, feel uncomfortable about their desire, and thus treat their objects of their desire poorly” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 92).

These are by no means conclusive or inclusive representations of female fatness in independent film and perhaps other “indie” productions offer a more compelling and enlightening depiction of the lives of overweight women.

# Epilogue

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## Epilogue

As mentioned, contemporary artist Lucian Frued often paints his muse, Big Sue. His latest piece depicts Sue asleep on a couch and is anticipated to earn \$36 million USD. While filmmakers tend to rely on stereotypes to portray obesity, it seems that painting can offer a more peaceful or humane depiction. Perhaps the film industry might one day follow suit and portray fatness with the same compassion.

Studies confirm that exposure to images of slender women in the media leads to the internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction among North American girls and women (Harrison and Hefner, 2006; Brown and Dittmar, 2005; Park, 2005). Considering the frightening statistic that “40% of 6-year-old girls reported [in one study] wish[ed] that they were thinner” (Park, 2005, p. 594), it would seem that the epidemic of disordered female eating in Western society and the media’s exultation of the thin ideal would be as pressing a social issue as global warming or international poverty. But there are no political campaigns that strive to change the reigning gender ideology that equates successful femininity with thinness. The fact remains that the pressure to be thin affects many women’s lives and this concern – it often becomes an obsession – with body weight and self-esteem afflicts girls at a young age (Wolf, 1991). If it is known that exposure to images of the thin ideal in the media has a negative effect on girls and women, then why does society continue to accept the use of emaciated women as the standard in advertisements, television shows, and films?

LeBesco asks this question of the fashion industry, which justifies its refusal to use fat models because “the public apparently won’t accept them” (2004, p. 72). The public, however, might be more willing to accept larger models in advertising, and the

media at large, if the fashion industry would begin to “portray them in the same flattering light they shine on their slimmer sisters” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 72). At this year’s Cibeles fashion show in Madrid – Spain’s largest and most important fashion event – three models were banned from walking the runway because they had a body mass index (BMI) that fell below 16 (Catan, 2008), 2 points below the show’s standard requirement of a 18 point BMI. The rationale for prohibiting the models’ participation was the fear that their severe thinness might have a negative effect on young girls and teenagers who watched the shows (Catan, 2008). Cibeles’ organizers should be applauded for enforcing its body weight standards (first implemented in 2006) and doing its part to promote healthy body image among young women, but at the end of the day, the show is still casting very thin models to strut down the runway, and therefore, promoting and perpetuating the intense lure of being thin and its associations with beauty, sexual desirability, and glamour.

The film industry is as guilty as the fashion industry in terms of its depiction or treatment of actresses and characters who do not conform the thin ideal. This is not to say that thin women should be discriminated against or marginalized. That would simply be an inversion of the current state of body politics in the West and not a desirable solution. So long as thin women in film continue to be represented as socially, romantically and professionally successful and overweight women are treated as second class, “revolting” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 1) citizens, then the gender ideology that insists that being thin makes one a superior person remains unchallenged. Contemporary mainstream cinema, as well as the media at large, tends to show only the polar extremes when it comes to its representations of women and weight: those women who are “thin” (i.e. beautiful) and

those who are “obese” (i.e. not beautiful). Those female spectators whose figures fit somewhere between these two extremes on the continuum of body types have no positive role models to reassure them that they can be successful, happy, and sexy without starving themselves, or striving for the thin ideal through excessive exercise and dieting. Not wanting to identify with the grotesque, socially awkward, and usually single obese characters seen in film, North American women are left with very few alternatives to the thin ideal as a model of success, beauty, and desirability.

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