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Film Not Found: Current Cinematic Representation of Fat Females and Scripting the Self

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Dr. Lisa Litterio, Thesis Director
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“Overweight is a mar to beauty...An excess of fat destroys grace and delicacy. A fat face has a monstrous uniformity. No theatrical producer would hire a plump actress to mirror the real depths of the human soul.”¹

- Dr. James S. McLester, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1924

It is easy to shrug off the words of Dr. James S. McLester, written nearly a hundred years ago, and consider them only to be a representation of antiquated opinions of the past. After all, with Real Beauty campaigns from Dove in magazines and body-positive songs on the radio like *All About That Bass* by Megan Trainor and *Anaconda* by Nicki Minaj, most people would be inclined to believe that our society has become increasingly progressive in our views on the fat population. However, after a closer inspection, it is overwhelmingly clear that not much has changed, especially within Hollywood.

Fat actresses have starred in a variety of films, from highly-acclaimed dramas like *Precious* to blockbuster hits such as *Bridemaids*. However, these films are a rarity, and fat females are often relegated to sideshow roles or are entirely absent on-screen. Furthermore, while some films might include fat actresses, they are rarely given full inclusion as characters. Instead, their narratives are underdeveloped and riddled with stereotypes and popular tropes only associated with fat individuals. Fat actresses are hired to belch and trip, dance and eat, shock and offend. They are never given the chance to be human, much less “mirror the real depths of the human soul.”

“Anti-fat sentiment did not fall from the sky,” fat studies scholar Kathleen Lebesco writes, “nor is it the overdetermined product of a zealous media complex alone” (54). While it is true that this anti-fat sentiment cannot solely be attributed to Hollywood or any singular type of media, it also cannot be ignored that current cinema routinely reflects and regurgitates these sentiments rather than trying to subvert them. This has real, almost immeasurable impact:

¹ Sourced in Samantha Murray’s *The ‘Fat’ Female Body*, initially from Kersh & Morone, 2002, p. 166

We internalize all the statements made about certain bodies by our society and live them out. These idea(ls), or discourses, inform the ways in which we understand each other, and govern our experience of, and relations with, the other. In this historical epoch in Western society, ‘fat’ bodies are dominantly read negatively. We manage our identities through perception – we believe we can come to know the essence of a person through the way they appear to us. (Murray 32)

A film is never just a film, and no audience is immune to the statements delivered by them. People internalize these messages delivered on-screen by fat characters, which then impacts how they view fat people off-screen. For a fat viewer, the consequences can be even more disastrous – if you hear something enough, eventually you start to believe it.

What if we could change the narrative of our reality?

The goal of fat studies, a rapidly developing new discipline, is to do just that: change the current narrative, not just in popular media like film, but the narrative of our fatphobic culture. Scholars such as Marilyn Wann, Samantha Murray, Kathleen LeBesco, Amy Erdman Farrell and many more have written about issues of fat studies, addressing everything from health and beauty to masculinity and motherhood. The beginnings of fat studies can be traced to the emergence of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, which was founded in 1969 and the Fat Underground of the 1970s (Rothblum and Soloway x). Since then, countless communities have emerged up in support of fat studies and fat acceptance. Dr. Amy Erdman Farrell explains the unique mission of fat studies quite succinctly, writing: “Fat studies challenges notions of pathology and encourages scholars to listen to the work and words of fat people themselves” (Farrell 21-22). As such, fat studies has an inherent focus on the self and identity as formed through society and in reaction to it. The work done by fat studies scholars is

powerful and essential, as it gives voice to people previously silenced and renders them undeniably visible, as evidenced by the following said by Allyson Mitchell:

It is crucial for fat people to see themselves reflected in art – to see our struggles and our beauty. Dancing together, appearing in public, making speeches, reaching out, performing Cake Dances and sharing experiences with others creates culture and builds communities. When we stop mindlessly consuming culture and begin to actively participate in it, we craft and change our realities. We can imagine alternative ways of living and being. (qtd. in Murray 1).

Fat studies gives us an alternative to the stagnant state of our current society. Where fat studies is dynamic and radical, contemporary cinema is inexplicably ancient. There is a fundamental need for change within Hollywood, as fat individuals need to see a reflection of themselves within film rather than a facsimile of what everyone already believes them to be.

My journey with fat studies has been a lifelong one, beginning before I was even aware of it. I was always a chubby child, but I wasn't all too concerned about it. Still, as I grew up I went through an endless series of strange encounters that proved very formative in my perception of self and identity as a fat girl turned fat woman. Random asides by family members and stern lectures by doctors (despite my perfect health) were delivered to me and I was left to digest it all. I wasn't exactly sure what the problem was, but I knew it was a problem. Everything would become frighteningly clear to me in a single experience in sixth grade, when I was only twelve. After that, I would scowl at my stomach in the mirror and dig my nails into my thighs. I hid myself in baggy sweatshirts and ill-fitting jeans, and stopped talking so much in class. I became depressed, and I had determined that my body was the enemy. Fat was the enemy.

For the rest of my preteen and teenage years, I would have a trying and volatile relationship with my body. I loathed myself, and I felt that I deserved it. It never even occurred to me that this might not actually be a normal way of living.

Once I entered college, things changed. I began to speak up a little more – in class, in conversations with my friends, and in my writing. I was becoming present again. There's something unusually freeing in college where your opinions actually matter, and as a result I realized that *I mattered*. Fat or not, I was important. Scratch that, I was important, and so was my fatness. I signed up for an autobiographical writing class in my freshman year, and in a four hour period, I wrote down every word of my fat life. I came into class the next day for peer review of my final piece, and when I saw astonished faces blinking back at me, that's when I knew.

This was important – crucial, vital, life-changing. Every single horrible memory I had was essential in creating change. I had power, and I was damn sure that I was going to use it. Since then, I've been a fat studies scholar. I've delivered speeches on the dangers of fat shaming and fatphobic jokes, written satire and social media blog posts focusing on size acceptance, and even painted my fat body onto a canvas. When it came time to pick a topic for my honor thesis, the decision was easy.

This thesis is a culmination of my academic studies (English and Film) and my lifetime spent as a fat individual. It focuses upon current cinematic representations of fat female characters, and evaluates that representation in terms of authenticity, thematic issues, and narratives to argue that Hollywood has a lack of films that accurately and appropriately represent fat females. In order to be selected for analysis and discussion, a film had to be recent (released within the last fifteen years), be popular or critically acclaimed, and most importantly, represent a fat female character in a significant way. I chose to focus upon fat females exclusively both due

to their further marginalization within media when compared to males, and that women tend to be criticized more heavily based on their appearance within our society. Additionally, I only included films produced in the United States due to the fact that fatphobic attitudes are so overwhelmingly rampant within American culture.

I have chosen specific diction to fuel my discussion of these cinematic representations, which is based upon my own feelings towards particular words and how they relate to my identity, as well as fellow fat scholars' reactions towards words. Although the most commonly accepted descriptor within fat studies is "fat" for a variety of reasons, I disagree with this opinion. Many feel that by using the word fat as a descriptor, it is a way of reclaiming the word for the purposes of identity. For some, it is also the most neutral term to use in discussion of larger bodies. Samantha Murray sums up my opinion on this quite nicely within her book *The 'Fat' Female Body*, writing, "The social hatred of 'fat' is really baseless and unfounded, but our culture constructs 'fat' as always already abject(ed), so therefore there can, in fact, never be a neutral way to think 'fat'" (109). Essentially, since our culture is so fatphobic, simply saying the word fat conjures negative connotations and triggers negative memories within me. Despite this, I use the word fat because of its persuasive results: I say the word fat and the person I'm talking to may jolt, cringe, or even argue with me. It has real power and real consequence, more than any other word I can think of. It isn't neutral, but it should be. For that reason, I will use the word *fat* most prominently within my discussion. I also often default to the word *overweight* because I have a relatively neutral relationship with the term; however many scholars disagree and find it harmful due to its connection to issues of health and normalcy. This thesis is not about health, but identity, and I choose to use *overweight* because it strongly creates a contrast between a straight-size or thin population ("normal" weight) and what society views as abnormal, which is

the fat or overweight population. I refrain from using the word obese because I see no rhetorical power in the term, which is used most often by doctors and television news anchors, and problematizes fatness in the form of a medical condition.

In addition to film analysis and accompanying research, I have paired each film with my own autobiographical writings that were triggered by particular scenes or characters. This is in an effort to show what my own fat narrative has been and how that juxtaposes the cinematic narratives presented by Hollywood.

I have chosen to organize this thesis in a very deliberate and specific way, based on each film's thematic issues and relation to my own fat narrative. This thesis is a narrative in itself, with a gradual build to a climax of sorts in my personal life and the state of Hollywood. First, I will discuss *Little Miss Sunshine*, which focuses upon an impressionable fat child and her relationship with her family, who helps to form her own identity. Next, I move onto *Precious*, which depicts a black underprivileged teen who has the deck stacked against her, and has internalized the fatphobia she has experienced to startling results. Then, I tackle the blockbuster hit *Bridemaids*, which has been praised by many for its representation of women but upon further examination, contains fat characterization reliant on stereotypes and jokes instead of authenticity. Juxtaposed to this is *Pitch Perfect*, a film released within a year of *Bridemaids*, but focuses on college students including the hilarious Fat Amy who routinely shocks and titillates others in her unapologetic self-love and faith in herself. Lastly, I cover the cringe-worthy film *Shallow Hal*, in which a fat character is used more as a plot-device than an actual person, all in the pursuit of a few laughs and broken chairs. Together, these films show a full picture of Hollywood and its depiction of fat characters, while I examine what is broken within this representation, and how to fix it.

Little Miss Sunshine

Olive Hoover's face stares into the camera, peering at the audience with wide, inquisitive eyes obscured by her overwhelmingly large plastic framed glasses. A quick cut corrects this, displaying what the seven-year-old is actually staring at so intently – Miss America. As the beauty queen expresses her delighted shock at winning the crown, Olive mirrors her actions. In this short opening of the 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine*, there is a certain tragedy taking place, a tragedy that will last Olive's lifetime. She is placing herself into a contest that she is not prepared to compete in, where her worth or value as a female will be directly tied to her ability to perform as a beautiful woman. Olive turns sideways and cradles her belly, comparing hers to Miss America's.

This comparison addresses the crux of the problem. Young girls like Olive are looking up to the females they see in their world, and want to be these women. Yet, there is no sense of body diversity among them. Beauty queens have a certain expected height and weight they need to act a certain way all because of these rules set by society. Olive is learning that in order to “win” the contest she must adhere to these rules. As she frowns at her tummy, she is dissatisfied with her body – she is not a reflection of Miss America, but she wants to be. After all, as Olive waves her hands in her imagined triumph, her father is quick to remind, “There are two kinds of people in this world. Winners, and losers.”

Little Miss Sunshine is an ensemble comedy, categorized as an independent film rather than being designated as a theater-filling blockbuster. It focuses on a family that is advertised as decidedly dysfunctional, from a coke-snorting grandfather (Alan Arkin) to a selectively-mute broody teenager (Paul Dano) filling out a cast that can barely manage a dinner of fried chicken at the kitchen table, much less a road trip across the state. However, when the film's unexpected

star of young Olive Hoover (Abigail Breslin) earns a spot to compete for the title of Little Miss Sunshine, her parents Sheryl (Toni Collette) and Richard (Greg Kinnear) reluctantly drag the entire family, even Sheryl's suicidal gay brother Frank (Steve Carell), along for the ride. What follows is an adventure in a cramped Volkswagen bus that they could never have expected, filled with twists and turns as the family is pushed to its limits as it tries to fit into the roles already prescribed to them, all the while cheering on a small chubby girl who dances across the pageant's stage.

* * * * *

When I was around Olive's age, Britney Spears had begun her rise to fame. The first CD I remember wanting, asking for, was "Baby One More Time." I simply adored her. I'd practice routines in my room and then enthusiastically perform them at summer camp when they were ready for all (including the man I had a wildly inappropriate crush on) to see. I didn't have a sense of embarrassment or shame just yet, but I remember watching Britney flit about in a mini skirt and cropped top and realize that I wasn't like her. I couldn't be Britney, I couldn't wear a shirt like hers – my tummy wasn't flat like Britney's. Even then, I selected one-piece swimsuits when I saw my cousin Kelsey in a ruffled two-piece. I knew there was a problem with my body, but I didn't really know why.

At this time in my life, I was happily enrolled in dance classes. Tap and ballet, and then jazz once I was a bit older. I was one of the better students in my class – I never got stage fright nor did I ever forget my steps. My dance teachers placed me in the middle of the routines and sometimes I would be given a different role to play with a bit more "sass" to it. Recital days would arrive, with all of us huddling by the curtains in the dark, waiting to run on stage. I'd look at all our sequined outfits and how they so clearly showed the difference between us even in our

united wardrobe. Jackie, one of the favorite among parents, had her long straight hair hang in a ponytail that was only slightly thicker than her slender arms and legs. Other girls within the troupe were much of the same, only differing in how much product was in their hair or what makeup they were wearing. My mother styled me like the other girls, but I was starting to see the differences. I was short, with a bit of a tummy, and I had hips. (I knew how to use them, too.)

One day I sat in my grandpa's lap as he rocked in the disgustingly yellow chair he loved ever-so-much. As we sat watching PBS, I boldly declared, "I want to be a ballerina when I grow up!"

To which he simply replied, "Ballerinas have to be skinny."

A father chooses a quiet breakfast at a diner to give his daughter her first brutal lesson in dieting, as shown in a heartbreaking scene in *Little Miss Sunshine*. Olive's father, Richard, chooses to interrupt her uncle Frank to discuss the harmful effects of eating ice cream and how it can affect her body. The girl is understandably befuddled; looking around in distress at her family. Richard explains despite the protests of his wife, "So if you eat a lot of ice cream, you might become fat, and if you don't you're gonna stay nice and skinny, sweetie." The young girl has become overwhelmed despite her mother's soothing and reassurance that "it's okay to be skinny, and it's okay to be fat, if that's how you want to be." Cue an eyeroll from Richard. He continues, "Okay, but Olive, let me ask you: the women in Miss America, are they skinny, or are they fat?" The answer is implied, but Olive answers anyway, knowing from her previous observations at the opening of the film that beauty queens are skinny.

This is a truly devastating if not tragic conversation, one that Olive would never be prepared for. A few minutes before, Olive had been given the power to choose her own meal and

then she was immediately bombarded with messages implying that she had made the wrong decision. There is a sense of permanency to this decision through Richard's speech, suggesting that if Olive were to consume this one dish of ice cream, then her body would immediately register the effects. For a child, ice cream is often a treat for when vegetables have been eaten or homework has been done successfully. However, in this case, food is becoming the enemy to Olive; at such a young age, she is receiving messages she isn't sure how to compute. Perhaps her father really is just trying to help, but as he projects his own insecurities onto Olive, she behaves in a way that is typical of young children, as she takes Richard's words as reflecting a truth about her (Kostanski and Gullone 308). All she knows is that she wants to be beautiful like Miss America. Thus, it's not surprising when she immediately pushes the ice cream away from her body, despite the fact that she is obviously hungry. Her posture is the most alarming: a previously bubbly, effervescent child has become withdrawn and her shoulders are hunched, with her face sadly propped on her arm. It is evident that she wants to disappear from the situation, almost as if she is ashamed that she has chosen ice cream in the first place.

Admirably, the rest of her family rallies around Olive to try to repair the damage that Richard has done. Immediately they begin to pick up spoons and eat her ice cream, telling her how delicious it is. This is a reassurance, a soothing balm for the open wound Richard has made upon Olive's skin. They are telling her that it is okay to have treats; they are trying to restore a relationship with food that has already become frayed. The small smile that graces Olive's face when she caves and has a bite of her remaining scoops of chocolate ice cream is a small relief for the audience as well as her family, as no sooner does the dessert pass her lips does her father reply, "but Olive..." Her mother prevents the assault from continuing, but the extent of the damage is uncertain at this point. As Dr. Paul Campos writes:

We live in a culture that tells the average American woman, dozens of times per day, that the shape of her body is the most important thing about her, and that she should be disgusted by it. How can one begin to calculate the full emotional, financial, and emotional toll exacted by such messages? (xviii)

Yet what is perhaps most unsettling about this quote is the uncontrollable nature of it that has overtaken our Western society – it is not just the culture telling women that there is something wrong with their bodies. Friends and family members are the ones delivering these catastrophic messages without batting an eyelash, and the recipients are not just women – they are children. Indeed, the damage of these messages can never be wholly identified and understood, as these moments occur so frequently without our consent, but yet they are so subtle that we never even think to object.

When I was around five years old, I went with my grandparents to the Brockton Fair, an annual summer carnival. We'd go on "wristband" days, where you can go on the rides unlimited times – it was a way to save money, which is what my grandpa liked. He grew up in the Great Depression, something that has manifested into his entire being. He hoards everything in case he might need it someday (including used dryer sheets – seriously). If he has a coupon you can be sure that he is going to use it, and he abhors paying full price for anything. These trips to the fairs were always a nerve-racking experience, as I just wanted to keep the peace between my grandparents and make it worth the money my grandfather has spent for us to attend. The day progressed as usual: we spent some time at the animal pens, where my grandpa loved to stare at the giraffes and feed the goats. We walked around, sat and "people-watched" as was my

grandma's favorite pastime. I went on all the rides I was tall enough for, and got scolded by my grandfather whenever someone would cut in front of me.

The day had come to its close, and I was exhausted, but I wanted to cash in on my favorite part of the fair – the fried dough. After all, I could only have this treat once a year, as there was no other place that we went that had it.

“Are you sure you want this?” my grandpa questioned. “Are you going to eat it?”

I nodded vigorously.

So he bought the fried dough, shaking his head furiously at the price the whole time.

“It's highway robbery!” he exclaimed in disgust.

I didn't care; it was delicious. But it was also an outrageously large portion. Despite my most valiant of efforts, there was no way I could finish it. My grandfather scowled. I pressed onwards, trying my best to eat enough and hoping that throwing away a bite or two might go unnoticed by him. My stomach whined. Eventually, it became clear to my grandmother that I wouldn't be able to finish it, so she finished the fried dough for me.

When we got home, my grandpa stormed off without a word. An hour later, I was forced to apologize to him, for my “disrespect.”

My grandpa was over the house one day when I was fifteen years old. I was having horrendous cramps, and all I wanted was the chocolate that my mom had promised me when she got home from work. I waited until after dinner to ask for it, and I immediately started devouring the divine Symphony chocolate bar. With a mouthful of chocolate, I expressed my gratitude to my mom.

“You know, you really should watch what you eat, with your weight and all...” my grandfather offered.

I lost it. In my entire lifetime, I’ve sworn at my grandfather exactly one time, and this was the moment that had to happen.

“Fuck you,” I spat, walking away from the kitchen table and slamming the door shut.

My mom immediately barged in, demanding my phone. I simply handed it to her. I think my grandfather had left the house.

“I’m not apologizing. I’m not sorry.”

An hour later, my grandpa came back over and told my mother that I shouldn’t be punished, and to give me back my phone. He never came into my room to apologize. He never mentioned it again.

I’d like to think that in that moment, he remembered the fried dough, and a kid crying because she couldn’t finish it.

When the Hoovers finally arrive to the Little Miss Sunshine pageant, it’s the culmination of the film’s events: the acknowledgement that after all the family has been through; they have survived the journey together. However, once they actually enter the hotel where the pageant is being held, things take a turn for the worse. While there are small, yet heartbreaking, moments of joy for Olive (e.g. “Mom, she said she eats ice cream!”), the experience is clearly not what she expected. As she is guided into the changing room, she sees mothers applying spray tans to adolescent bodies that are bouncing in short frilly outfits. She stands alone with her glasses and a simple tee-shirt. It is becoming clear that Olive does not belong here.

Before anyone can stop it, the pageant begins. The music starts up, telling the contestants to “work it, own it” as young girls that look more like dolls sashay onto the stage. Girls are pretending to be women as they pose with their feet pointed and eyes wide with mascara. Olive enters with a simple walk, turning shyly in the spotlight as she is unsure as to how she is supposed to “work it” like the others. Her chubby tummy sticks out like a sore thumb next to the mini Barbies she is competing against, and she knows it. She is soon seen looking in the mirror during a costume change, sucking in her stomach to appear like the other girls. It’s notable that a few cuts later, her brother Dwayne delivers his famous speech, beginning, “You know what? Fuck beauty contests. Life is one fucking beauty contest after another.” This is particularly interesting, because Dwayne has the benefit of awareness in his jaded teenage years to realize how the world is, while Olive is completely blindsided by societal expectations (especially thinness) leaving her to process it by herself. Her entire life has been and will continue to be a beauty contest without her consent, and she has already begun to be worn down by it.

There is a sharp turning point once Olive is about to begin the talent portion of the competition. Her father redeems himself by suddenly realizing that Olive should not go onstage, his entire speech about “winners” and “losers” completely disregarded. Dwayne joins in, stating that he doesn’t want her doing this, citing fears about people laughing at her. This is an incredible moment of family solidarity as they show an immense desire to keep Olive safely away from a world she’s not ready for. Dwayne simply replies to Sheryl, “You’re the mom. You’re supposed to protect her.” Protection is a refreshing change from the course that Olive has been going down, with her self-esteem slowly dwindling as the film progresses. In this moment, her family has stepped up to realize they can try to protect Olive’s innocence, as she is only a child that is expected to behave and look like an adult. Notably, Sheryl allows Olive the

responsibility to choose what she wants, granting her the power that was taken away from her in the diner. She whips off her glasses much like a teenager in a romantic comedy, but she does not become a princess; she is Olive.

The performance Olive delivers is arguably her version of Dwayne's "fuck you" speech; she is refusing to conform to any of the demands directed at her throughout this experience. She is not in a sparkly tutu, nor is she singing a delightful little song that would be at home in a Shirley Temple movie. Instead, she stands tall in pants and a top-hat, rocking out to the classic "Superfreak." Taken literally, this suggests that Olive has a certain "freakiness" that the pageant audience is not used to – they're perfectly fine with the freakshow that has girls masquerading as women, but a chubby girl like Olive who is unadorned and unconcerned by these expectations of womanliness is truly freaky. As the audience voices their displeasure at the performance, Olive powers through with Rick James crooning "She's alright, she's alright, that girl is alright with me" to suggest that this moment is empowering and to be celebrated; she is going to be okay and no one is going to tell her that she isn't fine just the way she is.

The scene comes to a magnificent close with her father refusing to kick Olive off the stage, instead choosing to dance as well. With Frank, Dwayne, and Sheryl quickly joining in, the family makes a wonderful montage of screw-ups and "losers" parading around in the carefree nature that Olive exudes so brilliantly. No longer does she have slumped posture or defensive cradling of her stomach; she has no fear. Her family is there to support her, and join her in her pain and joy. She doesn't win the competition, but she is still a "winner", having won the prize of reclaiming herself from those who tried to fit her into a mold. She might not be ready for the world out there, but it seems more appropriate that the world is not ready for Olive – in all her imperfect glory.

In middle school and onto high school, I would come home crying from the pain inflicted on me from words in the hallway. Even worse were the stares – I had lost my sense of innocence and felt that everyone was judging the fat girl in the room. I hid myself in baggy clothing and sweatshirts, defensively tugging on them to make sure my skin was covered. For a few summers, I simply would not wear shorts outside, fearing what others might say. Instead I wore my thick jeans, preferring the sweltering heat over the humiliation I'd face over a glance at my thighs. I always hated them, after all.

Still, my parents stood strong as my protectors. When they noticed my pain or my tears, they did everything they could to stop it. My mom's solution was to try and get me out of the situation that was causing the pain. However, it was hard to when simply going outside at this point was becoming bothersome to me. My dad simply told me that he loved me, and that I was beautiful no matter what. I didn't always believe the words he was saying, but I still felt that he meant them nonetheless.

They tried the best they could. Unfortunately, at this point I was no longer an Olive. I was quite permanently damaged, and at the time no amount of protecting could repair the initial burst of hurt that I faced. This was something that only time could fix, time spent by myself relearning how to regain that love I once held for myself.

I joined a dance class at the start of the fall semester. It's the first foray into dance that I've made in over 10 years, probably more. I don't have the confidence that Olive has or that I had dancing to Britney, but it's a start.

I think I'm going to ask my grandfather to attend my recital.

Precious

Precious marks an important landmark in mainstream cinema – it tells the narrative of a black overweight female in which the audience is meant to sympathize with her struggles. While other films have included or even focused upon actresses with this specific body type, none have ever received the accolades that *Precious* (2009) has. The film was nominated for six Academy Awards and won two of those (Best Actress in a Supporting Role and Best Adapted Screenplay). Notably, Gabourey Sidibe received a Best Actress in a Leading Role nomination for her performance as Claireece Precious Jones, but lost to Sandra Bullock in *The Blind Side*. While this can be understood through the politics of the Oscars as well as the fact that this was Gabourey's debut performance, it is also important to consider the fact that both of these films featured similar storylines, albeit with different results. *The Blind Side* can be considered a “white savior” film, in which Bullock's Leigh Anne Tuohy takes in Michael Oher, a disadvantaged black youth, who has experienced years of trauma and “saves” him by teaching him to apply his protective instincts and “big” body type to the sport of football which eventually promotes him to success. In comparison, *Precious* has an entire lifetime of trauma that is unfathomable to most, and essentially saves herself with some help from the people in her community. Yet, despite the gravity of *Precious*' story and the intensity of Sidibe's performance, it is the classically beautiful (and thin) Bullock that was awarded the Oscar.

The narrative of *Precious*, originally published as the book *Push* by author Sapphire, focuses upon an overweight black teenager living in poverty. She is pregnant with her father's child for the second time, and lives in a cramped apartment with only her abusive mother Mary Lee Johnston (Mo'Nique) to talk to. *Precious* is illiterate and withdrawn, with little hope of success or a future in life until she enrolls in a special school, headed by her life-changing

teacher Ms. Rain (Paula Patton) and also gains counseling from a social worker Ms. Weiss (Mariah Carey). The film follows Precious as she struggles to repair the damage inflicted on her as a young child to present, and with much fanfare, celebrates her successes as she breaks away from the stifling and heartbreaking house that was never truly a home.

It is impossible to discuss the narrative of *Precious* and its importance in regards to weight representation without acknowledging the issues of race represented within the film. In fact, to do so would be negligent. Precious' race is as important to her story and perception of her body as her weight is. Her race is so innately connected to her story that it exposes the flaws within the narrative, as the film has "been seen by some critics as perniciously re-inscribing racial and gender stereotypes" (Jarman 164). Other critics have responded to her fatness as an extension of that stereotyping, even sometimes reflecting their own fatphobia, as one critic refers to Gabourey Sidibe as "an animal-like stereotype – she's so obese her face seems bloated into a permanent pout." (Jarman 167). Still, her race is crucial in representing body diversity – for weight representation to be fully effective it must be inclusive of all types of fat bodies, especially non-white bodies. Weight carries a stigma in all communities within America, yet these stigmas manifest in different ways and cause varying problems for those fat women within these communities. In addition, for racial minorities there are other issues (such as poverty, low education levels, and the absence of a nuclear family) that compound a fat female's weight narrative, as seen in *Precious*.

Precious' body is intrinsically tied to her story and the trauma she experiences. Her body was violated before she was old enough to protest and her mother punished her body for this violation. Her level of poverty and family life presumably contributed to her weight in a major way, as she is displayed cooking for her mother a high-calorie meal of fried food that Precious is

then forced to eat because it was not cooked to her mother's approval. While this is only shown on one occasion, we can infer through her level of resignation and weak protests that this is a common occurrence within the Jones' household. Thus, Precious' relationship with food has likely been strained for as long as she can remember. Weight is also commonly considered by many to be a safety blanket, or a way of shielding oneself from pain; Precious could fit this criteria as once she has become bigger than her mother, it is not as easy to be pushed around.

Still, while Precious' trauma is unfathomable and her pain is intense, there are glimmers of her hope and her self-confidence within the film from the opening scenes. The first time Precious is shown, she is not styled to perfection, yet she's not exactly hiding herself in her clothes either. She has accented herself with jewelry and a vibrant red scarf, which obscures a yellow shirt that she's wearing. Later she reveals that yellow is her favorite color. She has a focus on beauty even with her lack of funds and the presumed difficulty of finding clothes that fit her body. This clothing suggests that some part of her wants to stand out, even if her defensive posture and her side-stepping through the aisles of chairs in her classroom suggest otherwise. Later, she is seen looking in the mirror staring at an entirely different woman from herself – white and skinny with long blond curly hair. She tries her best to style herself to resemble her imagined self, but she cannot fit these standards. The importance of diverse representation is clear through this scene, as Precious tries to make herself beautiful but these body ideals she's trying to meet are impossible; yet Hollywood promotes these standards continually with movie after movie starring a glossy thin white actress.

Precious' dream sequences are an interesting addition to her conflicting self-image, with her imaginations of herself in the Hollywood spotlight. One such dream that is particularly compelling occurs after she has been pushed from behind by the catcalling teenagers on the

street. She places herself on a stage with music blaring and she is performing for an unknown man who is watching her. She is decidedly glamorous with a flowing dress and a feather boa, yet she has not imagined herself to be thin. As she dances, she is decidedly graceful and moves with an ease seen in many thin performers. Her smile is beaming and she looks completely content with herself. Still, this is a stark contrast to her reality in which she lies on the ground as the boys laugh at her.

I don't know what it's like to be Claireece Precious Jones. I do not know how to endure that kind of extensive trauma nor do I know the experience of being an overweight black teenage girl in Harlem. Despite this, I found my heart hurting as she shared the thoughts of a girl who finds herself unloved and broken, because I knew that pain. I still feel this pain in my bones even if I am recovering from the memories that sparked it; I know what it's like to look in the mirror and hate what you see, even though it is not your fault. I remember thinking that if I could just get a boyfriend, maybe it would get better. At one point, I would do whatever I could to make a boy like me.

In seventh grade, I fell in love. Or so I thought. He was the cutest boy ever, with long golden hair that curled around his ears that I once referred to my friends as being "so pretty that I want to buy it." I was head-over-heels, stupidly foolishly in love. He was nice to me when I met him, which was the first thing that drew me in, and he ended up being funny and silly and good-hearted, if a bit dim. Despite my studious nature even then, I'd help him by whispering answers to him or helping him fix what was wrong on the homework he tried to complete in the few minutes before class started. I thought I had a chance – after all, he was a bit chubby too, maybe he would warm up to the idea of dating me if I worked hard enough.

Towards the end of the school year, he invited me to go to the public library in the center of town with him after the last bell rung. I excitedly scrambled for a phone and pleaded for my mom to let me go to the library, under the guise of “studying.” Once class ended, I ran outside to find him so we could walk to the library, only I quickly spotted him talking to another boy that I didn’t know very well. I decided to cautiously follow them to the library, thinking that he’d notice me eventually and invite me to join the conversation. Little did I know what turn the conversation would soon take.

“Hey, fatty!”

My head whipped up. I looked at the two boys in front of me in horror as my “true love” stared sheepishly at his feet while his friend started hurling insults at me, all about how fat and disgusting I was. I didn’t know what to do, so I kept walking. I felt tears sting my eyes, but despite my natural inclination to start bawling with barely any prompting, I kept myself as pulled together as I could manage – no giant sobs, no red cheeks, no loud wailing. I stayed silent and kept walking, even though the words *wouldn’t stop*. At one point, despite my pain, I became angry that I was invited into this torment by someone I had trusted enough to not hurt me. I stared at the guy I had written pages of terrible poetry about over the year, the one that I had imagined introducing to my dad, as his friend kept on. He looked up at me eventually and I just kept on staring, trying to figure out what had happened. I didn’t find my answer.

Soon, I reached the library and locked myself in the women’s bathroom until I felt it was safe to come out. I saw the two boys laughing at their table as I hid from their view, and called my mom to pick me up.

I never helped him with his homework again. The next week at school he apologized, although to this day I'm not really sure what he was apologizing for – for having an awful friend? For not saying anything? For letting me believe that I could trust him?

All I wanted was to be loved.

Precious shares this same desire – to be loved. She spends much of her free time escaping into dreams where a man gazes at her figure adoringly as she twirls blissfully, only to re-enter a reality where she is neglected and abused. However, she soon finds people who clearly love and care for her, such as Ms. Weiss and Ms. Rain, and even the nurse John McFadden. Still, none of this is the same as the romantic love she so desperately craves. Additionally, it is uncertain how present any of these individuals can be within Precious' life as the film comes to a close. The final scene suggests that her life is going to dramatically improve, and that she is going to have a better future. This happily-ever-after appears sweet at first, but sours after one considers the two children she has on her hip and her impoverished upbringing. Even with all the progress she has made, her troubled past seems inescapable. Perhaps she has found a way to accept herself, through unconditional self-love. Yet, as the viewer watches Precious walk with her head held high, it brings an uncomfortable and unanswered question to mind: is self-love enough?

Bridesmaids

Bridesmaids was the hallmark film of 2011; it was praised by many for its groundbreaking status as a female-driven comedy and its progressive nature. Despite these claims, Paul Feig's film utilizes a frighteningly common film trope – that of the fat sidekick or side character. *Bridesmaids* is an ensemble comedy, with Kristen Wiig starring as the protagonist, Annie Walker, a disheveled yet plucky woman trying to find her way while her best friend Lillian Donovan (Maya Rudolph) seemingly has it all together as she gets engaged and plans her wedding. The fat character of Megan Price (Melissa McCarthy) enters the narrative as a decidedly unfeminine bridesmaid, which Roger Ebert referred to as having “the sturdiness and certainty of a fireplug” (Ebert *Bridesmaids*). While Melissa McCarthy's performance as Megan was considered by many, like Ebert, to be hilarious and noteworthy, her actual character represents many of the stereotypical and problematic aspects associated with mainstream Hollywood. Unlike drama films like *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Precious*, *Bridesmaids* pushes Melissa McCarthy's talent and fat character to the side; her character receives little screen time and is often utilized for sheer comedic relief.

It is important to note that much of Megan's characterization was decided by McCarthy, who favored a Guy Fieri-like persona within this role, both in appearance and mannerisms, to the point where people involved in the film told her that they needed her to not be repulsive (Penn). Thus, McCarthy assumes partial responsibility for Megan's presence within the film, and the reasoning for these questionable character choices should also be examined. Before her success in *Bridesmaids*, McCarthy had a prominent role within the television series *Gilmore Girls* as Sookie St. James, a character who is afforded dignity and complexity which is a rarity for Hollywood. During the filming of *Bridesmaids*, Melissa McCarthy entered television yet again

with *Mike & Molly*, a show that focuses on fat bodies in albeit stereotypical and often offensive ways, but there is evidence of flaws and deeper characterization within the show's episodes.

After her success in *Bridesmaids*, however, most of her roles have resorted to similar stereotyping (such as her roles in *Identity Thief* and *The Heat*). This rampant type-casting would suggest that McCarthy has found her niche within film, or perhaps that the only way she can gain acknowledgement is by portraying characters like Megan Price.

Megan Price is a character without dignity, and possibly humanity. While much of the humor within *Bridesmaids* resorts to crude jokes and inane behavior, the character of Megan Price exemplifies this to a startling degree. She is depicted burping without apology, and inappropriately conversing with strangers. This is reinforcing a stereotype that fat people do not know how to behave normally and politely within society, and instead they are unrefined slobs. Megan's clothing and appearance furthers this idea, with her mainly adorned in matronly or man-ish clothing such as ankle-length pants and newsboy hats, suggesting that she does not care about attractiveness or she simply does not care about her appearance. While this could be considered to be a progressive character trait, when she is placed in comparison to the other characters who maintain a ladylike and feminine appearance, it suggests that her clothing is intrinsically connected to her fatness. Megan shows symptoms of a stereotypically fat character even in the smallest details, like when she sprints off to the Mexican restaurant while the thin bridesmaids look on. While the rest of the characters are afforded quirks unique to them (such as Rita's intense need to go to a strip club or Becca's wide-eyed naivety), the details given to Megan perpetuate her fat character trope without granting her any complexity.

The scene in the bridal salon demonstrates how different Megan is from her thin counterparts in the film. When the bridesmaids walk into the store, the setting is intensely white

and classy, but even more than that, it is filled with mannequins – all with narrow waists akin to most straight-sized clothing. While the rest of the women seem to belong to this body type, Megan clearly does not; she does not “fit in” here, both literally and figuratively. Thus, her disinterest in the clothing is understandable as her focus turns to the big couch which seems to be the most welcoming aspect of the salon. Once all the women have picked a dress to try on, Megan’s “fatness” is on display yet again to show her differences. She is costumed in a darker-colored dress (as we all know, dark colors conceal “trouble spots”) with a matronly shrug on it that would be more at home on the mother of the bride, and the fabric appears to be the unseemingly and unforgiving bridal taffeta. The other bridesmaids wear flowing fabrics that have a breezy quality to them, while she is confined. Even once the women are showing signs of food poisoning, Megan mutters, “I think my dress was just tight.” Her whole presence within this scene seems to represent her discomfort in this world that she so clearly does not belong in.

When I was around eleven years old, a family friend got engaged. She called my home and purposely asked to speak to me, which was quite an honor for me at the time – an adult wanted to speak to *me*, after all! She began telling me about the wedding and asked if I would like to be a junior bridesmaid/flower girl, to which I blurted an excited, “yes!”

I always loved weddings, and I was overjoyed to be a part of this process. My mom accompanied me to dress shopping, where the bride and her own mother selected dresses for me to try. At this time, I had begun to feel uncomfortable in my own skin as I had begun the growing pains of puberty, but I was nevertheless eager to please the bride and fit her vision. I tried with my might to ignore the itchy fabrics that sat on my arms and the tops that didn’t quite fit me right, because these dresses were not about me. Yet, the bride and her mother became frustrated

with the choices as I squirmed in dress after dress. My mom tried to help with the process and pick options that she thought I would be comfortable in, but her advice went unacknowledged.

Eventually, they placed me in a dress that had a zipper across the back. The bride's mother told me to "suck it in," to which I desperately tried to do. As they tugged on the dress, I eventually voiced a weak complaint, saying, "It hurts and it's too tight." To which she replied: "Beauty is pain."

I resigned from my post as flower girl a week later.

* * * * *

As previously stated, many of the problems with Megan's character stem from the stereotypical fat side character trope. However, the most problematic aspect of her characterization is the lack of any actual characterization. While the other characters are given storylines, even the other minor characters (such as Annie's mom), little is ever learned about Megan. She is a fat character, but she is also a static character which results in a lack of relatability or reality within her character. She does not grow throughout the film, nor does she reveal anything intimately personal to any of the characters. More alarming is that beyond her fat goofiness and lack of manners, she does not have any character flaws: she is not selfish, uncaring, or hurtful. A lack of flaws means a lack of humanity, as there is nothing for the audience to relate to within her character; it is simply unrealistic for her to not have some negative character trait, yet one is never seen. This lack of realism is most explicitly displayed within the scene where Megan reaches out to Annie. Annie, as a protagonist, is full of flaws – a lack of motivation, self-esteem, and control. Megan appears at Annie's doorstep to help her, and ultimately delivers the inspirational pep-talk that pushes Annie into pulling herself together. The

speech Megan delivers, however, signifies the unrealistic nature of her character and the lack of a narrative granted to her.

She begins, telling Annie that she needs to hear about, “a girl named Megan who didn’t have a very good time in high school.” At first, it appears that this is going to be when Megan becomes truly vulnerable and shows her insecurities to the audience. However, she continues on, stating, “I know you look at me now and think, ‘Boy, she must of breezed through high school.’” This comment stings with an unsaid joke and truth in which no person within this society would actually believe a fat girl would have “breezed” through high school. Still, Megan goes on, stating, “No... this was not easy going up and down the halls, okay? They used to try and blow me up, they threw fire crackers at my head.” Her voice is unaffected here as she chronicles the torment she suffered, with the absurdity of this awfulness meant to further the hilarity of the film – after all, who throws firecrackers at a person?

Any sense of reality and tragedy within Megan’s story disappears as she begins the “inspirational” portion of her speech: “Do you think I let that break me? Think I went home to my mommy crying, ‘Oh, I don’t have any friends, Oh Megan doesn’t have any friends.’ No I did not, you know what I did, I pulled myself up...” The fact that Megan refused to be broken is admirable at first glance, but completely unrealistic once examined. She was bullied verbally and physically within high school, and there is an expectation here that she survived this without any lasting scars – she did not “break”. How could she not? This speech has an underlying current suggesting that it is not okay for a fat person to feel sad, to be broken by the world, or even to cry. The close of her speech furthers this idea, as she says, “So you gotta stop feeling sorry for yourself, okay? Because I do not associate with people that blame the world for their problems.”

A fat person, especially a teenager who has been bullied, has every right to blame the world for their problems. Fat individuals blame themselves enough for the pain they feel, for the unwanted attention they receive. Megan's statement suggests that society has been absolved of its role in her trauma. Often, the world is partially to blame for the problems facing fat individuals, especially women. Who taught these children that it was okay to throw firecrackers at her? Who taught them that they could call a young girl a "freak" without punishment? More importantly, who taught Megan that this was her burden to carry and that she must take responsibility for the actions of others? It is admirable that Megan could emerge from this pain with no signs of lasting damage, but it is also completely unrealistic and irresponsible to expect the same of others.

Pitch Perfect

Pitch Perfect was released in theaters in 2012, just a year after the success of *Bridesmaids*. The two films share the genre of being a comedy aimed at females, and likewise they each have a fat female side character. Despite this similarity, *Pitch Perfect* excels in fat female representation where *Bridesmaids* does not. The film's character of "Fat Amy" portrayed by Rebel Wilson is granted a sense of dignity and self-worth that is unseen in *Bridesmaids*' Megan, and the narrative works to develop her character just as much as the rest of the cast. Therefore, *Pitch Perfect* is an inclusive film in which Fat Amy is not reduced to stereotypes and she is not utilized solely for humor. Her character is proof that it is possible to have a fat female character within a comedy that is both realistic and hilarious without resorting to offensive, weird, or crude humor.

Even from the first encounter with Fat Amy, the differences and realism in her character are clear. Aubrey and Chloe, the leaders of the Barden Bellas, are searching for talent for their acapella group on the college campus. No one seems interested nor do the potentials meet their requirements, even as Aubrey utters, "We'll be fine. I am confident that we will find eight super-hot girls with bikini-ready bodies who can harmonize and have perfect pitch." Less than twenty seconds after this line is delivered, Fat Amy appears for the first time. Perhaps this entrance can be taken as a joke, as her plus-size body is not the idealized version of being "bikini-ready" or "super-hot", but Fat Amy enters nonetheless with her head held high, ready to meet their requirements on harmonization and perfect pitch. Notable is her choice of dress, which suggests the realism and depth of her character. She wears a simple v-neck shirt with a black skirt and low heels, while her makeup seems uncomplicated and her hair is in a messy ponytail. This entire ensemble is important as it is a reasonable outfit for a college student to wear, as well as the fact

that it does not over-emphasize her “fatness”. Her clothing is not meant to imply anything masculine, dumpy, or awkward about her character and instead establishes her femininity and desire to look her best; she is no different from any of her peers and is dressed as a typical college student. Her appearance could possibly explain her almost immediate acceptance by Aubrey and Chloe, who quickly ask her about her musical talent, to which she demonstrates well. Despite their previous requirement of “bikini-ready” bodies, they seem to acknowledge and desire the value of Fat Amy that goes beyond her body, which is conceivably dwarfed by her ability to match pitch and harmonize.

Notably, within this same scene there is a rhetorical conversation taking place with the reclamation of terms to reveal Fat Amy’s identity. When asked for her name, she simply replies, “Fat Amy.” Aubrey is taken aback, questioning, “You call yourself Fat Amy?” Fat Amy gives her reasoning immediately, saying, “Yeah, so twig bitches like you don’t do it behind my back.” This is especially revealing, because it suggests that there has been pain in Fat Amy’s past. It’s a subtle representation of a realistic fat narrative in which “twig bitches” or thin people will go behind a fat person’s back, even one who is a friend, to state this categorization of the body. By choosing to call herself “Fat Amy”, she is taking back the power to identify herself by her body as well as protect herself from those who want to hurt her. It is showing strength of character and a desire to include her fatness as part of her identity. Therefore, when Aubrey (who had previously been so judgmental about bodies) replies, she is forced to acknowledge this title, stating, “I will see you in auditions, Fat Amy.” Yet she says this without any sense of awkwardness or judgment, and the words imply not only is she excited to see Fat Amy at auditions, but she’s willing to be inclusive of not only her talent but her body. Every time she (or anyone else) says Fat Amy’s name, they are being reminded of a fat identity and are thus

cognizant of the rhetoric previously used to insult that identity. It is important to note that after this one scene, the word “fat” is never used as an insult against Fat Amy, and is only mentioned as part of her title. Roger Ebert makes a notable observation about Fat Amy, stating that she is:

...a character so ebullient, unstoppable and raucous that she steals every scene she’s in and passes the Character Name Test. This refers to our ability to remember the names of a movie character for more than 10 minutes after the movie has ended. Fat Amy, I will remember (Ebert *Pitch Perfect*).

While much of her memorability can be attributed to Wilson’s extraordinary performance, at least part of Fat Amy’s staying power is due to her jarring name choice. This is a noteworthy achievement for a fat side character to stay so ingrained in our minds, and is a testament to what progressive writing can achieve. Despite this, I had my reservations about the choice to name a character Fat Amy, if only because I thought about what it would have meant for me had this film been released seven years earlier.

“And winner of the biggest appetite award...Amy Pistone.”

That was the moment my life changed forever. I was twelve years old.

My sixth-grade English teacher had decided as a “fun” way to learn the grammar concept of superlatives, our entire “team” of approximately 100 students would vote on class superlatives. There would be both a boy and girl winner for each category, which included such noteworthy titles as “Most Likely to Succeed” and “Best Smile.” And the one anomaly: “Biggest Appetite.”

I have no idea what possessed my teacher to include that on the list of superlatives, but I do remember when we went to vote I found it extremely odd. I never thought that they would

choose me. I was wrong. A hundred of my peers decided that I had the biggest appetite, despite the fact that I rarely ate much at school. And the second that I was awarded that title over the school's intercom system, I knew what it really meant.

Everything beyond that moment is a blur. I've gone over that day dubbed the Worst Day of My Life countless times to the point where it doesn't seem real anymore. Part of me still doesn't believe it actually happened to me. Yet even in the blurriness, I remember.

I cried at my desk. I've always been rather infamous for how often I cried, but on that day I sobbed quietly, trying to avoid the stares of my classmates. I wanted to disappear. Still, my teacher realized her mistake (too late) and asked me if I was okay.

Stupid question, if you ask me. But ever-so-polite was I as a twelve-year-old, and I simply asked to go to the bathroom. I wish I had hid there.

My best friend LeeAnn grabbed me and asked worriedly if I was alright. I shrugged; she knew the answer just as well as I did. The rest of my math class whispered as I walked to my seat.

At lunch, I refused to eat. My friends offered their lunches to me, only to receive mumbled responses.

"I'm fine."

The table next to us, full of boys (including the male winner of the biggest appetite award) snickered as I hugged myself and my friends glared back at them. Everything was a dull roar, with my thoughts echoing the words that I recognized from the boys' mouths.

Fat, fat, fat, fat... it was a mantra they sang, reminding me of exactly why I won this award, of exactly why I deserved this. My mind began to sing too. *Fat, fat, fat, fat...* a train was coming, and it was going to hit me soon.

When I went to get on the school's shuttle bus at the end of the day, the blur was beginning to fade from my mind. I quietly took my seat next to LeeAnn and waited for the day to be over.

"Fat cow," one of the boys muttered as they passed me.

FAT, FAT, FAT, FAT... the train finally hit, and everything seemed to crash all at once.

I remember swearing as my voice shook. I remember in between screams, wondering how the hell this was even happening. I remember being asked, "When's the baby due?" and being told that next to the lanky LeeAnn, we were, "Timon and Pumba."

Ten years later, we still think that one is particularly hilarious.

The boys screamed at me, and I screamed back. And then the weirdest thing happened. As the bus got louder and louder, I realized some of the voices were in support of me. Girls in my grade, girls who *hated* me, began to yell back at the boys in my defense. LeeAnn, the one who evades conflict whenever possible, stood up on the bus seat and began telling off those "fuckers". I had never heard her swear before in my life and here she was, stringing together obscenities in ways I have never heard of.

After ten minutes of this, the bus reached its destination. I left for the bus that was going to take me home, and sat in silence for the rest of the ride. No one was screaming anymore, and I was left to my thoughts.

I would be left to my thoughts for the rest of my life. Ten years later, I'm still thinking.

I think of how a hundred children learned to hate my body, and then taught me how to hate it all the same. I think of depression, pain, and glaring at mirrors. I think about how as a twelve-year-old, I began brainstorming the best way to commit suicide.

I think about a girl whose only crime was being fat.

That day caused me to lose myself for a long time. Years passed and I blamed myself, because if only I wasn't fat, this wouldn't have happened to me. I began to hide myself away.

But I am grateful for that day.

It taught me about the strength, endurance, and the perseverance required to be a fat girl in this world. That day brought me to this day, where I can be angry about what happened to me, and I can write a thesis about it. I may not have the best self-image there is out there, but I also don't have the worst. I am comfortable in my skin more times than not, and I am no longer apologetic for my existence. I still flinch at the word "fat" and I still scowl at my tummy, but I have accepted myself and what happened to me. It's too late to protect that twelve-year-old fat girl on the bus. She's been hurt and will continue to hurt for a long time. But it's not too late to protect the other little girls out there.

For that, I am grateful.

Fat Amy continues to express her strong identity and sense of self as she interacts with boys. During the acapella mixer, Bumper, the leader of The Treblemakers, is shown desperately trying to attract women. Fat Amy approaches him to make casual conversation, and Bumper pushes his friend away so they can have a private conversation. It seems at first that Bumper is going to hit on her, but he then says, "You are probably the grossest human being I've ever seen." This seems to be an attack on her fat body, as there is nothing else about her appearance that represents a "gross" image. Fat Amy recognizes this for what it is, and hurls an insult back at him. Bumper then blurts, "So I have a feeling that we should kiss." Fat Amy's response to this is ludicrous and hilarious, as she replies, "Well, I sometimes have a feeling I can do crystal meth, but then I think, mhm, 'better not.'" This dialogue proves that Fat Amy has a strong sense of

self-worth; while Bumper seems to be desperate to connect with any woman, even one he believes to be gross, Fat Amy squashes any hopes he might have of a flirtation with her by comparing him to drugs. Often, there seems to be a societal expectation that any fat woman should be grateful to receive male attention of any kind, but Fat Amy is proving to be a role model for these fat women, as she shows dignity and poise while denying a man who does not deserve her. Interestingly, this line was utilized within the trailers for *Pitch Perfect*, and is one of the more frequently quoted lines by fans of the film.

While Fat Amy does deny the affections of Bumper, a brief scene in the middle of the film reveals that she still does enjoy the company of other males. During spring break, she is shown lounging in a pool with two shirtless men who are giving their full attention to her. She is dressed in loud colors with a swimsuit of purple and orange, suggesting that she intended to attract these males and was successful. Despite the brief duration of this scene and the fact that the identities of these men are never given, this scene is extremely valuable in understanding Fat Amy. The fact that these men are classically hot and seem to be so attentive to her create a contrast to Bumper's flirtation, in which Fat Amy is willing to spend her time with men who treat her well, and their appearances indicate that she is not a "gross" human being to them. It produces an image of a fat woman who is also desirable, both sexually and romantically.

Pitch Perfect demonstrates an attention to realism in the character of Fat Amy, in which her entire role seems to be devoted to promoting her strength as a person and how her "fat" identity does not impede her, but rather seems to empower her. While the film is a comedy, it is also part musical – and Fat Amy is able to deliver memorable performances without resorting to exploiting her fat body. From her audition in which she sings lines of Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone", she establishes that she has a powerful voice and powerful stage presence that is

valuable to the entire acapella troupe. Most of the other singers who are auditioning seem ill-prepared or bizarre, as they hit notes awkwardly or dance in unusual ways, and then Fat Amy sings for the first time with the notoriously high lyric, “Since you’ve been gone”, and she actually hits the pitch that Clarkson is famous for. It represents the scope of Fat Amy’s talent, and foreshadows her incredible performance in the finale number of the film.

In the Barden Bella’s finale, each member of the acapella troupe is given their own unique role to play, including Fat Amy. Perhaps more importantly, they all are also able to perform together as they have finally reached cohesion in the form of recognizing strengths and individuality within each other. This is shown even in their choice of costume – in which each member has chosen their own outfit that represents themselves. Fat Amy has chosen a loose fitting shirt and cropped pants, both of which have a black sheen to them that is reminiscent of Sandy’s outfit from *Grease*. She is glamorous in her own way – comfortable with femininity, as her hair is worn in voluminous waves. She contributes to the entire accapella performance, but her solo is particularly striking as she sings lyrics that were originally delivered by Pitbull:

Excuse me, and I might drink a little more than I should tonight

And I might take you home with me if I could tonight

And baby Imma make you feel so good tonight

Cause we might not get tomorrow

These lyrics can be interpreted when sung by Fat Amy to represent her identity as being powerful and strong, as she is in a position of control and empowerment (she is going to be the one to “make you feel so good”). Her delivery of these lyrics is notable as well, as she sings them with a seductive drawl on the end of the lines, and she has a strong tone to them that conjures images of powerhouse singers such as Aretha Franklin or Adele – artists whose power

spoke for themselves despite appearances. In fact, while Fat Amy's "fatness" is visible throughout the performance, she never performs in such a way that would imply that she is any less capable than the thin performers. The Bellas planned difficult choreography for the entirety of the performance, and yet Fat Amy is able to perform these moves. She can keep up with all the other singers (even in a particularly complex move that requires her to rapidly lower herself to the floor), and her dancing has attitude and sass to it rather than the clumsiness that is often assumed of fat performers. As she ends her performance, she ends with a wide smile, as she should – she has proved herself to be not just an artist, but a *fat* artist who can perform just as well, if not better than the thin singers.

Shallow Hal

Despite the fact that the film *Shallow Hal*, directed by Peter and Robert Farrelly, was released in 2001 and thus years before any of the previously discussed films I chose to cover this film at the end of my thesis, as it is easily the most offensive and problematic film that I have selected. Perhaps *Shallow Hal* should be judged on a curve, due to its older release date, but this would be an irresponsible tactic – after all, the film is only 13 years old and has no qualms about judging the bodies of fat women, and therefore it should be subjected to the same criticism. The problems within *Shallow Hal* arise not just out of the film’s liberal use of stereotypical fat jokes, but the film’s entire plot and format. Interestingly, this film is also marketed as a romantic comedy, and is possibly the only recent mainstream film to feature a fat woman as a romantic interest. Yet, this film fails on all levels in delivering a genuine narrative of a fat woman, and instead seems to utilize her as a tool to propel the plot forward. However, the film does have a merit in a cruel and unusual way – it represents how society really sees a fat woman, even if it glosses this over with a manufactured “happy” ending.

Shallow Hal tells the story of an extremely superficial man named Hal (played by Jack Black) who falls under a spell that causes him to view every person he encounters by their inner beauty. When he encounters a beautiful person with a rotten soul, he sees them as a visual representation of that ugly personality, and vice versa. Enter Rosemary, a fat woman with a heart to rival Mother Theresa’s and a personality to match, and to Hal she appears as the most stunning woman he has ever encountered. Gwyneth Paltrow plays both the thin and fat versions of Rosemary, although she wears a fat suit for the latter version. This is the only film to utilize a fat female character without using a fat actress, thus it can be considered a “fatsploitation”² film

² Refers to a film that utilizes a fat character as a gimmick; exploits fat identities for the sake of entertainment.

with its lack of authenticity and reliance on fatness as a gimmick rather than a realistic narrative (Rosthblum and Solovay 268). While this film might have been a learning experience for Paltrow, as the fat suit “made her more conscious of how oppressive the current cultural body ideal is,” she has a luxury that none of the actresses in any of the other films have – at the end of the day, she got to take off the fat suit and walk away relatively unscathed. (Campos 84). How is a fat audience meant to identify and empathize with a character portrayed by someone who has not, and likely never will, experienced their struggles?

One of the most overwhelmingly problematic aspects of this film is the mysticism it relies on to tell the story of Hal. Hollywood magic means anything can happen, and yet the film seems to argue that the only way to fall in love with a fat woman necessitates a type of sorcery. This mystic version of “love is blind” yields a justification as to how or why Hal could ever fall in love with Rosemary, which begs the question: why do we need a justification? It reads as a suggestion that no one could ever find a fat woman beautiful at a first glance, and this spell is a convenient way of breaking through those barriers without any internal change occurring within Hal. Furthermore, while the issues of shallowness manifest within Hal, the major hurdle that needs to be conquered is the existence of Rosemary’s fatness, which therein places the blame upon her. Oddly enough, in the words of the film’s directors, the Farrelly brothers, the film’s plot was conceived by their roommate Sean Moynihan, who is legally blind, yet “wrote a screenplay about inner beauty” (Argent 39). This seemingly trivial fact is undeniably disturbing as one considers just exactly *how* a blind man developed this concept that seems to rely solely on the unsettling aesthetics of a fat woman and the hilarity that would ensue in loving her.

A major side effect of this mystic plot is the following visual representation of Rosemary. While her fatness is continually represented through physical comedy such as the breaking of

chairs and a tilted rowboat, rarely is her fatness ever *seen* on-camera. For the majority of the film, Rosemary is shown through Hal's eyes in all the glory that is the thin Gwyneth Paltrow. Occasionally, the viewer sees her through the rest of society's eyes, but even then she is shown for a brief moment, often from behind or from an extreme close-up, as if the camera is reluctant to show her reality, because her fatness is too much to bear for the audience. As Katharina Mendoza writes of Rosemary, "she is only pieces of a fat body, made available to viewers mostly in chopped up, fetishized chunks." (Rothblum and Solovay 283). This lack of visible fatness allows both Hal and the audience to fall in love with Rosemary in a thin package with a glowing personality, and at no point is the audience forced to confront their own shallowness. An avoidance of a fat identity renders this identity meaningless, and thus the character of Rosemary is treated as more of a concept than an actual person.

Accordingly, the humor within *Shallow Hal* generally lacks any meaning or subtlety as it treats Rosemary's fat body as a comedic device instead of a way of actually subverting a narrative. In the words of the directors, the initial draft had "a bunch of clichés in it" which required multiple drafts to "flush [them] out" (Argent 40). Yet, most of the comedy within the film relies upon physical gags, as Rosemary "cannonballs into a swimming pool, causing a near tsunami" and "breaks furniture on a regular basis; apparently, no chair is safe under her" (Rothblum and Solovay 282). These jokes read as cheap ways of provoking a laugh from an audience that buys into these clichés as a manifestation of what they believe to be the truth about fat women. Bobby Farrelly insists that he and his brother "love" their characters and that characters like Rosemary are "just regular people. They're just like us, and they're all around us. So why can't they be in a story?" (Argent 41). These sentiments seem contradicted by the film's

narrative and comedy which uses difference, specifically Rosemary's weight, as the source of humor; fat characters might be regular people, but they are never treated as exactly normal.

Despite this flawed visual representation, there are small cinematic moments in which Rosemary demonstrates a realistic self-awareness that one could expect from a fat person, even if these moments are under-represented. When Hal begins to flirt with her through his perception of her physical beauty, Rosemary takes it as an insult, referring to Hal as a "jackass." Still, she seems almost resigned to this kind of treatment, which is indicative of the society she has been produced in. On their first date, Hal approves of the large, possibly gluttonous meal that Rosemary has ordered, commenting, "I hate it when you guys order a glass of water and a crouton." While the audience can assume that Hal means thin women by "you guys," Rosemary is aware of her fat reality and makes apologies, stating, "That's probably what I should be ordering. But I don't know, no matter what I eat, my weight just seems to stay the same." This quotation provides a magnificent dual-duty in which it shows the emotional burden Rosemary holds for herself in simply ordering a meal, while also indicating to the audience that she is a "Good Fatty."³ In the same sequence, two men comment on Rosemary's appearance, saying, "Looks like we're too late. The food's probably all gone." Hal misunderstands this as an attack on his body, but Rosemary is well aware of what is actually happening, and pleads for him to "just let it go." This furthers the idea of her previous painful experiences in the world, as she does not seem surprised at this occurrence, and her desire to let it go suggests that she has internalized these comments to the point where she is placing the blame on herself. Society has failed her repeatedly, so much that she doesn't even anticipate basic respect from the world.

³ Term within fat studies and fat blogging communities, refers to an individual who may problematize their own body and apologize for it, often diets or says they intend to diet, and thus earns the title of "Good Fatty" in the eyes of society.

Likewise, the film's ending is a failure of itself. Despite these small moments in which Rosemary shows her insecurities and fears, at the close of the film she has not been given a character arc; she is a side character, the intended love interest, regardless of her place in this love story. For the entirety of the film, Hal misunderstands her and views her as a trophy to which he is not entitled, and then has the audacity to disregard her once the mysticism is lifted. While he does eventually come to his "senses," he still has this period in which he casts Rosemary aside because of her appearance, and nothing more. His shallowness has not disappeared. Once he decides that he will continue to pursue and love her, the film seems to imply that he has conquered his shallowness, while this is simply not the case. As stated before, he was given this time to fall in love with Rosemary as a thin woman, and by the time he sees her as a fat woman, he is already in love, thus he is more easily able to make allowances for her fatness. When he utters the words, "Oh, my God. You're beautiful," it is hard to accept this as a viewer because he spent the entire movie judging women on their appearances and initially approached Rosemary because of an imagined physical (thin) beauty. He then offers, "You're the only girl I've ever loved," as if this is a grand gesture that justifies his intrusion into her life after the hurt he has caused her. Unbelievably, Rosemary seems to accept this, and a tidy happy ending follows with the pair riding off in a car.

Is there anything wrong with a happy ending? No, of course not. However, this "happy ending" of *Shallow Hal* seems abrupt, unjustified, and unfair, especially to the character of Rosemary. Hal emerges from this film looking like a martyr, for loving Rosemary despite her fatness. Yet, what does Rosemary win? She seems content to accept the first form of love she receives, without a critical glance. She is simply there to receive Hal's love, because she is his reward, and she is likewise rewarded...a man who had to "overcome" his shallowness just to

accept a relationship with her? Perhaps this is the expected happily-ever-after for a fat woman; she is what a man “settles” for.

* * * * *

I found happily-ever-after at age fifteen. *Fat* fifteen.

I asked Mark out in our freshman year of high school, expecting a decisive “no” as I had received from all the other boys I had shown interest in before. Imagine my surprise when I handed him a painstakingly written note (*hey, I was fifteen*) and he immediately replied “yes.”

And I promptly ran away out of shock.

I didn’t expect to fall in love at fifteen, and I certainly didn’t expect that anyone could have ever loved a fat girl like me. Mark did, and he still does.

A few weeks after we started dating, I showed him a “Life List” that I had started keeping. On a color-coded and meticulously organized piece of computer paper, I had written down a list of goals that I wanted to achieve – places I wanted to go, people I wanted to meet, experiences I wanted to have. Nestled between lines about swimming with dolphins and seeing a shooting star was the line, “Learn how to love myself.”

Mark’s brow crinkled.

“Why don’t you love yourself?” he asked. I shrugged my shoulders.

“Well, you should love yourself. You’re beautiful.”

He said it with such certainty that it felt like a fact that I couldn’t argue with, as my heart melted. I was shocked that a teenage boy could find a fat girl beautiful, without any clauses or conditions. My weight was such a non-issue, something that was not preventing me from beautiful. Mark’s words weren’t said as a consolatory remark or a way of dismissing my body, but rather a statement of what he found to be obvious, even if it wasn’t to me.

Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve him, because the fat girls never get the guy. Seven years later and some days I still cannot believe that I was lucky enough to find a man as wonderful as him. Yet, he is not a Hal. He loves me for everything I am, including my round tummy and my thick thighs and those stupid arms I hate so much. He tells me that I am beautiful, and I believe him.

He loves me, as the fat girl that I am.

And I love him too.

Conclusion

I'd like to think that Hollywood is changing for the better, that fat females are finally being heard and represented through film. Perhaps it is a sign of progress that there are even films including fat females in America's popular cinema, yet that seems like a small victory. Yet, I don't want to confuse presence with representation. Fat females might exist in movies for brief moments and even show some characterization at times, but they are not real. The audience can't empathize with them because virtually every fat female character is a facsimile of humanity.

There are small glimpses of hope, certainly, in the films mentioned previously. For example, *Little Miss Sunshine* shows the sheer danger of a fatphobic society and how it can harm a little girl, starting with a few quiet words in a diner. Or consider the exuberant and joyful nature of Fat Amy in *Pitch Perfect*, who takes charge of her own identity before others can do so for her, and she looks damn fabulous doing it. There is even hope in *Precious*, where the fat female actually gets to be the star of the film, and the audience can root for her along the way.

These tiny moments of triumph are dwarfed by the inescapable stereotyping and lack of authenticity within these fat narratives. This is most obvious in *Shallow Hal*, where Rosemary is merely a prop in a man's quest for the perfect (thin, beautiful, sexy) woman. Yet, even one of the most popular blockbusters, *Bridesmaids*, is guilty of these cinematic sins with Megan existing to belch and flop onto couches, resorting to stereotypes over authenticity. The aforementioned hopeful films are not without their problems, either. *Little Miss Sunshine* yields a tidy ending with gleeful dancing on a stage and a family closer than ever, but what of Olive's future? Is that diner scene really just an anomaly in her life, and can she ever truly escape beauty contests? Despite the gravity and significance of the narrative in *Precious*, it ties up her story in an unbelievably sweet and inspirational ending, where despite the overwhelming odds against her,

Precious emerges triumphant and hopeful with two children that she is presumably ill-equipped to take care of. Fat Amy might be the most progressive fat female in current cinema, but *Pitch Perfect* also never really gives the viewer her full story, as she is yet again, a side character rather than the star.⁴

All of these stories aren't real. They are fictional to the point of absurdity, because they lack the authenticity found in a real-life fat narrative. The characters aren't real, either, but there is a very real audience that sits watching each film, waiting to connect to the Hollywood versions of themselves and their reality.

I am real.

No authentic fat narrative is created alike. That's probably the most important distinction between these films and the lives of fat women across America (and beyond), is that overwhelming unpredictability.

My fat narrative is indecipherably complicated, and ever-changing. It would be easy to sit here and tell you that once I hit college and found fat studies, that I am fixed. It would be easy to say that I am as confident as my namesake Fat Amy, or that I am as carefree as Olive. It would be easy to say that I am beautiful and *fuck what society thinks of me*, I am perfect the way I am.

All of those words would be a lie. Nothing within my fat lifetime has been easy or simple, and that's the reality of it. For the most part, I feel better about myself on a daily basis and I look into the mirror and smile at my reflection. Like any other person, I have my bad days where I scowl and none of my clothes seem to look good. Still, it goes much deeper than that.

Recently, one of my best friends took a candid photo of me during our painting class and held out her phone for me to look at. My expression is the highlight – I've turned my face into a

⁴ Pitch Perfect 2, the sequel, is to be released in theaters within a few days. The trailers are somewhat concerning in regards to Fat Amy's story, which seems to rely more on physical gags than any lines with true substance. It is very possible that her progressive character could be derailed once this film is released.

grumpy pout (that my boyfriend Mark says resembles the pugs I love so much) – but then my blood froze and everything went a little hazy.

God, is that what I really look like? Are my arms that big? That shirt doesn't look very flattering...

The rational side of me got angry at the rest of me for even thinking this way. I don't really care about flattering clothing anymore, and to be honest, I never liked my arms regardless of the photo. I felt like I was being a traitor to fat studies. Yet, rationality was dwarfed by my emotions that flooded over me, to where I began trembling a little bit and thinking of how badly I wanted to get home.

These moments don't happen for me very often, thankfully. The truth is that I will likely spend the rest of my lifetime dealing with days like that, and trying to maintain my identity and confidence through it all.

My fat narrative is not tidy, and I don't ever expect it to be. My lifetime has been, and will continue to be a crescendo of tremendous highs and valleys of unexpected lows, all related to my fatness. This is my reality, and I've come to accept it.

Change can happen, though. Consistent authentic representations make a significant difference in promoting that change. I've seen it within my own life. I follow blogs of my fellow fat women, who model their "fatshion" and deliver unapologetic quips directed at the status quo that society seems so determined to enforce. Every time I see a picture of one of these women, I smile a little and think, "*Hey, she looks just like me.*" It improves my mood, every time.

It's time that Hollywood catches up, and starts proving that idiotic doctor from the past that things really are different now. Instead of all of these falsified, static characters and their

stagnant narratives, why don't these films start showcasing fat women who can really mirror the depths of the human soul? It certainly could be a lot more interesting.

Give me films where fat women don't just exist, but they are the star. Give me a fat mermaid, terrorizing foolish sailors for venturing too far out into the ocean, and when they say, "No fat chicks," she devours them whole. Give me a fat woman making out with a man who looks like Ryan Gosling, where she is no consolation prize but the best thing that has ever happened to him, and he will do anything to win her love. Give me a fat woman in an indie drama where she goes on the path to self-acceptance and never completely finds it, but she gets pretty damn close, and she finally stops dieting. Give us fat women crying, laughing, kissing, dancing, and thriving.

These films are necessary, and it's time we start demanding them.

Somewhere out there, there's a young girl digging her nails into fat thighs and pinching at her rounded stomach. She's hiding herself in shades of navy and black, layer after layer obscuring her figure, but no one can see her in the darkness of the movie theater. No one can see her in the trailers that flit across the screen either.

She needs to know that she matters, too.

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