

FABRICATED FLESH: FAT SUITS & FAILURES OF SUBVERSION IN GROSS-OUT COMEDY FILMS

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DEDICATION

To Grammy: My biggest fan.

ABSTRACT

Fabricated Flesh: Fat Suits & Failures of Subversion in Gross-Out Comedy Films explores how Hollywood used fat suits in the peak years of gross-out comedy, from 1996 to 2007. This period brought together new prosthetic technologies, the rise of diet culture, and a moral panic around the “obesity epidemic.” The result was a cycle of films that amplified anti-fat stereotypes through their prolific use of prosthetic fatness.

The dissertation focuses on five case studies. *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Jay Roach, 1999) and *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (Rawson Marhsall Thurber, 2004) show how fatness was tied to class excess and comic grotesquerie. *Shallow Hal* (Peter and Bobby Farrelly, 2001) and *The Nutty Professor* (Tom Shadyac, 1996) highlight how fat suits were used in an attempt to moralize about fatness while still leaning on anti-fat humor and reifying rigid gender scripts. *Norbit* (Brian Robbins, 2007) demonstrates the culmination of these trends, where racial caricature and anti-fat tropes merged in ways that pushed the gross-out genre toward collapse.

Through close readings of these films and their production histories, the project shows how fat suits disciplined spectatorship by teaching audiences to conflate fatness with failure, pity, or contamination. While marketed as transgressive or empathetic, these performances rarely disrupted stigma. Instead, they reinforced cultural scripts that treated fatness as disposable.

By situating these comedies within the broader history of fat suit performance and the cultural politics of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the dissertation argues that the fat suit was never a neutral prop. It was central to how Hollywood taught viewers to see fatness, and it remains a key lens for understanding the intersection of comedy, technology, and body politics.

EPIGRAPH

“Movies make magic. They change things. They take the real and make it something else right before our eyes.”

—BELL HOOKS, *REEL TO REAL*, 2

“When it comes to fatphobia, the solution is not to improve our self-image or love our bodies better. It is nothing less than to *remake the world* to properly fit fat bodies, and to effect the socially transformative recognition that there is truly nothing wrong with us.”

—KATE MANNE, *UNSHRINKING*, 9

“[fart sounds]”

—FAT BASTARD IN *AUSTIN POWERS*

FOREWORD

I. A Semi-Autobiographical Overture

Every era has its defining myths. For the 1990s and early 2000s, it was the myth that a thinner body promised a better life. These years marked a time where “diet culture” became mainstream. The ingredients for this diet- and image-obsessed era had been simmering for many decades beforehand, but a unique blend of factors — fad diets, the proliferation of “health food” marketing, the commercialization of ultra-thin and hyper-sexualized body types, the explosion of reality television, and the rise of the internet — crystallized into a culture where dieting was not just a personal endeavor but a moral imperative. As a fat kid coming of age during this era, I experienced firsthand the ubiquity and harm of diet culture. I started my first diet at 12 years old, long before I had any awareness of concepts like eating disorders, body positivity, fat acceptance, or fat liberation. Those ideas were as alien to me as the yet-to-exist iPhone. What I knew — what I had been taught — was that I was “chubby” or “big-boned” (terms I clung to in an effort to avoid the dreaded word *fat*), and that I needed to lose weight. My friends, my family, even strangers who commented on my body (often suggesting that I would make a great football player) reinforced this message. But no force shaped my understanding of weight and worth more powerfully than movies and television. I was raised on books, movies, and television; they were my guides to life, for better and for worse. And in the latter camp were the inescapable messages from pop culture that conflated my weight with my health, moral character, and desirability. One could not be healthy *and* fat, a hero *and* fat, and — especially — attractive *and* fat. These were mutually exclusive states of being. Fatness ate them all up. If I were to become any of these, the solution was clear: I had to lose weight.

And so, I did — repeatedly. In middle school, I crash dieted during the summer break between 7th and 8th grade. I returned to school with a new body and new confidence. Yes, I had starved myself of calories for three months, but that was of little relevance. What mattered was that people noticed. People praised me. They marveled at my transformation. And I drank it in. My thinner body was temporary, of course, but the validation was intoxicating and addicting.

I was “yo-yo dieting” (or, what the medical literature calls “weight cycling”) for the next two decades, rapidly losing and gaining weight and trying every new fad diet I could get my hands on. I worked with doctors, nutritionists, and personal trainers. Low-carb, low-calorie, high-cholesterol, high-protein, low-fat, high-fat, no fruit, all fruit, whole foods, liquid foods, grapefruits, green foods, yellow foods, Atkins, Slim Fast, South Beach, Weight Watchers, Keto, intermittent fasting — I tried it all. All told, I gained and lost more than 1,000 pounds in the two decades between the ages of 12 and 32. It became a Sisyphean task, trying to lose weight, and it held all the absurdity such a task implies. The more I chased weight loss, the more I realized I did not even understand what I was working toward. My health was no better off. It was, in fact, much worse. Whether I was 200 pounds or 400 pounds did not seem to make me a morally worse or better person — but it certainly threw my physical and mental health into tailspins. Why was I putting myself through all of this? That is a story for another time. What matters is this: I lived through the diet-obsessed culture of the 1990s and 2000s. I was literally shaped by it. And that lived experience is what drives this project.

I was an adolescent boy when gross-out comedies were surging in popularity — films that reveled in crude humor, bodily fluids, and shock value. My friends and I devoured them. Our comedic sensibilities were shaped by the fraternity-style hijinks of *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999), the toilet humor of *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (Jay Roach, 1997), the so-offensive-it’s-funny schtick of *Family Guy* (1999–present) and *South Park* (1997–present), the surreal shocks of Adult Swim

shows, and the body fluid gags that dripped and seeped through so many scenes of Farrelly Brothers films. I was a young, impressionable fat boy who could not get enough of these movies and shows that framed fat bodies as inherently freakish and disgusting, using them as punchlines for laughs or as grotesque spectacles to provoke audience revulsion. I sat in theaters while hundreds of people laughed and recoiled in disgust at bodies that looked just like mine — and I was disgusted right along with them. These texts, at their core, presented fat bodies as *funny* and *gross*. The connection between fatness and moral failure, moreover, was deeply ingrained in these depictions, just as it was in the broader media landscape of the time.

Much of the reality television of this era, for instance, played a key role in shaping cultural attitudes toward fatness, mine included. *The Biggest Loser* (2005–2020) epitomized the fatphobic ethos of these years. At the height of its popularity, *The Biggest Loser* enjoyed more than ten million viewers, beating out other reality show staples like *Fear Factor* (2001–2006), *The Bachelor* (2002–present), and *The Bachelorette* (2003–present), as well as sitcom juggernauts like *The Simpsons* (1989–present), *Will & Grace* (1998–2006), and *King of Queens* (1998–2007) (“Primetime Series”). *The Biggest Loser* treated fatness as a problem to be solved — an affliction to be eradicated through extreme weight loss regimens. Contestants were subjected to public weigh-ins, their bodies displayed on massive scales like livestock at auction. Week after week, the audience cheered and shed tears as the contestants shed pounds, reinforcing the idea that weight loss was not just desirable but morally righteous.

The show’s so-called trainers, Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels, were at the center of this spectacle. Their brand of “motivation” often crossed into outright abuse — yelling, berating, and pushing contestants to physical and emotional breaking points. One of the show’s most persistent tropes was the moment of revelation: the contestant, after suffering a breakdown, would finally unearth the “real reason” for their fatness. Trauma. Self-loathing. An unresolved emotional wound.

This moment played into the pervasive stereotype that fat people are fat for an unfortunate and specific reason — that their size is always a symptom of something deeper, rather than a simple fact of their existence. As sociologist Deborah Lupton puts it, the underlying messages of the show were clear: “Fat people are lonely, unloved, emotionally volatile and sad; they deserve punishing exercise routines and stringent diets as part of their weight-loss efforts; they are childish and need a stern authority figure to force them into proper weight-loss habits” (2). Of course, *The Biggest Loser* was far from the only place these narratives thrived. These stigmas and stereotypes — that fat people are lazy, pitiful, and unloved — were featured in cinematic depictions of fat characters, particularly in scenes that portray their most desperate, shame-filled moments (many of these will be explored in my body chapters).

I watched week in and week out, season after season, as these fat people were bullied and berated into dropping massive amounts of weight in extremely short stretches of time. Oh, how I wished to be standing on that scale as crowds of people cheered for my new body.¹ Those early experiences with reality TV and gross-out comedies, with their relentless mockery of fat bodies — contestants and characters frequently uttering the word “fat” with disgust and shame in their quivering voices — gave me a script that taught me to laugh at and pity people who looked like me. And I performed that script with vigor, eager to stay one step ahead of judgment. I did not have the media literacy and education to understand or process many of the harmful messages that I was consuming. I did not yet know how to read anti-fat bias as a systemic force — something embedded not just in our culture’s visual landscape but in its linguistic habits as well. Fat studies scholars have long noted that language is one of the primary mechanisms through which body hierarchies are enforced: “fat”

¹ Like the contestants, I wanted to have a breakthrough that would free me from what I viewed as my prison of fatness. I went so far as meeting and talking with a former contestant, exploring the logistics of applying to be on the show. Alas, I (thankfully) never came close to being a contestant on *The Biggest Loser*.

becomes not a neutral descriptor, but a moral judgment, a slur, a punchline. For years, the word felt radioactive to me — too dangerous to touch, let alone claim. I reached instead for euphemisms like “chunky” or “big-boned,” phrases that preserved the hope that maybe I wasn’t really fat. It took years of unlearning to see that it wasn’t the word that hurt me — it was the culture that had made it unspeakable. And so, I turn now to language — to the politics and stakes of naming — and explain why, in this work, I choose to say “fat.”

II. A Few Words on Word Choice

Throughout this work, my choice of terminology is both deliberate and reflective of the broader cultural and academic discourse surrounding body size, representation, and identity. The terms “fat,” “fat suit,” and “superfat,” among others, are employed intentionally to navigate the complex landscape of body politics, media representation, and the lived experiences of individuals with fat bodies. Nevertheless, I want to bring attention to the fact that the word “fat” remains charged and somewhat controversial, as not all reclaimed terms are universally embraced. I’m choosing this term for specific reasons outlined below. At the same time, language is always evolving, and the preferred terms for describing fat people/fatness can and will likely shift over the years. That is the nature of language: controversial terms get replaced by euphemisms, euphemisms become dysphemisms, controversial terms get reclaimed, and so on. Moreover, there is a subjective element to identity markers like “fat,” where individual people embrace terms that might vary from what is preferred in scholarly or activist circles. Scholarly conventions aside, I personally choose to describe myself as fat; others might not. This is not about prescribing how any single person should or should not identify. On those notes, I will outline the definitions of my preferred terminology and explicate the rationale behind their usage.

- **Fat:** The term “fat” is used in this dissertation to describe larger body sizes in a neutral, descriptive manner, devoid of the negative connotations often associated with other terms like “overweight” and “obese.” Fat activists and Fat Studies scholars have chosen to reclaim the word “fat.” This intentional choice serves a dual purpose: it advocates for the destigmatization of fatness and asserts the rights and dignity of fat people. “There is nothing negative or rude in the word *fat*,” Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum argue in the introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, “unless someone makes the effort to put it there” (xii).² “Short,” “tall,” “muscular,” “freckled,” “brunette” — these are neutral descriptors of superficial aspects of someone’s appearance. The important thing is that these terms are *descriptive* rather than *evaluative* — they name observable traits without implying moral or health judgments. “Fat,” too, can be a term used simply to describe a fact about someone’s appearance. Using “fat” as a descriptor rather than an evaluative, pejorative term challenges societal prejudices and promotes a more inclusive and respectful discourse on body diversity.
- **Superfat:** The term “superfat” is used to describe individuals who are significantly larger than what is typically categorized as “fat.” The occasional inclusion of “superfat” in this dissertation highlights the importance of specificity in discussing body size, advocating for a nuanced understanding of fatness that extends beyond a monolithic perspective. The term superfat was “intentionally created and chosen, after extensive discussion, as a means of visibility, self-love, and empowerment; a way of naming ourselves and making our experience visible” (Midnight

² Because of its controversial nature, it is common for books in the field of Fat Studies to foreground their discussion by explaining why they are using the term “fat.” This is done in the foundational anthology from Solovay and Rothblum, as mentioned above, but also in more recent anthologies like the *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* published in 2021, which opens with a section entitled “Defining Fat” (Pausé and Taylor 19–42). They write that fat activists “have reclaimed this term, arguing that it is the most apt descriptor of their bodies and enjoying the political power that comes with taking it back from the harmful taunting it had been for so long for so many” (19). We see this continuing in popular Fat Studies-related publications such as Aubrey Gordon’s *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (1), Kate Manne’s *Unshrinking* (8–11), Barbara Plotz’s *Fat on Film* (5), among many others.

and Airborne). My adoption of this term to describe fat bodies that do not fit in the typical categories of fatness is in the spirit of making this experience visible.³

- **Fat Suit:** “Fat suit” refers to a costume apparatus worn by actors to simulate a larger body size for film, television, or theater performances. This dissertation examines fat suits as both a technical device in media production and a cultural artifact that reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward fat bodies. While the term can broadly describe a range of bodily simulations — from Robin Williams’s old woman disguise in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993) to Arnold Schwarzenegger’s prosthetic pregnancy belly in *Junior* (Ivan Reitman, 1994) — my focus is narrower. I analyze fat suits designed to simulate superfat bodies within gross-out comedies, where exaggerated size is the central spectacle. Importantly, a distinction must be made between actual fat people with fat bodies and non-fat people made to appear fat by prosthetics. Terms like “superfat” were coined and adopted by people within fat activist circles to solicit solidarity and create shared language to fight an epistemic and heuristic injustice. Thus, these terms, born from social movements striving for recognition and rights, are unfit for the artificial portrayal of fatness through fat suits. Within these narratives, characters might be intended to represent superfat individuals, yet they are embodied by actors who do not share these body types and thus their lived experience. Just as the blackface characters infamously portrayed in, for instance, *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), or *Babes in Arms* (Busby Berkeley, 1939) should not be described as Black people but rather white actors in blackface, it would be incongruous to apply a term like

³ While the term “superfat” was popularized by Cherry Midnight and Max Airborne in their *Medium* article “Community origins of the term ‘Superfat,’” it has since been adopted more widely in Fat Studies scholarship. Charlotte Cooper writes about some of the nuances of the term “superfat” in her influential work *Fat Activism* (185). Additionally, Fat Studies scholar Darci L. Thoun has an article entitled “Am I Fat?” that explores the challenges of determining who gets to “count” as fat, including who qualifies as “superfat” (23). “Superfat” as a term has also been discussed in relation to disability in April Herndon’s “Fatness and Disability” (94–95).

“superfat” to actors in fat suits. Instead, I will use phrases such as “fat-suited actors” or “actors in fat suits simulating superfat bodies.”

- Fatphobia and anti-fat bias: I use the terms fatphobia and anti-fat bias largely interchangeably to describe the widespread set of negative assumptions, judgments, and systemic inequities directed at fat people. Fatphobia is not simply an individual prejudice but a pervasive social ideology that casts fat bodies as morally suspect, medically compromised, and socially undesirable. Fat people are presumed to be “necessarily unhealthy, even doomed to die from our fatness; that we are to blame for our own fatness, in lacking moral fiber or willpower or discipline; that we are unattractive, even disgusting; and that we are ignorant, even stupid” (Manne 11). These beliefs are reinforced across cultural domains — from medicine to media to everyday interactions — and they function not only to stigmatize fat individuals but also to normalize and valorize thinness as the default or ideal. Fatphobia thus intersects with other systems of oppression, including sexism, racism, classism, and ableism, shaping the conditions under which some bodies are rendered laughable, expendable, or invisible.

My decision to use these terms is grounded in a commitment to centering the voices and experiences of fat people, challenging dominant narratives that pathologize fat bodies, and contributing to a more equitable and empathic discourse on body size. By employing terms that are embraced within the field of Fat Studies, this dissertation aligns itself with social and theoretical frameworks like Critical Race Studies and Queer Studies that seek to reclaim language and redefine the cultural conversation around marginalized and stigmatized groups.⁴

⁴ For accounts within these critical frameworks that treat language and categories as sites of power and resignification, see Delgado and Stefancic 3–9; Crenshaw 1242–44; Butler 18–21; and Warner xxvi.

Moreover, avoiding medicalized terms such as “overweight” and “obese” is a conscious choice to detach from the pathologizing framework that often accompanies these words. These types of terms are rooted in the medical model of health, which frequently ignores the complexity of health outcomes and the socio-cultural dimensions of body size. Fat activists have long pointed out that the term “overweight” implies a normative weight one ought to be, while the term “obesity” lends itself to pathologizing body size based on the Body Mass Index (BMI), a simplistic algorithm created in the 1800s. This dissertation instead adopts a feminist and socio-cultural lens, recognizing that discussions about body size cannot be divorced from their broader cultural, political, and historical contexts. These terms (what Solovay and Rothblum deem the “O-words”) will appear in scare quotes except under specific conditions, such as when directly quoting from another source (xii).

I will also avoid euphemistic descriptors such as “big-boned,” “plus-sized,” “chubby,” “heavyset,” etc. While these terms are commonly used in everyday language and various industries (notably fashion and retail) to describe large body sizes, their use in academic discourse requires careful consideration. Euphemistic terms, while often well-intentioned, can serve to diminish or obscure the realities faced by fat people. Terms like “chubby” or “heavyset” are frequently employed to soften or mitigate the perceived impact of acknowledging fatness directly. However, this softening can inadvertently perpetuate the stigma against fatness by implying that there is something inherently negative about being fat that needs to be euphemized. Moreover, the choice of language in discussing body size is not merely a matter of semantics but is deeply intertwined with political and cultural discourses on bodily autonomy and rights. Euphemistic terms often lack the political charge and cultural significance that terms like “fat” carry, especially within social movements that aim to reclaim derogatory language and challenge societal norms.

I write as a fat scholar whose earliest literacy in bodies was acquired through filmic forms that taught audiences how to read fatness as a joke, threat, or lesson. The chapters ahead return to those forms not to adjudicate taste, but to account for how representational techniques — prosthetics, costuming, performance, editing, language, dialogue, and genre convention — produce a limited view of fat characters. This project proceeds from the conviction that *representation participates in the distribution of dignity*. Because representation informs public attitudes, it shapes how groups are treated, how policies are written, and who has access to resources — conditions that ultimately afford the possibility of a dignified and flourishing existence. By situating fat suits within the technical and industrial histories that made them so persuasive and influential, I seek to describe how they organized audience attention and affect, and how those habits traveled beyond the screen. I aim to name how fat suits have disciplined spectatorship — teaching audiences to conflate fatness with failure and contamination — without foreclosing comedy’s possibilities, and to equip scholars, teachers, and storytellers to imagine fat characters as complex, ordinary, desiring, villainous, heroic, sexy, intelligent, successful, and funny (i.e., *human*) rather than prosthetic metaphors or cues for collective disgust.

What follows is deliberately modest in means and ambitious in implication: a set of close readings and production histories that clarify how we learned to see — and a set of critical practices that might teach us to see differently.

INTRODUCTION: GENRE, HISTORY, AND THE POLITICS OF FABRICATED FLESH

Consider the following scene. A fat-suited protagonist, portrayed by a famous Hollywood leading man under dozens of pounds of rubberized prosthetics, sits alone in a dimly lit, cluttered apartment. He is despondent over his weight and surrounded by piles of “junk” food, which he desperately, ravenously shoves into his mouth. The music is tragic and mournful. The camera lingers on the spectacle. It is a scene of a man at his lowest, the “all is lost” moment in the narrative. He is the hero of our story, and thus the narrative assures us that he is meant to be sympathized with. Yet, the actual visuals on the screen tell us a different story: he is wheezing and weeping cartoonishly, food pouring down the sides of his mouth and spilling on his dirty gray shirt and fat torso, no regard for his surroundings. His over-the-top behaviors and frenzied gorging create an emotional distance between us and him. Our hero’s grotesque behaviors are rendered sad, pathetic, and — intentionally or not — comical.

Am I describing the 1996 fart-filled, gross-out comedy *The Nutty Professor* (Tom Shadyac) starring Eddie Murphy in seven different roles? Or, am I describing the 2022 Oscar-winning A24 arthouse film *The Whale* by auteur director Darren Aronofsky? The answer is both. *The Whale* — despite its arthouse prestige — rests on similar visual language as gross-out fat suit comedies of the 1990s and 2000s. This includes blocking, framing, sound design, character arcs, and stories that work together to depict fat characters (even when they are the protagonists) as objects of pity and comic relief. The exaggerated way that these scenes unfold — whether it’s Eddie Murphy’s distraught Sherman washing huge bites of ice cream down with donuts and drinking candies from a jar until they spill down his body, or Brendan Fraser’s distraught Charlie gorging himself on stacks of ranch-drenched pizza slices and potato chip sandwiches smothered in grape jelly — reveals continuity in the way Hollywood tells stories about fatness (see fig. 1 and 2). A quarter-century and a gulf of artistic

pretension separate these films, yet Hollywood still reaches for the same prop: a latex body, a heap of “junk” food, and the conviction that fatness is spectacle. Comedy, melodrama: different genres, same stereotypes. The tragic, the comic, and the freakish are smashed together like a potato chip jelly sandwich.



Fig. 1. Charlie (Brendan Fraser) pouring grape jelly on his potato chip sandwich in The Whale.



Fig. 2. Sherman (Eddie Murphy) drinking candy in The Nutty Professor.

The narrative and filmic analogs are striking. But even more notable is that these similarities appear in films marketed and received in radically different ways, released decades apart. *The Nutty Professor* was an early film in the resurgence of gross-out comedies. It was advertised as a low-brow comedy, featuring Eddie Murphy in drag and farting at the dinner table in its marketing. *The Whale* was an independent, prestige drama that made waves in the film festival circuit and topped many critics' list for best film of the year. Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* described the film as an “empathetic, haunting, beautiful, heartbreakingly moving story of a broken man” (“The Whale’ Review”). Most notably, Brendan Fraser’s portrayal of Charlie — achieved under nearly 300 pounds of prosthetics — garnered him an Oscar for “Best Actor” at the 95th Academy Awards (Canfield). That same year, *The Whale* also won “Best Makeup and Hairstyling,” an accolade that recognized not only the technical skill but also the narrative importance of its fat suit. In fact, three different critically acclaimed films featuring fat suits were nominated for Oscars in 2023 — a testament to the central role these prosthetic designs played in the films’ critical recognition. Fat suits were not incidental to these nominations; they were integral to why the films were recognized in the first place.⁵ How, then, did we transition from fat suits serving as mere visual punchlines — tools for eliciting cheap laughs in gross-out comedies — to being integral to films celebrated by critics and award bodies? More importantly, does this shift represent progress in the representation of fat people?

Darren Aronofsky, the director of *The Whale*, asserts that his film is an “exercise in empathy” and a deliberate effort to counter prevalent stereotypes (Alter). In an interview with *Yahoo! Entertainment*, Aronofsky said that criticisms of the film’s portrayal of fat people “make no sense” because Charlie is intended as sympathetic and complex. “People with obesity are generally written as

⁵ The other fat suit Oscar nods were for the makeup effects in *The Batman* (Matt Reeves, 2022), which involved a team of nine people transforming Colin Farrell into an unrecognizable fat-suited version of himself to play the Penguin, and *Elvis* (Baz Luhrmann, 2022), which saw Tom Hanks transformed into a fat-suited, villainous version of the real-life Colonel Tom Parker (E. McCarthy).

bad guys or as punchlines,” Aronofsky said. “We wanted to create a fully worked-out character who has bad parts about him and good parts about him” (Alter). Yet this supposed shift toward empathy must be viewed with skepticism, particularly considering the cultural resurgence of anti-fat narratives. The popularity of weight-loss drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy, alongside a broader medicalization of fatness, signals a renewed cultural appetite for erasing fat bodies rather than understanding (let alone embracing) them.

Cultural critic Lindy West argues that *The Whale* fails to be a meaningful step forward in fat representation. She states that the film signifies the sublimated negative attitudes that mainstream culture harbors against fat people. Writing for *The Guardian*, West asserts that

people respond positively to *The Whale* because it confirms their biases about what fat people are like (gross, sad) and why fat people are fat (trauma, munchies) and allows them to feel benevolent yet superior. It’s a basic dopamine hit, reifying thin people’s place at the top of the social hierarchy. (“The Whale is not a masterpiece”)⁶

She even makes a connection between *The Whale* and its gross-out ancestors, sarcastically comparing Fraser’s performance to the fat-suited Mike Myers in the *Austin Powers* franchise, writing that Fraser “hauls himself up off the couch and plonks across the room with the gravitas of Fat Bastard (way more empowering representation imo — [Fat Bastard] was really strong and he had hobbies and a lust for life!)” (Fat Suit Fart Attack #1). Indeed, *The Whale* elicited strong backlash in tandem with its critical praise. In the wake of the film’s release, major outlets like *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*,

⁶ West argues that *The Whale* fails in its representation largely because of its inauthenticity. She writes, “*The Whale* is not a real fat person telling their own raw story with all the complexities and contradictions of lived experience. Charlie is a *fictional character* created by a thin person, a fantasy of fat squalor, a confirmation that we ‘do this’ to ourselves: that we gorge buckets of chicken like mindless beasts, that we never see the world, never let the sun warm our bodies, never step into the sea, never make art, never feel human touch, never truly live. Portrayals like this steal from us in two directions: we are denied both the freedom to enjoy food and to have complicated relationships with it. I suppose my criticism boils down to this: a fat person, even one with a life identical to Charlie’s, could never have made *The Whale*. It is fundamentally *not of us* and therefore incurably untrue” (“The Whale is not a masterpiece”).

and *The Independent* published articles with headlines such as, “It’s 2023. Why are we still using fat suits in film and TV?” (Quirk); “Why Does Hollywood Keep Using Fat Suits?” (Fleurima); “Why Are We Still Putting Actors in Fat Suits?” (Clouse); “Why Hollywood Loves Fat Suits and Why They Suck” (Donaldson); and “Why are Hollywood fat suits back in fashion?” (Hendy).

The repeated exasperation in these headlines brings us back to a central question of this project: *How did we arrive at this point?* How did we arrive at a point in which fat suits are employed in prestige dramas, despite increased awareness of the stigma bound up in them? I contend that the late 1990s and early 2000s constitute the “golden age” of fat suits in Hollywood — a time when technological advancements, makeup artistry, the birth of the so-called “obesity epidemic,” and general cultural preoccupations with diet converged to define the role of fat suits on screen. In 1998, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) officially declared fatness a disease, “swiftly transforming people’s body size into a sickness” (Seraphin). In December of 2001, the government launched its “anti-obesity” campaign with the publication of *The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity* (Biltekoff 32). By 2002, U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona called “obesity” the “‘terror within’, a threat that is every bit as real to America as weapons of mass destruction” (Bitar 8). The war on obesity was in full swing. This era, so terrorized by fatness, and the gross-out comedy subgenre more than any other, established the primary filmic conventions surrounding fat suits even today. Thus, we cannot understand fat suits as they are used in the 2020s without understanding how and why they were used in gross-out comedies of the 1990s and 2000s.

I. Elevation of the Low: Gross-Out Comedies to the 1990s

What a culture finds funny is deeply revealing — a kind of historical snapshot of its values, fears, and unspoken norms. As film scholar Geoff King explains, “Film comedy, like all popular

cultural products, is rooted to a large extent in the societies in which it is produced and consumed,” meaning that comedy films “can provide revealing insights into the underlying and often taken-for-granted assumptions of the society in question” (17). Laughter, then, is not just entertainment; it is a window into collective cultural consciousness. What makes audiences laugh often reinforces dominant ideologies or exposes cultural tensions, including those surrounding body norms and fatness. Examining which jokes landed, and at whose expense, can uncover implicit beliefs about which bodies were considered attractive, acceptable, disgusting, dangerous, or laughable. With this in mind, it is particularly instructive to consider what American audiences were laughing at between 1996 and 2007 — years that I have identified as the beginning and end of the gross-out comedy boom. During this period, few genres dominated the comedic landscape more than gross-out comedies. These films, wildly popular and financially successful, not only reflected but helped shape mainstream attitudes toward fatness and the fat body. As film scholar Barbara Plotz notes, “Comedy is *the* genre in contemporary Hollywood cinema that features fat characters most frequently” (10). Media scholar Katariina Kyrölä makes a similar point, arguing that “comedy is perhaps the only popular cultural arena where fat women and men [...] have had continuing and widespread success and fame,” so common that the fat body is treated as “almost innately funny” (109).

Gross-out comedies represent a distinct subgenre of comedy that derive much of their humor from shock value and bodily excess, often pushing the boundaries of what mainstream audiences consider socially or aesthetically acceptable. The subgenre “deliberately confronts the acceptable standards of taste within society,” turning taboo into spectacle (Mundy and White 218). But those standards — what counts as “acceptable” or “tasteless” — are never fixed or universal. They are culturally constructed and historically contingent, which makes gross-out comedy a particularly rich site for cultural analysis. The genre’s outrageousness does not emerge in a vacuum; it reflects the

boundaries that society implicitly polices. As Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering note, “Humour is only possible because certain boundaries, rules and taboos exist in the first place” (16). For a gross-out joke to land, audiences must recognize the norms being violated — and often, these norms involve bodies, behaviors, and identities that society marks as Other. Thus, gross-out comedy does not just test the limits of taste; it maps those limits, revealing what a culture views as deviant.

Nowhere is the cultural function of comedy more apparent than in transgressive humor, which derives its force by deliberately violating established boundaries. As King notes, “the act of transgression draws attention to the norm itself” (68). In this sense, gross-out comedy is diagnostic. Its exaggerated, boundary-pushing humor offers a unique lens for discerning which values, taboos, and social anxieties are operative within mainstream culture. Yet despite its popularity and cultural reach, gross-out comedy has often been dismissed in academic circles for its perceived vulgarity. As John Mundy and Glyn White observe, “The greater the perceived poverty of taste of any given film, the less likelihood of its being dealt with in critical depth [...]. Just as cinema itself has been found worthy of study, so film criticism must eventually turn to bad-taste comedy and gross-out films. These films are not an obscure byway of cinema but a historically and economically vital area of the industry that won’t go away even if it is critically ignored; it makes money and it does so because it has wide appeal” (218). These films, regardless of their debauched and trashy reputations, are not fringe curiosities but were once commercially dominant and remain culturally significant texts. Their broad appeal and financial success make them critical sites for understanding how laughter is mobilized — and at whose expense. In short, the very features that make gross-out comedies “lowbrow” are what make them so valuable for cultural analysis.

In his seminal 1994 study *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, film historian William Paul was one of the first scholars to take this lowbrow genre seriously and outline its defining

features. According to Paul, gross-out comedies are characterized by a “gleeful uninhibitedness” aimed at “provoking a strong, visceral response from their audience” (20). These films are, at their core, radically challenging to dominant tastes and cultural mores — albeit in a manner distinct from the more self-consciously highbrow transgressions of avant-garde art that would be framed as acceptable to “arbiters of taste and value” (20). This distinguishes gross-out comedies from transgressive “highbrow” art by underground avant-garde figures like Andres Serrano (who had a famous art piece entitled “Piss Christ” featuring a crucifix suspended in a glass tub filled with his own urine), or Zhu Yu (who published photos of himself consuming what appeared to be a human fetus). The effects of this art, such as provoking outrage or disgust, significantly overlaps with gross-out comedies; however, gross-out comedies possess a campy appeal that tends to make them more accessible to wider audiences. They are transgressive in a way that does not aim to deeply disturb the audience. Conversely, avant-garde art fails to hold broad appeal yet garners heavy attention from critics and theorists (i.e., the “arbiters of taste” to whom Paul is referring). Gross-out comedies make no such pretensions:

At their best, these films offer a real sense of exhilaration, not without its disturbing quality, in testing how far they can go, how much they can show without making us turn away, how far they can push the boundaries to provoke a cry of “Oh, gross!” as a sign of approval, an expression of disgust that is pleasurable to call out. (20)

In other words, gross-out humor trades on a kind of ambivalence, eliciting a reaction that is simultaneously “Ew!” and “Haha!” The audience’s cry of “Oh, gross!” is both an expression of disgust and a form of approval — what Paul elsewhere describes as a form of carnivalesque, “festive laughter,” a giddy joy in the very act of being revolted (67). This aggressive impulse to show what polite society tends to hide is key to the gross-out’s transgressive thrill. Indeed, Paul argues that exposing what

“should be hidden” is “always implicitly a political act” because it “threatens the social order by contesting proper social behavior” (52). By flagrantly breaching the boundaries of acceptable public discourse — “the key to the aesthetics of gross-out,” as Paul puts it — these comedies carry with them deeper cultural implications (52).

What kinds of outrageous things might one expect to see in a gross-out comedy? “Farting cowboys. Faces grotesquely stuffed with food. Projectile vomiting. Explosive shitting. More explosive shitting. Semen dangling from ear; semen in hair. Semen in beer glass. Copulation with apple pie. Who knows what’s next,” chronicles Geoff King (63). King’s viscerally descriptive list underscores how fixated the genre is on the human body’s most unruly processes, turning matters usually kept private into the very stuff of humor. The gross-out film thrives on fart jokes, feces gags, ejaculate sight gags, and every other imaginable bodily function run amok. By dragging onto the screen all the corporeal muck that normative decorum insists we keep hidden, these films revel in bad taste — and invite viewers to revel right along with them in a kind of communal shamelessness.

A comedy can be categorized as “gross-out” by incorporating transgressive, shocking, or offensive material in different ways and to different effect. For instance, the gross-out aspects can be the central point of the film itself. This is the case in boundary-pushing extravaganzas like 2001’s *Freddy Got Fingered* (Tom Green), a film Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times* described as a “vomitorium,” or the John Waters cult classic *Pink Flamingos* (1972), which *Variety* deemed “one of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made,” or the debauched shenanigans in *Jackass: The Movie* (Jeff Tremaine, 2002) and its sequels (“*Freddy Got Fingered* Movie Review”; Lang).⁷ In these films, shock, schlock, and trash are not just occasional flourishes but the central focus; the narrative is little more

⁷ In her sweeping biography of reality television, *Cue the Sun!*, Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist Emily Nussbaum writes of the time when John Waters visited the set of *Jackass* in the early 2000s. “You’re sexual terrorists!” Waters reportedly exclaimed to Johnny Knoxville in response to the debauchery on set (289).

than a vehicle for an escalating parade of the grotesque. *Freddy Got Fingered* showcases things like a character leaping from his car to “wag a horse penis” and later “spray his father with elephant semen, straight from the source” (Ebert, “*Freddy Got Fingered* Movie Review”). *Pink Flamingos* is about a group of deviants competing to be named the filthiest people alive, committing acts like eating dog feces and killing chickens during a sexual assault. *Jackass* is not about anything; it is simply a mosaic of disconnected acts of depravity, such as men stapling their scrotums to their legs and eating each other’s vomit cooked into an omelet. In the cases of these latter two films, the depictions involve unsimulated elements of these nauseating acts, adding to their extreme reputations. I sketch these conventions at some length because they define the comic toolkit that my case studies inherit and reshape, especially when fatness becomes the target of gross-out humor.

Such punishing gross-out films tend to gain cult followings rather than mainstream success (fittingly, Waters has been deemed “The Pope of Trash,” while *Pink Flamingos* was long billed as “an exercise in poor taste” for midnight movie audiences).⁸ This is especially true of Waters whose filmography toes the line between campy B-movies and transgressive avant-garde art in the vein of Serrano. Geoff King argues that the reason such “ultra-gross-out” films fail to gain mainstream success lies in how they handle audience comfort. In “the truly carnivalesque world of thoroughly inverted values” presented in Waters’ early films, for instance, there is far more “unalloyed disgust” with few moments of relief to offer safer comic pleasure for the viewer (68–69). In other words, Waters plunges viewers into an all-out assault on good taste with no breather, a strategy that limits his appeal to a willing fringe.

Mainstream gross-out fare, on the other hand, is ultimately “safer, more contained and commodified” (69). Hollywood gross-out comedies that became big box-office hits often did so by

⁸ The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures dubbed their John Waters exhibition “Pope of Trash,” citing William S. Burroughs as the first person to anoint Waters with the title (“John Waters: Pope of Trash”).

incorporating just a few infamous gross-out scenes or set pieces into otherwise more conventional narrative frameworks. These signature disgusting gags frequently become synecdoches for the film as a whole — often highlighted in marketing and popular memory. “Gross-out comedy is often sold in publicity material, and discussed in media coverage and more informal discourses, on the basis of these sometimes isolated moments of transgression,” King explains (63). Many of these isolated moments of transgression were alluded to in the above gross-out list from King; he did not even need to mention the names of the movies to conjure them to mind. Think, for instance, of the notorious hair-gel scene or the testicles-caught-in-zipper reveal in *There’s Something About Mary* (Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly, 1998) or the pastry love scene and “beer cup” misadventure from *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999) — single outrageous moments that came to define those films, highlighted in their trailers and plastered across their posters. The gross-out elements grab attention and get people talking, even if they occupy only a small portion of the runtime.

Importantly, these films are also targeted in a broader sense at a mass (often working-class) audience with a taste for lowbrow humor. Gross-out comedies — even when released by major studios — proudly position themselves as “lowbrow” entertainment created to thumb their noses at upper-class sensibilities. Indeed, many gross-out narratives explicitly pit unruly underdogs against stuffy elites — the classic “slobs-versus-snobs” dynamic that was a staple of 1970s and 1980s campus and summer camp comedies like *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (John Landis, 1978), *Meatballs* (Ivan Reitman, 1979), and *Porky’s* (Bob Clark, 1981). These stories invite the audience to side with the vulgar underdog against the pretenses of authority. Gross-out comedy has always carried this populist streak. Thus, as transgressive as gross-out gags can be, the subgenre is inextricably tied to matters of class and cultural hierarchy, often celebrating the crude pleasures of “regular folks” in defiance of refined taste.

Historically, this strain of outrageous comedy blossomed in the 1970s — a period of major social and cinematic change. The collapse of Hollywood’s restrictive Production Code in 1968 (and the advent of the MPAA ratings system) allowed filmmakers to depict material that had previously been forbidden from the Hollywood mainstream, whether graphic violence, frank sexuality, or all things scatological.⁹ Coupled with the anti-establishment spirit of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this new freedom set the stage for an unprecedented wave of gore and grossness in popular cinema. Not coincidentally, the 1970s saw the rise of both the modern splatter-horror film and the modern gross-out comedy. William Paul pinpoints 1978’s *Animal House* as the progenitor of the gross-out comedy cycle, a film that solidified several of the subgenre’s key conventions. Paul notes that *Animal House* emerged during a “striking inversion” in the 1970s when “low-class genres became high-class product” (33). This “elevation of the low,” Paul argues, coincided with a broader socioeconomic shift in which the American proletariat was moving into the middle class, enabling more people to enjoy raunchy, transgressive comedy in relative comfort. “It is perhaps only in a time of comfort that the utopian project of gross-out comedy is possible,” Paul writes (33). In Paul’s analysis, gross-out’s gleeful assault on decorum resonated in a climate shaped by post-Vietnam disillusionment, civil rights and feminist upheavals, and the rise of the Free Speech movement — an era when challenging authority and orthodox values was part of the cultural zeitgeist. Gross-out comedies positioned themselves as “lowbrow” entertainment, but they smartly capitalized on this rebellious posture, attracting large audiences across class lines with their anti-authoritarian streak. In fact, *Animal House* and its early 1980s imitators became tremendous box-office successes, proving that an appetite for “bad taste” humor cut broadly through the American public.

⁹ “Toilet humor” was so taboo, in fact, that it was not until the 1960s that an actual toilet made an appearance in a major film. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) is listed by Guinness World Records as “the first Hollywood movie to feature an on-screen toilet” (“First Hollywood Movie to Feature a Toilet”).

Paul's study largely examines the twin cycles of gore horror and gross-out comedy from the 1970s through the 1980s — but the story of gross-out does not end there. After a relative lull in the late 1980s, gross-out comedy came roaring back in the mid- to late-1990s for a second wave, reaching even greater levels of mainstream popularity. A new generation of comic filmmakers once again tested the limits of taste, now armed with contemporary sensibilities and improved special effects, makeup, and prosthetics. The Farrelly Brothers, for example, spearheaded this resurgence with hits like *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *There's Something About Mary* (1998), which unabashedly embraced absurd, offensive, and physically disgusting gags. In the same era, teen-oriented sex comedies such as *American Pie* (1999) proved that audiences would flock to theaters for outrageously lewd set-pieces, as long as they were delivered with enough humor and heart.

This late-nineties renaissance of gross-out humor not only filled movie theaters but also introduced new twists — such as the prominent use of fat suit characters as comedic centerpieces. Advancements in prosthetic makeup in the 1990s meant that films could now create highly exaggerated fat bodies for actors to inhabit, opening up a fresh avenue for gross-out spectacle. Movies like *The Nutty Professor* and its sequel *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps* (Peter Segal 2000) put prosthetically fat-suited characters front and center, using their oversized bodies (and the unruly bodily functions that accompany them) as prime comic material. In these films, Eddie Murphy — padded with elaborate makeup appliances — portrays the entire Klump family, whose dinner-table fart contests and gluttonous eating habits were made a marketing centerpiece for the film.¹⁰ Likewise, Mike Myers' *Austin Powers* series introduced the character Fat Bastard in 1999, a grotesque caricature of a

¹⁰ The official theatrical trailer, for instance, is little more than a string of fat jokes. Many of the fat jokes from the film are distilled down to the 95 second trailer, including several gags involving the Klump family and their prodigious eating habits. There are also farts and burps added into sound design that are not featured in the film, presumably to amplify the toilet humor in the marketing (“The Nutty Professor Official Trailer #1”). The popularity of the Klump family’s gastro-hijinks proved so popular that the sequel bore the family’s name and featured all of them on the movie poster.

(once again) flatulence-prone fat Scottish henchman whose very name signals the film's intent to elicit laughter through shock and disgust at his sheer bodily excess. These examples show how, by the turn of the millennium, gross-out comedy had embraced exaggerated fatness as one of its ultimate sights of transgression — merging the genre's traditional obsession with obscene bodies and fluids with the visual shock value of extreme body size. Concurrently, the late twentieth century saw the emergence of another powerful cultural narrative: the rise of the “obesity epidemic.”

II. Certainty in the Face of Uncertainty: “The Obesity Epidemic” Grosses Out America

By the mid-1990s, Americans were being told with increasing urgency that the nation faced an epidemic of obesity. This phrase, which gained currency in medical and media circles, framed fatness as a public health crisis. Health officials, journalists, and politicians alike sounded alarm bells about rising body weights. As cultural critic Adrienne Bitar observes, the tone of diet discourse shifted dramatically at this time: what had once been dismissed as “faddish” diets or siloed medical advice morphed into “clarion calls for serious political and cultural reform” — suddenly “the health of the nation [was] at risk” (9). Weight loss thus became a civic duty. Just months after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services went so far as to urge all Americans to lose ten pounds “as a patriotic gesture” (Biltekoff 29). Carrying extra pounds was no longer just a personal concern but practically a crime against society's well-being. This rising narrative painted fatness as an American public enemy, a pathology threatening to “gross out” (and wipe out) the body politic itself. Under the banner of the so-called obesity epidemic, fatness was further pathologized and stigmatized.

This feverish anxiety about fatness went far beyond legitimate health research. It took on the classic features of a moral panic: the threat of “obesity” was portrayed in hyperbolic terms, the entire culture seemed to reach a consensus that “something must be done,” and there was open hostility

toward the presumed culprits.¹¹ “The ‘obesity epidemic’ is not just big news,” scholars Gard and Wright explain. “It is also a subject that has generated an almost visceral reaction among some commentators and [. . .] an apparently irresistible desire to lash out and blame someone” (16). In popular imagination, the “culprits” were fat people. Late-night comedians and talk show hosts piled on with fat jokes that barely disguised their contempt. A few years before the term “obesity epidemic” was coined, Oprah Winfrey famously wheeled out trash bags overflowing with 67 pounds of animal fat on a little red wagon, all to show off her slender new body while also disgusting viewers with the visceral image of the fat that she had temporarily shed from her frame.¹² The atmosphere was saturated with what philosopher Susan Bordo called our culture’s “horror of fat” (“I Was There on Every Page”). Fat was cast as evil. “Fat is the devil, and we are continually beating him,” Bordo quipped, noting how vigilantly people tried to “eliminate” and “tame” any hint of flesh (*Twilight Zones* 107). In short, fatness in the 1990s came to signify moral failure — a lack of discipline, an excess of indulgence — as much as it did a health concern.

The rhetoric of “the obesity epidemic” draws on deep cultural currents of bodily control and fear of excess. Those ideals reached a fever pitch in the 1990s, as everyone was expected to wage war on their own flesh. Self-surveillance — counting calories, jumping on the latest diet craze, agonizing over the bathroom scale — became a normalized part of life for people of all genders, but women in particular, and not just dieters on the fringe. Writing during this period, Bordo notes that “Children in this culture grow up knowing that you can never be thin enough and that being fat is one of the worst things one can be” (107). During the 1990s, government agencies, doctors, and diet gurus all

¹¹ For more about the way anti-fat bias manifests as a moral panic, see LeBesco’s “Fat Panic and the New Morality” (2010).

¹² Winfrey has since expressed regret over her wagon of fat stunt, acknowledging that she had been a “major contributor” to modern diet culture. During a 2024 Weight Watchers YouTube live special, Winfrey said “That wagon of fat moment was set into motion after years and years of thinking that my struggle with my weight was my fault, and it has taken me even up until last week to process the shame I felt privately as my very public yo-yo diet moments became a national joke” (Crosbie).

began “truly [creating] a unifying narrative of American health and disease” around weight (Bitar 9). The “unifying” message was clear: fat = diseased; thin = healthy (and virtuous). To be a “good” citizen (and a good parent, especially), one must constantly guard against fat. Media scholar Melissa Zimdars calls this ideological equation a form of “common sense” — the widely internalized belief that body size is the direct outcome of individual choices, and that fatness necessarily signals lack of control and poor health (3–4).

This “obesity epidemic” discourse did not merely emerge from neutral scientific inquiry but was “constructed at the intersection of scientific knowledge and a complex of culturally-based beliefs, values and ideals” (Gard and Wright 168). Even as policymakers and pundits insisted that the crisis was grounded in data, the language they used — epidemic, plague, war — revealed a deeply moralistic framework. Lest we forget, fatness is neither a site of war nor a contagious disease. This kind of confident fearmongering reflects what Gard and Wright call the tendency to adopt “certainty in the face of uncertainty” (7). Even though the science around fatness is fraught with contradictions and gaps, the public discourse maintained an illusion of objectivity — bolstered by headlines, inflammatory punditry, and an increasingly punitive tone. This discourse became a powerful cultural narrative, not just describing fatness but judging it. In this way, public health rhetoric served as a form of cultural storytelling — one that carried clear messages about what kinds of bodies were desirable, what kinds were dangerous, and what kinds were laughable. It is no surprise, then, that popular media, especially comedy, internalized and amplified these messages with its own visual shorthand.

As with any moral panic, the “obesity epidemic” crusade also resonated with other social tensions bubbling under the surface. The anxiety over fatness carried a subtext of social control: it upheld a predominantly white, middle-class ideal of the “correct” body, treating those who fell outside that norm as problems to be contained or corrected. Zimdars argues that fatness, like race or gender,

“marks one as ‘other’” and becomes a mechanism for maintaining social hierarchies (3). As she puts it, “thinness is the default, privileged category,” while fatness is positioned as excessive and socially deviant (3).

Given this charged cultural climate, it is little surprise that Hollywood comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s found rich material in America’s collective fat panic. Gross-out comedies in particular — already preoccupied with bodily excess and transgression — now seized on the fat body as the ultimate gag. After all, what could be more visibly excessive than a corpulent figure busting out of ill-fitting clothes, eating with abandon, or literally throwing their weight around? Onscreen fat suits allowed filmmakers to literalize the era’s anxieties about “expanding” bodies in a way that was both cartoonish and viscerally eye-catching. It became common for a popular actor (usually male and known for a trim or average build in real life) to don layers of prosthetic flesh in order to portray an imitation of a superfat character. These characters were walking punchlines — fantasy concoctions of everything society found objectionable (and perversely fascinating) about fatness. Gluttonous, often shown binge-eating “junk” food, farting and burping with abandon, and clumsily breaking chairs or creating tsunami-like waves at the pool, these fat-suited figures embodied the cultural script that “the obesity epidemic” had been writing: fatness as uncontrolled excess, as something grotesque, comedic, and inherently Other.

Audiences, primed by years of “anti-obesity” messaging, recognized these stereotypes instantly and responded with conditioned laughter and disgust. This priming had, in effect, given everyone permission to laugh at fat bodies — or even to see that laughter as a kind of social commentary, a humorous reminder of what not to become. After all, “nothing tastes as good as skinny feels,” goes the saying popularized by supermodel Kate Moss.¹³ The “obesity epidemic” of the 1990s and 2000s

¹³ Moss was “the poster child” for the aesthetic known as “heroin chic” during this era, which, according to *Cosmopolitan*, glamorized “pale skin, dark circles underneath the eyes, emaciated features, androgyny and stringy hair – all traits associated

created the cultural petri dish in which fat-suited gross-out comedies could thrive. Widespread anxieties about health, morality, and body size set the stage by normalizing contempt for fatness. Gard and Wright argue that this is underscored by the use of the term “epidemic,” which “metaphorically evokes the high levels of emotion associated with infectious disease” and “legitimizes the same kinds and levels of intervention and public response” (174). Fat people have thus “already succumbed and are thereby dangerous ‘carriers’ to be avoided” (174). It is this cultural climate that allowed popular media to indulge in exaggerated displays of fatness, milking them for humor and shock value.

III. A Brief History of Fat Suits in Cinema

One could watch countless films and shows from the 1990s and 2000s and come away with the sense that fatness was always a temporary costume, a metaphorical gag to be worn by a star and then tossed away, rather than an identity that real people live in with dignity. This reflects the era’s underlying belief that fatness should be discarded — that no one could possibly be both fat and happy, or fat and healthy, or fat and beautiful, or fat and deserving of respect. The result was a feedback loop between culture and cinema: the moral panic about fat made extreme representations of fatness feel timely and “edgy,” while those comedic representations in turn reinforced viewers’ gut-level prejudices that fat is something disgusting, contagious, and hilarious in its wrongness. This symbiosis helped normalize the fat suit as a staple of turn-of-the-millennium comedy. It built a dangerous bridge between public health rhetoric and pop culture parody, showing how deeply anti-fat stigma had seeped into American entertainment.

with abuse of heroin or other drugs” (Biggs). Moss became “one of the most common celebrities discussed on pro-anorexia” websites (Alderton 157). In recent years, Moss has spoken out against eating disorders and expressed regret over her role in popularizing this phrase (Biggs).

That late-1990s logic did not appear *ex nihilo*. Hollywood had long treated added flesh as an instrument — something applied to a body to signal excess, decline, or corruption — well before the fat suit became a turn-of-the-millennium punchline. Consider Orson Welles. When he played corrupt cop Hank Quinlan in the 1958 film noir *Touch of Evil* (also directed by Welles), the production decided his body still wasn't "enough" to visualize his moral rot and tragic nature. The remedy was an early fat suit solution: makeup artist Maurice Seiderman built out Welles's face and frame to manufacture a heavier, more debased physiognomy. Seiderman taped plastic bags under Welles' eyes and stuffed his supersized suit with more than sixty pounds of padding, with the actor-director himself speaking of the "terrible, enormous makeup that took forever to put on" and the "padded stomach and back, sixty pounds of it" (McBride 148) (see fig. 3). Though rudimentary by today's standards, this fat suit reflected the era's early efforts to artificially construct a larger body onscreen — a gesture of "performing" fatness that would evolve in increasingly elaborate and troubling ways.¹⁴

¹⁴ Long before film, theater relied on padding and facial build-ups to signal type and temperament; audiences read the silhouette as character. Shakespeare's Falstaff is the stock example: actors routinely padded the role to render his appetites and excess visible. Welles understood that lineage — he would later play Falstaff (and direct himself) in *Chimes at Midnight* (1965).



Fig. 3. Orson Welles' early fat suit in 1958's 'Touch of Evil'

While these early fat suits included plenty of creativity and skill to create, they were quite basic compared to the advanced prosthetics that developed in the 1990s. Early fat suits needed to be mostly hidden under layers of clothing, effectively attaching weighted pillows to the actors' bodies, with more attention paid to the actors' face via layers of makeup and plastic applied to create a dim illusion of fatness. Sometimes the steps to create a fat face were skirted altogether, instead creating a mere gesture of fatness via comically inflated and disproportionate bodies of actors wearing thick padding. This recalls some of the earliest known uses of fat suits in American cinema, which were found in comedy and vaudeville acts. The following history establishes the technical and aesthetic repertoire that late-1990s gross-out comedies draw on when they place prosthetic fat bodies at the center of their narratives. Duos like Weber & Fields and Kolb & Dill wore rudimentary fat suits ("inflated pads," as a 1904 newspaper review called them) for comic purposes as far back as 1904, a tradition passed onto

the vaudeville descendants of variety hours and skit comedies like *The Carol Burnett Show* and *Saturday Night Live* (“New Bills at the Theaters”). Even the most famous fat entertainer in the world during the early twentieth century, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, had to force himself into a fat suit after losing eighty pounds due to a heroin habit, a piece of trivia underscoring that weight loss is not always healthy (Vaucher).

As the incorporation of makeup effects expanded, so did the representation of fat bodies. A notorious (non-American) example appears in *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* (Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam, 1983), which involved a spectacle of gluttony where a grotesque caricature of a superfat man called Mr. Creosote (Terry Jones) gorges himself almost literally to death at a fancy restaurant. Creating Mr. Creosote required the film’s actor and co-director, Terry Jones, to sit in the makeup chair for more than three hours (Michael). This lengthy preparation indicates a high degree of care over how the character was brought to life; yet, at the same time, Creosote’s body is cartoonish, with no attempt at mirroring realistic fatness (see fig. 4). Instead, the character resembles an inflated balloon, reminiscent of the toy “sumo suits” that are used as Halloween costumes. Creosote’s body literally inflates until it explodes, showering the room with gallons of the half-digested food the audience witnessed him gulping and guzzling throughout the skit. To emphasize the cartoonishness, Creosote survives his body exploding, leaving a beating heart and a shell of ribs and viscera (see fig. 5). This fat suit tableau at once imagines the fat body as recognizably human and fleshly while at the same time somehow beyond human. As film theorist Benjamin Aspray writes, this performance “lapses from aesthetic verisimilitude to hyperbolic fantasy,” using grotesque excess to render the fat body “beyond human, even beyond flesh” (101). Mr. Creosote’s explosion literalizes fatness as the ultimate site of abjection — unstable, contaminating, and grotesquely excessive.



Fig. 4. Mr. Creosote's (Terry Jones) cartoonish fat suit in Monty Python's the Meaning of Life.



Fig. 5. The inhuman, exploded body of Mr. Creosote in Monty Python's the Meaning of Life.

It was not just Mr. Creosote. The 1980s ushered in a rise in the popularity of makeup artistry, prosthetics, and animatronics. Practical effects artists like Stan Winston, Rick Baker, and Tom Savini were becoming true celebrities, despite occupying positions that were mostly behind the camera. Audiences were hungry for cutting-edge practical effects, and the envelope was being continually pushed. Rick Baker, known for his award-winning creature effects in films like *An American Werewolf in London* (John Landis, 1981) and *Harry and the Hendersons* (William Dear, 1987), would be the man largely responsible for bringing fat suits into the modern era.¹⁵ Baker led the team who turned Eddie Murphy into Sherman Klump, crafting the most realistic and dynamic fat suit ever put on the screen up until that time. Notably, the artist best known for bringing cinematic *monsters* to life was tasked with building a “believable” fat human body. Baker’s fame came from making werewolves, yetis, and other grotesque creatures feel uncannily alive; now he was making a fat person.¹⁶ The industry approached fatness with the same toolkit used for horrific monsters — treating it as a special effects challenge whose success would be measured by how convincingly it could be engineered.

The technical aspects of the fat suits used in *The Nutty Professor* were pioneering for their time. They were designed to be as realistic as possible, not only in appearance but also in movement. The innovative approach Baker took to create the prosthetic effects is highlighted in a behind-the-scenes vignette where Baker himself explains that the process began with creating a plaster mold of Murphy's entire body, capturing every detail from head to toe (VHSfx).¹⁷ From this mold, a rubber suit was crafted using lightweight urethane foam, hand-carved into shapes that replicated the look and feel of

¹⁵ Baker won the inaugural Academy Award for Best Makeup in 1981 for *An American Werewolf in London*.

¹⁶ There were brief uses of full-body, realistic fat suits in films before *The Nutty Professor*, such as Goldie Hawn’s fat suit in *Death Becomes Her* (Robert Zemeckis, 1992) and Tim Allen’s festive fat suit in *The Santa Clause* (John Pasquin, 1994), but these were more visual gags than central narrative spectacles.

¹⁷ The information in this paragraph is taken from a behind-the-scenes vignette uploaded to the YouTube channel VHSfx. Although this video is a secondary source, it features original footage of Rick Baker discussing the prosthetic process for *The Nutty Professor*. The direct insights and demonstrations provided by Baker himself, captured in this behind-the-scenes vignette, offer valuable, authentic perspectives on the film’s makeup artistry, despite the absence of the original VHS’s release details.

a 450-pound physique. This foam base was then covered with a Lycra spandex skin, providing a smooth surface that could easily slide under the actor's costume. To strive for authenticity, parts of the suit were filled with cellulose and water, simulating the wobbling of fat around the body. Even the naked flesh, which needed to hang and convey heaviness convincingly, was meticulously crafted from silicone, modeled on a local nineteen-year-old and molded into a shell that fit inside the foam suit (see fig. 6). Baker also faced the challenge of crafting the faces to go with the torsos. Using modeling clay, Baker and his team gradually built up the features onto Murphy's face, ensuring that each character, like Sherman Klump or his mother Anna Pearl, had their own distinct appearance. Once the clay sculpture was complete, a negative mold was made, and foam rubber was injected into it, creating what Baker called an "appliance" that could be applied to Murphy's face. The application process involved meticulous attention to detail, with each piece carefully glued onto Murphy's skin and blended thoroughly to avoid any visible edges. To further enhance the attempted realism, Baker employed a technique known as morphing, using latex bladders and thin foam rubber pieces to simulate the fluctuations in weight that Sherman Klump experiences throughout the film. In some instances, Baker even gave Murphy prosthetic implants, made of silicone and designed to clip onto his teeth, to create exaggerated features like a bloated lip.

Yet for all its technical accomplishment, Baker's work had to justify itself culturally as much as it did artistically. As he recalled in an interview with Chuck Crisafulli for the *Los Angeles Times*, studio executives were initially wary of making Sherman Klump a fat character at all. "There was fear that it would be offensive," Baker admitted. "I said, 'Did you read the script I did? The overweight guy's the hero.' But I was told, 'Unless you can prove that the fat makeup can be funny, we won't do it'" (Crisafulli).



Fig. 6. Rick Baker constructing the fat suit for 'The Nutty Professor.'

The implication here is telling: that fatness onscreen was only permissible if audiences could laugh at it. Baker rose to the challenge, creating an early prototype of Klump and filming Murphy improvising in character. The resulting footage, he recalled, was “one of the most hilarious things I’ve ever seen” — and it was only after this private screening that the producers greenlit the fat version of Sherman (Crisafulli). It was not just that Eddie Murphy was funny; it was that *fat* Eddie Murphy was funny. His exaggerated body became a visual punchline simply by appearing fat.

By the time filming began, Murphy was spending over three hours in the makeup chair each morning, and an additional hour in the evening to remove the prosthetics safely. Despite the physical toll, Baker remembers the experience fondly — not just for the creative freedom it allowed, but for the strange intimacy it fostered. “Most of the time I spent with Eddie, I was really with Sherman,” he said. “We were with Sherman so much, we really thought of him as a person. When we realized one day that it was the last Sherman day of the shoot, we were really sad. It was like losing a friend” (Crisafulli).

The irony, of course, is that while the creative team became attached to Sherman as a character, the film repeatedly humiliated him. For all the painstaking realism Baker achieved — the tactile weight, the believability of movement, the humanizing prosthetics — the script leaned on Sherman’s body for fat-shaming punchlines, flatulence jokes, and cringe-worthy spectacle. In this way, the fat suit encapsulates the central paradox of gross-out comedy’s relationship to fatness: enormous care is taken to craft a character who is ultimately treated as disposable. The artistry behind the suit both reveals and conceals the deeper cultural anxieties that the fat body evokes — and, crucially, licenses laughter at.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, these extremely elaborate and expensive fat suits were appearing in a host of comedy films. What had once been a rare sight gag became a staple of comedy.

In addition to Eddie Murphy, iconic stars like Mike Myers (*Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, Jay Roach, 1999 and *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, Jay Roach, 2002), Martin Lawrence (*Big Momma's House*, Raja Gosnell, 2000), Ben Stiller (*Dodgeball*, Rawson Marshall Thurber 2004), Julia Roberts (*America's Sweethearts*, Joe Roth, 2001), Tyler Perry (*Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, Darren Grant, 2005), Ryan Reynolds (*Just Friends*, Roger Kumble, 2005), Adam Sandler (*Click*, Frank Coraci, 2006), John Travolta (*Hairspray*, Adam Shankman, 2007), and Steve Carell (*Get Smart*, Peter Segal, 2008) all donned elaborate padding and prosthetics to portray exaggerated fat characters. On television, *Friends* (1994–2004) gave us “Fat Monica,” kicking off a trend where fat suits would almost be required to appear in random episodes of sitcoms — including *That '70s Show* (1998–2006), *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014), *30 Rock* (2006–2013), *Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019), *Raising Hope* (2010–2014), *New Girl* (2011–2018), *Mom* (2013–2021), and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013–2021).¹⁸

The fat suit became so ubiquitous in comedy that it even became a parody of itself. The 2008 meta-comedy *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller), for instance, opens with a selection of fake trailers starring the characters from the film. This includes a trailer from Jeff Portnoy (Jack Black), whose latest film is called *The Fatties: Fart 2*. In it, Portnoy portrays every member of “America’s favorite obese family,” each one clad in a massive fat suit, while they dine at a fancy restaurant, eat obnoxiously, and fart up a storm.¹⁹ This satirical trailer is clearly taking aim at Eddie Murphy’s Klump family in *The Nutty Professor* films, but also more generally at Hollywood’s (over)use of fat suits in gross-out comedies.²⁰

¹⁸ The use of fat suits in television during this era deserves its own conversation. Many of the most harmful and enduring uses of fat suits come via mainstream sitcoms. While my focus is on gross-out comedy films, there is much to mine in these televisual depictions of fat suits. For more on fatness and fat suits on TV specifically, see, e.g., Krause (2025) and Gullage (2012).

¹⁹ There are roughly twenty farts in the sixty second trailer for *The Fatties: Fart 2*, which equates to a fart every three seconds.

²⁰ *Tropic Thunder* is an interesting case study as a film written to satirize Hollywood, while simultaneously helping itself to many of its harmful tropes. Not only does Jack Black don multiple fat suits in the opening, but Robert Downey, Jr. spends the entire film in blackface. His character Kirk Lazarus is a satire of method actors who go to extreme lengths to win Oscars. In an either ironic or fitting turn of events, Downey’s blackface performance earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor. This speaks to some of the complexities inherent in satire.

Cultural critics took notice of this trend as well. Fat Studies scholar Katharina Mendoza explored how fat suit performances construct fatness as a detachable shell rather than a lived identity. She argues that such films are “just the latest manifestations of the ‘inside every fat person is a thin person’ trope so often found in weight loss discourse” (281). This trope not only dominates weight-loss narratives but also shapes audience expectations around transformation and redemption.²¹ In Mendoza’s reading, fat-suited characters often represent a temporary obstacle — a grotesque layer to be stripped away in order to reveal the desirable “true” self. In *Shallow Hal*, for instance, Gwyneth Paltrow’s thin body is clearly privileged, appearing on screen far more often than her fat alter ego. “Fat Rosie,” Mendoza writes, “haunts her skinny self like a specter” (282). This spectral framing renders fatness uncanny — both present and not, visible yet disavowed. By the end of the film, Paltrow’s transformation culminates in what Mendoza calls “an illusion of detachable weight,” as if the character’s fatness could simply be cracked open and discarded to reveal a whole, mobile, lovable thin self “fully invested with personality, movement, and agency” (283). In Aspray’s terms, the fat suit’s “semiotic duplicity” rests on this tension: it is both a costume and a signifier, allowing the audience to enjoy the fantasy of transformation while never questioning the legitimacy of the thin self beneath (107). The fatness we see is ultimately never “real” — it is always already destined to be peeled away. Such images reaffirm that fatness is something to mock, pity, or transcend. Rather than disrupting body norms, Mendoza contends that fat suits help audiences avoid engaging with fatness at all, substituting the spectacle of transformation for the possibility of recognition.

²¹ A recent example of the “thin person inside” trope appears in the first season of *Sbrill* (2019-2021), when the fat protagonist Annie (Aidy Bryant) is approached by a patronizing personal trainer. Grabbing Annie’s wrist, the trainer exclaims, “Wow, your wrists are tiny. You actually have a really small frame. There is a small person inside you, dying to get out.” Annie awkwardly replies, “Well, I hope that small person’s OK in there.” Bryant later revealed to *The Today Show* that this exchange had happened to her in real life (TODAY).

Though a handful of theorists have dived into the complexities of fat suits, it largely remains an underexplored cultural artifact. LeBesco ends her 2008 article on fat suits and blackface with a statement of exigency, writing:

Beyond my initial speculations about the politics of fat suit performance and how it is ideologically situated relative to the traditions of drag and blackface, a sustained investigation of the range of response to fat suits might be our best hope for locating the fissures in the form. (“Situating Fat Suits: Blackface, Drag, and the Politics of Performance” 241)

There has yet to be a sustained investigation into fat suits since LeBesco called for one nearly two decades ago. LeBesco, Mia Mask, Katarina Mendoza, Katariina Kyrölä, and a handful of other academics have published chapters and peer-reviewed articles on fat suits, but there is no text that expands these discussions or brings them all together. This project can be seen as a necessary step in that direction, as gross-out comedies are of particular importance for understanding fat suit performances. I am invested in study that may lead to some critical judgment but will not make simple “appropriate” versus “not appropriate” conclusions. I intend to complicate the usage of fat suits in cinema, to shed light on the existing discussions, and to argue that their lineage in gross-out comedies specifically have served to perpetuate stereotypes and further marginalize an already marginalized group. However, this does not mean that fat suits have no place. LeBesco, as mentioned, does not deny the potential of fat suits to function in a “camp” manner, not unlike drag. Discussions around how and when fat suits are deployed are complex and do not lend themselves to easy generalizations. Nonetheless, some fat activists, such as Aubrey Gordon, take a stance against fat suits in any capacity. In her piece “When Thin Actors Play Fat Characters,” Gordon writes about how fervently her readers come to the defense of fat suits, bombarding her with “what about” questions:

What about when a character goes through a significant weight change?

What about if it's just a prop? Can't it be a neutral tool to tell stories?

What about local theater? I work in a small theater company and our cast is our cast — we have to make do with what we've got.

What about Big Momma's House?

What about Austin Powers?

What about Weird Al's "Fat" video?

What about Monica in Friends?

What about Shallow Hal?

What about

What about

What about

For Gordon, these questions ignore something much more straightforward: fat suit narratives harm people. “There is a cultural weight to fat suit narratives, and it pulls everyone down,” Gordon writes. “These narratives are contrived by thin people for thin audiences” and at their core, the problem with fat suits is that they are “deeply damaging and triggering to people with body dysmorphia and eating disorders. And that we know and love the very fat people these narratives place in their crosshairs” (“When Thin Actors Play Fat Characters”).

In the 1990s, though, as the gross-out comedy gained momentum, there were not many people with platforms who were decrying fat suits in film. The fat suit became a natural fit for gross-out gags. These films thrive on bodily excess and the fat body fit seamlessly into this palette of transgression. However, gross-out comedy also relies on a balancing act between revolt and reassurance. The fat character provides shock, laughs, and release — but the narrative eventually reinscribes the norm,

whether through weight loss, the removal of the suit, or by straightforwardly playing into common anti-fat beliefs and stereotypes.

In short, the fat suit became a perfect embodiment of “certainty in the face of uncertainty” around fatness (Gard and Wright 7). As scientific consensus wavered, cultural narratives hardened. In the era of the “obesity epidemic,” fatness was increasingly pathologized and stigmatized. Fat suits allowed filmmakers to literalize this anxiety. As Paul Campos reminds us, “Making fun of things we secretly fear has always been a staple of the broader forms of comedy” (83). Fat suit films channel those fears — of failure, loss of control, illness, and contamination — into laughter. In laughing at fatness, viewers rehearse a moral script that casts thinness as virtue and fatness as vice. By the 1990s, fat bodies, especially when exaggerated by fat suits, had become, like projectile vomiting and explosive shitting, a go-to cinematic gross-out gag. Understanding the cultural history of fat suits reveals how cinema has helped shape public perceptions of fatness — offering exaggerated, dehumanizing representations precisely when the political discourse around fatness was at its most fraught.

IV. Theoretical Frameworks, Chapter Breakdown, and Further Reading

When people ask about my research, and I respond that I study the representation of fat bodies in the media, the conversation frequently takes a turn to the health and morality of fat people. I often hear comments like, “I don’t like it when movies mock bigger people, but I also don’t think we should glorify obesity.” Remarks like this reveal an underlying discomfort with the idea that fat people could, let alone *should*, be portrayed in ordinary, nuanced, or affirming ways. This is, no doubt, part of the reason why when fat people, and especially superfat people, show up in movies and shows, their narratives so frequently revolve around weight-loss.²² When the conversation takes this turn, I find

²² Notable recent examples of stories that include fat people whose major arcs revolve around weight loss include *This is Us* (2016-2022) and *Insatiable* (2018-2019), and, of course, the many reality shows that focus on the lives of superfat people,

myself having a much broader conversation about the systemic injustices against fat people, usually in an attempt to explain that fat oppression both exists and ought to be remedied. Yet this claim is difficult to make when dominant cultural narratives frame fatness as a disease — an “epidemic” that threatens lives, drains money, and requires a full-scale “war.” In a society where the eradication of fatness — and by extension, fat people — is seen as a moral imperative, it becomes difficult to argue that fat people deserve basic dignity and respect, let alone that our presence in media, and the way we are represented, warrants serious scholarly attention. For these reasons, it is understandable that many people fail to view anti-fatness as a major source of systemic injustice, though this is in itself a symptom of injustice. Our society holds deeply ingrained biases against fat people, all while the media inundates us with hostile anti-fat rhetoric. This results in a host of inequities for people existing in bodies larger than what society has deemed acceptable.

These stereotypes and stigmas and their broader ideological underpinnings translate to oppressive material conditions for fat people. Countless studies confirm the unjust realities for fat people: higher rates of bullying and abuse, lower-quality medical care, fewer jobs, lower pay, worse mental health, higher rates of self-harm, suicidality, and preventable death.²³ In the context of medical treatment, anti-fat bias can lead to misdiagnosis or no diagnosis at all, meaning that “fatphobia can literally be a killer” (Manne 29).²⁴ The fatter one is, the more they are affected by these unjust conditions, which are, in turn, compounded for women, people of color, trans people, and disabled

e.g., *My 600-lb Life* (since 2012), *Family By the Ton* (since 2018), *1000-lb Best Friends* (since 2021), *Embarrassing Fat Bodies* (2011-2015), *Obesity Med* (since 2021), *The 6000-lb Diaries* (since 2025), amongst others.

²³ For research on the ways anti-fat bias contributes to bullying and victimization, see, e.g., Puhl et al. (2011), Puhl and King (2013), Bacchini et al. (2015), and Puhl and Luedicke (2012). Studies have also documented the economic penalties faced by fat individuals, including fewer job opportunities, lower pay, and “the obesity wage penalty,” as examined in e.g., Giel et al. (2010), Kenney et al. (2015), Flint et al. (2016), Brown and Routon (2018), and Levine and Schweitzer (2015). The psychological effects of weight discrimination — including increased rates of depression, self-harm, and death — are explored in Nutter et al. (2019) and Curran (2019).

²⁴ On disparities in medical care and the negative bias of healthcare providers, see e.g., Geller and Watkins (2018), Vogel (2019), Wells (2022), Phelan et al. (2015), Gudzone et al. (2013), and Fraser (2017).

people.²⁵ All the while, the science is not even clear on the general health risks of being fat, with some studies showing that “excess” weight decreases all-cause mortality risk.²⁶ Moreover, dieting and attempts at weight loss, despite all the cultural pressures and anxieties, are almost never successful and dieting does not lead to weight loss: dieting efforts appear to predict weight *gain* and overweight status over time in a “near-ubiquitous” trajectory (Hall and Kahan).

Before I get too far into overviewing the marginalization and stigmatization of fat people, I must stop here and simply recommend further reading. This dissertation will not establish the reality of anti-fat bias, whether fat oppression exists, whether being fat is healthy or unhealthy, whether being fat is a choice, what determines fatness, or what large-scale shifts must occur to allow for fat people to live with equal access to jobs and healthcare. For excellent and accessible starting points to explore these questions (and more), I recommend *Unshrinking: How to Face Fatphobia* by the philosopher Kate Manne (2024), *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* and “You Just Need to Lose Weight”: *And 19 Other Myths About Fat People* by author and fat activist Aubrey Gordon (2020; 2023), *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* by sociologist Sabrina Strings (2019), and the foundational anthology *The Fat Studies Reader* edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (2010).

This work will take for granted, and thus not spill much ink arguing for, certain elements related to fatness and fat bodies.²⁷ I will take for granted that the relationships between health, nutrition, and body fat are extremely complex and do not lend themselves to easy answers, and that,

²⁵ For more on the harms specific to anti-fatness for Black people, see, e.g., Villarosa (2018), Strings (2019), and Harrison (2021). For harms specific to the trans community, see e.g., Martinson et al. (2020), Herman et al. (2019), and King (2021).

²⁶ There are many complicating factors around this, such as “the obesity paradox” (see Hainer & Aldhoon-Hainerová, 2013, Crawford 2021, and Flegal et al. 2005), weight relativism (see Dixon et al., 2014), “healthism” (see Mackert & Schorb, 2022), the harms of weight-centered health paradigms (see O’Hara & Taylor, 2018), and the advantages of weight-inclusive healthcare (see Gomez, 2024). For an accessible yet in-depth discussion of health and fatness, see Gordon and Hobbes, “Is Being Fat Bad for You?” in the *Maintenance Phase* podcast (2021).

²⁷ By “taken for granted,” I am referring to the implicit premises contained within my arguments that will be presumed without explicit justification. The work of justifying these premises has already been undertaken at length by the various theorists and researchers cited above.

even if they did, this would not justify the shaming, stigmatization, or “concern trolling” that fat people so frequently face. I will take for granted the existence of anti-fat bias and the oppression of fat people. I will take for granted that this oppression is a form of injustice that ought to be remedied through systemic change. As Kate Manne puts it, “when it comes to fatphobia, the solution is not to improve our self-image or love our bodies better. It is nothing less than to *remake the world* to properly fit fat bodies, and to effect the socially transformative recognition that there is truly nothing wrong with us” (9). This approach is at the heart of Fat Liberation, and its narrower, academic counterpart, Fat Studies.²⁸ I will be viewing the use of fat suits in Hollywood gross-out comedies through a variety of lenses, including an intersectional feminist lens and a Bakhtinian lens, but my primary theoretical framework will be Fat Studies.

Fat Studies offers a critical lens through which to interrogate the construction of fatness as a social and ideological concept. As a discipline, Fat Studies is uniquely suited for exploring the filmic representation of fatness because a Fat Studies lens “requires skepticism about weight-related beliefs that are popular, powerful, and prejudicial [. . .] Whenever members of society have recourse to only one opinion on a basic human experience, that is precisely the discourse and the experience that should attract intellectual curiosity” (Rothblum and Solovay X). Fat Studies, in other words, brings the complexities and realities of fatness, so frequently reduced to stigmas and stereotypes, to bear on its dominant cinematic and cultural representations. This project argues that “fatness” can only be understood within specific socio-historical contexts and that it is constructed through powerful ideological avenues, such as the moving image.

²⁸ For more on the intersections of Fat Studies, Fat Activism, and Fat Liberation, see Pausé and Taylor pp. 6–13. They argue that “fat activism and Fat Studies are siblings whose epistemologies come forth through a shared necessity to understand and traverse a fat pathologizing society and in theory and practice humanize the fat body” (13).

Cinema continues to hold significant social influence. As such, the representations on our screens “shape our perception and imagination regarding bodies, sexualities, relational models, moral values, health, and spirituality, among other aspects” (Castillejo et al. 1) Social critic bell hooks put it succinctly when she said that “Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people” (*Reel to Real* 2). Similarly, sociologist Deborah Lupton writes that film and television feeds us narratives about who we are, working as “pedagogical tools” that “demonstrate and enact specific types of idealized bodies and selves” (2). Popular filmic depictions, then, both reinforce and create ideological attitudes about bodies, which highlights the centrality of media in shaping societal understandings and values.

Fat Studies scholars Jana Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco contend that questioning ideological conceptions of fatness reveals it as a constructed, discursive phenomenon, rather than an inherently “abnormal” or pathological state (2). Lupton reinforces this sentiment, writing that “In and of itself, fat has no meaning” (3). Instead, it is the “specific historical, social and cultural contexts in which fatness is lived, experienced, portrayed and regulated which give it meaning” (3). What it means to be fat, therefore, is fluid. This perspective — that fatness is a contingent ideological construct — disrupts dominant narratives that frame fatness (what fat is, who counts as fat, what fatness represents) as universal and ahistorical, underscoring its reliance on cultural, rather than biological, premises. Building on these ideas, Barbara Plotz demonstrates that cinematic representations of fatness do not merely describe body size but actively construct it as a cultural category, intersecting with race and gender to reify normative ideals (7–8). In this context, my work focuses specifically on the filmic construction of fatness, and the way that such constructions are reified and exaggerated through fat suits. By critically examining these representations, I aim to explore how such portrayals reinforce

ideological frameworks that stigmatize and dehumanize fat bodies, while also investigating their role in perpetuating cultural narratives about size and identity.

Specifically, this project will interrogate the use of fat suits and portrayal of fatness in Hollywood gross-out comedies released between 1996 and 2007. These years mark the beginning and end of the golden age of gross-out comedy, especially as it relates to fat suits — bookended by two Eddie Murphy films. Released in 1996, *The Nutty Professor* came out two years before the genre’s high point in *There’s Something About Mary*. In contrast, 2007’s *Norbit* marked a low, appearing only a year before *Tropic Thunder* skewered the glut of gross-out fat suits in Hollywood. *The Nutty Professor* helped launch the fat suit as a central engine of gross-out comedy, while *Norbit* signaled its exhaustion and decline in film.²⁹ Film Studies and Fat Studies have largely neglected a thorough analysis of the meaning of fat suits in contemporary cinema, despite gross-out comedy’s massive popularity during these years and their lingering impact on today’s comic and cinematic sensibilities.

Gross-out comedies and fat suits have fundamental connections to grotesquerie and carnival performances, which traditionally offend mainstream tastes and purposely turn up their noses at those in power. The subversive and liberatory potential of “bad taste” has been explored by various literary theorists, most notably Mikhail Bakhtin, but there remains significant disagreement on to what extent carnivalesque revelry and grotesque aesthetics, in their inherent ambivalent social function, can meaningfully challenge or upend hierarchies.³⁰ Are gross-out comedies, for instance, actually subverting anything? As we will see, the answer is not straightforward, especially when it comes to

²⁹ As mentioned above, televisual comedic fat suits are another story. As Katariina Kyrölä notes, “In the 2010s, fat suits seemed to have lost some of their popularity – possibly due to the critique that they have received. However, fat suits have been and are still regularly used on TV, especially to indicate former fatness and temporary fatness” (110). Similarly, fat suits continue to be used a great deal in non-comedic films (e.g., *The Whale*, *The Batman*, *Elvis*, *Dune*, etc.).

³⁰ On the ambivalent politics of bad taste/carnival, see e.g., Stallybrass and White, who argue that carnivalesque inversions are commonly reabsorbed into dominant hierarchies (6–23). Russo’s *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* also shows how the “feminine grotesque” is distinctly policed and easily recuperated (53–74); Geoff King’s *Film Comedy* explores how gross-out shocks as marketable transgressions that tend to reinstate normative order (63–92).

gross-out depictions of marginalized groups. Certain groups, including and especially fat people, are deeply associated with disgust. Consequently, the question is how can representing fat people as disgusting possibly subvert and transgress mainstream boundaries?

Fat Studies will be the major lens through which I analyze my five focal films: *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (Rawson Marshall Thurber, 2004), *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Jay Roach, 1999), *Shallow Hal* (Peter Farrelly and Bobby Farrelly, 2001), *The Nutty Professor* (Tom Shadyac, 1996), and *Norbit* (Brian Robbins, 2007). Fat Studies is a “radical field” rooted in social justice and dedicated to challenging the cultural, medical, and aesthetic systems that stigmatize fat bodies; as such, rather than approaching these films as neutral cultural products, I treat them as ideological texts — sites where dominant narratives about fatness are manufactured, circulated, and reinforced (Wann ix). My methodological approach centers on close reading, a tool well-suited to unpacking the layers of meaning embedded in a film’s narrative, visual language, and cultural context. I examine how fatness is constructed not only through dialogue and character arcs, but also through shot composition, sound design, makeup artistry, editing choices, and other formal elements that shape the viewer’s perception.

In each case study, I draw attention to the interplay between four recurring elements: the sociohistorical context of the film’s production and reception; the aesthetic strategies used to render fatness and bodily excess on screen; the narrative structures that frame fat characters and fat suits; and the underlying ideological work these representations perform around issues including gender, class, and race. While these areas are not discrete, they serve as guiding lenses through which my analysis unfolds.

My investment in this project is not detached or abstract — my own experiences as a fat person inform my understanding of these films and their impact. This dissertation is therefore shaped by an embodied and politically engaged perspective that seeks to hold film accountable for the stories

it tells about real people and real bodies. Fat Studies as a field embraces autoethnography, meaning that it is common to entangle personal stories with theoretical analysis. Though the autoethnographic aspects of this project will be limited to the foreword, I nonetheless feel it important, as a fat person who was both shaped and shamed by the representation of fat people in the 1990s and 2000s, to disclose my personal investment in Fat Studies and gross-out comedies.

In keeping with this investment, I have prioritized writing in a clear, public-facing style that reflects Fat Studies' commitment to accessibility and to dismantling academic elitism. Charlotte Cooper describes Fat Studies as “an emerging interdisciplinary academic field” that “combines popular and high academic discourse with social justice concerns” and “provides a platform for identifying, building and developing fat culture as well as extending alliances between activism and the academy” (“Fat Studies: Mapping the Field” 1020–21). In Cooper's view, the field's vitality depends on that hybridity — on its ability to move fluidly between scholarship and activism, between theory and lived experience. Her attention to “zines, online message-boards and blogs, where a significant amount of Fat Studies commentary currently operates” underscores that the discipline values modes of writing that are immediate, participatory, and accessible to those outside the academy (1021). This interdisciplinarity and accessibility reflect a deliberate refusal of gatekeeping, aligning with Fat Studies' activist roots and commitment to collective knowledge-making. Similarly, Fat Studies scholars Jenny Lee and Emily McAvan emphasize that autoethnography “can be a way to create relationships with readers, and as a way of being present and connected in the world” (182). To write in an accessible style is not to simplify or dilute the analysis, but to affirm the field's ethical commitment to reach the communities whose experiences ground its critique. Writing in a style that is invitational rather than exclusionary, then, is both a rhetorical and a political choice — an effort to ensure that the insights of

this project remain accessible not only to academics but also to the broader fat community whose experiences it represents.

The three body chapters will consist of close readings of five highly influential gross-out comedies that prominently featured fat suits. The actual screentime of fat suits varies from film to film, but each of the five gross-out comedies deploy fat suits in notable ways. Crucially, the *fatness* of all the fat suited characters is highlighted in the films. In her 2020 book *Fat on Film*, which is the first book-length exploration of the cinematic representation of fat bodies, Barbara Plotz explains which characters her analyses focus on by noting that the characters are “marked” as fat, meaning “they are explicitly addressed as fat by the film’s dialogue and/or they are stereotyped or Othered as fat” (5).³¹ While all the fat-suited characters in my films are marked as fat in these ways, I would argue that *any* character in a fat suit is marked as fat the moment they show up on screen under pounds of prosthetics. Fat suits, by their very nature, draw attention to the fatness of the character. Their primary function is, in fact, to *mark* their characters as fat. Typically, these characters are marked as fat via their fat suits *and* via their celebrity status. Audiences frequently notice that the character is fat because they are being portrayed by a well-known actor, recognized by the audiences, known to be thin — and this makes the character strange or uncanny to us, consciously or unconsciously. Thus, it is not enough to say that I chose my six films because their fat-suited characters are marked as fat. I have, additionally, chosen films where fatness, body size, health, and beauty are central to the narrative, especially in ways that meaningfully interact with class, gender, and race.

³¹ Plotz writes in her introduction that *Fat on Film* is “the first book dedicated exclusively to the cinematic representation of fatness and the first broad study of this representation, providing a mapping of the most common tropes of fatness in contemporary Hollywood cinema” (2). Plotz’s work is expansive in nature; while it focuses on popular Hollywood films post-2000, it crosses genre boundaries and looks at the representation of fatness in general. Fat suits are discussed but they are not a focal point in her book (see, e.g., her discussion of fat suits as feminizing fat men, pp. 47-52).

The first chapter focuses on how *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* and *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* leverage fat suits to express anxieties about class and bodily excess. Both films draw from the gross-out tradition of slobs-versus-snobs comedies, where class tensions are worked out via underdogs and atypical heroes. Here, fatness becomes a visual shorthand for low status and failed self-management, signaled through sight gags, prosthetics, and costume exaggerations that turn these characters into punchlines. Rather than simply cataloging these tropes, the chapter shows how the films' humor depends on a Bakhtinian play with the grotesque — mocking high culture by reveling in low, unruly bodies — while ultimately reinscribing the very hierarchies they seem to subvert. By centering these films, the chapter illustrates how fat suits operate as tools for negotiating class anxieties within the cultural economy of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The second chapter examines how fat suits intersect with gender performance in *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor*. These films hinge on the spectacle of bodies that defy beauty norms: Rosemary in *Shallow Hal* is alternately idealized and fragmented, her appetite and size treated as jokes that undercut the film's surface message of inner beauty, while Sherman Klump in *The Nutty Professor* embodies the feminized “soft” man whose body is coded as unruly until it is shed for the hyper-masculine Buddy Love. Here, I draw on Rowe's “unruly woman,” Russo's work on the feminine grotesque, and bell hooks' “dominator masculinity” to show how these performances position fatness as a failure of normative gender performance. Plotz's analysis of “the fat eater,” “the funny fat body,” and “the de-masculinized fat male” help illuminate how these films turn everyday acts — eating, sitting, moving — into spectacles of gendered excess. Fat suits become the hinge for these constructions, enabling both films to oscillate between humiliation and sentimentality, reinforcing the very ideals of beauty and masculinity they pretend to question.

The third chapter turns to *Norbit*, a film that most fully exposes how fat suits intersect with racialized caricature at the height of the gross-out cycle. Eddie Murphy's fat drag character Rasputia is framed through what Patricia Hill Collins calls "controlling images" of Black womanhood — the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel — recombined into a grotesque composite that renders her domineering, hypersexual, and perpetually excessive. Building on Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body*, the chapter situates Rasputia within a longer history in which Black women's fatness has been pathologized as immoral, primitive, and threatening, while LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant's theorization of the "sapphimmabel" clarifies how these archetypes collapse into a single figure. The chapter also draws on Kathleen LeBesco, Mia Mask, and Barbara Plotz to show how prosthetic performance and spectatorship rely on viewers' familiarity with these stereotypes, making Rasputia's body both comic and monstrous. Brief discussion of Martin Lawrence's *Big Momma's House* (Raja Gosnell, 2000) and Tyler Perry's *Madea* films situates *Norbit* within a broader popular trend of "fat Black drag," where Black male comics don latex fat suits to embody caricatured Black women. This chapter also looks at identity more broadly, and the political and ideological implications of donning race, gender, body size, and disability as a costume for profit. Ultimately, the chapter argues that *Norbit* demonstrates how the fat suit itself becomes a technology for circulating anti-fat, racialized, and gendered hierarchies — using prosthetic flesh to stage Black women's bodies as grotesque and comic stereotypes primed by deep-seated cultural prejudice. In doing so, the film not only condenses centuries of controlling images into Rasputia's caricature but also reveals the limits of the fat suit gross-out cycle, marking both its peak and its decline.

Together, these chapters map how fat suits function across a spectrum of gross-out comedies, each film deploying them to different ends — class humor, gender anxieties, racial caricature — while drawing from a shared visual vocabulary of bodily excess. It is this very visual vocabulary that, despite

the popularity of gross-out comedies fizzling out, continues to influence films that rely on fat suits — even prestige films that take home Oscar trophies. In keeping with the concerns of Fat Studies and Film Studies alike, the project treats these representations not as isolated gags but as cultural texts that reflect and shape attitudes toward bodies marked as “too much.”

CHAPTER 1: FAT, POOR, AND DISGUSTING: CLASS AND GROTESQUERIE IN *DODGEBALL* AND
AUSTIN POWERS

I. Introduction

In a memorable scene from director John Landis' 1978 \$140-million-dollar hit *National Lampoon's Animal House*, the film's raucous fat character, John "Bluto" Blutarsky (John Belushi), instigates a cafeteria food fight by doing an impression of an unsightly skin growth ("National Lampoon's Animal House - Box Office Mojo"). A group of preppy classmates watches in disgust as he stuffs his face with Jell-O and hamburgers. "This is absolutely gross! That boy is a P-I-G, pig!" says one of the preppy women. Bluto responds, "See if you can guess what I am now." He then jams a ball of mashed potatoes in his mouth, chews it up, and smashes his cheeks with his hands, spraying masticated food all over his bourgeois classmates. "I'm a zit. Get it?" Bluto exclaims, eyebrows bouncing in self-satisfaction (see fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Bluto (John Belushi) in a seminal gross-out scene from *National Lampoon's Animal House*.

As a benchmark text of the American gross-out comedy, *Animal House* exemplifies the central features of this cinematic mode that I will interrogate throughout this dissertation: exaggerated physicality, grotesque humor, and the use of fatness to encode socio-economic hierarchies. Released at a moment of cultural change in the United States during the late 1970s, *Animal House* helped establish the defining features of this comedic subgenre, including raunchy humor and a distinct focus on class tensions. While Paul situates *Animal House* within the broader cultural inversion where “low-class genres became high-class product,” this shift did not erase class anxieties; instead, it reinforced them through new aesthetic and comedic codes (33). Gross-out comedies often revel in an oppositional stance toward dominant class structures, using humor to mock bourgeois sensibilities. However, this oppositionality frequently functions within a broader framework that ultimately upholds existing hierarchies. As Paul argues, “one way of addressing the overwhelming power of the class structure is to invert the terminology by which it defines its values” (35). Gross-out comedies, therefore, subvert societal hierarchies by mocking and undermining the language and behaviors typically associated with power and status, challenging dominant cultural narratives. The disillusionment and class strife coming out of the 1960s created an atmosphere where an increasing number of people were willing to give a middle finger to conformity and compulsory gentility, all of which helped set the stage for gross-out comedies, like Bluto’s zit, to explode big-time.

Paul’s observations align with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, where grotesque humor destabilizes power structures by reveling in bad taste. However, as Bakhtin and subsequent theorists have noted, the ambivalent social function of carnival often limits its potential to truly upend hierarchies.³² This tension between subversion and reinforcement is crucial to understanding gross-

³² For additional perspectives on the ambivalent social function of the carnival and the grotesque beyond Bakhtin, see, e.g., Stam (1989) on Bakhtinian film theory; Stallybrass and White (1986) on transgression and the grotesque body; Kristeva (1982) on abjection; Russo (1995) on the gendered grotesque; Epstein (1995) on the transcultural grotesque; and Harpham (1982) on grotesque contradiction.

out comedy's treatment of fatness, and it will be explored at length in each of my chapters. While the gross-out comedy positions itself as oppositional, its reliance on fat suits and grotesque portrayals of fatness often undermines its liberatory potential. Instead of challenging societal hierarchies, these portrayals frequently reify oppressive structures and perpetuate anti-fat stereotypes. This chapter aims to start unpacking these dynamics by focusing on the intersection of fatness and class — a neglected but vital dimension of the gross-out comedy subgenre.

Despite the foundational role of class dynamics in gross-out comedies, the intersection of fatness and class remains critically underexplored in both Film and Fat Studies, particularly in relation to the prominent use of fat suits as a cinematic device that amplifies and caricatures fatness. As mentioned, Barbara Plotz's *Fat on Film* is the only book-length study of fatness in cinema. However, Plotz deliberately avoids engaging with class, arguing that “class is not as clearly a bodily and embodied concept as race and gender” (8). This decision underscores the gap in scholarship surrounding how socio-economic factors shape the representation of fat bodies in film. My analysis seeks to address this exigency, focusing specifically on the heavily classed nature of gross-out comedies and the ideological work they perform in constructing the meaning of fatness. While Plotz is correct to note that class may not manifest on the body as visibly as race or gender, this very invisibility makes it all the more crucial to examine — especially in a subgenre like gross-out comedy, where fatness is not only hyper-visible but often weaponized to mark lower-class identity and behavior.

This chapter will begin by providing a brief and necessarily incomplete historical contextualization of the relationship between fatness and class, before grounding this discussion in Bakhtin's theories of carnival and grotesquerie to explore the ambivalent social function of gross-out humor. This historical overview will serve as a foundation for analyzing the ideological work of fatness in the gross-out comedy subgenre. I will then move to a close reading of *Dodgeball: A True Underdog*

Story. Narratively, the film directly follows the beats established in slob-versus-snobs films like *Animal House* and *Caddyshack* (Harold Ramis, 1980) over two decades earlier. While *Dodgeball* adheres to many of the conventions of its 1980s predecessors, it also amplifies the gross-out gags expected of blockbuster comedies following the success of films like *There's Something About Mary* and *American Pie*, the fourth and twelfth highest-grossing films of 1998 and 1999, respectively (“1998 Worldwide Box Office”; “1999 Worldwide Box Office”). One year after the release of *Dodgeball* came Judd Apatow’s runaway blockbuster *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), marking a move toward a new style of dialogue- and improv-driven comedies. Apatow’s film shifted the comedy landscape, launching the “bro comedy” and opening the doors to “a cottage industry of man-child characters working their way through arrested adolescence” in what was framed as sweet and lovable ways (Tobias, “‘The 40-Year-Old Virgin’: The Most Influential Comedy of the Last Decade.”). These films moved the industry away from the ultra-gross-out, body-based humor of the Farrelly Brothers and the *American Pie* franchise and instead toward something like a comedian comedy renaissance.³³ *Dodgeball* was released at this major juncture for Hollywood comedies. By incorporating fat suits and centering the narrative on fitness and fatness, *Dodgeball* offers a unique case study for understanding the shifting attitudes and expectations toward fat bodies and gross-out humor during this period.

The second case study, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, represents social class in ways that connect to fatness and reveal a particularly generative example of the mere appearance of fat bodies as a gross-out gag. The character of Fat Bastard serves as a monstrous parody, amplifying

³³ Steve Seidman coined the term “comedian comedy” to describe a subgenre of Hollywood films structured around the performances of established (usually male) comedians in leading roles (1981). This tradition, dating back to the silent era with Chaplin and Keaton, persisted through the classical Hollywood system and resurged in the early- and mid-1990s with figures like Jim Carrey, Adam Sandler, and Mike Myers (Drake 2003). There was once again a resurgence of comedian comedy in the late 2000s, with key comedic figures like Will Ferrell, Paul Rudd, Seth Rogen, and Ben Stiller appearing in a host of hits, as well as the broader trend of “bro comedies.” Major films representing this era include *Step Brothers* (Adam McKay, 2008), *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Nicholas Stoller, 2008), *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007), *Funny People* (Judd Apatow, 2009), and *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009).

stereotypes through his fat suit and embodying crude masculinity, class caricatures, and national stereotypes. As one of the most egregious examples of fatness as a spectacle of disgust in all of gross-out comedy, Fat Bastard underscores the genre's reliance on fat bodies as sites of humor, repulsion, and social commentary. Despite being a character with a name that literally calls out his fatness and foulness, Fat Bastard has been notably absent in discussions of the cinematic representations of fat bodies.³⁴ Considering the successes and cultural cachet once held by the *Austin Powers* franchise, Fat Bastard's characterization demands a closer examination. These close readings will illustrate how the use of fat suits encodes fatness through humor and narrative to both reflect and reify societal norms around class, amplifying and caricaturing fat bodies within the ideological framework of the gross-out comedy subgenre. By situating this discussion within an intersectional framework, I will demonstrate how categories such as class, race, and gender intertwine to produce nuanced but ultimately harmful representations of fatness in cinema. Any discussion of class, especially in the context of films made within the Hollywood system and its "long history of racialized gender constructs," will necessarily implicate various axes of identity (Plotz 8). With that in mind, the heavily classed nature of gross-out comedies demands that I foreground my textual explorations with a look into class dynamics, beginning with key sociohistorical shifts that contributed to the cultural resonance of these films.

II. Gold Watches and Round Paunches: A Brief History of Fatness and Class

Gross-out comedy inherits a long repertoire in which fat bodies signify class — corpulent elites as decadent, the fat poor as undisciplined. An enduring image of the former comes from a skit previously mentioned in the introduction: the fat-suited monstrosity Mr. Creosote portrayed by Terry Jones in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam, 1983). Gross-out comedies are

³⁴ The name Fat Bastard may also nod to the James Bond franchise's tradition of outlandishly suggestive character names — think Pussy Galore, Jaws, or Holly Goodhead — offering a blunt send-up of that convention.

overflowing (often literally) with bodily functions and fluids, and this is perhaps nowhere more extreme than when Mr. Creosote waddles into a posh French restaurant and gorges himself on food to the point of explosive vomiting, which he continues to do repeatedly. As mentioned at the outset, his body *literally* explodes, showering fellow patrons with viscera and half-digested food. This is, of course, a gross-out performance specifically related to fatness, with Creosote's hugely exaggerated, cartoonish body, along with his ample bodily fluids, being the focal point of the gags (i.e., the jokes and the actual gagging).³⁵ But along with this corporeal spectacle is a visual commentary on social class.

Mr. Creosote is a cinematic caricature of the corporate fat cat, a stereotype that associates fatness with greed, overconsumption, and excessive wealth. "Once upon a time, a man with a thick gold watch swaying from a big, round paunch was the very picture of American prosperity and vigor," Laura Fraser explains in "The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States" (11). While Mr. Creosote is certainly not American (he is, like Jones, British), he does fulfill this picture of prosperity, complete with a tuxedo, bow tie, and, yes, a watch swaying from his engorged paunch. Mr. Creosote patronizes a restaurant so ritzy (it is literally called "L'Elegance") and so dedicated to the service of its wealthy diners that the *maitre d'* (John Cleese) calmly subjects himself to being covered in vomit while waiting on him, hand and barf-covered foot.³⁶ A busboy played by Eric Idle even carries a puke bucket over to the table with the panache and dignity of a man serving white truffles and caviar — again, to be rewarded with a shower of vomit. Creosote is presented as the embodiment of upper-

³⁵ Although the fat suit, vomiting, and exploding torso are the most iconic (or notorious) elements of this scene, Geoff King mentions the transgressive potential of a brief, oft-forgotten moment, where a fellow diner experiences an unusually heavy period. King writes, "The passing reference to menstruation — specifically, to the possibility of 'bleeding all over the seat'; a comment that causes discomfort to the woman's male accompaniment — is perhaps more transgressive of the representational norms of male-dominated culture than the main gross-out attraction" (77).

³⁶ The name of the restaurant is revealed in a deleted scene, which also shows Mr. Creosote wheeling his paunch in a wheelbarrow (NerdyIncorporated).

class snobbishness, greed, and capitalist overconsumption, his excesses being enabled and indulged via his opulent surroundings (see fig. 8).

From a modern standpoint, this fat stereotype is somewhat antiquated. While cartoonish depictions of corporate fat cats persist, this is largely a relic of the past. The cultural association between fatness and wealth has largely shifted. As Fat Studies scholar Amy Farrell explains,

Throughout the 19th century, political cartoons sometimes lampooned fat people, usually the ‘fat cat,’ the successful businessman or the rich politician. By the early 20th century however, this was no longer the primary image. Indeed, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, physicians and cultural thinkers linked ‘obesity’ to lower levels of civilization and the primitive, and thinness to progress and civilization. (259)



Fig. 8. A Collection of “fat cat” political cartoons compiled by Politico (Wuerker).

This shift, Farrell notes, was tied to broader cultural anxieties about modernity and progress, with fatness becoming “yet another signifier of inferiority” (260). Fatness, then, became stigmatized not only as a marker of physical excess but as an indicator of moral, cultural, and intellectual vulgarity.³⁷

This historical shift in the meaning of fatness has had profound implications for its association with class. I linger on this longer history because it clarifies how contemporary gross-out comedies inherit and repurpose these classed meanings of fatness, and it prepares the ground for my analysis of the 1970s and 1980s ensemble comedies that bridge this history to *Dodgeball* and *Austin Powers*. Rewinding the clock to before the early nineteenth century, people believed “that a layer of fat was a sign that you could afford to eat well and that you stood a better chance of fighting off infectious diseases than most people” (Fraser 11). However, as food production expanded and social ideologies shifted, this perception changed dramatically. By the early twentieth century, thinness began to take on new cultural significance, shaped in part by the prevalence of tuberculosis among the bourgeoisie. The illness, which caused a frail and sickly appearance — “pale and thin with rosy cheeks and wide sunken eyes due to the low blood oxygenation and fevers” — was romanticized as a sign of delicate sensibilities and a superior nature (Green 66). All of these features “became signals of beauty and value” (Green 66). As author John Green explains, “Women with consumption were believed to become more beautiful, ethereal, and wondrously pure” (66).³⁸

Susan Sontag wrote about this “tubercular look” in her influential work *Illness as Metaphor*. She observed that “For snobs and parvenus and social climbers, [tuberculosis] was one index of being genteel, delicate, sensitive.” It was, in short, “glamorous to look sickly” (28). This aestheticized ideal

³⁷ The word “vulgar” frequently appears in discussions of gross-out comedies, which is noteworthy as it relates to class since the word comes from the Latin “vulgāris,” meaning “of or belonging to ordinary people, common, belonging to the lower classes of society” (OED).

³⁸ In his 2025 book *Everything is Tuberculosis*, Green provides a variety of examples of well-known figures striving for the deadly beauty that accompanied a “consumption” diagnosis. One example includes Charlotte Brontë, who wrote in a letter as her sister was dying of the disease, “Consumption, I am aware, is a flattering malady” (66).

of thinness further morphed into a broader association with restraint, discipline, and modernity, marking the aspirational ideal of the middle and upper classes. Fatness, by contrast, was increasingly tied to poverty and lack of self-control. As Fraser notes, “When it became possible for people of modest means to become plump, being fat was no longer a sign of prestige [...]; it became chic to be thin and all too ordinary to be overweight” (12). This shift in the cultural narrative emphasized the alignment of body size with broader social and economic trends, highlighting the growing dichotomy between restraint and excess as indicators of class. Farrell puts it succinctly: “thinness becomes associated with the middle class and the wealthy, whereas fatness becomes associated with the poor” (259). This reversal of class-coded body norms is central to the tropes analyzed in this chapter, where stereotypes surrounding fatness shift away from the wealthy elite to target poor and working-class people.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this historical narrative is not as straightforward or linear as it might initially appear. Historian Christopher E. Forth complicates this tale of shifting attitudes in *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*. He writes, “[M]any scholars implicitly subscribe to some version of the idea that the history of so-called obesity is the story of ‘how what was good became ugly and then bad’” — a simplistic story that Forth ultimately challenges (8). He critiques the notion of linearity by emphasizing that “positing overly sharp or reductive distinctions in how people of different periods and cultures viewed the body is to overlook the multiple and sometimes contradictory ways in which bodies may be conceived and experienced at any given time” (9). For example, Forth notes that “people in pre-modern eras viewed corpulence with ambivalence rather than appreciation” (14). Moreover, his analysis highlights deeply rooted Western tendencies to associate the “soft, flabby, bloated and viscous with the feminine and the feminizing, but also with the backward, primitive and uncivilized” (15). Similarly, Sabrina Strings, in *Fearing the Black Body*, argues

that a significant amount of contemporary anti-fat attitudes can be explicitly traced to anti-Black attitudes from the past several centuries. These attitudes framed Black bodies as inherently excessive and deviant, contributing to a cultural narrative that stigmatizes fatness as both a racialized and classed identity. Consequently, fatness's cultural meaning is not limited to class or any single social marker; among other things, fatness also has a long history of racial and gender associations, which will be explored in depth in the subsequent chapters.

Mr. Creosote's characterization as an embodiment of upper-class excess is thus a relic of an antiquated cultural mythos, a time when fatness sometimes signified wealth and power. In contemporary cinema, fat bodies are more often associated with disgust, failure, and societal marginalization, reflecting their alignment with stereotypes of the working class. The complexities around these shifting signifiers demonstrate that fatness has always been a site of contested meaning, shaped by the interplay of gender, race, and prejudice. Forth and Strings' insights remind us that fat narratives are part of a broader and far messier cultural history than things might appear at first glance. It is a history, from consumptive chic to heroin chic, that continues to have ramifications for today's standards of beauty.³⁹

This evolving understanding of fatness as a marker of social boundaries reveals the inadequacy of conventional class analyses for addressing the visceral and performative dimensions of gross-out comedies. While Marxist frameworks often dominate discussions of class in film, their focus on economic hierarchies and material conditions fails to capture the embodied humor and grotesque

³⁹ As an example of the shared impacts of shifting attitudes, Green tells the story of one of his fans, a woman who commented that, "As a fat person, I used to wish for a wasting disease like tuberculosis" (71). Green says that dozens have expressed similar sentiments to him, chronicling their experiences of being "complimented for weight loss associated with life-threatening illness, or their fantasies of tapeworms and other illnesses that would shrink their bodies [. . .] The idea of becoming sick in order to look healthy or beautiful speaks to how profoundly consumptive ideals still shape the world we share" (71). Fatness has been so historically reviled (and thinness so glorified) that many would sooner court death than live as a fat person.

aesthetics that define this genre.⁴⁰ Gross-out comedies demand a theoretical approach that not only critiques systemic oppression but also explores how laughter, bodily excess, and disgust intersect to challenge and reinforce cultural norms. Enter Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and the grotesque body.

III. Slobs, Snobs, and Bakhtin

Traditional frameworks of class analysis emphasize systemic critiques of oppression and exploitation but often overlook the human body with all its wrinkly, leaking, reeking, rotting, fatty baggage. To better understand how fat suits function in gross-out comedies we can turn to literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. His theory of *the grotesque body* provides a set of conceptual tools for analyzing how culture uses exaggerated or transgressive bodies to produce meaning. Developed in his study of medieval folk humor and Renaissance literature, Bakhtin's grotesque is not just an aesthetic but a framework for understanding how representations of certain kinds of bodies (and bodies doing certain kinds of things) can parody, destabilize, or reassert dominant ideologies.⁴¹

As a literary and artistic trope, the grotesque body operates as a powerful symbol of rebellion against societal norms. It is an aesthetic that embodies degradation, the lowering of abstract, spiritual, or idealized notions to the material and bodily level, and challenging the traditional separation between

⁴⁰ An influential collection related to Marxism, film, and art is *Aesthetics and Politics*, which is not an edited anthology but an interlinked debate between major Marxist figures including Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Georg Lukács (Brecht et al.). Other representative Marxist film theory includes Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," which is an influential discussion of mass media and the impact of images; Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970), which shaped theories of cinema as an ideological tool; Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (1992), which examines the relationship between aesthetics, capitalism, and film; Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (1989), which historically contextualizes Marxist frameworks; and David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (1993), which examines Soviet montage through a Marxist lens.

⁴¹ Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* is a highly influential book in literary and cultural studies, and it informs much of my discussion of the grotesque. Bakhtin reexamined François Rabelais' 16th century collection of works *Gargantua and Pantagruel* — a series of novels that contained highly subversive and even shocking elements — and expanded our understanding of the culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

the high and the low (Bakhtin 19–20). Unlike the polished, closed-off “classical body” of Renaissance art — associated with “rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie” — the grotesque body is open, unruly, and in constant flux (Bakhtin 29; Russo 8). The grotesque body is characterized by its dynamism and openness: it is “unfinished, outgrowing itself, transgressing its own limits,” and constantly in a state of becoming (Bakhtin 26). Such imagery relishes in its depiction of “copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation” (26). By presenting the body as porous and interconnected, the grotesque trope foregrounds the inevitability of decay, hybridity, and transformation, forcing an engagement with a host of distasteful material realities.

The grotesque aesthetic, not unlike gross-out comedy, thrives on breaking norms and decorum, making it a central tool for challenging established hierarchies. However, the grotesque does not operate in isolation; it is one of the core components within the broader framework of carnival. Bakhtin introduces the concept of carnival as a metaphor for the subversion of social order — the very space where ordinary hierarchies are temporarily suspended and a “world upside-down” emerges, allowing laughter to reign supreme. Carnival is a topsy-turvy social experience, building upon the grotesque by providing a social and cultural context in which these bodily excesses and inversions gain their subversive power. This carnivalesque inversion suspends “all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” and instead adopts a “view of the world from below, a view that privileges the marginal and excluded over that which is considered sacred and authoritative” (Bakhtin 10; Stukator 201).

Bakhtin’s explanation of carnival and the grotesque body are dialectical in nature, engaging with opposites and holding contradictory potentials. For Bakhtin, this revelry and aesthetic contain ambivalence in myriad ways: “it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts

and denies, it buries and revives”; in it we find “both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (Bakhtin 12, 24). Humiliation, revival, mortification, renewal, sacred, profane, death, birth — ambivalence abounds when hierarchies are subverted. Such transgressions open up to a “radical and liberating potential, breaking through the limitations of dominant cultural norms” — words used by Geoff King to describe the carnivalesque potential of gross-out comedies (66).



Fig. 9. VHS cover for *Caddyshack* with “The Snobs against the Slobs” tagline.

Grotesque and transgressive as they may appear on the surface, gross-out comedies risk reinscribing the very norms they flout — this, despite gross-out comedies possessing an aesthetic sensibility aligned with the carnivalesque and grotesque more than perhaps any other filmic genre (Paul 24). Whether painted on a canvas, described on the page, or captured on the big screen, such depictions “can be appropriated to sustain marginality or [they] can be used to subvert and challenge the dominant official culture and its representation” (Stukator 201). We see this dynamic explored in a subset of gross-out comedies colloquially termed “slobs-versus-snoobs” films, a phrase popular enough to make its appearance on the cover of VHS, laserdisc, and DVD versions of *Caddyshack* (see fig. 9).⁴² These films directly tie their narratives to

class tension by typically featuring relatable “everyman” characters pitted against disconnected, WASPish antagonists who represent the systems that judge, marginalize, and exploit the boorish

⁴² Another early use of the term “slobs-versus-snoobs” appears in a scathing 1988 *Hollywood Reporter* review of *Caddyshack II* (Allan Arkush), which argues that the film is so obnoxious it could “drive even the most egalitarian of citizens to seek out a country club as refuge” (Byrge 54).

protagonists. While these protagonists can hardly be described as heroic, audiences are encouraged to root for them because “they’re in revolt against ossified institutions like the university system and the military” (Weinman). Paul identified slob-versus-snobs films, such as *Animal House* and *Porky’s*, as “Animal Comedies.” These are progenitors of the gross-out comedies that dominated the late 1990s, and they set the standard for juxtaposing the vulgarity of “slobs” (lower-class, deviant, counter-cultural, and sometimes fat) against the refinement of “snobs” (high-class, genteel, judgmental, powerful, white, and thin) (86).⁴³

In gross-out comedies, this inversion of tastes is dramatized through the exaggerated bodily humor of characters aligned with the “slobs.” *Animal House’s* Bluto set the standard here. His grotesque characterization, described by film journalist Nick de Semlyen as “id incarnate” and a “Rabelaisian slob,” amplifies his alignment with the lower-class “slobs” who rebel against institutional power structures (1). Having a side character such as Bluto rather than a lead character as the perpetrator of the gross-out gags is a standard convention in gross-out comedies. Geoff King argues that this could be explained by the need for a certain distance from the most disgusting moments in a movie: “The pleasure on offer might be one of vicarious transgression, from which we can maintain a certain safety of distance. The grosser acts are in some cases performed by secondary figures rather than the principles” (69). We see more examples of this trope, with gross-out comedies frequently featuring a single fat character who not only performs “the largest number of gross-out acts but also the more outrageous ones” (Plotz 157).⁴⁴

⁴³ Paul coined them “Animal Comedies” because of the prominence of nonhuman animals in film titles such as *Animal House* and *Porky’s* (Bob Clark 1981), as well as the films’ insistent emphasis on “animality,” which Paul argues underscores their focus on physicality and bodily excess (Paul 86).

⁴⁴ Plotz mentions *The Hangover* trilogy (Todd Phillips, 2009, 2011, 2013), *Grown Ups* (Dennis Dugan, 2010) and its 2013 sequel, *Good Luck Chuck* (Mark Helfrich, 2007), and *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011) as examples (pp. 157-169).

The 1980s saw a proliferation of ensemble comedies that took the slobs-versus-slobs approach and, as Hollywood production studios tend to do, simply stuck them in different settings. *Animal House* but with nerds? You get *Revenge of the Nerds* (Jeff Kanew, 1984). *Animal House* at summer camp? *Meatballs* (1979, Ivan Reitman). *Animal House* but with cops? *Police Academy* (Hugh Wilson, 1984). In broad strokes, all these films followed the generic conventions established by *Animal House* and articulated by Paul and other theorists — including giving many of the most outrageous moments to the fattest, most unkempt member of the ensemble.

The *Revenge of the Nerds* franchise distributes its gross-out labor across size and mess: Curtis Armstrong's Booger is comparatively lean but rendered repulsive through stringy, unwashed hair, a perpetual stubble, stained tees, and on-screen nose-picking, while Donald Gibb's Ogre is a hulking, thick-set jock — bulging muscles under an open letterman jacket, bull-necked posture, belches used like weapons. Importantly, Ogre starts as a nerd-hating enforcer for the “snobs” in the first film but is absorbed into the nerd fraternity in the sequels; the series effectively decides that his sheer bigness and unruliness belong on the slob side of the ledger. The later sequels also add John Pinette's Trevor Gulf, whose round face, double chin, and heavy torso — often packed into tight-fitting button ups and ill-fitting ties — stage appetite and breathy exertion as recurring gags. *Police Academy* presents Bobcat Goldthwait's Zed as soft-bodied and filthy, with matted hair, jittery posture, grime-smudged denim, and a scratchy, feral vocal fry. Tab Thacker's “House,” by contrast, supplies the franchise's unmistakably fat body — an enormous frame and overhanging belly crammed into a too-snug uniform so that routine movement (squeezing into a desk, jogging in formation) becomes slapstick spectacle.

Though some of these characters are portrayed by actors who would not generally be considered very fat, they are all fatter than any of the leading men in their films. They are certainly fat by conventional Hollywood standards. And these characters are consistently positioned as the most

physically undisciplined, disruptive, and transgressive figures, their size visually reinforcing their status as agents of chaos. These grotesque bodies — fat, unruly, and excessive — operate as symbols of rebellion against the decorum and restraint of the “snobs.”

The influence of the slobs-versus-snobs trope also extended into genre-bending blockbuster hits like *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984) and its sequel. Though more mainstream and less explicit in its body humor, *Ghostbusters* nonetheless aligns closely with the working-class ethic and outsider status that typify the slob characters. The Ghostbusters themselves are underfunded, overworked blue-collar exterminators of the supernatural — hardly heroic in appearance or behavior, but resourceful and grounded. The film is laced with class tension, as the Ghostbusters butt heads with government bureaucrats like the EPA agent Walter Peck (William Atherton), who represents a regulatory system out of touch with the gritty, *ad hoc* ethos of the team.⁴⁵ Originally, both John Belushi and John Candy were considered for major roles in the film, further linking *Ghostbusters* to the broader comedic lineage of the decade. Belushi’s untimely death prevented his participation, but his presence lingered: Dan Aykroyd later confirmed that Slimer — the film’s most grotesque (and fat coded) ghost — was based on Belushi’s physicality and persona. “Slimer was based on John’s body,” Aykroyd recalled in a *Vanity Fair* interview. “I will admit to having an inspiration along those lines” (Blume). As a ghostly figure of gluttony and transgression, Slimer embodies the grotesque aesthetic of Belushi’s Bluto: disruptive, excessive, and chaotically charming. Though not a fat-suited character in the literal sense, Slimer is a proto-version of the prosthetic grotesques that would follow, a cartoonish echo of the fat slob archetype made spectral and immortal (see fig. 10).

⁴⁵ The plot of *Ghostbusters* has led to much discussion about its politics, with many seeing it as a fundamentally conservative film perfectly aligned with the political zeitgeist of the Reagan era. Writing for *Politico*, Derek Robertson explores this dynamic, saying that “Conservatives seized on the key element of [*Ghostbusters*] plot, in which the titular entrepreneurs are antagonized (and New York City is apocalyptically endangered) by an overweening EPA flack: *National Review* listed it in 2009 as one of the 25 ‘best conservative movies’; a *Washington Examiner* writer declared it ‘the most libertarian Hollywood blockbuster of all time’” (“The Weirdly Political Legacy of ‘Ghostbusters’”).



Fig. 10. John Belushi (left), the physical inspiration for Slimer (right) in Ghostbusters.

While these ensemble films frequently sidelined the fat characters, reserving them for a key gross-out or manic moments, the 1980s also saw a number of exceptions to this trend. Fatness did not always relegate characters to the margins; in several influential class-based comedies of the era, fat actors took center stage as leading men. While they still embodied aspects of the grotesque and were frequent sources of bodily humor, their roles often allowed for more complexity, emotional range, and narrative importance than those of their secondary counterparts.

In the 1980s, fatness in comedy was most often embodied by real, fat performers. These actors — John Belushi, John Candy, and Rodney Dangerfield are among the most famous — represented an era in which fat characters in gross-out, snob-versus-slob, Animal Comedies were exaggerated and comedic, yet still recognizably human. These bodies were often framed as grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense — leaky, chaotic, unruly — but they belonged to people, not prosthetics. They were allowed to exist with emotional depth, even if that depth was frequently obscured by slapstick, buffoonery, or abjection. Importantly, these characters almost always existed in working-class milieus and were pitted

against uptight, upper-class antagonists, emphasizing a populist, class-based humor that reveled in disruption, vulgarity, and lack of refinement. This is why I focus at some length on “slobs-versus-snobs” gross-out comedies before the 1990s: they mark a moment when fat, unruly characters could be celebrated as folk heroes, a model that sharpens the contrast with the classed, punitive uses of prosthetic fatness in *Dodgeball* and *Austin Powers*.

John Candy’s performances offer particularly rich examples. In *Stripes* (Ivan Reitman, 1981), Candy plays Dewey “Ox” Oxberger, a fat, jovial recruit introduced through jokes about his size. His most memorable scene involves mud wrestling a group of women, a spectacle that underscores his function as both comic relief and embodied chaos. Yet Candy’s performance is affectionate, deeply working-class, and aligned with the “slob” protagonists of the genre. In *The Great Outdoors* (Howard Deutch, 1988), Candy again plays the lovable slob, this time as a vacationing family man facing off against a snooty brother-in-law (Dan Aykroyd). The famous “Old 96er” scene — in which Candy’s character attempts to eat a 96-ounce steak — uses his fatness for comedic effect while aligning him with traditional masculinity and the pleasures of overindulgence. And in *Uncle Buck* (John Hughes, 1989), though the film is more family-oriented and less gross-out than some of these other films, his character still embodies the slob archetype: an unemployed bachelor whose boisterous, messy habits clash with middle-class expectations of decorum and propriety. The film tempers its slapstick with sentiment, further cementing Candy’s screen persona as the affable, rough-around-the-edges everyman whose fatness signifies both social transgression and emotional authenticity.

Rodney Dangerfield occupies a similar niche in this comedic landscape. Though not as physically large as Candy, Dangerfield often played characters coded as fat through attitude, appetite, and fashion. In *Caddyshack*, his character Al Czervik is a loud, crass real estate developer who crashes the elitist world of Bushwood Country Club with a boorish sensibility. Though Czervik is technically

wealthy, his fatness (visual and behavioral) codes him as culturally low-class: he eats with his mouth open, makes lewd jokes, and wears flashy clothes that offend the WASPish sensibilities of his snobbish rivals. He extended this persona in films like *Easy Money* (James Signorelli, 1983), and *Back to School* (Alan Metter, 1986). In *Easy Money*, Dangerfield plays a slob (that the film positions as fat) who must lose weight and clean up his act in order to inherit a fortune — a plot that turns the fat working-class body into both a problem and a site of transformation. Fatness, in these narratives, is a sign of indulgence, unrefinement, and proletarian rebellion.

The comedic logic at work in these films positions fatness — and grotesquerie more broadly — as a form of resistance to social order. These are bodies that overflow, bodies that do not conform, bodies that disrupt the smooth functioning of institutions. Yet, importantly, they are also tolerated, even embraced, within the diegetic world of the films. Characters like Al Czervik, Ox, and Uncle Buck are not cast out or punished for their fatness; they are, rather, positioned as heroes of a sort — flawed, yes, but fundamentally decent and aligned with the audience. While they certainly deploy fatness for laughs at times and perpetuate stereotypes associated with fatness, they also permit fat bodies a degree of humanity that becomes increasingly absent in the next decade, when fat suits allow for even greater grotesqueness with none of the consequences.⁴⁶ In each of these films, fatness becomes a visible marker of working-class identity — whether aligned with pleasure, laziness, or nonconformity. The “slob” is not just a classed subject, but a bodily one, and the fat body operates as a locus of humor, rebellion, and, increasingly, ridicule. The transition from actors like Candy and Dangerfield to prosthetic characters like Fat Bastard or Rasputia involves not only a shift in technology but a shift in

⁴⁶ Industry pressures also move to smooth unruly bodies into safer brands. Candy pushed to change the *Stripes* mud-wrestling gag, worried it made him “a pig in mud,” and later bristled at being called “the elephant” by a critic, even resolving to hire a trainer to “turn himself into a lean, mean machine” — evidence of a system that homogenizes actors if they want to be “stars” at the top of the call sheet (Knelman 87–88).

tone: from affectionate fatty to abject monstrosity, a shift that we see even within the fat suit films themselves as the gross-out elements becoming increasingly extreme.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the genre of gross-out comedy evolved dramatically, ushering in a new phase defined by prosthetic fat suits and heightened bodily spectacle. The shift from real fat actors to artificial fat bodies coincided with the intensification of diet culture, the rise of weight-loss reality television, and the moralization of health under neoliberalism. Where once the fat slob could be chaotic yet endearing, the new fat grotesque emerged as an object of horror and mockery. The fat suit allowed for a kind of exaggeration that dehumanized its wearer, transforming the body into a joke that could be easily zipped up or removed — fatness no longer as identity or reality, but as temporary abjection. Moreover, this emphasis on exaggerated bodies did not occur in isolation. Film scholar Yvonne Tasker argued that the late 1980s and 1990s also saw the “box-office success of the white male bodybuilder as star,” signaling a “wider shift in the male image” from the everyman action hero of 1970s New Hollywood to bodies marked by hypervisible spectacle in the form of “baroque muscles” (73; 78). Stars like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger came to embody what Barbara Creed called a “simulacrum of an exaggerated masculinity,” a performance in which “the original [is] completely lost to sight” (68). Read alongside the rise of the cinematic fat suit, this broader move toward exaggerated bodies in the film industry reveals a moment when both ends of the bodily spectrum — hyper-muscularity and hyper-fatness — were rendered as outsized caricatures. The bodies deemed desirable and undesirable alike became spectacles, exaggerated to the point of cartoonishness, offering audiences not representations of lived embodiment but theatrical extremes that reinforced narrow ideals and cultural anxieties about bodies themselves.

This shift paralleled cultural discourses that framed fatness as both epidemic and failure. In the wake of the 1990s “obesity epidemic” rhetoric, the fat body came to represent not only indulgence

but also social decay, a failure of self-discipline, productivity, and national health. As public health discourse medicalized fatness and marketed thinness as virtue, popular media doubled down on depictions of fat characters as grotesque pariahs.

This is not to say that Bakhtinian grotesquerie disappeared entirely; rather, its subversive potential was increasingly curtailed. The ambivalence Bakhtin describes — the simultaneous laughter and renewal, the death and rebirth — was flattened into ridicule. Whereas the 1980s fat body could signal rebellious joy, the 2000s fat-suited body became a simulacrum of rebelliousness. The fat suit may gesture at heroically defying upper-class decorum, but, in effect, it functioned to simply reinforce and amplify anti-fat attitudes. Fatness and fat jokes came to define these characters, even when they were otherwise intended to be charming or morally heroic.

The *fat body* is fundamentally a *grotesque body*, since it is “associated with eating and digestion, with weight gain, sometimes weight loss, therefore with physical change, and also with death and disease” (Plotz 131). Jerry Mosher argues that fat bodies retain a subversive power that “reconfigures the threatening forces of the cosmos and death within the physicality of [the human] body” (177). However, this potential is contingent upon representation. When fat bodies are rendered as synthetic, solitary, and disgusting in a way that reifies dominant narratives, the grotesque loses its capacity to challenge and becomes merely a visual shorthand for failure. The question that remains, then, is whether the carnivalesque still holds any liberatory promise — or if, in the age of the fat suit, it has been fully subsumed by the very hierarchies it once mocked.

Unlike actual fat actors, fat suits allow filmmakers to push representations of fatness deeper into the disgusting and absurd. These artificial portrayals magnify stereotypes and inscribe narratives about fatness, framing large bodies as excessive and undisciplined while distancing these depictions from the realities of lived fat people. This ambivalence between subversion and reinforcement, so

central to Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque and carnival, plays out in the films I will analyze throughout this work. Each film pushes against the boundaries of good and bad taste, but to varying effect. One common denominator in them all, though, is their use of fat suits and their depictions of fat bodies as a site for comedy. Fat suits, as both a comedic and ideological tool, become a focal point for exploring how humor rooted in bodily excess intersects with narratives of socio-economic power and resistance. This is particularly evident in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*, where humor and physicality serve as a vehicle for examining class tensions and cultural hierarchies.

IV. "Overweight & Under-Attractive": Class Dynamics in *Dodgeball*

2004 saw the release of multiple high-grossing comedies, including *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*, which grossed \$114 million domestically (Kit).⁴⁷ It was a surprise smash at the box office, earning \$30 million on its opening weekend and beating out the Spielberg-directed Tom Hanks vehicle *The Terminal* and the big-budget remake of *Around the World in 80 Days* (Frank Coraci). This unexpected number one opening made the front page of *The Hollywood Reporter* and sported the headline "Dodgeball' leaves mark" (Fuson).

Dodgeball was and remains acclaimed by both audiences and popular critics, currently with a 72% Rotten Tomatoes score and a top review from Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone*, who deems it a "masterpiece of modern cinema" ("Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story | Rotten Tomatoes"). The film went on to have a large cult following, even leading to a 2017 charity dodgeball game that united seven of the featured actors from the original film, including Ben Stiller and Vince Vaughn, for a marketing video that garnered 3.3 million views on YouTube alone (Omaze). It continues to have a

⁴⁷ Several adult, gross-out adjacent comedies grossed over \$100 million at the box office in 2004, including *White Chicks* (Keenan Ivory Wayans), *50 First Dates* (Peter Segal), *Along Came Polly* (John Hamburg), *Starsky and Hutch* (Todd Phillips), and *Meet the Fockers* (Jay Roach). Along with *Dodgeball*, Ben Stiller starred in four wildly successful adult comedies in 2004 alone ("2004 Worldwide Box Office").

strong fan base, even two decades after its initial release. As recently as 2023, there have even been ongoing reports of a sequel in the works (Grobar). As with *Caddyshack* and *Animal House*, the slob-versus-snobs gross-out comedy proves to have a broad appeal to audiences.

The plot of *Dodgeball* is similar to many other films within the subgenre. Peter La Fleur (Vince Vaughn) is our “everyman” character, an uber-laid-back owner of a gym called “Average Joe’s.” This gym is a safe haven for many of the freaks and weirdos who would feel unwelcome or out of place at a more corporatized, fitness-obsessed gym. As it happens, one of those very gyms exists across the street: Globo Gym. White Goodman (Ben Stiller), our deranged antagonist, owns this gym. La Fleur is presented as easy-going to the point of not collecting membership fees for his gym and letting his bills go unpaid, leaving Average Joe’s at risk of being seized by the banks. Goodman, in contrast, has turned his gym into a multimillion-dollar industry and aims to capitalize on Le Fleur’s financial woes by swooping in and buying Average Joe’s out from under him. “If I choose to level Average Joe’s to build an auxiliary parking lot for my members — then so be it,” Goodman says. The Average Joe’s misfits band together to raise the requisite \$50,000 in back taxes by winning a national dodgeball tournament, despite having no experience with or knowledge of the game. Naturally, Goodman gets wind of this plan and puts together a team to prevent Average Joe’s from winning the prize money. Thus, we have a group of “slobs” in the Average Joe’s team competing against the powerful “snobs” represented by the Globo Gym team (called the Purple Cobras).

This is a classic setup, alluded to in the subtitle of the movie itself: “A True Underdog Story.” The film plays heavily with familiar gross-out comedy tropes — such as the battle between misfit underdogs and elitist authority figures, the celebration of vulgarity and physical excess, and the mocking of polished professionalism. These self-referential, winking moments and on-the-nose names anticipate the audience’s familiarity with such conventions, including the exaggerated dichotomy of

the slobs and the snobs, the crude body humor, and the casting of fat actors as comic relief. While many of these conventions have, as I mentioned above, relied heavily on class tropes and stereotypes, *Dodgeball* is unique in how heavily it pulls from the intersection of class and body size for much of its humor. Of course, as discussed, gross-out comedies (and comedy more generally) have long used fat bodies for various gags; however, few, if any slobs-versus-snobs films have built attitudes toward fitness and fatness into the very foundations of their story as explicitly as *Dodgeball*. This makes it a uniquely fertile gross-out comedy for exploring the ways in which fatness and fat suits are used to both challenge and reinforce class-based stereotypes.

The opening scenes of *Dodgeball* perfectly express these crossroads of fat- and class-based stereotypes. The film opens with an in-universe commercial for Globo Gym America Corp. We are presented with various conventionally attractive, muscular, and toned bodies as they pump iron and run on treadmills at a high-end, expensive gym — what Roger Ebert describes as “a multi-million-dollar muscle emporium” (“*Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* Movie Review”). A voiceover asks the audience, “Tired of being the same old you? Tired of being out of shape and out of luck with the opposite sex? Tired of being overweight and under-attractive?” before the camera dollies over to White Goodman (Ben Stiller) running obnoxiously fast on an elliptical. Goodman proceeds to take the audience on a tour of the gym, where we get to see the sheer scale of the facility: towering windows, massive metal sculptures, an indoor climbing wall, a gift shop, personal masseuses, and endless rows of cutting-edge exercise machines all being actively used by toned and athletic humans in matching fashionable workout gear. Ostentatious posters and “inspirational” quotes line the walls (many featuring Goodman’s visage) with sayings like “out with the flab and in with the fab.” There’s even on-site cosmetic surgery offered in a room called the “Shame Reduction Center,” with an entry sign that depicts the silhouette of a fat person under a scalpel (see fig. 11). Goodman’s selling point is that

his gym will morph clients into the people they truly want to be. “We understand that ‘ugliness’ and ‘fatness’ are genetic disorders, much like baldness or necrophilia,” Goodman says to the camera. “And it’s only your fault if you don’t hate yourself enough to do something about it.”



Fig. 11. The set design adding to the satirical depictions of fitness culture in the opening scene of Dodgeball.

The big reveal in this opening scene is that White Goodman is not just the owner of the gym; he is also a client. The commercial smash cuts to ominous music and a picture of a nude White Goodman “six years and six hundred pounds ago” with a fat body, shoveling ice cream in his mouth and looking ashamed, Chinese takeout containers and plates of cookies and candy strewn about his

bed and bedside (see fig. 12). The commercial ends with Goodman saying the catchphrase of his gym: “Come on down and join the winning team because here at Globo Gym, we’re better than you. And we know it!” In the flashback photo, the “joke,” as we will see time and time again, rests on the visual humor of simply observing a conventionally attractive actor covered in fleshy rolls. It is meant to be funny because he’s fat.



Fig. 12. White Goodman's flashback photo of when he was fat in Dodgeball.

The sound fades as the camera pulls back to reveal that the commercial has been playing on a television inside a tiny, messy apartment. This is the apartment of our underdog hero, Peter La Fleur (Vince Vaughn). Where Globo Gym gleams with aspirational wealth and order, La Fleur’s apartment is a chaotic tableau of neglect. Beer cans and pizza boxes clutter every surface, a wilted plant sits forgotten in the corner, and a well-worn poker table serves as his dining area. A magnet on his refrigerator reads, “Got Beer?” The film’s gross-out sensibilities are immediately apparent in both characters’ introductions: Goodman’s naked fat body and then La Fleur, sprawled on his couch, moans with pleasure as he stirs awake to his dog sniffing and licking at his crotch. Once fully awake, La Fleur shoos his dog from between his legs, saying, “Bad dog! No grundle!” The soundtrack shifts to a series of voicemails from an old answering machine, offering a comically tragic portrait of La

Fleur's financial woes. A voice from the electric company announces that his overdue payments will result in a shutoff, followed by increasingly exasperated reminders from a video rental store about unreturned DVDs — a mix of pornography titles, *Drunken Hussies 3* and *Backdoor Patrol 5*, and the curiously incongruous *Mona Lisa Smile*. La Fleur takes a swig of Yoo-hoo while brushing his teeth, swirls it around in his mouth, and swallows. These details paint La Fleur as a man unmoored, embodying the archetypal slob who shirks responsibility and prioritizes immediate pleasures over stability. And, of course, he is very clearly working-class. He does not have any of the wealth or power that we just witnessed from Goodman. La Fleur's dilapidated car, covered in rust and barely operable, struggles to start as he leaves for work, requiring a push to make it the last leg to Average Joe's, the humble gym he owns and operates.

While these scenes explicitly play into stereotypes around fitness and class, it is essential to note that much of what is happening here is meant to be ironic and even satirical. Goodman's character, in particular, is the villain of the story, and his views and attitudes are meant to be precisely that: villainous. He is an absurd human being, framed as arrogant, ignorant, mean-spirited, and committed to a performative, bombastic masculinity that contrasts with and heightens the laid-back charm of Peter La Fleur.⁴⁸ We are, in short, not meant to take Goodman seriously; we are meant to see everything he stands for as *bad*. Irony, though, can be tricky. And it makes for a curious partner with gross-out comedy. “For what could be more definitive of the ambivalence of comedy than the partnership between an affect most conventionally linked to cerebral distance [irony], and a genre most commonly known for its visceral, base appeal [gross-out comedy]?” Benjamin Aspray asks (10). Satire, too, complicates this equation. Satire is a “somewhat unstable quality” that has the potential to either undermine or heighten the critique's impact (King 94). This is especially true in the case of

⁴⁸ Roger Ebert described Stiller's portrayal as “overacting to the point of apoplexy” (“*Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* Movie Review”).

Dodgeball (and, really, all the films I will analyze in this work), where the film wants to criticize stereotypes about certain people (fat and working-class people, in this case) while also indulging in those very stereotypes as a source of humor.

This is at its most explicit in *Dodgeball* in the moments involving fat suits. I will turn to those scenes shortly. First, though, I would like to take a closer look at the first and only scene in the film to showcase a real-life fat person. The fact that this is the only scene to feature a fat person in a speaking role is notable, considering just how much fatness is implicitly and explicitly referenced throughout the film. Nonetheless, there are no major fat characters in *Dodgeball*. Average Joe's, despite being a gym that's supposed to champion everyone regardless of body size, is apparently populated almost entirely with thin-to-average-sized, able-bodied, white men. In a surprise twist, *Dodgeball* even avoids having a fat "Rabelaisian slob"-like character, à la Bluto, despite having the narrative structure and generic qualities that all but require it. The character of Dwight (Chris Williams) is the only character of color from Average Joe's; the only fat person we see associated with the gym is an out-of-focus actor briefly shown in the background of a single scene. Other than that, the only fat character to be found is Martha Johnstone (LB Denberg), who is unrelated to the gym and appears in an isolated flashback scene.

We meet her in a flashback to the previous day when scrawny high schooler Justin (Justin Long) tells Peter about his failed attempt at trying out for the cheerleading team. Justin is assigned Martha as his cheer partner for tryouts as a form of punishment orchestrated by the male cheer captain, who is jealous of the attention Justin receives from the female co-captain. The camera whip pans to reveal Martha along with a jump-scare musical cue. Justin gasps when he sees the fat body of his cheer partner. Martha's fatness is emphasized in both her framing and her costume design. She stands next to several other young women trying out for the cheer team, each slender and dressed in athletic shorts

and t-shirts. Martha, on the other hand, is wearing a fluted skirt and a tank top, showing off much more skin than the other women. This, combined with her over-the-top movements, brings attention to her fleshy arms and jiggling legs as she kicks and flails her way over to Justin. Earlier, I said this was the only fat character with a speaking role. More accurately, hers is more of a screaming than a speaking role. Her only actual speaking line, outside of her cheers and moans, is “I’m not wearing any panties,” which she whispers to Justin with a wink.

The gross-out event peaks when Justin attempts to lift Martha above his head. As he lifts her, the sound design exaggerates the moment with cartoonish whooshing noises, as if her body were a projectile. The scene escalates when Martha inevitably falls, crushing Justin beneath her. Foley artists took the sound design to the extreme in this scene, with loud, wet, splatting noises accompanying Justin’s face getting buried in her crotch — “which connects her weight and her sexuality” (Plotz 149). Flailing helplessly, he slaps at her large thighs while the crowd gasps (see fig. 13). An onlooker quips, “Dude. Can he breathe?” The absurdity continues as fellow cheerleaders struggle to pull Martha off Justin, along with a loud plunger sound, implying her body has vacuum-sealed his face into her crotch. Finally, Justin gasps for air as the scene abruptly cuts back to the present day, where he and Peter sit in stunned silence, managing only a single word: “Wow.”





Fig. 13. Martha's fat body and sexuality framed as comical and gross in *Dodgeball*.

Rather than offering any substantive critique of fitness culture, this scene exploits Martha's body as a comedic prop to reinforce the harmful messages the film seemingly aims to satirize. Plotz argues that this scene presents Martha's sexuality as aggressive and repellent, which is a trope that we will see frequently in gross-out comedies, especially in my Chapter 3 analysis of Eddie Murphy's fat-suited Rasputia from *Norbit* (149). These fat women are depicted in ways that connect their weight to "the characters' — lack of — sexual desirability and/or their inability to fulfill traditional gender roles" (148). Thus, the joke around Martha and similar fat female characters is not *just* that they're fat — but also that they're failing to live up to the standards of normative femininity. Throughout *Dodgeball*, Globo Gym's ethos of bodily perfection is positioned as villainous, yet Martha's scene simultaneously indulges in the same mockery of fatness central to Globo Gym's ideology. This tension reveals the instability of *Dodgeball's* satire: it critiques fitness culture's exclusionary ideals while perpetuating those very ideals through humor that stigmatizes fat bodies.

This tension reflects what Geoff King describes as the double-edged nature of comedic transgression, a question related to complexities of Bakhtinian ambivalence. Bakhtin himself understood that the carnival, being in constant flux and regeneration, could only offer temporary

reprieve: “It does not permit a lasting hierarchy to be destroyed; it suspends only for a time” (255). King, similarly, questions whether the grotesque in gross-out comedy truly disrupts norms or ultimately reaffirms them: “Is this type of transgression radical or conservative in effect? Are cultural boundaries put into question and undermined, or confirmed and reinforced?” (67). We see the ways in which the grotesque can be conservative in its effect throughout *Dodgeball*, where the seemingly transgressive displays are rendered hollow, stripped of their carnivalesque context and reconfigured to uphold dominant ideologies. “We must ask,” film scholar Robert Stam writes, “who is carnivalizing whom, for what reasons, by which means and in what circumstances” (95). In *Dodgeball*, the carnivalesque promise of a “world turned upside down” is betrayed by its reassertion of fatness as failure and its reinforcement of bodily discipline as the norm. The film mimes the aesthetic of the grotesque but abandons its liberatory potential, leaving viewers with a display that critiques without transforming, mocks without renewing. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the film’s climactic deployment of the fat suit.

V. No Good, Man: Fat Suits and Failed Ambivalence

The humor of fat suits often depends on their artifice. Viewers are aware that the exaggerated bodies on screen are not “real,” which grants filmmakers license to push boundaries in ways that might otherwise be unpalatable. This artifice creates a veneer of detachment, allowing audiences to laugh at these bodies while maintaining a distance from the realities of fatness. In this way, fat suits serve as both a mechanism for humor and a tool for reinforcing harmful stereotypes. They transform fat bodies into caricatures, often framing fatness as synonymous with failure, laziness, or lack of discipline. While writing about animated fatness in the CGI film *Kung Fu Panda* (Mark Osborne, John Stevenson, 2008), Plotz argues that the lack of actual fat people required for the animation frees the film from the

“restraints of physics and realism” but also from “possible inhibitions regarding the humiliation of actors/actresses” (148). Even though Plotz was writing about animated fatness here, it serves well in capturing some of the affordances that fat suits offer to filmmakers.⁴⁹ This tension is particularly evident in the final and post-credits scenes of *Dodgeball*, where a fat suit is used to depict the ultimate downfall of White Goodman.

The final scene takes place after the slobs have officially defeated the snobs. The team of misfits who make up the Average Joe’s dodgeball team have won the national tournament, as well as the prize money needed to save their gym. On top of that, Le Fleur bet all the money on Average Joe’s winning the competition. The \$50,000 prize was thus turned into millions of dollars, allowing La Fleur to purchase the controlling stake of Globo Gym. The film ends with Goodman’s business being taken out from under him. As the credits roll, we are presented with Goodman, defeated and dejected, alone in his apartment — except now he is very fat. He sits in his own filth, watching a commercial for Average Joe’s and angrily chewing on a fried chicken leg. “Spare me,” he says with a mouth full of meat. “I won that tournament.”

The film thus culminates by positioning Goodman as a thwarted caricature of gluttony, inhabiting a setting that starkly contrasts with the aspirational grandeur of Globo Gym. The mise-en-scène of his dingy, cramped apartment reflects his fall from grace: fast-food wrappers, greasy chicken bones, and empty soda bottles dominate the frame, while dim, yellowed lighting casts an oppressive shadow over the clutter and grime. Every detail is exaggerated to create a visual shorthand for failure and neglect, reinforcing associations between fatness, moral degradation, and lower-class status. Goodman, a ratty robe hanging loose over his shirtless torso, is a disheveled vision: crumbs cling to

⁴⁹ The dehumanizing effects of fat suits and the psychological consequences for actors/actresses playing ridiculed fat characters will be discussed in Chapter 2 in my section on *Shallow Hal*.

his fat-suit-enhanced body, his face shines with grease, and his heavy breathing punctuates the scene. The audience is invited to linger on this tableau, reveling in the degradation of a character who once embodied the obsessive pursuit of physical perfection.

This portrayal aligns with Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body as unfinished and transgressing its own boundaries. Goodman's transformation appears to embrace this transgression, as his body spills over the confines of his surroundings. However, unlike Bakhtin's grotesque as a site of renewal and resistance, Goodman's body is rendered abject and pathetic — a visual punchline signaling his ultimate comeuppance. By positioning this scene as the film's final narrative moment, *Dodgeball* ensures its resonance, leaving viewers with an indelible image of fatness as synonymous with failure.

The film extends this fatness-as-gross-out imagery even further in the post-credits epilogue, transforming Goodman into a self-aware jester. Here, he directly addresses the audience, breaking the fourth wall in a moment that escalates both the absurdity and cynicism of his portrayal. Seated in the same dingy apartment, Goodman mocks the simplicity of mainstream cinema: "Don't make me *think*," he sneers, "I just wanna be entertained." He then offers what he assumes the audience desires — an outlandish performance that reduces his fabricated flab to an object of mockery. As Kelis's "Milkshake" plays, Goodman grabs his breasts, shaking them at the camera with exaggerated enthusiasm. The camera lingers, shifting to a widened aspect ratio to maximize the visual impact of his performance (see fig. 14). The scene culminates with Goodman gasping and addressing the audience directly: "Ya happy? Fatty make a funny?"



Fig. 14. Ben Stiller in a fat suit, fondling his prosthetic breasts, his fatness framed as punishment at the end of Dodgeball.

The fourth-wall break implicates the audience in this dynamic, using self-awareness to critique our complicity while simultaneously indulging the very stereotypes it purports to mock. The placement of this sequence in the post-credits is equally telling. Traditionally reserved for bonus content or Easter eggs, post-credits scenes function as a reward for dedicated viewers. Similarly, the Blu-ray version of the film features a fat-suited Ben Stiller, reprising his role as White Goodman, appearing for a hidden bonus feature, where he reveals that there are Blu-ray-specific Easter eggs all throughout the film (*Dodgeball*). By using these spaces to extend Goodman's gross-out performance, *Dodgeball* signals its belief in the comedic potential of this imagery, positioning it as a centerpiece rather than an afterthought.

The failed ambivalence of these scenes once again underscores the tension at the heart of *Dodgeball's* satire. On one hand, the film critiques Goodman's villainous obsession with bodily perfection, using his transformation as a form of narrative justice. On the other, it reinforces anti-fat prejudices, making his body the ultimate source of ridicule. The grotesque oscillates between critique and complicity. Again, as King wrote, "The act of transgression draws attention to the norm *and might*

reinforce it' (68, my emphasis). King argues that framing these transgressions as something for mainstream audiences to laugh at "might increase this effect of reinforcement. Laughter has often been seen as a means of enforcing conformity through ridicule of that which does not conform to dominant expectations" (68). This means that the transgressive, subversive, political potential of the gross-out gag sometimes functions as little more than a "safety valve," a "means of letting off steam without really changing the norm" (King 67). Marxist critic Terry Eagleton also discusses a similar concept he calls "licensed affairs," which are "relatively ineffectual" transgressions that can act as a "permissible rupture of hegemony, contained, popular blow-off" (148).

The fat suit climax exemplifies a licensed affair: gross-out enough to elicit some guffaws and gags, but contained within the permissibility of dominant cultural narratives to effect little more than a reinforcement of the idea that fat people are disgusting, and thus deserving of their marginal status. Goodman's representation fails in its attempts at transgression and cultural subversion because it remains entrenched in the very systems it ostensibly critiques. While his transformation could serve as a critique of Globo Gym's toxic obsession with thinness and dominance, the comedic framing undermines this potential by reducing his fatness to a punchline — really, *the* punchline of the film. The film's reliance on fat stereotypes (e.g., slovenliness, filth, lack of control) signals a retreat into well-trodden cultural narratives that denigrates fat bodies rather than celebrate or humanize them.

The film's structure ensures that Goodman's fat suit transformation serves as a site of punishment and containment. His fat body becomes an easily identifiable marker of failure and moral deficiency, a symbolic "loss" that's inherently tied to his inability to conform to Globo Gym's ideals. While *Dodgeball* faithfully adheres to the conventions of a slobs-versus-slobs gross-out comedy, the ending of the film shifts the dynamic in a way that highlights its failed ambivalence. Slobs-versus-slobs films, as established, paint the slobs as our (non-heroic) heroes. The films get audiences rooting for

the deviants, the freaks, the weirdos — and against the stuffy institutions, the rich, the elitist, the suffocating demands of good manners. *Dodgeball* does exactly this, and then ends the film by putting the villain into the body of a slob *and framing it as the ultimate failure and punishment*.

Yes, it is poetic justice for a man whose primary fear is being fat — but this form of poetic justice can only be understood in a social context that allows fat and weight gain (and the loss of a muscular physique) to be read as abject failure in the first place. This is not some esoteric phobia of White Goodman's; this is a widespread cultural fear, causing very real harm for people, fat or otherwise. Studies have shown that stigmas associated with fatness have significant negative health effects, often surpassing the risks associated with any specific BMI (Tomiyama et al.; Udo et al.).⁵⁰ Simply perceiving oneself as fat has even been linked to dangerous levels of blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose, even among individuals with “normal” BMIs (Daly et al.). Additionally, a 2015 study found that individuals who reported experiencing weight discrimination faced a 60% greater risk of death — regardless of their weight (Sutin et al.). Unlike many other forms of bias, fatphobia and anti-fat attitudes have not diminished over time; in fact, it has intensified. A 2019 Harvard study on implicit and explicit bias revealed that anti-fat attitudes are growing more pervasive, harming people of all sizes, races, genders, and ages (Charlesworth and Banaji). These effects are disproportionately severe for certain groups, such as Black women, low-income individuals, and superfat people, but the reach of anti-fat bias extends across the entire cultural landscape.

⁵⁰ I mention BMI here only because these studies use it as a relevant measure in their discussion of weight-based discrimination. However, BMI has long been shown to be a vexed index of both fat and health. As a measure of health and wellness, it is simply a ratio between one's height and weight. This fails to consider age, habits, genetics, comorbidities, underlying disease, muscle mass, body fat distribution, psychology, social factors, etc. etc. Despite being a woefully incomplete picture of well-being, BMI continues to be America's default measure of how fatness is impacting one's health. As Aubrey Gordon puts it, “Despite its fraught history and proven inaccuracies, the BMI soldiers on. The science has disproved many common myths about size, health, and weight loss for years. Yet, instead of recognizing the evolving and increasingly complex science around fatness, people stick stubbornly to the truisms that allow them to freely marginalize fat people” (61). For more on the complexities and controversies surrounding BMI, see, e.g., Gordon pp. 52–62 (“*You Just Need to Lose Weight*”: *And 19 Other Myths About Fat People*, 2023); Campos (2004); Cain (2021); Strings (2019); and Metz (2010).

The fatness-as-punishment ending effectively negates the possibility of meaningful subversion by doubling down on a common association between fatness and moral and financial failure, rather than using the grotesque to imagine alternative, more radical, or genuinely transgressive depictions of bodies. Put simply, in our world today “the slim body is considered successful and beautiful, while the fat body is seen as a failure” (Castillejo et al. 2). Even in a self-styled “slobs-versus-snobs” narrative that ostensibly champions working-class characters, fatness remains coded as a lower-class condition, a bodily marker of insufficient discipline, aspiration, or respectability. In this way, Goodman’s transformation quietly betrays the film’s own logic. It reveals that the genre’s populist framing only extends so far — right up until a body becomes fat — at which point classed assumptions about fitness, value, and upward mobility reassert themselves. As a result, Goodman’s transformation does not disrupt dominant ideologies but instead revels in them, ensuring that the film’s transgressive veneer remains just that: a surface-level critique that leaves underlying norms uncontested.

This dynamic is not unique to *Dodgeball*. It finds an even more explicit and enduring expression in the character of Fat Bastard from the *Austin Powers* franchise. Like Goodman at the film’s conclusion, Fat Bastard embodies a form of the grotesque, his exaggerated fatness serving as a site of humor, disgust, and cultural critique. However, where Goodman’s fatness is tied to his fall from power, Fat Bastard’s excess operates as a spectacle from the outset, foregrounding the intersections of fatness, class, and national identity.

VI. “Get in my Belly!”: Anti-Fat Spectacle in the *Austin Powers* Franchise

Barbara Plotz’s *Fat on Film* explores a wide range of cinematic depictions of fatness, with particular focus on Hollywood films made within the two decades before the book’s 2020 release. Plotz includes fifty-six films in her primary “corpus,” each one explored at length. She also includes a

list of more than three dozen films outside her corpus, each of these mentioned in passing — for a combined total of nearly a hundred films. Plotz also has a full section dedicated specifically to how fat bodies are represented in gross-out comedies (154–173). Despite all this, the name “Fat Bastard” is nowhere to be found within the pages of her book.

Fat Bastard is a potent case study in exposing the role that fatness plays in gross-out comedies of the era, as well as how fat suits are used to augment the desired comedic effect. Fat Bastard is, at first blush, the apotheosis of the grotesque body. His grossness helped turn his character into a pop culture icon. Fat Bastard makes his debut in the second *Austin Powers* film, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* and appears again in the third and final film of the franchise, *Austin Powers in Goldmember*. As we will see, this franchise was massively successful, leaving an imprint on pop culture that can still be felt today. Eminently quotable, memorably designed, an outsized outlet for audience’s fatphobia — Fat Bastard demands attention in any discussion of gross-out comedies of the 1990s and 2000s.

It would be difficult to overstate the pop culture status of the *Austin Powers* films through these years. For one, these movies were financial megahits. *The Spy Who Shagged Me* and *Goldmember* both banked more than \$200 million at the domestic box office, each out-grossing the first film’s entire theatrical run in just their opening weekends (“Franchise: Austin Powers - Box Office Mojo”). *The Spy Who Shagged Me* became the most profitable film in New Line Cinema’s history and was cited by *The Hollywood Reporter* as single-handedly saving the studio from financial ruin (“It’s ‘Austin Powers’ to the Rescue at New Line”).⁵¹ *The Spy Who Shagged Me* was one of several movies capitalizing on the success of gross-out comedies that year. “When the box-office returns came in for the blockbuster summer

⁵¹ *The Spy Who Shagged Me* wouldn’t hold the record for long. The same *Hollywood Reporter* article that cites *Spy* as New Line’s most profitable movie ends with mention of a series of films in the works, the production company’s “most ambitious project to date” — the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (“It’s ‘Austin Powers’ to the Rescue at New Line”).

of 1999, the pun was inevitable: Gross-out equaled big grosses,” Thomas Doherty wrote in a 1999 op-ed for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

It was not just their financial success that made these movies noteworthy. The *Austin Powers* franchise became an undeniable part of the zeitgeist. The characters of Austin Powers, Dr. Evil, Goldmember, and, yes, Fat Bastard became omnipresent references, especially amongst the standard target audience of gross-out comedies: young men. Anecdotally, I was the perfect age for these films upon release. Geoff King writes that gross-out films of the late 1990s “appear to be designed to appeal principally to relatively young male audiences” (73). Much of the humor of these films seems tailored to the sensibilities of thirteen-year-old boys. *The Spy Who Shagged Me* was released when I happened to be a thirteen-year-old boy. Now, as a thirty-eight-year-old boy, I can reflect back on just how *quotable* these movies were amongst my peers. Line after line is burned into my grey matter (“Yeah, baby!” “Be-have!” “One *million* dollars!” “Get in my belly!” etc. etc.), taking me back to the playgrounds and cafeterias of my middle and high school where the characters’ lines were, like our NERF footballs, tossed around *ad nauseam*. Of course, their cultural impact is more than mere anecdote. The *Austin Powers* films were big business, spawning endless merchandise, Halloween costumes, video games, board games, action figures, and more. As *Forbes* reported, “If the first film was a cult hit that grew in acclaim and appreciation, the sequel established the *Austin Powers* franchise as the biggest comedy franchise on the block, surpassing (at least in America) even the 007 series that it was intended to spoof” (Mendelson).

Indeed, the ubiquity of these films renders a plot description almost moot. Plus, the films are so parodic and over-the-top that laying out the storytelling beats seems wholly irrelevant in helping us grasp their use of various tropes related to fatness and class. Nonetheless, I want to provide at least some cursory context for the film’s story. The franchise’s first film, *Austin Powers: International Man of*

Mystery (Jay Roach, 1997), introduces us to the eponymous character, a suave and successful spy of Swinging London played by Mike Myers. The film functions as a broad parody of the 007 franchise, as mentioned, as well as other Swinging Sixties touchstones like the Derek Flint and Harry Palmer films.⁵² We follow Powers as he time travels and swings his way through a variety of espionage-related mishaps while trying to defeat the franchise’s mindless “mastermind,” Dr. Evil (also played by Mike Myers). The sequel, *The Spy Who Shagged Me*, follows the same narrative beats, this time with the introduction of our fat-suited villain in question, Fat Bastard, who steals Powers’ “mojo.” Fat Bastard is played once again by Myers, now beneath many pounds of prosthetics. Myers stated in the audio commentary for the film that Fat Bastard was “the most foul character I’ve ever done in my life” — a notable feat for a *Saturday Night Live* alum known for playing a veritable clown-car full of excessive character types (Roach and Myers).

The film introduces Fat Bastard as both a figure of fat grotesquerie and a caricature of the working-class Scottish man. His exaggerated Glaswegian accent, animalistic behavior, and over-the-top wardrobe draw on long-standing screen tropes that mark Scottishness — especially working-class Scottishness — as uncouth and excessive. In Scotland, “the link between points along the Scottish English phonological continuum and social class is strong,” and stigmatized urban Scots features are often dismissed as “sloppy speech” (Corbett and Stuart-Smith 80–81). British film and television also recycle national myths that code Scottishness in recognizable ways, notably “Clydesideism,” one of the “stereotypes consistently recycled in television shows and films depicting Scots or using Scotland as a setting” that emphasizes “the urban, often violent, face of Scotland” (Marmysz 28, 30). British

⁵² Harry Palmer is a character portrayed by Michael Caine in films like *The Ipcress File* (Sidney J. Furie, 1965), *Funeral in Berlin* (Guy Hamilton, 1966), and *Billion Dollar Brain* (Ken Russell, 1967), which has meta-resonance, since the character is a clear visual inspiration for Powers, and Caine was cast to play Powers’ father in the third installment of the franchise. In an interview with BBC, Caine even claimed himself as the “creative father” of the character of Powers, saying, “From the very first time I saw *Austin Powers*, I realized Mike [Myers] had based it on [Harry Palmer]. The 60s, the glasses, and the accent — I knew it was me” (“BBC - Films - Interview - Michael Caine”).

pop culture keeps this template vivid: the popular show *Rab C. Nesbitt* (1988–1999) cast its titular character as a “dirty, lazy, alcoholic, sexist, womanizing, but lovable Glaswegian slob” (“Rab C. Nesbitt | Rotten Tomatoes”). Rab is “the eternal loser,” reveling in a gleeful rejection of manners, while roundups of other Scottish characters flag recurring stereotypes such as “the incomprehensible yokel” and “the foam-flecked, scary rageaholic” (Colgan; Mitchell). *Fat Bastard* plays these stereotypes to the hilt: he is loud, foul, and wholly uncontained. His grotesque embodiment is thus not only a function of fatness, but also of class and national identity, shaped by a transatlantic comedic vocabulary that equates working-class Scottishness with lower-stratum abjection. *Fat Bastard*’s belligerence, crudity, and unruly, outsized body pull directly from that Clydesideist repertoire. When mapped onto fatness the effect doubles down on the grotesque — less an individual than a bundle of nationally and class-coded stereotypes.

The character’s first appearance highlights this intersection of class, nation, and bodily spectacle. The scene begins with a slow pan up his exposed, prosthetically enhanced thighs as he plays the bagpipes (notably, “Scotland the Brave,” an unofficial national anthem) in an exaggerated, anachronistic take on a traditional Scottish guard uniform. Dr. Evil’s voiceover kicks in with, “He’s a disgruntled Scottish guard known for his lethal temper and his unusual eating habits. He weighs a metric ton. His name: Fat Bastard.” The camera’s upward pan and eventual reveal of his prosthetic-enhanced face heighten the gross-out humor, presenting *Fat Bastard*’s body as a visual punchline. But the punchline is doubled: not only is he too fat, too hungry, too bodily — he is also too working-class Scottish. His national and class position, marked through accent, costume, and behavior, codes him as the unruly Other within a hierarchy of Britishness that privileges white-collar English masculinity.

The prosthetic design itself is a gross-out drama. As actor Mike Myers notes in the film’s audio commentary, the fat suit, designed by Stan Winston and Mike Smithson, was “like wearing a sculpture”

(Roach and Myers). Weighing eighty pounds and requiring seven hours to apply, the suit was a feat of design, with its sulfur-based material making Myers smell like “a sewage filtration plant on legs,” as he put it in the commentary (Roach and Myers). The smell was not just coming from the material of the fat suit either. We learn in a behind-the-scenes anecdote that Myers had to urinate through a tube that sometimes became trapped within the suit’s complex architecture — a problem so challenging that Myers’s wife occasionally had to assist him (Roach and Myers). These real-life, fetid sartorial challenges perfectly fit the construction of Fat Bastard, whose odor and excretions are pretty much his entire personality.

Costume design further plays into the pageantry, outfitting Fat Bastard in a garish ensemble complete with a bagpipe, a kilt, a scarf, and a feathered hat adorned with metal pins. These exaggerated elements mark him as a parody of Scottish cultural identity while emphasizing his physicality. The deployment of such iconic symbols taps into well-known stereotypes of Scottishness, particularly those surrounding “tangible heritage.” According to a 2021 study on Scottish stereotypes, items like kilts and bagpipes are among the most frequently mentioned cultural markers, with respondents associating them strongly with Scottish identity (Szele 5–6). The film draws upon and caricatures this cultural heritage by escalating these elements to absurd proportions.

The camera cuts to a wide shot, framing Fat Bastard among other guardsmen. This juxtaposition underscores his incongruity — both in size and in his exaggerated costume — and draws attention to the ways in which his body disrupts the otherwise uniform aesthetic of the group (see fig. 15). We then see the head guardsman, an English Colonel, admonish Fat Bastard, saying, “Try to lose some weight for God’s sake.” This visual contrast is particularly relevant given the class dynamics at play between Fat Bastard and the English Colonel. Fat Bastard’s mocking response, “Mr. English Colonel, tellin’ me to lose weight. Oh, I’m a heart case, he says. Well, listen up, Sonny Jim! *I ate a baby!*”

not only ridicules the Colonel's judgment but also draws attention to the hierarchy at play. His gross-out retort exaggerates themes of indulgence and lack of restraint, framing his character as both a cultural and physical foil to the Colonel's presumed propriety. Drool dripping down his chin, Fat Bastard continues, "I ate a baby! Baby, the other *other* white meat. Baby: it's what's for dinner," parodying popular 1990s meat industry slogans.⁵³ The spittle and drool accompanying his tirade add to the repulsive aesthetic, presenting Fat Bastard as a caricature of indulgence and lack of self-control, which shares a comment on class conflict.



Fig. 15. Fat Bastard in exaggerated costume design, contrasted against his fellow thin guards in Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me.

Later in the film, Fat Bastard's entrance into Dr. Evil's lair further builds upon his characterization as monstrous excess. The scene begins with the lair shaking violently, as though an

⁵³ This scene parodies two popular U.S. advertising slogans from the late 1980s and 1990s: the National Pork Board's "Pork. The Other White Meat" and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's "Beef. It's What's for Dinner" (narrated famously by Robert Mitchum and later Sam Elliott). At the time, these slogans were everywhere (billboards, commercials, radio, even school cafeterias) part of a larger cultural effort to reframe meat-eating as healthy, masculine, and patriotic. In Fat Bastard's hands (or mouth), the slogans turn recognizable marketing into cannibalistic parody. The result is a collision of 1990s diet culture and excess, where the slogans intended to encourage "healthy" protein consumption and American values are reconstituted by a fat-suited caricature who revels in nauseating villainy.

earthquake or volcanic eruption is occurring. The camera then cuts to Fat Bastard's legs in slow motion, stomping into the room, with booming footsteps that literally rattle the entire setting. The camera's deliberate movement heightens this visual gag: the shaking lens, flickering lights, and exaggerated diegetic sound create a sense of disruption caused solely by Fat Bastard's massive presence. The camera pans up his body once again, echoing his initial introduction, before cutting to a low-angle full shot that emphasizes his overwhelming size. The music swells to a crescendo. Fat Bastard then announces, "First thing's first: where's your shitter? I've got a turtle head poking out. I've got a crap on deck that could choke a donkey. It's squidgy. Christ, I'm getting all emotional from it." This barrage of scatological humor is paired with his exaggerated movements, as he dances and writhes in discomfort. By foregrounding Fat Bastard's bodily functions, the scene ties his grotesquery to vulgarity and his lack of concern over middle-class propriety and politeness.

The scene further intensifies when Mini-Me (Verne Troyer) enters, prompting another cascade of gross-out line delivery. Fat Bastard's reaction to Mini-Me's small stature — "Jesus Christ, he's tiny. I've got bigger chunks of corn in my crap" — escalates the absurdity. His subsequent declaration, "Wait a minute. He kind of looks like a baby. Come here! I'm gonna eat ya! I'm bigger than you, I'm higher on the food chain. Get in my belly!" underscores his character's conflation of size with consumption. Once again, spit pours down his chin as he screams and then sings a rendition of the Chili's "Baby Back Ribs" song.⁵⁴

Plotz can help shed light on the underlying dynamics at play in these scenes. In her discussion of the trope of "The Funny Fat Body," Plotz argues that slapstick and gross-out comedies often

⁵⁴ Like the earlier references to the pork and beef industry slogans, Fat Bastard's rendition of Applebee's "Baby Back Ribs" jingle continues the film's parody of late twentieth-century food marketing. Yet this moment also highlights a deeper ambivalence: while the film mocks overconsumption and fatness, it simultaneously reinforces the branding of the very products it derides. The line teeters between satire and soft endorsement, implicating the film in the same consumer culture it appears to critique — one that aggressively markets casual, mainstream American fare to the very demographic it stigmatizes.

emphasize “the weight, volume, and size of the fat body” so that “the *fatness* of the fat body — the fatness itself [is] turned into a comic spectacle” (136). This dynamic is apparent in how the film choreographs Fat Bastard’s movements, employs sound design, and frames his body to maximize his physicality as a source of humor. “Three different techniques are employed to highlight the weight, volume and size of the body: choreography, sound design and framing,” Plotz writes (136). We see this in the above discussion of the fat cheerleader in *Dodgeball*, but it is taken to new heights in Fat Bastard’s framing.

In this scene, Fat Bastard’s booming footsteps and the literal shaking of Dr. Evil’s lair align with Plotz’s observation that such techniques emphasize the weight, volume, and size of fat characters. The choreography of his slow-motion stomping movements exaggerates his presence as a force of disruption, making his body synonymous with chaos. Sound design amplifies this effect; the resonant thuds of his footsteps, combined with creaking floors and rattling objects, create an aural drama that shows off his exaggerated size. By drawing such overt attention to his physicality, the scene participates in what Plotz — writing about different films but describing a broader representational pattern — calls the reproduction of “a clear and common stereotype of fat people as unhealthy, physically unfit and physically incapable” (136). This bodily excess is further underscored through the joke about his fear of soiling himself and his constant slobbering, which link fatness to a loss of control over basic bodily functions. Incontinence and messiness often signal low class, marking a character as uncultured, undisciplined, or socially unrefined. The grotesque, in other words, is calibrated here not only to humiliate Fat Bastard’s size but to tether that size to classed assumptions about filth, vulgarity, and bodily disorder — amplifying the stereotype Plotz identifies rather than disrupting it.

The cinematography also contributes significantly to the comic spectacle of Fat Bastard’s body. Low-angle shots and slow upward pans linger on his bulk, inviting the audience to both marvel

at and ridicule his physical presence. The camera shakes violently when Fat Bastard arrives, as if his presence transcends the film itself. These visual choices reinforce what Plotz describes as the transformation of “fatness itself” into a comedic focal point, with the character’s size serving as both the joke and the means of delivering it. By utilizing choreography, sound design, and framing in tandem, the film ensures that Fat Bastard’s body is constantly positioned as a site of grotesque humor, foregrounding societal anxieties about bodily excess while simultaneously eliciting laughter. This is precisely what we saw with the reveal of White Goodman’s fat body in *Dodgeball*: at the heart of the joke is simply seeing Ben Stiller as a fat person, the “fatness itself” is the punchline.

In a later scene, we see Felicity Shagwell (Heather Graham) seduce Fat Bastard. The scene cuts to a tableau of him in bed after sex, shirtless and holding a greasy chicken leg in one hand. His chest is covered in half-chewed chunks of meat, and grease drips down his chin, pooling on his body. His skin is adorned with sores and boils, adding to the visceral depiction of his repulsiveness (see fig. 16). These markers of bodily excess — grease, half-chewed food, open sores — once again draw on broader cultural stereotypes that conflate fatness and lower-class status with poor hygiene, lack of discipline, and inadequate self-care. Still, Fat Bastard rubs his nipples and proclaims, “Look at me, I’m dead sexy,” a moment relying on similar humor to White Goodman’s breast-grabbing “Milkshake” dance mentioned earlier. Shagwell here acts as the audience proxy, looking over at Fat Bastard’s nude body with revulsion.

As the camera pulls back, revealing platters of food surrounding him, Shagwell takes advantage of the moment to surreptitiously insert a tracking device into his rectum, further amplifying the association between fatness and the lower stratum. This moment also shows Fat Bastard quickly hide a pacifier that he finds amongst the chaos of food scraps and garbage, implying that he was sincere in

his earlier claims of eating babies. Shagwell's visible disgust and his excited reaction to the act, culminating in him rolling over and crushing her, compound the scene's gross-out humor.



Fig. 16. Fat Bastard, nude and covered in grease and meat in Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me.

This scene further embeds Fat Bastard's characterization of grotesquerie as tied to the lower stratum of the body. His exaggerated gluttony, bodily fluids, and sexual vulgarity align him with what Bakhtin describes as the "material bodily principle," which disrupts societal norms of restraint and

decorum. This principle involves “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 19–20). Specifically, Bakhtin links the lower stratum to “the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation” (21). Plotz’s analysis reinforces this, noting that the grotesque body in gross-out comedies is defined by how “its orifices and body fluids as well as organs of digestion and reproduction are constantly showcased and utilized” (130).

This emphasis continues in a subsequent gross-out gag where Powers accidentally pours Fat Bastard’s stool sample into his mug instead of coffee. The scene revels in its toilet humor as Powers unknowingly drinks the contaminated liquid, leaving a shitty mustache on his face (see fig. 17). Plotz observes that fat characters in gross-out comedies frequently “involv[e] letting go of, or more often inadvertently losing, what is considered appropriate control of their body, with films commonly showcasing the physical results of this lack of control, namely an array of bodily fluids and excretions” (131). This film certainly showcases the “physical results” of Fat Bastard’s appetites, having an entire set piece designed around it. This gag firmly ties Fat Bastard’s grotesquerie to both the lower stratum and class-based stereotypes, as his bodily excesses are depicted as a spectacle of vulgarity.



Fig. 17. Austin Powers drinking Fat Bastard's stool, further reinforcing his character to the lower-stratum of the body.

This connection deepens in the final scene featuring Fat Bastard, where he appears in a UPS-inspired disguise labeled “FBD” (Fat Bastard Delivery), a costume steeped in working-class connotations (see fig. 18). As he holds Powers and Shagwell at gunpoint, Shagwell challenges him by asking, “Are you happy?” His bombastic posturing quickly dissolves into an emotional monologue,

exposing his self-loathing: “Of course I’m not happy. Look at me. I’m a big fat slob. I’ve got bigger tits than you do! I’ve got more chins than a Chinese phone book! I’ve not seen my willie in two years, which is long enough to declare it legally dead.” As he continues, lamenting, “I can’t stop eating. I eat because I’m unhappy. I’m unhappy because I eat,” the scene pretends at sincerity. The phrasing mimics the pop-psych confessional cadence popular with 1990s daytime talk show hosts — like Oprah, Ricki Lake, and Sally Jessy Raphael — where complex pain was condensed into tidy self-help mantras.⁵⁵ Then a loud fart punctures the moment, snapping the audience back to laughter.

The emphasis on Fat Bastard’s lack of bodily control, punctuated by over-the-top sound effects, further aligns with Bakhtin’s concept of the lower stratum as tied to “the life of the belly and the reproductive organs” (21). However, the film stops short of using this moment for genuine critique or subversion. Instead, it layers abjection and humor to reiterate Fat Bastard’s status as an embodiment of disgust, collapsing the potential for complexity into a punchline of anti-fat and classist attitudes.

⁵⁵ 1990s daytime talk shows functioned on what sociologist Laura Grindstaff calls the “commodification of emotion,” with producers and critics themselves distinguishing “classy” from “trashy” programs and noting the shift toward “younger, less-educated” guests who would deliver explosive confession or conflict (8). Such shows openly exploit “the different” for profit, and bookers often targeted participants who were “uneducated [...] not very worldly, often a minority” (Gamson 49, 83). Audience research from the era likewise mapped the genre onto low status and marginality, routinely describing typical guests as “overweight women,” “lower class,” and stigmatized “Others” (Mittell 39). In this environment — especially as these shows continued getting edgier and more controversial into the late-1990s with programs like *The Jerry Springer Show* — fat people frequently appeared as spectacle, activating disgust while also reinforcing classed and racialized stereotypes. It is no coincidence that this stigmatizing spectacle coincided with the gross-out comedy renaissance.



Fig. 18. Fat Bastard in a UPS-inspired costume, connecting his character to working-class stereotypes at the end of *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*.

Director Jay Roach defends these gross-out moments while discussing Fat Bastard in the film’s audio commentary. Roach says that “Sometimes comedy needs to be impolite to shake people out of their suppositions about what’s going to happen in the movie. Let them know there are no rules, and we have license to try pretty out-there stuff [...] it’s about testing it for audiences and seeing how far you can get away with it” (Roach and Myers). Taken on Roach’s own terms — provocation over critique — such gags may stretch the form, yet when they lean on stereotypes they leave existing hierarchies untouched, if not subtly reinforced.

Fat Bastard’s final scene in *The Spy Who Shagged Me* involves Felicity providing him with a swift kick to the testicles and exclaiming, “That’s for calling me crap, ya fatty!” Fat Bastard collapses — a moment depicted in slow motion as earthquake-like with shaking cameras, crumbling shelves, and booming sound design. This final act, like much of the character’s arc, functions as craven grotesquerie, a safety valve, a licensed affair to evoke laughter and cement Fat Bastard’s body as a destructive and disgusting entity linked with an inferior class to Austin and posh Felicity.

But what may be most ideologically revealing is what happens next. In *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, the final installment of the trilogy, Fat Bastard is revealed to have lost weight after going on “the Subway diet” (another example of Myers explicitly and ironically incorporating product placement in his films). “I’ve lost 180 pounds,” he announces with pride. Powers congratulates him, of course, prompting Fat Bastard to show off his excess skin. He holds his arm up and pulls on the flap (see fig. 19). We cut back to Powers and his new spy partner, Foxy Cleopatra (Beyoncé Knowles), who both grimace in disgust. Fat Bastard punctuates the state of his excess skin by saying, “unfortunately, my neck does look like a vagina.” Fat Bastard is still grotesque, still connected to the lower stratum, still Othered. But he is also no longer a villain. He has become a good guy. He is redeemed. His grotesque fat body has been reformed, reshaped, and, in the logic of the film, rehabilitated. He has become, at long last, a citizen.

This transformation aligns closely with the broader rise of 1990s and early 2000s diet culture and with what Plotz identifies as “the ideology of neoliberalism and specifically its paradigms of anti-intervention, individualization and responsabilization” (16). In such a framework, fat individuals are not seen as products of structural inequality — of low wages, exploitative working conditions, food deserts, or lack of access to healthcare — but rather as failed citizens who have not sufficiently taken control of their own bodies. “Fat people,” Plotz writes, “are constructed not only as failed consumers but also as inadequate workers, who are unable to fulfil their duty as productive members of a capitalist economy” (17).



Fig. 19. Fat Bastard's weight loss and excess skin resulting from "the Subway Diet" in Austin Powers in Goldmember.

Aubrey Gordon reinforces this idea when she argues that we see bodies as sites of meritocracy: “We are told that our choices are our own, and our bodies are reflections of the rightness of those choices. If we are thin, we will be presumed to have made good choices. If we are fat, we must have chosen poorly” (*You Just Need to Lose Weight 3*). Within this logic, redemption is always individual, never systemic. One must discipline the self to be seen as worthy of inclusion. This dynamic is embodied perfectly in Fat Bastard’s arc. He is still a joke — but he is no longer a threat. He has become, in the film’s moral universe, socially acceptable because he has taken “personal responsibility” for his grotesque working-class body and changed it.

Plotz further observes that neoliberal discourses elevate thinness as “the embodiment of responsible consumption” (137). In other words, the thin body is taken as proof of moral character — of self-control, productivity, and upper-class citizenship. It is “the perfect solution” to the contradictory expectations of the neoliberal subject: to be a voracious consumer, but never indulge too much; to spend money freely, but never on the wrong things; to enjoy abundance, but only if it leaves no trace on the body (137). Fat Bastard’s weight loss thus offers a form of narrative closure that reproduces these classed expectations. His redemption is not the result of compassion, healing, or communal support. It is the result of sheer willpower and responsible (i.e., socially acceptable) consumption. The film asks the audience to believe that he has conquered his appetite, tamed his vulgarity, and achieved a kind of class mobility — not through social support, but through self-discipline. In this, his narrative functions as a grotesque mirror to that of White Goodman in *Dodgeball*, whose final scene presents the inverse moral logic. Goodman is last seen bloated, shirtless, and surrounded by fast food in a dimly lit room. His weight gain signals not transformation, but punishment — aligning his fatness with moral decay and socioeconomic decline.

Together, these two endings stage a kind of binary morality tale: Goodman is bad and now he is fat; Fat Bastard was bad, but now he is thin — and good. This juxtaposition reinforces a neoliberal, meritocratic fantasy in which fatness is equated with weakness, excess, and failure, while thinness becomes proof of virtue, control, and worthiness. The logic of individual responsibility is fully circular: Goodman’s downfall is his lack of restraint, Fat Bastard’s redemption is his newfound thinness discipline. Both are cast against a backdrop of class-coded bodies and behaviors, inviting audiences to laugh at fatness when it marks humiliation, and to celebrate its disappearance when it signals conformity. Fatness, in this schema, is not only a spectacle but a verdict.

Fat Bastard is expected to transform himself under the weight of ridicule and rejection, and only when he conforms is he permitted some crumbs of dignity. The neoliberal body politic, as Plotz makes clear, demands visible proof of moral fortitude through bodily control, and punishes those whose bodies mark them as failures of discipline. Fat Bastard's redemption arc naturalizes the association between class, fatness, and unworthiness, only to offer a fleeting escape that reaffirms the very structures it pretends to transcend.

VII. Conclusion

The representations of fatness in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* and *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* highlight the interplay between class, humor, and the grotesque in gross-out comedies. Both films leverage fat suits to transform bodies into exaggerated spectacles of social and moral deficiency. In *Dodgeball*, the fat-suited White Goodman embodies the ultimate failure of self-discipline, framed as both villainous and grotesque, while the film simultaneously mocks and critiques fitness culture's exclusionary ideals. *Austin Powers* intensifies these dynamics with Fat Bastard, whose exaggerated physicality and vulgarity turn fatness into a shorthand for both comic excess and cultural transgression. Yet, as both films demonstrate, this transgression often collapses back into a reinforcement of the very norms they parody, using fat-suited fatness as a punchline rather than a site of meaningful critique.

The analysis of class dynamics in gross-out comedies sets the stage for the subsequent chapters, which will delve into the intersections of fatness with gender and race. By establishing the foundational role of class in shaping the cultural meanings of fatness, this chapter provides a framework for understanding how other aspects of identity further complicate these meanings. The grotesque body, as a site of transgression and critique, will remain a central theme in these analyses,

offering a lens through which to examine the shifting boundaries of acceptability and representation. We will continue to look at how both White Goodman and Fat Bastard are caricatures of failed masculinity, their grotesque bodies presented as physical manifestations of moral and social inadequacy. This alignment of fatness with failed masculinity raises important questions about gender and body politics, particularly in how fat suits are deployed to exaggerate and distort feminine ideals of beauty and desirability.

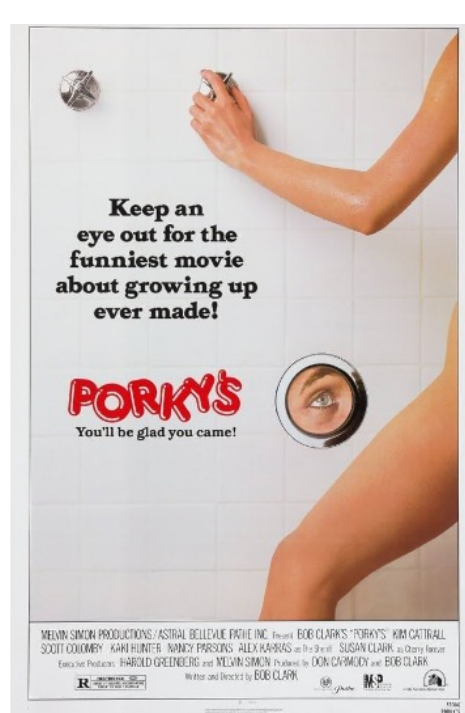
In the next chapter, I will explore how these dynamics take center stage in *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor*, with the fat suit becoming a tool for exploring (and often reinforcing) gendered expectations of attractiveness and worth. Unlike the overtly comedic grotesquerie of Fat Bastard or Goodman, *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor* position fatness within romantic narratives that seemingly have fat-positive messages. This shift in tone introduces new questions about how fat suits mediate cultural understandings of gender performance, beauty, and morality.

CHAPTER 2: FAT SUIT MORALIZING AND FEMINIZED FAT MEN IN *SHALLOW HAL* AND *THE NUTTY PROFESSOR*

I. Introduction

The poster for director Bob Clark's 1981 gross-out sex comedy *Porky's* features a man's eyeball peering through a hole in the wall, his stare fixed on a showering woman whose nude body is almost out of frame (see fig. 20). The poster references the most notorious scene from the film, where three high school boys discover small holes that open directly into the girls' showers. After the group of young women realize they are being watched, one of the men slips his penis through the hole, not realizing that the girls' coach, Miss Balbricker (Nancy Parsons) has entered the shower. Balbricker sees the phallus protruding from the hole in the wall and proceeds to grab it, holding on for dear life, and yelling for someone to bring the principal. This memorable scene was used heavily in the film's marketing campaign, from the poster to the trailers, and has since become synonymous with the film more generally.

Fig. 20. The movie poster for *Porky's*, featuring the notorious "peeping tom" shower scene.



As iconic as this scene became in 1980s popular culture, there are some noteworthy moments in it that are generally overlooked. This scene involves two fat women who are essential to the comic events as they unfold. First, the reason the boys' lecherous voyeurism is discovered is because of a fat woman (Cathy Garpershak, credited as "Girl in Shower"). Each of the three boys has situated himself behind a hole, watching as a group of svelte, conventionally attractive women shower together. One

of the men, Pee Wee (Dan Monahan), has his view obstructed by the fat “Girl in Shower,” who the men refer to as “Blubber McNeil.” Her buttocks fill the entire frame as Pee Wee desperately tries to see the group of thin women showering behind her. The woman is simply too fat, taking up too much space. The camera cuts from Pee Wee’s frustrated attempts to see the other naked women back to the woman’s fat body a total of ten times. The camera lingers on the fat woman’s naked body, filling the frame with her rolls and buttocks. With each cut, her fatness is highlighted a bit more, with the final few shots showing her scrubbing her butt cheeks and leaning over to expose the sides of her large breasts to the camera. Exasperated, Pee Wee yells, “Goddammit, will you move it, you lard ass?!” All the women go silent as they try to make sense of the voice they just heard. The fat woman rushes out of the shower, while the group of thin women stay behind to investigate. The fat woman is used in this scene as a prop, little more than an excuse for some visual gags of a fat butt filling the frame before the flirtatious hijinks can begin in earnest. While the thin women are shown in a way to highlight their sex appeal — fully nude and playfully splashing in the water, giggling with one another — the fat woman’s body is used to fill the frame with a visual punchline. Her fatness is played as a joke, partly at the expense of Pee Wee, whose plans to peep on the thin women are foiled, but also at the expense of the audience, who is forced to observe, repeatedly, what the film positions as a gross-out spectacle of her nude fat body.

Eventually, another fat woman enters the scene: Miss Balbricker. Her fatness and aggression set her apart from the group of conventionally attractive young women, marking her contrasting presence as a punchline. This is amplified when she makes the very aggressive and “unladylike” move to grab the man’s penis with both hands, even leveraging her foot against the shower wall to get a stronger grip (see fig. 21). Balbricker — whose name conjures to mind “breaking balls” — is one of

the film's antagonists, a constant wet blanket for the high school boys' attempts to partake in venereal mischief.



Fig. 21. Miss Balbricker grabbing a penis and embodying non-normative femininity as grotesque in *Porky's*.

Her characterization reinforces stereotypes about fatness and gender by positioning her as both grotesque and emasculating, embodying anxieties about women who transgress traditional gender roles. She is an “unruly woman” — a feminine figure who “unsettles social hierarchies” by being “too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious” (Rowe, *The Unruly Woman* 19). I begin with Miss Balbricker because she embodies an early version of the figure this chapter tracks: the grotesque, feminized fat body that comedy uses to police the boundaries of acceptable femininity and heterosexual masculinity.

As discussed in Chapter 1, *Porky's* is, alongside *Animal House*, one of the two films William Paul identifies as foundational in the “Animal Comedy” genre (86). These films center on gross-out humor, bodily excess, and a rebellion against societal decorum. However, this rebellion often intersects with cultural anxieties about fatness and gender. The unruly behavior and exaggerated bodies in these

films become vehicles for both subversion and containment, reflecting and reinforcing the same social hierarchies they claim to disrupt, particularly along the axes of class and gender. In this chapter, I shift from my earlier focus on class to examine how gross-out comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s deploy fat suits to construct exaggerated performances of femininity and masculinity. What *Porky's* renders with real women's bodies — the unruly female grotesque — later returns as male fat drag and prosthetic fabricated flesh, a shift that recenters male control while keeping the laughs. Through case studies of *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor*, I explore how these films perpetuate cultural anxieties about gender and fatness, simultaneously gesturing toward subversion while ultimately reinscribing harmful stereotypes.

In *Shallow Hal*, the fat suit is central to the film's moralizing narrative about beauty and superficiality. Rosemary's fat body, played by Gwyneth Paltrow beneath prosthetics, is framed as a challenge to Hal's (and by extension, the audience's) obsession with conventional beauty. However, this attempt at subversion is undercut by the film's reliance on grotesque physical humor and exaggerated stereotypes of fatness, which frame Rosemary's body as an object of both pity and ridicule. This dual framing creates a narrative tension: while the film ostensibly critiques superficiality and celebrates inner beauty, it simultaneously perpetuates harmful cultural anxieties about women's bodies by treating fatness as inherently comedic and undesirable. These contradictions highlight the ambivalent role of the fat suit in the film, undermining its ability to disrupt entrenched beauty standards. Similarly, *The Nutty Professor* uses Eddie Murphy's multiple fat-suited performances to construct a grotesque interplay between masculinity and femininity. Sherman Klump's masculine presentation changes depending on whether he is fat or thin, particularly in scenes where his thinner alter ego, Buddy Love, embodies hypermasculine traits such as aggression, confidence, and sexual prowess. I read Sherman/Buddy through Plotz's trope of "the De-Masculinized Fat Male,"

Gerschick's less-normative bodies, and hooks' dominator masculinity — a trio that explains why the film feminizes fatness and rewards male domination. This dynamic highlights how the film ties physical size to perceptions of gender and power. This is particularly significant in the context of fat drag — a concept I will explore briefly here and expand upon in Chapter 3 — where Murphy's performances rely on exaggerated gendered body tropes to heighten the comedic impact.

Shallow Hal and *The Nutty Professor* serve as foundational texts for analyzing fat suits in comedy; much of the limited scholarship on fat suits inevitably references these two films.⁵⁶ This prominence is partly because both films emerged during the height of the gross-out comedy renaissance of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The films' reliance on advanced makeup and prosthetics — techniques that were not as widely accessible in earlier decades — allowed for more elaborate portrayals of fat bodies. Moreover, their plotlines explicitly center on fat people, weight loss, and the burden of superficial beauty standards, positioning them as Urtexts for understanding how fat suits navigated themes of fatness and gender during the height of diet culture and the rise of “the obesity epidemic.” Because these claims are staged as much in trailers, posters, DVD extras, and “empathy” anecdotes as in the films, I read those paratexts alongside the diegesis. I will expand on the ideological construction of fatness discussed in Chapter 1, examining how these representations recursively shape and are shaped by cultural anxieties about gender, beauty, and bodily discipline. Across both *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor*, “acceptance” is achieved by containing fatness — by fragmenting it, moralizing it, and finally detaching it. In this chapter, I argue that these films ultimately resolve their apparent critiques of superficiality by reasserting conventional beauty and gender norms; to make that case, I first establish the critical lenses of the unruly woman and the de-masculinized fat male before turning to the extended close readings.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Kyrölä pp. 109–111; LeBesco pp. 231–240; Mask pp. 155–170; Mendoza pp. 81–87; and Plotz pp. 151–152, 227–229

II. Senile Hags, Unruly Women, and Demasculinized Men

Fatness is, at its core, a feminist issue.⁵⁷ Body size determines not only how women are seen, but also how they are allowed to move, speak, and take up space in the world. As Plotz observes, “in contemporary society physical attractiveness and with it adherence to a certain type of body image have become the pinnacle of normative femininity” (67). Put simply, femininity is measured against a narrow ideal, an ideal that is anchored in thinness: “Slimness is at the centre of contemporary ideals of feminine beauty, thereby making the fat female body the epitome of non-normative femininity” (68). Building on this, Kathleen Rowe shows how the culture polices bodies that fall outside that ideal, noting that “fat females are stigmatized as unfeminine, rebellious and sexually deviant” because in patriarchal culture “women who are too fat or move too loosely appropriate too much space, and femininity is gauged by how little space women take up” (“Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess” 413). A fat woman, by the very fact of taking up space and refusing to shrink herself, inherently transgresses the narrow boundaries of “normative femininity” — making her body a site of potential resistance to the gendered status quo. Fatness, then, becomes a marker of what patriarchal society deems “excess” in women, an embodiment of female unruliness that challenges the strictures of how women *should* look and behave.

This transgressive quality of the fat female body resonates strongly with Bakhtin, who identified the image of “senile, pregnant hags” as emblematic of grotesque realism — figures who, in their very bodies, unite opposites (age and pregnancy, decay and fertility) to subvert social and aesthetic norms (25). In Bakhtin’s model, the grotesque body is the antithesis of the classical body of

⁵⁷ In 1978, psychotherapist Susie Orbach published an early and influential work on anti-fat attitudes in her book entitled *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. This book identified the need for body size to be included in feminist discourse. In 2018, 40 years after the publication of her book, Orbach wrote a piece for *The Guardian* arguing that we have only backslid in the intervening decades. “There is still a desperate search for approval, for safety, for body acceptance,” wrote Orbach in 2018 (“Forty Years Since Fat Is a Feminist Issue.”).

bourgeois decorum. Instead of being sleek, closed, and contained, the grotesque body is “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing,” fundamentally connected to the “lower bodily stratum” of eating, excretion, sex, birth, and death (Russo 8–9). It is a body in flux and excess, one that by its very nature mocks any pretense of genteel perfection. The fat female body perfectly fits this description: it “exaggerates its processes, its bulges and orifices, rather than concealing them as the [...] ‘classical’ or ‘bourgeois’ body does” (Rowe, “Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess” 413).

Despite the affinities between Bakhtin’s grotesque vision and various schools of feminist thought, the gender dimension of Bakhtin’s theories remains underdeveloped. Bakhtin does not go to great lengths to explore how shifting gender expressions distort or amplify social understandings of the grotesque. Bakhtin connects the grotesque to the feminine but largely leaves these connections unexamined. In one of the more specifically gendered excerpts from *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses how some ancient Greek terracotta figurines “very strongly” express the grotesque:

In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. (Bakhtin 25–26)

It is no coincidence, then, that after describing the laughing hags, Bakhtin’s vision of the carnivalesque body naturally foregrounds feminine images (the pregnant belly, the sagging “hag”) that literally embody growth, aging, and regeneration. This detail builds directly from his ambivalent image of

pregnant death and birth in one body. As Rowe notes, implicit in Bakhtin's analysis is "the privileging of the female body — above all the maternal body which, through pregnancy and childbirth, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death" ("Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess" 413). The female grotesque carries a potentially radical charge: it merges that which society tries to keep separate (youth/age, beauty/ugliness, creation/decay) and in doing so hints at a world turned upside down, a challenge to the established order. Yet, as Mary Russo cautions, Bakhtin still leaves the feminist dimension of this idea underdeveloped; he "fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped" (63). This gap is precisely where later feminist theorists have stepped in, extending and revising Bakhtin's framework to account for how gendered bodies operate within the grotesque tradition.

Rowe's "unruly woman," developed in the context of comedy and popular culture, builds on this Bakhtinian tradition of the grotesque female body. Citing Natalie Zemon Davis's study of folk carnival, Rowe points out that the unruly woman descends from the archetype of "the woman on top," an inversion of gender hierarchy in which what is normally "below" (women, often even "their images appropriated by men in drag") usurps the position of what is "above" (male authority) in a carnivalesque display of disorder ("Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess" 410). This unruly figure "reverberates whenever women, especially women's bodies, are considered excessive — too fat, too mouthy, too old, too dirty, too pregnant, too sexual (or not sexual enough) for the norms of conventional gender representation" (410). Through her very excess, the unruly woman flouts the rules of decorum that tether "proper" femininity. By being loud, vulgar, aggressive, or physically large, she violates what Rowe calls "the unspoken feminine sanction against 'making a spectacle' of herself"

(410). In short, the unruly woman embodies the carnivalesque impulse. She is a presentation of femaleness who refuses to be contained or silenced, transgressing boundaries of body and behavior, a figure who is “transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire” and asserts herself as a subject rather than an object (410). Such female unruliness carries a strongly ambivalent charge — it can be genuinely subversive, but it can also provoke cultural anxiety and backlash, as it so boldly challenges patriarchal expectations (409–410).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, no figure embodied the “unruly woman” more vividly than Roseanne Barr. Roseanne — both the real-life stand-up comic and the fictionalized sitcom persona — presented a working-class “domestic goddess” who flagrantly rejected the slender, demure model of TV femininity. Fat and unapologetically brash, Roseanne’s very presence on prime-time television was revolutionary.⁵⁸ “Indeed, the very appearance of a 200-plus-pound woman in a weekly prime-time sitcom is significant in itself,” Rowe writes; Roseanne’s body “epitomizes the grotesque body of Bakhtin” in that it publicly displays what polite society expects women to hide — fat, appetite, bodily functions, and all (413). On *Roseanne*’s stage, the female grotesque is not a stigmatized sideshow but the main event. Roseanne openly celebrates behaviors and traits traditionally coded as unfeminine. “Concerning her fatness, she resists the culture’s efforts to define and judge her by her weight,” refusing to apologize for her size (414). She jokes about eating with lusty enjoyment, insisting that women “need to take up more space in the world, not less” (414). She brazenly violates taboos around the “proper” female body: discussing menstruation on national television (to Oprah Winfrey’s visible

⁵⁸ Several television figures anticipated Roseanne’s unruly style, though most were not fat. Bea Arthur’s Maude Findlay (*Maude*, 1972–78) and Dorothy Zbornak (*The Golden Girls*, 1985–92) relied on sarcasm, height, and commanding presence to flout feminine decorum; Flo on *Alice* (Polly Holliday, 1976–80) embodied working-class brashness with her trademark “Kiss my grits!” despite being conventionally slender; and Thelma “Mama” Harper (*Mama’s Family*, Vicki Lawrence, 1983–90) projected unruliness through volume and bluntness rather than body size. By contrast, Nell Harper (*Gimme a Break!*, Nell Carter, 1981–87) was one of the few fat leads in a domestic sitcom, bringing physicality and vocal force unapologetically to the center of her show. Peg Bundy (*Married... with Children*, Katey Sagal, 1987–97) inverted the ideal housewife through slovenly indulgence and refusal of domestic duty without being coded fat. Together, these characters established a TV lineage of unruly women that primed audiences for *Roseanne*’s unapologetic excess.

shock), cracking jokes about her “cramps that could kill a horse,” and narrating proudly gross bodily experiences that most women were taught to keep hidden (414). In her sitcom, Roseanne’s character belches, farts, and slouches on the couch after a long day at work, far removed from the prim housewives of sitcom past. “Both in body and speech, Roseanne is defined by *excess* and by *looseness* — qualities that mark her in opposition to bourgeois and feminine standards of decorum,” Rowe explains (413). She “sprawls, slouches, flops on furniture,” laughs loudly, and speaks in an unrestrained, nasal drawl that oozes working-class frankness. Through this performance of *too muchness*, Roseanne reveals how arbitrary and repressive the norms of feminine modesty really are. Her indifference to conventional beauty standards “exposes the ideology underlying those readings” of her body (414). By making a spectacle of herself on her own terms, she seized the comedic power traditionally reserved for male buffoons or drag acts and wielded it as a form of feminist commentary. Roseanne Barr’s unruly comedy showed that the “female grotesque” could be a source of subversive strength: she turned the supposed liabilities of fat, middle-aged femininity — the very attributes that mark women as “hags” in a youth-obsessed patriarchy — into the basis of her authority and appeal. This strategy was not without its complications; Roseanne’s deployment of unruliness both “intensifies and undermines her popularity” because female transgression is always walking a tightrope (409). Nevertheless, for a time Roseanne provided a real-world glimpse of the carnivalesque *female* grotesque — a fat, aggressive, outspoken woman who, much like Bakhtin’s mythical hags, could upend social expectations and speak truth from below.

However, the subversive potential embodied by Roseanne and the unruly woman archetype was largely undermined in the gross-out comedies that proliferated a decade later. The late 1990s and 2000s saw a string of gross-out comedies that *evoked* the figure of the unruly woman, but in ways that re-inscribed her as an object of ridicule rather than a carnivalesque provocateur. Crucially, these films

frequently erased actual fat women from the equation. Instead, male actors donned elaborate fat suits to portray outrageously exaggerated caricatures of fat women. This practice is a direct extension of what Rowe observed in the unruly woman's history: the appropriation of the unruly female image by men in drag (410). Yet in these modern cases, the effect is not to celebrate female transgression, but to contain and mock it. The carnivalesque energy of the "woman on top" is co-opted as a gag that ultimately reassures the audience of male superiority.

The examples are numerous. Eddie Murphy made a mini-genre of such performances: in *The Nutty Professor* (1996) and its sequel, and even more grotesquely in *Norbit* (2007), Murphy plays loud, overbearing, or sexually aggressive fat women (the raucous matriarch Mama Klump in the *Professor* films, and the monstrous girlfriend Rasputia in *Norbit*). Martin Lawrence did something similar in *Big Momma's House* (2000) and its sequels, suiting up as "Big Momma" — an elderly fat grandmother character played for slapstick laughs. Tyler Perry's hugely popular Madea character also fits this pattern: Madea is a towering, sassy, gun-toting grandmother who can be read as an unruly woman figure. In all these cases, a male performer adopts the grotesque traits of the "fat hag" — the bulk, the brashness, the uncouth bodily presence — as a comic disguise.⁵⁹ The very fact of a man masquerading as an outsized, over-the-top woman is positioned as hilarious. But the joke comes at a cost: it reinforces the notion that a genuinely fat female body is so absurd or so "Other" that it takes a man in a wig and padding to adequately perform its extremes. The outcome is a travesty of the carnivalesque: rather than elevating real fat women to positions of subjectivity, these films keep fat

⁵⁹ Divine, the stage persona of Harris Glenn Milstead, is perhaps the most famous fat drag performer in American cinema, appearing in John Waters's cult films such as *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Polyester* (1981), and *Hairspray* (1988). As noted in my Introduction, Waters's films belong to a distinct "ultra-gross-out" lineage that differs from the mainstream comedies I focus on here. Divine's performances share surface traits with the "fat hag" archetype — large body, brash behavior, grotesque excess — but they emerge from a queer, camp tradition that more flagrantly set out to unsettle bourgeois norms. *Hairspray* is a particularly interesting case because it edges closest to the mainstream, with Divine's role as Edna Turnblad later reprised by John Travolta in the 2007 musical remake. For this reason, Divine stands less as a precursor to the fat suit drag of Murphy, Lawrence, or Perry, and more as a parallel current — demonstrating how fat drag could oscillate registers between camp subversion on the margins and cautious incorporation into Hollywood comedy.

women *literally* out of the picture, reducing them to drag parodies. Any disruptive power the unruly fat woman might hold is safely defused by the audience's awareness that under the layers of latex is a familiar male comedian who will eventually return to his normative male form.

Within the narratives of these gross-out comedies, the fat female figure is often framed as a target to be laughed at, insulted, or vanquished. Often, she is a grotesque antagonist or an impediment to the true (usually slim or male) protagonist's goals. As Plotz observes in her analysis of fat women in films across genres, there is "little progressive potential for the trope of the dominating fat woman. Many of her representations are perpetuations of stereotypes [...] and any emancipatory power the figure might yield is often undercut, either by her obviously being played by a man [...] or by her narrative defeat, which is presented as a triumph for the male character" (Plotz 89). Plotz points to *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009), *Grown Ups* (Dennis Dugan, 2010), *Monster House* (Gil Kenan, 2006), *Wanted* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2008), *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002), and, most notably, *Norbit* (Brian Robbins, 2007) as cases where the unruly "dominating fat woman" figure is ultimately stripped of power — her unruliness neutralized, her authority mocked, or her defeat staged as a triumph for male characters. In other words, even though these films borrow the *image* of the unruly woman, they do so only to humiliate her and reassert the very power structures that the carnivalesque grotesque once aimed to subvert.

Tellingly, on the rare occasion when an actual woman is allowed to occupy the fat suit role, the subversive potential still fails to materialize. One prominent example is the Farrelly Brothers' film *Shallow Hal*. Superficially, *Shallow Hal* flirts with a "positive" message about seeing a woman's inner beauty. Yet the film cannot resist undermining its fat heroine through classic gross-out devices. Crucially, Rosemary's fat embodiment is given little authentic presence. For the bulk of the film, both Hal and the *audience* see Rosemary as the slim, conventionally attractive Paltrow. Hal has been

hypnotized to perceive only her inner beauty, and the film adopts his point of view. The result is that the fat female body is literally kept off-screen for most of the narrative, present mainly as an unseen joke. When Rosemary's fatness does manifest, it is chiefly as a source of visual grotesquerie. The device of showing Paltrow's slender face while attributing chaotic physical effects to an *invisible* fat body underscores how *Shallow Hal* centers the slim ideal: it uses the fat suit as a fleeting comedic prop, while ultimately reassuring viewers with the image of a thin movie star. As we will see, Rosemary as a character has little agency or interiority beyond being the catalyst for Hal's personal growth. As a result, *Shallow Hal* fortifies the idea that a fat woman's worth lies in the eye of the (male) beholder, and that her body — especially when actually shown — is an object of comedy or shock rather than simply a human body deserving of normalcy. The “fabricated flesh” of these fat suits ends up reinforcing the very failures of subversion that feminist critics lament. The senile hags of Bakhtin's carnival — those outrageous old fat women symbolic of renewal and revolt — have, in gross-out comedy, been hollowed out into hollow laughs, their once-subversive potential largely lost in translation.

Alongside this failed feminine grotesque, Plotz introduces another vital gendered dimension in her concept of the “De-Masculinized Fat Male” (25). Plotz argues that while male fatness is somewhat culturally permissible — men can take up space in ways denied to women — the marked fat male body often signifies a compromised masculinity, being portrayed as “de-masculinized, feminized and/or infantilized” (26). The De-Masculinized Fat Male trope emphasizes a profound gendered failure: fatness signals an inability to exert bodily control, essential in traditional constructions of masculinity. Plotz elaborates, “masculinity is constructed as an expression of bodily control; hence the fat body cannot be seen as a masculine body” (28). Therefore, male fatness is emasculating because it symbolically denotes a loss of control, physical competence, and dominance.

This compromised masculinity can also be projected outward, onto male interactions with fat female bodies. Within a conservative heteronormative logic, the “real man” is expected to attract and be attracted to a thin, conventionally feminine partner; his desirability is measured through hers. Thus, pairing a man with a fat woman becomes a kind of emasculation by proxy, suggesting that he lacks the status or virility to secure the “proper” object of desire. *Shallow Hal* makes this dynamic especially visible with the casting of Jack Black. Unlike a conventional Hollywood leading man, Black carries a stocky, atypical physique and a comic persona built on juvenile energy rather than physical prowess or sexual charisma. The film’s conceit — that Hal could fall in love with a fat woman — reads as humorous largely because Black himself is already coded as not-quite-masculine, a man whose body and demeanor fall short of hegemonic ideals. Indeed, the joke would not have landed had the role been filled by a square-jawed romantic lead; the humor depends on an alignment between Hal’s “unmasculine” body and his supposedly misguided attraction, which together reaffirm the cultural script that “real men” deserve thin, conventionally beautiful women.

These gendered expectations are deeply intertwined with broader cultural anxieties about masculinity and power. Plotz identifies contemporary comedic films as spaces where such anxieties play out vividly. We saw this with White Goodman’s character in *Dodgeball*, his exaggerated muscular façade, juxtaposed against his hidden past as a fat man. Goodman’s obsessive focus on fitness and his intense disdain for fatness highlight broader societal fears regarding the feminization and emasculation inherent in losing bodily discipline, effectively reinforcing the trope of the De-Masculinized Fat Male. Plotz further argues that films frequently situate the fat male body as an ideological extreme, the antithesis of desirable masculinity: “Fat masculinity is here positioned as the Other, the actual loser of the film,” marking boundaries of acceptable masculine behavior (48).

Thus, Plotz's analysis complements Rowe and Bakhtin's theories, revealing how the grotesque is gendered differently for men and women. While fat women grotesquely disrupt by excess and unruliness, fat men grotesquely fail by embodying softness, vulnerability, and feminized characteristics. The comedic framing of these De-Masculinized Fat Male bodies reassures audiences of the continued dominance of normative, disciplined masculinity.

Male actors in fat suits, as grotesque female caricatures, further complicate these intersections by embodying simultaneously both the unruly feminine and the failed masculine, ultimately reinforcing conservative gender hierarchies through ridicule. In what follows, I read these traditions through four recurring filmic devices — headless-fatty framings, montage as joke-delivery, the “good-fatty” moral script, and the prosthetic logic of detachable fatness — to show how carnivalesque unruliness is staged and then contained.

III. Inner Beauty, Outer Thinness: Paratexts, Prosthetics, and the Good-Fatty in *Shallow Hal*

At the turn of the millennium, Peter and Bobby Farrelly were at the top of their careers. 1998's *There's Something About Mary* was a box-office smash and is considered one of the key films in the gross-out comedy resurgence. It was the fourth highest-grossing film in 1998, garnering over \$369 million worldwide against its \$23 million budget (“1998 Worldwide Box Office”; “There's Something About Mary - Box Office Mojo”). The Farrelly's eagerly awaited follow-up to *There's Something About Mary* was 2000's *Me, Myself and Irene*, which saw the Farrelly's reunite with Jim Carrey after helping launch him into A-list status with *Dumb and Dumber* (1994). *Me, Myself and Irene* failed to recapture the critical acclaim of *Mary* but still grossed nearly \$150 million worldwide, a notable feat for an R-rated comedy (“Me, Myself and Irene - Box Office Mojo”). Riding on these successes, the Farrelly's followed up

with 2001's *Shallow Hal*, a film that promised to fulfill their gross-out reputation by featuring an abundance of fat jokes.

Shallow Hal follows the eponymous Hal Larson (Jack Black) as he tries to seduce conventionally attractive women. Hal and his obnoxious roommate Mauricio (Jason Alexander) aggressively objectify all the women they come across, only concerning themselves with pursuing women they view as attractive. In short, the film is, as Peter Farrelly put it, about a guy who's not getting anywhere with women because he's "chasing elevens and he's a five" (HBO *Making of Shallow Hal* Special). The film's inciting incident occurs when Hal is trapped in an elevator with self-help guru Tony Robbins (playing himself), who hypnotizes Hal to see only women's "inner beauty." This leads to a magical-realist, comedy-of-errors plot where "ugly" women appear conventionally attractive to Hal. Hal quickly falls for Rosemary Shanahan (Gwyneth Paltrow), who looks to him the same as Paltrow's real-life figure: svelte and model-like. Rosemary is actually fat. The narrative culminates in Hal's hypnosis breaking, forcing him to confront his central conflict of the film: whether he can ever truly love someone so fat.

The film was marketed as a gross-out romantic comedy with a moral message about looking beyond appearances, yet the marketing itself undercut that premise. Trailers and promotional spots — seen by far more people than would ever watch the full film — foregrounded some of the movie's most fat-shaming moments. Even the trailer's tagline, "a comedy of gigantic proportions," framed fatness itself as the joke. "The biggest love story ever told" was plastered across its early promotional posters, complete with a fat silhouette framing the slender Paltrow. After the film was released on DVD, these images and jokes continued. An image of Paltrow shattering a wooden bench and launching Jack Black into the air along with the caption "True love is worth the weight" donned the cover of the 2010 DVD release, along with a back cover that bolds the words "heavyweight,"

“squashed,” and “biggest,” while also describing Rosemary as a “300-pound not-so-hottie.” The back cover also featured a still from the film where Jack Black is attempting to lift Gwyneth Paltrow in a fat suit, along with animated cracks under their feet, again highlighting Rosemary’s weight. Even the DVD discs themselves featured Rosemary’s feet on a bathroom scale with the numbers blurred because her weight is off the charts (see fig. 22). The marketing positioned *Shallow Hal* less as a moral fable and more as a spectacle of fat-focused ridicule, setting the tone for the controversy that surrounded the film upon its release.



Fig. 22. *Shallow Hal's fat joke marketing in its posters and DVDs.*

Commentary around the film highlighted this tension. As *The Atlantic* noted, *Shallow Hal* “is a fat joke with a 114-minute run time,” even as it attempts to deliver a lesson in empathy (Garber). As the film approached its release, fat activists and cultural critics protested the film’s marketing and content, arguing that it perpetuated harmful stereotypes under the guise of romance. *The New York*

Times published an article entitled “Charting the Outer Limits of Inner Beauty” on the same weekend of *Shallow Hal*’s theatrical release. The article mentions many fat activists who “charge that the movie, which on its surface arguably aspires to eradicate issues of size consciousness by emphasizing ‘inner beauty,’ actually fortifies the American prejudice against obesity” (Kuczynski). Advocates such as Carnie Wilson spoke out against the film, saying, “It made me feel like I was a big joke, and that crushes my heart” (Kuczynski). Others, including Miriam Berg of the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination and Sandie Sabo of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, pointed to some of the aforementioned promotional materials as proof that the marketing leaned on mockery (Kuczynski). These organizations argued that these images alone were enough to reveal the film’s reliance on cruel fat jokes long before audiences ever saw the full narrative (Kuczynski).

Despite all the controversy, the film managed to be a modest financial success at the box office. It had a worldwide box-office gross of more than \$140 million against its \$40 million budget (“Shallow Hal - Box Office Mojo”). It received mixed reviews from critics. While some critics noted the controversy — like A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* calling the film “a series of fat jokes” — many simply described the film as entertaining yet milquetoast compared to the Farrelly’s previous outings (“Inner Beauty Counts, And She’s a Perfect 10”). Roger Clarke of *The Independent* wrote that the film was “Unexpectedly rather sweet and underplayed, given that it comes from the gross-out kings” (“Shallow Hal”). Roger Ebert gave it 3 out of 4 stars, arguing that it is “often very funny” and “surprisingly moving at times,” while Todd McCarthy of *Variety* wrote that “the lack of directorial finesse lets the enterprise down, creating some clunky scenes and dead air where laughs might have been expected” (“Shallow Hal Movie Review and Film Summary”; “Shallow Hal”). *The Hollywood Reporter* described the film as “a laugh machine that never really powers up” (Honeycutt). Still, the film continued to make money and foster cult-favorite status on home video, as it “racked up sizable

dollars” in DVD sales and, in what *Variety* called a “stunning performance,” even became 2002’s most-viewed film on Pay-Per-View (Dempsey).⁶⁰ This commercial success heightened the significance of its representational choices, as the film’s imagery and characterizations reached an even broader audience.

Throughout its runtime, *Shallow Hal* deploys a series of visual and narrative strategies that render its fat heroine both hypervisible and erased. Psychologist and activist Charlotte Cooper’s influential concept of the “headless fatty,” for example, helps illuminate the film’s recurring shots that fragment Rosemary’s fat body, presenting her as an object without agency: “we [fat people] are reduced and dehumanised as symbols of cultural fear: the body, the belly, the arse, food” (Cooper) (see fig. 23). These strategies of partial display and comedic framing create a lens through which the film’s representation of Rosemary can be examined — not simply as a romantic lead, but as an objectified spectacle.

One sequence that illustrates this dynamic occurs when we are first introduced to Rosemary’s character. After spotting Rosemary walking down the street, Hal abruptly pulls his car over, captivated by her figure as he watches her enter a department store. He rushes to follow her inside, and the camera’s framing of this pursuit immediately reveals the film’s approach to her body. Rosemary’s fat figure is first seen from behind as she browses through racks in the lingerie section, but the shot deliberately omits her face, presenting her instead as a faceless body in motion.

⁶⁰ *Shallow Hal* managed to top the Pay-Per-View charts even against stiff competition, outperforming films like *Jurassic Park III* (Joe Johnston, 2001) and *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001). In fact, the second most-viewed film of the year was *American Pie 2* (J.B. Rogers, 2001), which speaks to the massive popularity of gross-out comedies at the time (Dempsey).



Fig. 23. Examples of Rosemary as a “headless fatty” throughout Shallow Hal.

As Rosemary lifts a pair of underwear from the rack, the garment is played entirely for laughs — comically oversized, clearly designed to read as ridiculous rather than functional. It is not clothing intended to reflect the needs or realities of someone her size (an issue that presumably could have easily been rectified if they cared to consult an actual fat person about clothing sizes); instead, it is a

sight gag, a prop meant to amplify the absurdity of her presence. This same joke will be repeated later in the film, during a scene of Hal and Rosemary's first sexual encounter, when her underwear is somehow even more oversized (see fig. 24). These moments, though brief, capture the film's investment in spectacle over authenticity: a quick laugh takes precedence over any attempt to portray fat embodiment with care or dignity.

Back at the department store where Hal is searching for Rosemary after following her inside, a carefully blocked shot has Hal step into frame while Paltrow's fat body double (Ivy Snitzer) is seamlessly swapped out in a single take, transforming the image from a body marked as grotesque to one coded as desirable. This is the film's first instance of the prosthetic logic mentioned in the introduction, where fatness functions as a detachable effect that can be toggled without granting a fat subject. Rosemary's fatness exists as a removable, theatrical layer, a performance device to fuel Hal's growth rather than a stable or meaningful aspect of her character. The production cast real-life fat actress Ivy Snitzer to serve as Rosemary's body either from a distance or in headless chunks, emphasizing how her fatness was used purely as a visual stand-in rather than an integrated identity.

Hal looks at Rosemary's underwear and quips, "Building a parachute?" Rosemary is understandably offended by his comment and initially responds with anger, but the film offers no space to dwell on her reaction or to unpack her perspective. Instead, in a disorienting tonal shift, she quickly softens, and the narrative cuts abruptly to a lunch date between the two characters. This transition not only sidesteps the emotional weight of Hal's insult but also opens the door for the film to layer in a new round of fat jokes, using their meal as an opportunity to showcase Rosemary's appetite and frame it as comic excess.



Fig. 24. Rosemary's undergarments used for visual gags in Shallow Hal.

The lunch date scene between Hal and Rosemary is pivotal because it solidifies how *Shallow Hal* mobilizes food and eating as shorthand for character. As Barbara Plotz observes, “The fat body in modern society is constructed as a grotesque body. It is a body associated with eating and digestion [...] it is a consuming body, incorporating what it consumes into itself and thereby open to and

connected with the world” (131). Rosemary’s body, as framed by the film, is rarely shown apart from eating or the promise of eating, and this lunch sequence is where that association first coalesces into a recurring pattern.

The scene begins immediately after Hal’s awkward parachute remark in the department store. Despite Rosemary’s flash of irritation, the film cuts directly to the two of them seated at a restaurant. Their table is positioned in such a way that Rosemary appears set back from her meal. She is not close to the table like Hal; instead, the staging suggests that her belly intrudes into the space, preventing her from scooting forward. This is a visual cue that primes the audience to read her body as a spatial obstacle, an object rather than a subject.

When the server arrives, Rosemary meekly lists off her lunch order: “A double pizza burger, chili fries with cheese, and a large chocolate milkshake.” The order is caricatured (whatever a “double pizza burger” is), but the framing makes it more than just an indulgent lunch. The camera holds on her after the request, capturing a sheepish glance upwards, as though she knows she is expected to apologize for her appetite. By connecting Rosemary’s character so deeply with her appetite and eating, the film aligns her with what Plotz calls “the Fat Eater,” a media trope which portrays fat characters as people whose identities are defined by excessive and inappropriate eating (175–208). Plotz writes that the fat eater reinforces the ways in which contemporary discourse around bodies conflates overeating and fatness, “the former constantly being presented as the main cause of the latter” (200–201). Rosemary’s constant eating and over-the-top food orders invite laughter precisely because Rosemary does not follow the script of bodily restraint that audiences expect from women in romantic contexts, as well as from the visual incongruity of seeing someone who looks like Paltrow (i.e., a slender Hollywood star) eat so copiously.

After ordering her “double pizza burger,” Hal praises Rosemary for being different from most women who only order “a glass of water and a crouton.” “That’s probably what I should be ordering,” Rosemary confesses. “But no matter what I eat, my weight just stays the same.” Hal says that he feels bad for people who obsessively count calories, to which Rosemary responds: “Yeah, but in return they get to be a lot thinner than I am.” By including these lines, the film acknowledges Rosemary’s attempts to lose weight and emphasizes her desire to control her appetite and reign in her excessive body; she may have failed at this, but at least she *tried* and at least she admits to her failures. This constructs Rosemary as a “good fatty” — i.e., a fat person who “perform[s] supposedly healthy behaviors, such as dieting, or who duly regard[s] their own fatness as a failing” (Manne 12).⁶¹ The script allows Rosemary to be both the fat eater and a good fatty, layered together in one body: voracious and regretful at once. Plotz argues that “What goes hand in hand with these assumptions about fatness is the notion of a lack of will, of self-discipline, of self-control being the root cause of overeating habits, and thus of the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’, making fat people indulge without the appropriate restraint. *Fatness thereby becomes a moral issue or rather an indication of a lack of morals?*” (Plotz 201, my emphasis). By framing Rosemary as a “good fatty,” the film is simultaneously reassuring audiences that Rosemary is a morally righteous character. Despite Rosemary’s ample appetite and endless food-related gags, she is not a slothful layabout and, thus, remains worthy of Hal’s romantic desire.

⁶¹ The concept of the “good fatty” has been explored by various Fat Studies scholars, including Kate Manne (pp. 12, 98), Gemma Gibson (pp. 26–33), and Cat Pausé (“Rebel Heart: Performing Fatness Wrong Online”). Pausé writes that a good fatty is “an apologetic fat person who takes ‘care’ of themselves (read: is well groomed, fashionable, and active) and acknowledges that they could and should be pursuing lifestyle choices that are socially palatable,” all in an attempt, conscious or not, “to legitimise their existence with the larger fat hating culture” (“Rebel Heart: Performing Fatness Wrong Online”). This is contrasted with “bad fatties,” who nakedly embody many of the most hated and stigmatized aspects of being fat: “Bad fatties are fat people who do not work hard to become thin, they are often presented as a caricature in mainstream media as a grotesque figure who does not exercise and eats to excess” (Gibson 27). Most of the fat-suited characters in gross-out comedies are bad fatties in these ways, with Rosemary and Sherman Klump being exceptions. Notably, these are also the two fat suit characters who audiences are meant to root for, and who are destined to succeed in their romantic pursuits by the end of their films.

The sequence also integrates physical slapstick humor, another key element of Plotz's "Funny Fat Body," which portrays fat people as clumsy and physically unfit (132). Plotz writes that this characterization is "rooted in the notion of the fat body being a non-disciplined body, a body out of control" (130). As we saw in our discussion of *Fat Bastard*, these attributes use various filmic techniques — e.g., choreography, sound design, and framing — to emphasize the size, weight, and volume of the fat characters (136–137). We see these techniques in all the fat suit movies analyzed in this work; here, the fat slapstick first shows up for Rosemary during their lunch date in the form of a collapsing chair. When that moment arrives, the camera captures Rosemary crashing to the ground, chair legs splayed at 90-degree angles, a visual echo of the unruly body Plotz describes. Hal's indignant question — "What's this shit made of anyway?" — and the server's awkward reply of "Uh, steel?" are capped by Rosemary's self-aware quip, "It's happened before, it'll happen again." In fact, it does happen again. Later in the film, Rosemary snaps a bench in a fancy restaurant, this time spilling backwards and exposing her lacy red underwear. It is another instance of slapstick, but also an opportunity for the filmmakers to sexualize Paltrow.

Their first lunch date is also a blueprint for many of the slapstick and "fat eater" moments throughout the film. In a later date, Rosemary casually requests that Hal get her "a beer and nachos with all the stuff on it," reaffirming the association between her presence and eating. In yet another lunchtime gag, she and Hal share a massive chocolate milkshake. The server shows up to take their lunch order while they're both drinking from the milkshake, each with their own straw. Hal turns briefly to tell the server their food order, and in that short moment Rosemary drains the entire milkshake. When Hal turns back, he sees her emptying the glass and then clutch her head in brain freeze. Rosemary consuming a milkshake at inhuman speeds is just one example of many where a fat

character in a gross-out comedy is shown as endlessly hungry and capable of consuming amounts and at speeds that defy physics.

We see this again when, at a celebration with Hal's colleagues, Rosemary approaches a large cake. Instead of cutting a normal slice, she removes an enormous third, lifts it directly with her hands, and walks away, eating as she goes. The absence of utensils and plates frames her eating as unfeminine and animalistic, outside the boundaries of social etiquette. The visual humor of frosting-covered fingers and exaggerated bites serves as another reminder of how the film defines Rosemary's identity through appetite. We see it again in a dinner scene with Rosemary's parents, where the camera lingers on a turkey carcass stripped to the bone and a table of dishes scraped clean, despite the fact that only four people were present. Taken together, these moments establish a choreography of consumption that threads through Rosemary's characterization (see fig. 25).





Fig. 25. *Fatness as uncontrolled appetite in Shallow Hal.*

The montage that follows Hal and Rosemary’s lunch date becomes one of the most telling sequences, and it was widely featured in the film’s marketing. It is a montage that, narratively speaking, is meant to show the many dates between Hal and Rosemary, offering peeks into their blossoming romance. In effect, though, it is merely an excuse for rapid fire fat jokes that would become the promotional backbone of the film. Crucially, this montage exposes how *Shallow Hal’s* humor about fatness rarely requires the presence of an actual fat body. Instead, it trades in the spectacle of a thin body — Gwyneth Paltrow’s body — producing exaggerated “fat effects,” an approach that relies on the promise of the fat suit while withholding its full visibility.

Within the montage, we have the abovementioned milkshake scene. Rosemary also weighs down one side of a canoe so drastically that Hal’s oar barely skims the water, leaving him visibly confused (see fig. 26).



Fig. 26. The thin Paltrow creating exaggerated "fat effects" in Shallow Hal.

Then there's the splash scene, where she leaps into a pool and displaces enough water to launch a child into a nearby tree — a gag so central to the film's humor that it even received a dedicated behind-the-scenes special on the DVD that explained the mechanics behind the specially constructed high-powered hoses used to rocket water out of the pool when Gwyneth jumped in (*In at the Deep End*

Stunts Featurette).⁶² What makes these moments especially striking is how rarely they show Ivy Snitzer's fat body. Instead, they show Paltrow's own body, untouched by prosthetics, engaging in ordinary activities — rowing, swimming, eating — that the film reframes as extraordinary through sound design, editing, and narrative implication. The humor is partly derived from the absurdity of seeing Paltrow's body doing these stereotypically fat body things.

When the fat body does appear, it remains fragmented. The most explicit instance in the montage comes when Rosemary mounts a diving board. The camera shoots from behind, framing the curve of her hips and thighs in, notably, a two-piece bikini, emphasizing her rolls. Her head is once again out of frame, a textbook headless-fatty framing that splits visibility from subjectivity (see fig. 27).



Fig. 27. Ivy Snitzer as a headless fatty at the pool, framed from behind in Shallow Hal.

⁶² There is also a deleted scene from this montage where they go horseback riding, only to have the horse react in fear and protest when seeing Rosemary — another instance of her destabilizing presence. A brief clip of this scene was featured in the trailer, and it can be found in its entirety on DVD.

This headless rear-view is the unruly woman's body without her subjectivity: Rowe's spectacle stripped of agency and kept "on top" only long enough to be laughed back down. The diving board loudly creaks and groans under her weight. The scene culminates with Paltrow's thin body cannonballing into the pool, creating a massive wave of water, and launching a small child into a nearby tree.

In the midst of these jokes, the film grants Rosemary a moment of dialogue that exposes the deeper ideology at work. At the end of one of their dates, Rosemary, exasperated with Hal obsessively commenting on her physical beauty (i.e., her thinness), says the following:

Do me a favor and stop saying that I'm pretty [...]. Look, I know what I am, and I know what I'm not. I'm the girl who gets really good grades and who's not afraid to be funny. I'm the girl who has a lot of friends who are boys and no boyfriends. I'm not beautiful, ok? And I never will be.

Rosemary's confession that she will never be beautiful is striking not only because it appears in a rare moment of sincerity, but also because the film never truly challenges it. On the surface, *Shallow Hal* frames itself as a moral fable about learning to see "inner beauty." Yet the formal elements of the film undermine that message by translating inner beauty into precisely the same cultural standards that the film claims to critique. Her claim lands because the film has already equated "inner beauty" with outer thinness, the very conflation I mentioned in the introduction as the engine of fat suit moralizing. When Hal looks at Rosemary and sees Gwyneth Paltrow, the audience is told that her true self, her soul, her spirit (all things that Tony Robbins explicitly names as part of Hal's hypnosis) manifests as thin, blonde, youthful, and conventionally attractive. In other words, the supposed moral lesson that "beauty comes from within" is delivered through an aesthetic already sanctioned by the very culture the film purports to subvert. Rosemary is never given space to be physically beautiful on her own

terms; instead, the film insists that the only way to make her “beautiful” to Hal and to the audience is to replace her body with one that already fits dominant ideals.

The narrative logic thus eats its own tail. The film appears to critique superficiality, but its plot relies on an essentialized vision of beauty. The world of *Shallow Hal* suggests that beauty is not subjective or culturally constructed, but an objective quality — something that resides in the soul and, once revealed, happens to align perfectly with mainstream beauty standards. By representing Rosemary’s “inner beauty” through a thin, white, conventionally attractive actress, the film reaffirms the very hierarchies it gestures toward dismantling. Her fatness is coded as a surface-level flaw, a barrier to be looked past, but not as a body that can itself be desired. When Rosemary asserts that she is not beautiful and never will be, the film offers no counterpoint; it does not allow her fatness to coexist with beauty. Instead, it affirms her statement through its filmic grammar: beauty is thinness, and thinness is beauty.

The narrative reinforces this essentialized standard through other visual gags and character moments. Hal’s newfound “vision” allows him not only to see inner beauty but also inner ugliness. A conventionally attractive woman who is coded as manipulative and materialistic appears to Hal as an elderly woman — wrinkled and plastered with garish makeup. The film treats this transformation as a punchline, but it also reveals an underlying bias: old women are visually equated with ugliness, regardless of their character. Similarly, when Hal visits a children’s burn unit, he does not see the children as they are but instead sees smooth-skinned, unscarred bodies. The implication is that burn scars are a form of ugliness, something that needs to be erased to make these children’s inner purity visible. These moments betray the film’s claim to radical empathy. Instead of broadening the definition of beauty, the film collapses inner goodness into an unexamined cultural script that excludes fatness, aging, disability, and visible difference (see fig. 28).



Fig. 28. Shallow Hal's characters' "inner beauty" on the left, and their "outer forms" on the right.

The effect is particularly stark when we return to Rosemary's fatness. By never challenging her self-assessment, the film positions her fat body as incompatible with beauty in a way that is presented

as both obvious and unchangeable. As LeBesco argues, the fat suit itself enables thin actors to perform fatness without ever threatening their own alignment with cultural beauty standards. “The audience is granted a reassurance that [Paltrow] needs a suit to become Rosemary — that she’s in no danger of a slide into obesity” (238). Paltrow can step in and out of the fat suit, experiencing fatness as a temporary condition and then returning to the safety of thin celebrity status. Rosemary, by contrast, is trapped in a narrative that never allows her to be seen as beautiful in her own body. The fat suit becomes not only a prosthetic but also a symbolic device that keeps fatness quarantined from desirability.

This tension is compounded by the film’s handling of femininity. Since the “fat female body is the epitome of non-normative femininity,” as Plotz puts it, then feminized fatness is rendered “a repulsive object of the male gaze” (68; 161). Rosemary’s comment that she has “a lot of friends who are boys and no boyfriends” gestures toward that non-normative femininity and abjectness. Her humor and intelligence are coded as acceptable traits, but her body renders her outside the romantic economy altogether. Rather than inviting the audience to question why femininity is so tightly bound to a narrow beauty ideal, the film uses her statement as another layer of characterization — an unchallenged truth that underscores her outsider status. The supposed moral of *Shallow Hal* — that beauty comes from within — cannot function without a shared, uncritical assumption of what beauty looks like on the outside.

In this way, *Shallow Hal* performs a sleight of hand. It markets itself as progressive, as a narrative that encourages viewers to look past appearances, but the very mechanics of its storytelling betray that aim. The film’s climactic reveals, whether it is Rosemary in the fat suit, the “ugly” young woman rendered old, or the scarred children rendered flawless, never expand the definition of beauty. Instead, they offer audiences a comforting reassurance: beauty still looks exactly as it always has. The result is a film that, rather than challenging Rosemary’s belief that she will never be beautiful, quietly

affirms it. She may be kind, generous, and loving — her soul may be “beautiful” — but the fat suit that encases her ensures that physical beauty will remain something she can only borrow, never possess.

Even in its closing moments, *Shallow Hal* cannot resist undercutting its own supposed moral with a barrage of visual gags. After Hal declares his love for Rosemary and embraces her “true form,” the film immediately turns the emotional climax into another round of fat jokes. As the crowd cheers them on, Hal tries to scoop Rosemary up to carry her to the car, only to grunt, strain, and fail (this is the scene included on the back cover of the DVD). The scene then cuts to her effortlessly carrying him instead — an inversion played for laughs despite the fact that Jack Black himself is not a lightweight. And just before they drive away together, Rosemary approaches the car, stands and waves as she steps inside, and the camera pulls back to capture the full effect of her weight. Framed from behind and at a distance, we watch as the car frame visibly sinks under her, punctuated by the sounds of exaggerated creaks, calling back to the sound design of Rosemary walking on the diving board. These final beats puncture the film’s earnest claims to celebrate inner beauty; even at the point of resolution, when the film wants to most earnestly pull at the audience’s heart strings, Rosemary’s body remains a spectacle — the veneer of a sweet romance continually undermined by fat-shaming humor.

Rosemary is poised to inhabit Rowe’s unruly woman — a fat heroine whose size, appetite, and refusal to shrink might “make a spectacle” on her own terms — but the film systematically neutralizes that potential (Rowe, “Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess” 410). Formally, it fragments and substitutes her body (the headless fatty framings and seamless swaps to Paltrow) so that unruliness is hinted at and then whisked away, converting presence into prosthetic effect rather than subjectivity. Comedically, it routes her through Plotz’s twin tropes of the Funny Fat Body and the Fat Eater — collapsing chairs, tidal wave dives, eating gags — so that fatness reads as clumsy excess and appetite

as comic deviance (Plotz 131–37, 175–208). And narratively, the script recasts any threat of unruliness as moral respectability by scripting Rosemary as a “good fatty,” which reassures viewers that her fatness is already under self-surveillance. The result is a tidy containment loop. In short, the film uses the specter of unruliness to get laughs, then smooths it over with safe moralizing and special effects, making Rosemary’s fatness something to look at but never a source of real power.

IV. “A Valentine for Overweight People” : The Limits of Fat Suit Empathy

The cultural story surrounding *Shallow Hal* extends far beyond its onscreen jokes. The press coverage and behind-the-scenes features reveal a troubling pattern: thin actors and creators presenting fatness as a temporary costume, a thing to try on and take off, as though donning prosthetics for a day could offer insight into systemic oppression. As Paltrow described in interviews and promotional spots, Tony Gardner, *Shallow Hal*’s special makeup effects creator, put her in the prosthetic suit and she walked through the lobby of the Tribeca Grand hotel. Paltrow said of the experience that it was “so sad” and “so disturbing.” She explained that “No one would make eye contact with me because I was obese. I felt humiliated” (ABC News, *Paltrow ‘Humiliated’ by Fat Suit*). In a behind-the-scenes special, Paltrow remarked that “It was a very sad and startling experience [...]; it was a profound experience,” (“*Seeing Through the Layers* Makeup Featurette”).

Despite Paltrow describing the experience as profound, it was still limited to fleeting interpersonal encounters while wearing the fat suit for brief stretches of time on a handful of occasions. What she internalized was not systemic injustice, but the emotional sting of falling outside desirability. “I got a real sense of what it would be like to be that overweight,” Paltrow reflected, “and every pretty girl should be forced to do that” (Odell 185). Her framing turns fatness into a punishment, a kind of moral corrective for thin women rather than a position deserving dignity in its own right.

This perspective is rooted in a deeper fear: according to Paltrow's biographer, as a young woman, Paltrow listed "obesity" as her "worst fear" in her high school yearbook, a sentiment that followed her into adulthood (182). The discomfort Paltrow experienced from being "overweight" later became a launchpad: filming on the set of *Shallow Hal* "marked the beginning of what would be her defining interest in wellness" (180). Paltrow's personal horror at fatness — and the fat suit's symbolic link to loss of beauty, control, and value — helped seed the very empire of thinness she would later build through Goop and other wellness ventures.

Paltrow's shock at how she was treated while wearing the fat suit must also be understood through lenses of identity and privilege. Ideals around femininity are not just gendered but also deeply tied to race and class. As sociologist Sabrina Strings observes, in the United States, "fatness became stigmatized as both Black and sinful," while thinness came to signify "racial and class distinction" and the discipline of elite white women (6–7). Paltrow's discomfort, then, can be read as a brief step outside her usual embodiment of the thin, white, affluent ideal, not only as a disruption of celebrity but as a temporary exile from the cultural privileges of idealized womanhood. To claim that this moment offered her deep empathy is to ignore how gendered, classed, and racialized beauty norms operate over lifetimes, not minutes.

Paltrow's anecdote echoes other high-profile stunts, such as Tyra Banks' televised experiment in which she donned a fat suit, rode public transportation, shopped in stores, and went on blind dates. Banks later told ABC News, "The people that were staring and laughing in my face — that shocked me the most [...]. I immediately heard snickers" ("Tyra Banks Experiences Obesity Through Fat Suit"). Like Paltrow, Banks framed this as a revelation, a way of grasping fat people's struggles, and then, like Paltrow, she simply stepped out of the costume at the end of the day and returned to her privileged status. Both women framed their experiences in terms of a perceived loss of feminine

desirability, as though their brief immersion in fatness offered a window into what it means to be positioned outside normative womanhood. Banks, like Paltrow, momentarily inhabited a body that defied that standard and was startled by the gendered social penalties that followed.

Moreover, even in clinical contexts, fat suits have been deployed in attempts to simulate the embodied experience of fatness, often under the guise of fostering empathy or measuring stigma. In a high-profile study published in *Obesity*, researchers “experimentally manipulated the experience of obesity to understand how weight stigma causally affects eating behavior, physiology, and psychological well-being” by randomly assigning participants to wear fat suits (Incollingo Rodriguez et al. 1892).⁶³ The study hypothesized that this superficial embodiment would reproduce the psychological toll of weight stigma and potentially reduce anti-fat attitudes. Instead, the fat suit yielded negative effects on participants’ well-being — including disordered eating behaviors and emotional distress — without altering their implicit biases (1897). The researchers concluded that while their manipulation replicated some harmful effects of stigma, it failed to engender the kind of attitudinal shift often associated with successful empathy interventions. More tellingly, the study acknowledged that fat individuals may signify “a socially stigmatized group representing a boundary condition in which perspective taking may be unsuccessful,” revealing how deeply entrenched weight stigma is, even under controlled experimental conditions (1897).

A response to the study published the following year by Angela Meadows and colleagues challenges the premise of such interventions even more forcefully. The authors argue that the physiological and psychological responses observed in thin participants wearing fat suits are “nonequivalent to those of a fat person in the same situation,” as they do not emerge from a lifetime

⁶³ These kinds of experimental simulations have also been commodified. So-called “obesity simulation suits” are sold as wearable training aids, marketed with promises to replicate “the physical experience of living with obesity” for healthcare workers or educators. See “Obesity Simulation | Fat Suits | Obesity Education,” AnatomyStuff.com.

of navigating hostile social structures or internalized stigma (275). Rather than providing meaningful insight into the fat experience, these simulations reproduce a shallow caricature divorced from systemic realities like discrimination in employment, healthcare, or housing. As Meadows et al. explain, such studies are not only “inappropriate for determining causality” but may in fact perpetuate the very hierarchies they seek to critique by requiring fat experience to be verified through privileged embodiment (275). Their critique underscores the ethical limitations of such research: we cannot “manipulate the experience of obesity” through performance, nor should we ask thin people to “become fat” to confirm what fat people have long articulated for ourselves. Fat suits, whether worn by actors or participants in lab experiments, offer little more than a costume drama — one that recycles stigma rather than dismantling it.

Fat suits do not — and cannot — replicate the lived experience of fatness. At best, they simulate a brief encounter with stigma; at worst, they repackage that stigma as spectacle. They ignore the systemic forces that shape fat people’s lives, including medical discrimination, inaccessible public spaces, and routine bias and hostility in employment and education. What’s more, these suits flatten the complex gender dynamics of fat embodiment. As Plotz argues, fat women in particular are “positioned in opposition to hegemonic femininity,” and the stigma they encounter is often tied to their perceived failure to uphold dominant standards of beauty and discipline (68). When a thin woman wears a fat suit, then, she is not just stepping into a different body size — she is performing a version of femininity that has been culturally coded as failed, deviant, or grotesque.

This helps explain the emotional tenor of Banks and Paltrow’s reaction, and of other thin people who have worn fat suits under the guise of revelation. Their surprise at being ignored or laughed at reflects not a newfound solidarity with fat women, but the disorientation of losing the social capital their thin bodies normally confer. Like Tyra Banks, Paltrow frames this momentary alienation

as transformative. But what she experienced is not fatness — it is the disapproval that comes from violating norms of desirability. This is on top of the fact that this “experiment” was done while inhabiting an altered, prosthetic body. The responses Paltrow received were filtered through that visible artifice. People may not have been responding to perceived size, but to the uncanny look of latex and padding or to the spectacle of a celebrity attempting disguise. Random people might be gawking because they are wondering why someone is wandering around in a fat suit. In such situations, the fat suit becomes a costume for brief immersion in social deviance, not a lens into structural marginalization. And like the participants in the *Obesity* study, Paltrow stepped out of that costume unharmed and returned to her privileged reality, all while holding up her temporary discomfort as a moral lesson.

The behind-the-scenes production history of *Shallow Hal* reveals further layers of exploitation. Makeup artist Tony Gardner described how his team created Rosemary’s body. They didn’t simply pad Paltrow; they invited real fat people — nude models between 250 and 450 pounds — to be photographed for reference. “They put together photo albums of these nude pictures to send to the Farrelly brothers to ask ‘which degree of largeness would you like and which shape?’” (“*Seeing Through the Layers* Makeup Featurette”). These images are shown with black bars covering the faces (see fig. 29). The effect is unsettling: anonymous fat women’s bodies presented as raw material to be spliced into an “ideal person,” dehumanized twice over — first by the production process, then by the editing of their identity. These women’s bodies were treated as interchangeable parts.



Fig. 29. A nude fat model used as reference for the fat suit build of Shallow Hal.

A scene in *Shallow Hal* has Hal describe to Tony Robbins his ideal woman, which involves Hal listing off isolated body parts of various celebrities: “Heidi Klum’s beams would do. And her teeth. Ooh, and that Britney Spears girl? She’s got great knockers. Her ass would do to, if she had a better grill...”⁶⁴ The scene goes on for nearly a minute, with Hal simply listing body parts of women that he finds attractive, constructing a Frankenstein’s monster version of the ideal woman. Of course, the film provides this scene to highlight Hal’s titular shallowness. He is enacting the very quality that the movie

⁶⁴ It should be noted that Britney Spears was a teenager when this film was released. These lines demonstrate the un-self-conscious sexualization of Spears that was occurring on a cultural scale at the time, even though she was a child. This is symptomatic of many young women facing this level of objectification in the 1990s and 2000s, a phenomenon that has sparked reevaluation in recent years. For more on the way the aughts sexualized Spears and other young women, see Gilbert pp. 1-26; for more on the cultural reevaluation and the move toward a “reckoning with how pop culture treated women a generation ago,” see Berman.

is criticizing. There is a deep irony in the fact that behind-the-scenes footage shows Gardner and the Farrelly's doing exactly this to create the ideal fat woman's body, with Gardner describing building a template with the Farrelly's to "say 'I like this torso and these arms and XYZ and based on that we were able to design our ideal person'" (*Seeing Through the Layers Makeup Featurette*).

The consequences extend beyond abstraction. Ivy Snitzer, the young actress hired as Paltrow's body double, was thrust into a complicated cultural spotlight. *The Guardian* reports that Snitzer initially felt proud: "Out of all of the fat people in the world that they could have hired for that job, they hired me, because of my personality" (Tait). But once the film was released, her experience darkened. "It didn't occur to me that the film would be seen by millions of people," Snitzer said. "It was like the worst parts about being fat were magnified. And *no one* was telling me I was funny" (Tait). Strangers approached her on the street, some congratulating her, others berating her for supposedly "promoting obesity." She began receiving diet pills in the mail. This barrage of attention destabilized her ambitions. She withdrew from acting opportunities because the roles offered were "mean," caricatured depictions of fat women as grotesque or pitiable (Tait).

Snitzer's exploitation occurred within a system that punishes women more harshly for fatness, disciplining them through surgery and public shaming. Less than two years after the film's release, Snitzer underwent gastric band surgery, believing it was the expected step for a "good" fat person. The surgery went catastrophically wrong. The band slipped, creating a torsion. She lived for months unable to consume anything thicker than water while she waited for health insurance to begin. "I was so thin you could see my teeth through my face and my skin was all grey," Snitzer remembers. "Humans shouldn't have to experience how very bleak that particular time in my life was" (Tait). Her account complicates any narrative that *Shallow Hal* offered progress or compassionate representation.

The film's most direct link to a real fat woman resulted not in empowerment but in exploitation and life-altering harm.

Nevertheless, the film's creators framed their work as affectionate. Tony Gardner said in an interview that, "The filmmakers are not making fun of [Rosemary's] weight, they are embracing her weight. Peter [Farrelly] calls it a valentine for overweight people" (ABC News, *Paltrow 'Humiliated' by Fat Suit*). Paltrow, too, defended the film's moral compass, arguing that it "ends up being a love letter to people who are overweight" (Odell 185). Yet, as we have seen, the marketing leaned on humiliating gags, and the production process relied on dehumanizing reference images and a prosthetic artifice that kept real fatness at a safe distance. The fat suit made it possible for Paltrow to step in and out of a marginalized identity, to claim insight without living the reality. Meanwhile, Snitzer — the one person on set whose body actually reflected the film's premise — was left to navigate the fallout. At the end of the day, Paltrow remained "slim, famous, clad in designer clothes, and much richer because of [*Shallow Hal*], while the girls and women she's supposed to embody in the film (including her body double) have to live with the painful stereotypes she has helped perpetrate" (Anders).

These stories underscore that the cultural impact of fat suit films is not neutral. They may appear to offer empathy, and the stars and filmmakers may, in their heart of hearts, believe that such portrayals are "love letters" for fat people; but, in effect, these films reproduce anti-fat stigma while centering thin perspectives. They treat fatness as costume, as problem, as spectacle. And as Snitzer's later struggles illustrate, they can leave real scars long after the cameras stop rolling. In the face of all these structural inequities, deeply ingrained biases, and harmful cultural narratives, "fatphobia can literally be a killer" — a fact that the filmmakers and their "valentine for overweight people" largely overlooks (Manne 29).

In Paltrow's case, the prosthetic enabled a fleeting, highly publicized experiment with being marked as "undesirable," one that ultimately reaffirmed rather than challenged dominant ideals of feminine beauty. The film's humor depends on this contradiction: it claims to honor inner beauty while continually inviting audiences to laugh at fatness, often without showing a real fat body at all. This dynamic — relying on prosthetics and editing to create a safe distance from actual fat embodiment — will prove just as central in another landmark grossout comedy, *The Nutty Professor*. But whereas *Shallow Hal* deploys this artifice to police and parody femininity, *The Nutty Professor* uses it to stage a different kind of transformation, one that exposes anxieties about masculinity, control, and the unruly male body.

V. De-Masculinized to Dominator: Prosthetic Masculinities in *The Nutty Professor*

Eddie Murphy's career was struggling in the mid-1990s. He was coming off back-to-back-to-back critical misfires in *Boomerang* (Reginald Hudlin, 1992), *Beverly Hills Cop III* (John Landis, 1994), and *Vampire in Brooklyn* (Wes Craven, 1995). In the face of this, some critics were saying that whatever movie Murphy did next, it would be his "last chance" to save his career ("Jet Cover Story" 57). Murphy wanted to make a "straight comedy" in an attempt to "allow audiences to rediscover his comic talent" (Eller). So, he set to work developing a remake of a classic film that was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress for being "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant"—1963's *The Nutty Professor* (Jerry Lewis) (McNary). The original 1963 version was written, directed, produced by, and starring Jerry Lewis. It was a comedic take on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where Lewis would play a nerdy, awkward scientist who synthesizes a potion that turns him into "Buddy Love" — a smooth-talking, womanizing version of himself. Murphy, who would co-write the remake,

would expand on Lewis' dual role and instead appear as *seven* different characters. Additionally, rather than presenting his scientist persona as simply a bucktoothed nerd, he would also be very fat.

With a budget of \$54 million, the film grossed over \$273 million worldwide, making it the highest-grossing Eddie Murphy film internationally at that point (McNary). Critics largely praised the film, highlighting Murphy's performance and the spectacle of the prosthetics. "Messy, raucous, crude and undisciplined though this remake is, it also creates more laughter (and poignancy) than any Eddie Murphy movie has in quite some time," wrote Kenneth Turan in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Murphy's 'Professor' Earns a Doctorate in Comedy"). Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* proclaimed, "Eddie Murphy is funny again," while Roger Ebert added that the film succeeds in its "raucous slapstick and bathroom humor" ("The Nutty Professor"; "*The Nutty Professor* Movie Review"). In a review that demonstrates how mainstream it was at the time to laugh at fat people for being fat, Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* gleefully noted that the film has "loads of funny weight-related humor" ("The Nutty Professor").

Released in 1996, *The Nutty Professor* was an early entrant in the boom of gross-out comedies that would dominate the box-office across the following decade. Critics and audiences frequently commented on the film's crude "bathroom humor" elements, despite the fact that the vulgarity would prove quite tame compared to the films to come, with the ante being upped after each successful gross-out comedy. In 1996, however, many of the "raucous" and "messy" gags revolved around farts and fat jokes. Yes, *The Nutty Professor* would be a special effects extravaganza and a vehicle for Eddie Murphy's return to comedy, but fundamentally the film was about fat people: "Our movie is about obesity [because] America is obsessed with weight," Murphy said in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* (Eller). Murphy emphasized that "There will be fat jokes at every turn" (Eller). Still, echoing the valentine sentiment from Peter Farrelly, Murphy reassured audiences that "our movie is not a (put-down) of fat people" (Eller).

Much like *Shallow Hal*, the overarching narrative of *The Nutty Professor* appears, at least on the surface, to uphold Murphy's assurance. The film follows Sherman Klump, a fat professor and researcher at a local university, who is developing a radical weight-loss serum. Sherman is demure, awkward, and clumsy — a feminized absent-minded professor. He meets and falls for a new graduate student, Carla Purty (Jada Pinkett). After being ruthlessly ridiculed for his weight while on their first date, Sherman decides to drink the weight-loss serum himself — consequences be damned. The serum immediately (yet temporarily) transforms him into Buddy Love, a thin version of himself portrayed by Murphy without any prosthetics. The catch is that his alter ego is not *merely* thin — Buddy Love is also an obnoxious egomaniac hellbent on destroying Sherman's professional and personal relationships. Buddy Love does not want to share his existence with Sherman; instead, he wants to rid himself of “that fat tub of goo” once and for all. The film ends with Sherman outsmarting and defeating his slender alter ego. Sherman is, in the end, rewarded with the love of Carla and they live happily ever after (or, until the sequel was released two years later). Thus, on the surface, the film appears to have a message of fat acceptance. Sherman is the hero of the film, and he is written and performed with pathos and sympathy. Buddy Love, like White Goodman in *Dodgeball*, despite being thin and conventionally attractive, is the film's anti-hero. Sherman has seemingly come to accept his weight and so has his (thin and conventionally attractive) romantic partner.

Once we start to dig into the subtext and paratext of the film, however, the picture gets more complicated. Like *Shallow Hal*, the way a film is shot and marketed, and how the jokes are positioned throughout the story, serves to obfuscate and undermine the professed moral of the story — no matter how much the filmmakers may insist otherwise. This is evident from the very opening shots of the film.

The film opens with Eddie Murphy in a frizzy blonde wig and whiteface, embodying Lance Perkins — a hyperactive, Richard Simmons–style fitness guru. Perkins bounces across the screen, shouting breathless motivational slogans as he leads a troupe of fat women through a blur of knee lifts and jazz hands. The camera slowly pulls back to reveal that we are watching this from a living room, where Sherman Klump is beginning his day. But Sherman does not enter the frame as a whole person — instead, we see him in fragments. The headless, fat-suited torso moves in and out of view while the television blares, the editing cutting between Sherman’s body and Perkins’s aerobic spectacle so that the two bleed into one another (see fig. 30). A lingering shot of an oversized pair of pants hanging from a doorframe ensures the audience takes note of their size (see fig. 31). When Sherman opens the refrigerator, we see that the shelves are stocked with Lance Perkins–branded “Mega Shakes” and “Diet Meals” (99% Fat Free!!!), alongside a “U-Pig Diet Plan” — a plastic pig that oinks when the door is opened to discourage snacking via shaming (see fig. 32). Even Sherman’s eventual reveal withholds personhood; we see only the lower half of his face in a mirror, adjusting a bow tie and giving his double chin a tap as the title card appears (see fig. 33).



Fig. 30. Sherman's introduction in 'The Nutty Professor', mirroring the "headless fatty" trope.



Fig. 31. The camera lingering on Sherman's pants, centered in the frame and hanging on full display in The Nutty Professor.



Fig. 32. A peek inside Sherman's fridge, complete with fad diet meals and a plastic pig to discourage overeating in The Nutty Professor.



Fig. 33. The Nutty Professor title card and our first look at (part of) Sherman's face.

Fewer than two minutes in and the filmmakers make it very clear what is meant to be the focal point of this film: Sherman's size, and by extension, the spectacle of the film's fat suit. From a character perspective, this opening scene also does well in capturing the inherent tensions of the gross-out comedy's sentimentalism and fat-shaming. The camera lingers on Sherman's headless torso, emphasizing that what matters is his body. He is, like Paltrow's fat-suited Rosemary, another "headless fatty." Meanwhile, we see that Sherman is obsessed with the fitness guru Perkins, having his exercise videos playing in the background as a soundtrack to his morning routine and filling his fridge with Perkins-branded products. What this communicates to the audience is that Sherman is both very fat, his body worthy of being gawked at, and that he is very much motivated to lose weight — he is, audiences can rest assured, a "good fatty." Situating the film within the cultural context of the 1990s, where fad diets were a societal obsession, the scene evokes a dual sense of relatability and spectacle. The audience is invited to relate to Sherman's plight, as many will likely have engaged in similar weight loss endeavors.

The film's emphasis on Sherman's body, his fixation with diet products, and his proximity to the figure of the fitness guru not only establish him as a "good fatty" but also situate him within a deeply gendered economy of body management. The film reflects the broader anxieties of the 1990s — a period in which rising attention to men's bodies signaled a cultural shift toward what some commentators saw as a "crisis of masculinity." Kimmel et al. explain that 1990s marked "rising media interest and public debate about boys and men" (6). These cultural conversations were primarily "focused on social problems such as unemployment, educational failure, domestic violence, and family breakdown, but also discussing men's changing identities" (6). Under the heightened concern with masculine identities that Kimmel et al. describe, male fatness became a visible sign of failed self-control.

For a character such as Sherman Klump, doubly marked as fat and fat-suited, that perceived failure is translated on screen into feminization: the body is staged as soft, porous, and uncontained rather than firm and governed. Plotz distinguishes between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" fat male bodies, with the latter coded as soft/bloated rather than solid (25–27). She links this to a control axis: the fat body is presumed a body out of control, while masculinity is equated with bodily control — hence the fat male body "*cannot be seen as a masculine body*" (28, my emphasis). Adapting Bordo, she notes how "the bulge" — the soft, loose, jiggling parts — is stigmatized in contrast to the tight, firm body "protected against eruption from within" (28). For men in particular, she underscores the difference between "bulk" (muscle + fat signifying strength/power) and mere "fat" (coded as passivity) and shows how infantilization routinely tips fat men from adult authority into childlikeness (27; 29; 31).

Murphy's portrayal of Sherman leans heavily into this trope of the de-masculinized fat male. From his first full-body appearance, Sherman is coded not as a strong, solid figure, but as a soft,

bumbling one: a body “out of control,” clumsy, and passive. As he dresses for the day, his body is revealed in disjointed fragments — breasts bouncing, stomach jiggling, pants stretched taut — and the comic effect arises not only from the size of the body but its perceived lack of containment. Importantly, the film doesn’t just show “bulge” but engineers it. The fat suit’s silicone weight, foam baffles, and layered costuming produce the calibrated jiggle and bounce the camera then isolates — turning “lack of bodily control” into a repeatable special effect rather than a property of Sherman’s body.

This sense of softness, and with it, feminization, continues to dominate Sherman’s characterization. In one early scene, after a lecture in which his gut repeatedly erases his own writing from the whiteboard (to the delight of his students), Sherman opens a hidden drawer in his desk stuffed with candy. He pulls out a full-sized Snickers bar (which are arranged in a conspicuously product-placement-friendly manner), looks around furtively, and bites in with childlike satisfaction while the score swells triumphantly (see fig. 34–35). Beyond appetite, the scene choreographs shame: the candy is hidden, his glance is secretive, and the swell of music turns the “treat” into a desperate reward rather than ordinary nourishment. Within U.S. diet culture that often codes sweets, chocolates, and “treats” as both feminine and childlike domains while associating masculine eating with restraint, protein, and control, Sherman’s choice of a chocolate candy bar marks him as indulging rather than governing his body. The secrecy of the drawer shows that he knows his desire violates the norm of self-command expected of men and fat people alike; his childlike delight then completes the slide from adult authority into infantilization (Plotz 27, 31). In other words, eating functions as characterological shorthand here: the film converts a moment of hunger into evidence of failed manhood.



Fig. 34. Conspicuously readable labels in Sherman's secret drawer of candy in The Nutty Professor.



Fig. 35. Sherman passionately eating his secret Snickers bar in The Nutty Professor.

His budding romance with Carla Purty also underscores his gendered inadequacies. During their first meeting, Sherman fumbles through introductions, knocks over a glass jar of candy, and stammers in the face of her beauty. Later, in a dream sequence, he envisions himself kissing her on the beach — only for his weight to crush her into the sand. The dream quickly turns into a nightmare,

a symbolic rendering of his belief that his fatness is both unlovable and dangerous. The scene dramatizes the ways in which the film positions Sherman as a man incapable of participating in heterosexual romance unless transformed. His body is not just fat; it is a barrier to proper masculinity, sexual fulfillment, and social competency.

This feminized and infantilized portrayal is further emphasized in the recurring dinner scenes with the Klump family. Here, Murphy plays five fat-suited characters, stacking multiple prosthetic bodies on the same star, converting fatness into something interchangeable and detachable. Each of the Klumps is coded as socially grotesque to some degree. This is especially the case for the grandmother Ida Mae, who is hypersexual and inappropriate and the father Cletus, who is vulgar and endlessly flatulent. The young fat child Ernie Jr. (Jamal Mixon) — the only character not played by Murphy — is notably the only one not in a fat suit. While these scenes lean heavily into gross-out humor, they also frame fatness as a family trait — a kind of hereditary failure of bodily and moral control (see fig. 36).

The first dinner scene yokes fatness to bodily excess as soon as it kicks off. This sequence is the film's densest realization of Bakhtin's grotesque realism, as it displays a carnivalesque banquet built from eating, gas, spillage, and leaky, noisy bodies (the "lower bodily stratum") that renders the family literally open, protruding, and in flux. We are introduced to Ernie Jr. farting and then Cletus having a coughing fit. Later, Anna Pearl, Sherman's mother, mentions learning about the healing power of colon cleanses on TV, which prompts Cletus to punctuate the moment with an explosive fart. Eventually, multiple characters start farting at the table until Cletus farts too forcefully, prompting him to get up from the table and mutter, "Goddammit, I messed up my pants." Ida Mae reinforces the gross-out angle, saying Mike Wallace makes her "moist." Ida Mae's shamelessness obliquely conjures Rowe's unruly woman and the folk energy of "the woman on top," a noisy refusal of decorum

that, in a different carnivalesque frame, could signal renewal or truth-telling from below, but is undermined (or at least complicated) by the fact that Ida Mae is portrayed by Murphy in prosthetics rather than a woman (Rowe, “Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess” 410–14).





Fig. 36. Eddie Murphy in five different fat suits to perform the Klump family's grotesque revelry in The Nutty Professor.

Sherman's father also launches a complaint about diet culture — “Every time you turn [the TV] on they got somebody talking about ‘lose weight, get healthy, get in shape,’ everybody looking all anorexic [...] I know what healthy is!” — all while piling his plate high with fried food and drowning it in gravy, converting a potentially trenchant critique into a sight gag. Sherman, for his part, calls his research a “cure” for fatness, cementing the medicalized frame. The scene's sound effects, reaction

shots, and food choreography align to treat fatness as misrule and to position Sherman's family outside their gender scripts, including the bodily discipline masculinity is supposed to perform.

It is only through his later chemical metamorphosis into Buddy Love that Sherman is granted access to masculine privilege. Disability scholar Thomas J. Gerschick's argues that "less-normative bodies" are denied recognition as properly masculine until they approximate hegemonic standards of bodily control. Gerschick uses the term "less-normative bodies" to describe bodies that deviate from culturally dominant ideals of size, ability, and appearance — bodies deemed "too" fat, short, disabled, or otherwise outside the normative range (368). In a culture that treats the body as social currency for gender, such deviation "contravene[s] many of the beliefs associated with being a man," especially the linkage of masculinity to strength, independence, and the disciplined containment of the body (368, 371–373). Read this way, Sherman's fatness marks him as excessive and unruly, thus denying him access to the privileges of normative masculinity until the film literally strips those markers away. The Buddy Love persona functions as the visual correction that unlocks recognition; the same man, in a differently body, is suddenly granted authority, sexual agency, and deference.

If Sherman Klump represents a model of masculinity that is soft and feminized, Buddy Love is his hypermasculine shadow — a performance of domination, control, and full rejection of femininity. This transformation is directly tied to Buddy's masculinity, as the film repeats multiple times that Buddy acts the way he does because his "testosterone levels are off the charts." Buddy's persona reflects what bell hooks describes as the "dominator model" of masculinity, i.e., a model of masculinity "in which the authority figure is deemed ruler over those without power and given the right to maintain that rule through practices of subjugation, subordination, and submission" (*The Will to Change* 24). The dominator model, in short, equates manhood with control over others and suppression of the self. hooks explains that predominant thinking about masculinity is rooted in the

belief that men must not express vulnerability: “There is only one emotion that patriarchy values when expressed by men; that emotion is anger” (7). This model teaches that vulnerability is weakness, that “real men” do not cry, and that care, tenderness, and emotionality are feminine traits to be purged. Buddy Love enacts this dominator masculinity with precision: he mocks Sherman’s sensitivity, lashes out when emotionally challenged, and seeks to sever his connection to any trace of vulnerability — Sherman included.

Early in the film, Buddy’s appearance is marked by a striking contrast in posture, voice, and behavior. Where Sherman is apologetic and meek, Buddy is arrogant and flamboyantly confident. His exaggerated performance embodies what Gerschick describes as the centrality of the body to achieving social recognition as “appropriately gendered beings” in the contemporary West, where men are judged against the standard of hegemonic masculinity — “the optimal attributes, activities, behaviors, and values expected of men in a culture” (373). Buddy Love is always performing — for audiences, for Carla, and for other men. His swagger, womanizing, and cruelty aren’t signs of authentic selfhood but attempts to secure recognition as a “real man” from his audience.

Buddy’s contempt for Sherman’s fat body is not simply rooted in aesthetics — it reflects what Gerschick identifies as the vulnerability of masculinity “when corporeal appearance and performance are discordant with hegemonic expectations, such as in the case of having a less-normative body” (373). Sherman’s softness, excess, and need signal precisely the traits that hegemonic masculinity devalues, making his body a symbolic liability. As Gerschick notes, “One’s body serves as a type of social currency that signifies one’s worth. Consequently, people with less-normative bodies are vulnerable to being denied social recognition and validation” (371). Buddy’s hostility is a way of violently disavowing the part of himself that threatens his masculine performance.

That violence escalates throughout the film, culminating in a sequence where Buddy tries to permanently erase Sherman by stealing his research and taking over his life. This isn't just an identity crisis; it's a gendered power struggle in which "one's sense of self rests precariously upon the audience's decision to validate or reject one's gender performance" (372). Buddy cannot simply coexist with Sherman; he must dominate, not share space. In Gerschick's terms, the pressure to continually achieve and display masculinity makes maintaining that performance "an almost Sisyphean task" (373), and Buddy responds by performing it ever more loudly and cruelly to keep his power intact.

Even Buddy's appeal to the audience complicates the film's ostensible moral. While Sherman wins in the end — reclaiming his body and getting the girl — Buddy is undeniably funnier, more confident, and more in control. He is, after all, Eddie Murphy "raw," without any prosthetics — comical, boisterous, and familiar. The film flirts with critique, but it also fetishizes domination, giving Buddy the best punchlines and the most screen presence. It's not just Sherman's fatness that is made into spectacle — it is Buddy's masculinity, too.

This dynamic is perhaps most sharply illustrated in two pivotal scenes involving Reggie Warrington (Dave Chappelle), a sadistic insult comic who performs at the local comedy club. In Sherman's first encounter with Reggie, he takes Carla on a date and hopes to impress her — only to become the main target of Reggie's routine. Sherman enters the busy nightclub with Carla and, as they make their way to their table, proceeds to bump into multiple people, causing dishes to spill and break — fatness as a disruptive force once again. After the comedy show starts and he realizes that Reggie is insulting audience members, Sherman, aware of his own visibility, tries to dodge the attention by quietly slipping away. Once again, he bumps into someone, drops something, and bends over, prompting Reggie to exclaim, "It's a full moon tonight!" What follows is a brutal and relentless series of fat jokes, each punchline more dehumanizing than the last:

- “I think I found where they hid Jimmy Hoffa.”
- “More crack than Harlem.”
- “Boy’s so fat, every time he turns around it’s his birthday.”
- “Have to put a belt on with a boomerang.”
- “Who is sucking whose titties over here?”
- “Last time this guy felt a breast it was in a bucket of KFC.”
- “When he goes to Sea World, they pay him.”
- “He must be on that new diet: Slim-Slow.”
- “I bet if we cut him open, he’d bleed chocolate milk.”
- “What would you do for a Klondike bar?”
- “Now we know what’s eating Gilbert Grape.”

These jokes are delivered not just as individual insults, but as a high-speed assault, weaponizing cultural associations of fatness with gluttony, asexuality, emasculation, animality, laziness, and even criminality. The camera cuts repeatedly to the crowd, roaring with laughter, while Sherman sits, humiliated and shrinking. In this moment, Sherman is both the butt of the joke and the film’s emotional center — a duality that forces viewers to grapple with (or, more likely, ignore) the contradiction at the heart of the movie’s message. The insults land atop a prosthetic buffer; viewers of the film can laugh knowing the injured body is literally padded. The suit creates a “safe” distance that naturalizes the hatefulness and anti-fatness of the routine. Gerschick also draws on Patricia Hill Collins’s concept of the *matrix of domination and privilege* to situate men with less-normative bodies in a complex social position. Such men, he notes, “have gender privilege by virtue of being men, yet this privilege is eroded [...] by their less-normative bodies,” leaving them open to a spectrum of sanctions. Sherman’s treatment in the Reggie scene makes this erosion visible: although still accountable to

masculine norms, he is denied the deference typically extended to men, his body becoming a license for public ridicule and a signifier of diminished social status.

The complexities of masculine social status become even more pointed in the second Reggie scene. Now transformed into Buddy Love, Sherman returns to the club with Carla, seeking revenge. And indeed, the audience is encouraged to root for this retributive moment — Buddy’s takedown of Reggie is meant to feel cathartic, a moment where justice is served and Sherman’s wounded pride is restored. Yet what unfolds is another barrage of fat jokes, this time aimed at Reggie’s mother:

- “Your mother is so fat the bitch needs a Thomas Guide to find her asshole.”
- “After sex I rolled over twice and I’m still on the bitch.”
- “The bitch has her toenails painted at Earl Scheib.”
- “Her blood type is Rocky Road.”
- “Her belt size is equator.”

There is irony in the way this scene unfolds. While Buddy is framed as avenging Sherman’s earlier humiliation, the tools of his revenge are the very same fatphobic tropes used against him. The target shifts, but the language of degradation remains the same — and worse, it becomes reframed toward misogyny. Buddy’s jokes are explicitly misogynistic, repeatedly calling the comic’s mother a “bitch” and invoking hypersexualized, violent imagery. Buddy’s misogynist fat jokes convert carnival into dominator masculinity, proving power by reproducing the very hierarchy once threatened. In trying to reclaim power, Buddy reasserts dominance through humiliation and abuse, revealing that his idea of justice is simply to wield the same weapons that wounded him.

In this light, Buddy Love isn’t a rejection of fatphobia — he is its internalization, projected outward. As the embodiment of dominator masculinity, he channels Sherman’s pain not into healing but into retaliation. bell hooks warns against this “psychic self-mutilation” in *The Will to Change*, noting:

The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem. (66)

Buddy embodies this process: he has cut away Sherman's vulnerability, not by dismantling the shame attached to his fat body, but by adopting the same patriarchal logic that cast that body as unacceptable in the first place. In attacking Reggie, Buddy simply redirects the insults, relying on the same fat jokes and stereotypes that once wounded him. The film treats this reversal as triumph — as if being the one who lands the blow changes the meaning of the blow itself — but the recycling of the same tired tropes reveals otherwise, repurposed to flatter the fantasy of masculine control.

The sequence ends with a literal punch: Buddy slams Reggie's face into the side of a grand piano, bends his arm back until he screams, and then tosses his body inside the case of the piano as the lid slams shut. The audience erupts into laughter and cheers as they witness this brutal fight. Buddy has conquered his emasculation by asserting himself through ridicule, verbal assault, and physical domination. Far from rejecting the ridicule that Sherman faced, the film ends up validating it — so long as the power dynamic is reversed. But in doing so, it perpetuates the same structures of harm that wounded Sherman in the first place. Fatness remains the object of derision. Women are collateral damage. And masculinity is once again defined by who can dominate whom, not by who dares to be soft.

Anchoring the scenes of Sherman's public humiliation at the hands Reggie are a dual set of workout montages that contrast Sherman's "before" and Buddy Love's "after." As in *Shallow Hal*, the

montage structure here functions as a delivery system for rapid-fire fat jokes, linking bodily control with social and sexual success while masking cruelty with comedy (see fig. 37).

The first montage is kicked off by the aforementioned dream sequence where Sherman's body crushes Carla's into the sand while they are passionately kissing on the beach. Sherman awakens with a start, only to be greeted by the motivational shrieking of Lance Perkins's infomercial. Cue the music — specifically, The Pointer Sisters' "I'm So Excited" — and the film launches into a montage that plays Sherman's attempts at exercise for laughs. It begins with visual gags designed to emphasize his lack of coordination and physical incapacity: he stumbles through a dance fitness class, failing to match the rhythm; he punches awkwardly at a bag he can't quite reach; he tries to jump rope but can't get off the ground. The editing is quick and rhythmic, in step with the music. The montage also includes an acupuncture sequence where Sherman, stripped to his prosthetic-covered torso, lies passively as an acupuncturist inserts needles into his body. "Still hungry?" the acupuncturist asks after each jab. Sherman nods in increasingly sheepish affirmation. By the end, Sherman's body is covered in needles like a porcupine, prompting the acupuncturist to deadpan: "Maybe you should try Jenny Craig."

The humor escalates as Sherman attempts more strenuous activities. He tries to jump on a trampoline but only succeeds in flattening it, leaving him stranded and ashamed. He breaks the bars of a bench press, collapsing to the floor in a heap. Sherman "curls" candy bars to his mouth while seated next to a muscular white man lifting heavy weights. Sherman's fatness renders him incapable of seriousness, while the other man's leanness is synonymous with control and discipline. Even as Sherman begins to improve, *Rocky*-style, the film still keeps him a joke — his body remains unruly, his movements exaggerated, his chest bouncing visibly through his clothes during aerobic routines. The montage never allows him dignity; his progress is a setup, not a payoff.



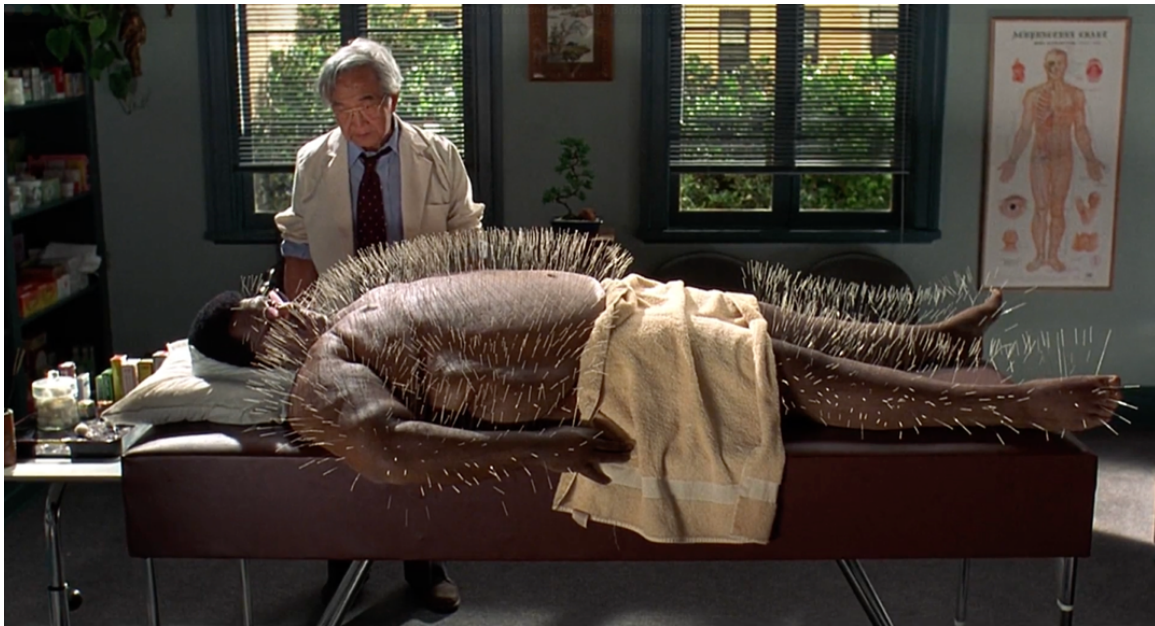


Fig. 37. Sherman's montage of fat jokes as he tries to lose weight in 'The Nutty Professor'.

After the insult comic humiliation, Sherman has another nightmare about his fatness. This time, Sherman's fat continues to expand to gigantic proportions, crushing and killing people under his weight. He expands to the size of a city-destroying monster (see fig. 38).



Fig. 38. Sherman growing to the size of a monster in a nightmare sequence in The Nutty Professor.

Reggie sees him from below and calls him “Fatzilla.” The dream ends when Sherman releases a massive fart that triggers a nuclear-style explosion. Sherman wakes with a start again, now desperate enough to go to his university lab in the middle of the night and consume his experimental weight-loss serum. After doing this, “Buddy Love” awakens, now miraculously thin and played by Eddie Murphy sans the fat suit. He clutches his chest in surprise and exclaims, “I don’t need to wear a bra no more!” He holds out his pants, now cartoonishly baggy, and gazes down with wide-eyed glee: “Well I’ll be damned. I can see my dick!” (see fig. 39). These lines, crude as they are, emphasize that to be fat is to be emasculated, hidden, and ashamed. To be thin is to be visible, virile, and free.



Fig. 39. Murphy sans-fat suit celebrating his visible penis in The Nutty Professor.

This kicks off the second workout montage (see fig. 40). Buddy Love tries on a rainbow of tight-fitting spandex outfits, dancing in front of mirrors. He bounds joyfully on a trampoline, yelling, “No titties!” He immediately turns to a nearby woman and clarifies, “I’m talking about my titties. They’re gone. Your titties are lovely. What’s your name?” The shame that haunted Sherman’s chest has been replaced by leering attention to women’s bodies. What was once a source of ridicule is now a source of power — but one that is explicitly sexually predatory. The montage continues with Buddy strutting through an aerobics class, thrusting his hips suggestively and ogling the women around him. The tone is celebratory, triumphant, even liberating, but only because the fat body has been obliterated. The montage ends with Buddy repeatedly screaming “I’m thin!” from a rooftop, arms stretched wide like a messiah. Only the thin body is granted agency, sexuality, and joy. And as in *Shallow Hal*, the montage structure allows these judgments to accumulate quickly, almost invisibly. The gags come fast, and together they reinforce the socially acceptable hierarchy that fatness is both unattractive and unlivable. Sherman’s montages, like Rosemary’s, show a body in the way.





Fig. 40. Buddy Love's hypersexual workout montage in The Nutty Professor.

The fact that the film tries to have it both ways — sentimentalizing Sherman while glorifying Buddy — reflects the cultural confusion of the 1990s. It's no coincidence that this film emerged in an era of intense backlash against “soft men,” a decade bookended by Clintonian triangulation and the rise of men's rights groups. Buddy Love isn't just Sherman's alter ego. He's a fantasy of hegemonic masculinity brought to life — a violent, seductive performance of power that is as insecure as it is excessive. Buddy is aggressive, hypersexual, egotistical, and emotionally vacant. He disrespects and dominates women, violently attacks men, and insults and condescends anyone unlucky enough to cross his path. Yet, in the face of all this, he continues to fulfill the patriarchal fantasy of success: he has group sex with three women; drives expensive sports cars; wears fashionable clothes; and obtains respect from and even dominates other rich and powerful men, including the money-hungry Dean Pelton (Larry Miller), who continuously fat-shamed and degraded Sherman.

The film's finale makes the stakes of that fantasy explicit. At a university fundraiser — a literal stage on which reputations and resources hang — Buddy intends to seal his social ascendance before

donors and colleagues. Sherman intervenes, and what follows is a CGI spectacle of a man split against himself. Their shared body erupts and distorts: cheeks balloon, torsos swell and shrink, and the crowd responds in horror. Murphy reacts from the audience as Sherman's mother, who faints at the sight. Whatever sentimental rhetoric the film has offered about self-acceptance gives way to a public trial of manhood. It is a fight to see which man will control their body and their fate.

Crucially, Sherman does not prevail through conventionally feminine qualities — care, tenderness, restraint — nor even through the tools of his profession as a scientist. He wins by out-shouting and out-muscling Buddy, grappling for authority, striking, pushing, and holding him back until the slender, cruel persona is forced into retreat. Each identity fights for dominance as they exchange insults: “Fat ass,” “Tinkerbell,” “Blubberbutt,” “Featherweight,” etc. These are not only comic jabs but also the internalized, gendered fatphobic shame Sherman has absorbed. In this light, the film recalls the film's original source material: Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which allegorically explored repressed desire surfacing itself in opposition to Victorian mores. This allegory can be mapped to Buddy as the grotesque “Other” who embodies the very diet-obsessed, fatphobic culture the film inhabits. Viewed this way, Buddy functions less as Sherman's pure antagonist than as his uncontained Id and the unflattering reflection of a culture that demands bodily control at all costs. While the comedy works to contain this possibility, the text leaves traces of a more complicated, partially redeeming critique: that the *true* antagonist of the film is the ideology that renders his fatness and femininity monstrous. Yet the film does not ultimately sustain this counterreading. Whatever symbolic echoes of *Jekyll and Hyde* might suggest about repressed desire or internalized shame, they are subsumed by the staging of Sherman's victory as a physical contest. The narrative resolves itself not in reflection, acceptance, or kindness but in spectacle, redirecting the drama of self-loathing into a public proof of masculine force.

Sherman chokes Buddy, his fat hand wrapping around his throat; Buddy punches Sherman in the crotch, playing into his emasculation. Sherman/Buddy slap and punch at their shared, deforming body, as thin and (CGI enhanced) fat forms vie for bodily control (see fig. 41). The terms of victory are those of domination. The fundraiser audience functions as the tribunal that confirms Sherman's renewed masculine legitimacy. What looks like an internal moral choice is narratively staged as a public contest of force. Ultimately, Sherman's attempts at masculine dominance prove successful after literally beating and subduing his thin alter ego.

This reprise of spectacle mirrors the insult comic episodes. Just as Buddy could only answer humiliation with more humiliation — turning fatphobic and misogynist cruelty outward — Sherman can only answer Buddy by mastering him through violence. The film cannot imagine a resolution in which softness, interdependence, or vulnerability constitute strength.





Fig. 41. The CGI spectacle of Sherman physically fighting himself/ Buddy Love during the climax of The Nutty Professor.

This is once again hooks' dominator model of masculinity in action: power is enacted as control over others, not care for others. In the climax, the fantasy of "self-acceptance" is paradoxically achieved by suppressing the self that feels, the part of Sherman coded as soft and feminized. To be the victor, he must subdue that softness on a public stage and absorb Buddy's hypermasculinity. By reinforcing this

violent and dominating picture of masculinity, the film is continuing a narrative that harms men. “The reality is that men are hurting and that the whole culture responds to them by saying, ‘Please do not tell us what you feel,’” explains hooks (6). In doing so, we “doom [men] to live in states of emotional numbness. We construct a culture where male pain can have no voice, where male hurt cannot be named or healed” (6). The film offers no solution other than domination and suppression, failing to align the purported message of love and fat acceptance with the actual events of the film. “Ultimately,” writes hooks, “boys and men save themselves when they learn the art of loving” — an art that *The Nutty Professor* fails to realize (16).

Instead, Sherman’s triumph of domination and control is ratified by heterosexual coupling with Carla Purty, a conventionally attractive partner whose admiration functions as social capital and masculine validation. The film neither acknowledges nor problematizes the institutional asymmetry that has shadowed their relationship all along. He is her professor; she is a graduate student. In real academic contexts, that power differential is generally discouraged precisely because it compromises consent; here it is folded into the fairy-tale ending. Off-screen, the approximate decade age gap between Murphy and Pinkett tracks with a broader cultural script that prizes pairings in which older men have relationships with younger women.

The ending is less a rebuke of fatphobia than a re-inscription of the norms that produce it. The fat body appears only as failure or as a problem to be overcome; successful masculinity is equated with visible control — of one’s body, one’s rivals, and one’s romantic partner’s gaze. *The Nutty Professor* thus closes its loop: it sentimentalizes Sherman’s vulnerability, but it crowns him only after he proves, before an audience, that he can dominate the part of himself that threatens his place within the patriarchy.

VI. Conclusion

Across *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor*, I have shown how prosthetic comedy regulates gender through repetition. Headless framings, montage-driven fat jokes, good-fatty moralizing, and detachable suits all operate less as subversions than as assurances: the fat body is a temporary obstacle, a condition that can be technically managed and narratively expelled. These films perform care only to translate it back into discipline, voicing empathy for fat characters while teaching that legitimacy comes once fatness is contained. Around them, trailers and behind-the-scenes features invite us to marvel at transformation while keeping real fat embodiment at a distance.

The next chapter takes up what happens when these same devices are enlisted in the service of racial masquerade. For if prosthetic comedy manages gender by keeping fatness detachable, it manages race by combining fat drag with longer impersonation traditions — blackface, gender drag, and other forms of identity borrowing. *Norbit* pushes the pattern to its limit, dropping the thin veil of “inner beauty” moralizing and relying openly on the expectation that a fat Black woman is always already grotesque as its engine of laughter. The result is a composite figure, the sapphimmabel, whose body fuses Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel images into a single caricature that reanimates stereotypes with new prosthetic and digital tools.

In following this movement from critique of films that prioritize gender performance to critique that prioritizes racial drag, the project emphasizes intersectional continuity. The detachable fat suit that allowed Paltrow or Murphy to exit intact in earlier films becomes, in *Norbit*, the site of digital dismemberment — famous faces composited onto anonymous bodies, real fat performers erased while their flesh remains as prop. The laughter still depends on reversibility, on the guarantee that the star is untouched beneath the latex, but it also draws on a centuries-long archive of Black

female caricature. What is at stake is not only which bodies can be desired but which bodies can be played, and at what cost.

If Chapter 2 demonstrated that prosthetic comedy polices gender through containment, Chapter 3 shows how those same technologies update blackface logics for the 1990s and 2000s, binding fatness to racialized femininity in order to secure disgust and restore normative romance. And because *Norbit* makes this logic so stark — offering no alibi of inner beauty, no promise of transformation beyond removal — it also marks the breaking point of the cycle. What had been a profitable “golden age” of fat suit gross-out comedies from the mid-1990s to early 2000s reaches its decline here: the laughter curdles, the disguises no longer feel novel, and the spectacle of Rasputia reveals the genre’s reliance on exhausted stereotypes. In turning to *Norbit*, then, the project moves from how prosthetics feminize or emasculate fatness to how they fuse fatness with feminine Blackness, exposing not only who may be loved and who may be laughed at, but why this particular cycle of prosthetic comedy could not sustain itself any longer.

CHAPTER 3: FAT SUIT EVOLUTION: *NORBIT*, RACE, AND EATING THE OTHER

I. Introduction

A decade after John Landis directed *Animal House* — the seminal gross-out Animal Comedy according to William Paul — he would be behind the camera directing Eddie Murphy in four different roles in 1988's *Coming to America* (86). This film proved to be the first of several films where Murphy would portray a host of characters rendered unrecognizable by makeup and prosthetics. For *Coming to America*, the 27-year-old Murphy would portray the film's hero, Akeem, the Crown Prince of Zamunda, as well as a lead singer of the soul band "Sexual Chocolate," an elderly barber called Clarence, and an old white Jewish man called Saul. Murphy would return to playing multiple characters (including another one in whiteface makeup) in Wes Craven's *A Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995). Notably, none of these characters were padded up or donning full-fledged fat suits — nor were any of them women. As we saw in the previous chapter, Murphy would tackle both fat and drag for *The Nutty Professor*. It is with this film that we see the beginning of the fat suit gross-out film, as well as a more specific trend: thin, bankable male stars disappearing beneath layers of foam rubber and latex to emerge as outsized, unruly Black women.

William Paul noted of the original strain of Animal Comedies that "race is rarely a central issue in these films" (127). Even in Animal Comedies that feature Black actors, including Murphy's starring roles in both Landis' *Coming to America* and *Trading Places* (1983), race remains hemmed in by conservative sexual politics (126).⁶⁵ Black actors were rarely seen in starring roles in these Animal

⁶⁵ While Paul identifies these Murphy-led films as Animal Comedies because of their strong anti-establishment ethos, it is notable that they are rather tame compared to the earliest Animal Comedies like *Animal House* and *Porky's*, especially in terms of their sexual politics and gross-out elements. In general, these SNL-inspired comedies became tamer as the Reagan era continued, which might partly account for their renaissance in the late 90s. Dialectically speaking, it makes sense that there would be a reactionary surge of gross-out films after they waned in popularity.

Comedies, and when they were, they were typically denied meaningful romantic or sexual plots. Paul argues that this was especially true in Murphy's first few starring roles, where his white counterparts maintained all the sexual agency:

Trading Places might present Eddie Murphy in a starring role that in effect raises him to the top of the social heap, but it still has a kind of double standard in the way that it treats him. A romantic plot is presented in great detail for white costar Aykroyd, but Murphy goes it alone for most of the film, even though he is a performer with far greater sexual presence on-screen than Aykroyd. (126)

Paul argues that this is much the same case in Murphy's star-making roles in *48 Hrs.* (Walter Hill, 1982) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984) (126–127).

By the mid-1990s, the landscape changed. Murphy was beginning to have more power over his roles, even getting focused romantic/sexual plots (as was the case in *Coming to America*). On top of that, as we have seen, effects shops that once concentrated on horror and creature work were now building seamless makeup and foam bodies for studio comedies, and stars were selling films on the promise of transformation. Eddie Murphy became the model for that approach. *The Nutty Professor* showed how a single performer could carry an entire comic world through prosthetics and timing. Thinness and fatness became moveable parts. Gender, race, and body size could be played as an act. The machinery was visible and, for audiences, part of the fun.

Earlier gross-out hits tended to keep race at the margins of their romantic plots, but by the late 1990s, Hollywood comedies had recentered their humor on performances of Blackness and femininity. This shift also drew on a longer Hollywood tradition of drag performance that had been mainstreamed in the 1980s through films including *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982), *Just One of the Guys* (Lisa Gottlieb, 1985), and the sitcom *Bosom Buddies* (1980–82) — films and shows that featured coded

ways of dealing with issues of same-sex desire and homophobia. By the 1990s, that model of “transformative” drag acting was available to Black comedians, such as Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry, as a way to express their range and expand their appeal. Many of these later films put a fat Black woman at the center of the frame then insured the risk through the presence of a beloved male star. It is a clever industrial solution. The audience gets the rush of recognition and the safe distance of impersonation. The studio gets an anchored brand and repeatable bits. The image that carries the weight is a familiar one: a large, loud, older Black woman who commands space, controls men, and overflows the frame. The history of that figure is long, and the comedy cues arrive ready-made.

That transition is the backdrop for the claim I make in this chapter. Murphy set the template with *The Nutty Professor* and then, a decade later, pushed it to its limit in *Norbit*. The films in between — including *Big Momma’s House* and the consolidation of Tyler Perry’s Madea on screen — proved the model’s reach across genres and ratings. *Norbit* is where the mask drops. Unlike the Lawrence and Perry vehicles, this film no longer pretends to deliver a lesson about beauty on the inside or loving the “real” person. It treats anti-fatness, racism, and misogyny as the engine of the comedy and trusts that the laughter will carry. It is a film that takes the extreme grotesquerie of Fat Bastard and a vanquished White Goodman — figures who once enthralled audiences in brief doses, combines it with anti-Black stereotypes, and makes it the film’s full focus. In that sense *Norbit* functions like a death rattle. It reveals how the cycle works and, by doing so baldly, shows why the cycle had limited places left to go.

This chapter begins by explaining why the fat, Black, female figure is so instantly recognizable in American popular culture. I sketch how Black women’s bodies, and fat Black women’s bodies in particular, have been built up as comic and monstrous signs in visual media. The aim is to show how certain faces, postures, and appetites were coded as excess; how those codes split across the familiar

images known as the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel; and how those images continued to surface in new forms as the medium changed.

From there, I turn to the perennial casting question: who gets to play whom, and under what terms. This means looking at a much older and wider set of impersonation practices in Anglo-American entertainment — blackface, yellowface, “cripping up,” cis actors playing trans roles — and placing the fat suit in that company.⁶⁶ My goal is not to collapse these traditions into each other but to notice the common patterns they share. Again and again, we see dominant actors borrowing marginalized embodiment as raw material for performance. What ties these examples together is the promise of reversibility. The actor can always take off the prosthetic, drop the accent, wipe off the face paint, and return to a privileged position once the part is over. Audiences are comforted by this guarantee as well. We can enjoy the spectacle while knowing our favorite star remains untouched by non-normativity beneath the disguise. That promise is not trivial. It shapes audience impact, what kinds of jokes are possible, and who is excluded from the roles themselves.

With that groundwork in place, I turn to the brief run of early-2000s comedies that made fat Black female drag a reliable Hollywood formula — most notably *Big Momma’s House*, *Big Momma’s House 2*, and the early entries in Tyler Perry’s *Madea* series. Although *The Nutty Professor* first proved that fat Black drag could drive a blockbuster, these later films cemented it as an industry model. They transformed the fat Black matriarch into a bankable persona whose authority, anger, and excess could be safely contained within the elastic boundaries of a fat suit. This section therefore situates *Norbit*

⁶⁶ The term “cripping up” is used within disability activist and advocacy circles to describe the practice of nondisabled actors portraying disabled characters. As journalist Gae Lee explains, it “traditionally [...] refers to an able-bodied actor ‘dressing up’ as a physically disabled character, but this term is often used more broadly to cover non-disabled people playing intellectually disabled characters or characters with mental illnesses, and neurotypical actors playing Autistic roles” (“The problem with ‘cripping up’ and why casting disabled actors matters”). The phrase critiques how such performances earn acclaim while excluding disabled actors from telling their own stories. “Crippling up” is similar to Siebers’ term “disability drag,” which is explored below.

within a longer history of Black feminine caricature, setting up the hybridized stereotype that LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant calls the “sapphimmibel” — a composite of the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel (59), types that will be discussed in depth below.

The heart of the chapter is the close reading of *Norbit*. *Norbit* does not try to soften or sweeten the fat jokes with a moral. It organizes disgust and control into a clean arc and treats Rasputia, the fat-suited antagonist, as a problem to be expelled so that the desired couple can live happily ever after. The final movement addresses the production choices that make those gags read as comical. The suit matters. The edit matters. The head-replacement work matters. The use of a body double matters. I call this “digital dismemberment” to mark how the film splits face and body in a way that updates older practices of objectifying the fat female form. The effect is a character who is assembled from parts in a way that keeps the star fully present and the fat body interchangeable. That design helps explain why the spectacle feels frictionless for the audience and why the figure on screen has so little interiority to work with.

Animal Comedies thrived on the pleasures of excess and the thrill of watching rule-breakers mock good taste. In *Animal House*, class resentment drives the narrative and the humor. In the 2000s cycle I track here, the humor is still present, yet the target is a body that comes pre-loaded with centuries of implications. The films rely on that history while claiming freedom from past baggage via drag. That is why *Norbit* matters for this project. It concentrates the move from naughty inversion to routine discipline. It shows how thinness, lightness, and heteroromantic legitimacy are restored through the removal of a figure that the film has taught us to read as excessive in ways directly connected with race and gender.

Casting and makeup are the means by which the industry decides who counts. When a star can take off a body and walk away, the people whose bodies are being borrowed are once again

sidelined from telling their own stories. Murphy's range and charisma helped launch an era of technical showmanship. *Norbit* shows the cost of that showmanship when the joke depends on a simulacrum of a fat Black woman's body to do the work. This chapter keeps that cost in view.

II. Controlling Images and the Fat Black Woman

The figure of the grotesque Black body — especially the fat Black female body — has long been a fixture of American visual culture and racial caricature. To understand Rasputia in *Norbit* and her antecedents, we must trace how women's Blackness and fatness became intertwined as comic and monstrous signifiers. Patricia Hill Collins insists that stereotypes including the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire function as “controlling images,” ideological tools “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69).⁶⁷ These images are not reflections of reality but “disguises or mystifications of objective social relations” (69). They allow dominant groups to naturalize white, patriarchal hierarchy by constructing Black womanhood as an object of ridicule, containment, or moral panic. As Collins explains, “portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression” (69). Such caricatures circulated widely across paintings, cartoons, advertisements, and literature long before their codification on screen.

One crucial stage for the development of these images was European theater. Before the rise of American blackface minstrelsy, white performers across Europe were already experimenting with racial impersonation as comic spectacle. As theater scholar Noémie Ndiaye demonstrates, early

⁶⁷ Black men have been subjected to vicious and enduring controlling images as well. For a study of Black images across cinema, especially those related to Black men, see Donald Bogle's influential book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, especially pp. 2–15.

modern European theatrical culture developed “scripts of blackness” — standardized performance techniques of impersonation that turned Blackness into a malleable stage effect (23). White actors used dark makeup, padding, and exaggerated gestures to embody a fantasy of Blackness for white spectators.

By the 19th century, this diffuse tradition of caricature and impersonation crystallized into a distinctly American genre: blackface minstrelsy. Whereas European impersonation treated Blackness as an exotic masquerade, American minstrelsy institutionalized it as the nation’s most popular theatrical form. “The minstrel show has been ubiquitous, cultural common coin,” explains cultural historian Eric Lott. “It has been so central to the lives of North Americans that we are hardly aware of its extraordinary influence” (5). As historian George Rehin notes, discussion of the stereotypes perpetuated by minstrelsy “requires no general introduction for students of American popular culture, for it was an extraordinarily popular theatrical genre” throughout the country’s history (682). Blackface minstrels exaggerated certain features to mark Black bodies as inherently outrageous and not-quite-human: wigs made of wool, bulging eyes, flat noses, exaggerated lips, including “long, dangling lower lips,” “wide, grinning mouths with prominent white teeth,” “gigantic, flapping feet,” and “skin as black as ink” were standard (694). Performers adopted distorted postures and “grotesque body movements” to amplify the effect, drawing on clowning traditions while developing a specifically racialized visual lexicon (694–695). The blackface minstrel’s clownish costume and prosthetic appearance signified Blackness as excess — a body of “too-muchness” that was laughable and alien. Through ridicule, these performances soothed white anxieties about Black presence, reinforcing a racial hierarchy under the guise of clown-like, buffoonish performance.

Lott describes minstrelsy as “an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice [...] in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit,” a “half-century’s inurement to the uses of

white supremacy,” but also a contradictory site where “fascination, theft, anxiety, and pleasure mixed” (3–4). Minstrelsy, he explains, staged “contradictory racial impulses,” joining “ridicule and racist lampoon” to a persistent white desire to “try on the accents of ‘blackness’” (4, 6). This contradiction was inseparable from the venues and audiences in which it flourished. Lott notes that those who “blackened up” and those who laughed along were working-class (often Irish) men navigating fraught masculinity and assimilation, and minstrelsy’s “equivocal character” reflects the conflicts of that position (36). “Structurally [minstrelsy] was a working-class form, firmly grounded in the institutional spaces and cultural predispositions of workers,” explains Lott (71). These precarious masculine and working-class “values and desires were aired and secured in the minstrel show” (71). In these performances, working-classness and Blackness were often equated as much as they were differentiated: the laughter both indulged in cross-racial identification and then re-instituted distance “with ridicule” (74).

This deeply male culture of minstrelsy also shaped how gender intersected with racial caricature. Minstrel companies were overwhelmingly all-male troupes of white performers who smeared burnt cork or greasepaint on their faces (Lott 6). Misogyny came through in drag performances: “White men’s fear of female power was dramatized with a suspiciously draconian punitiveness in early minstrelsy, usually in the grotesque transmutations of its female figures” (27). These men donned “outrageously oversized and/or ragged ‘Negro’ costumes” and built entire shows around comic songs, dialect, and caricature, with women’s roles usually played by men in drag (6). In these shows, grotesque performances of Black women were a staple of the olio, where “cross-dressed ‘wench’ performances” sat alongside stump speeches and comic dialogues (6). The obvious artifice of a white man in blackface *and* a padded dress was part of the humor, a joke in its own right. As Lott emphasizes, these performances often occurred in homosocial venues like saloons, billiard rooms, and

workingmen's clubs (often alongside "bare-knuckle prizefights and cockfights"), where young men came to bond, perform masculinity, and negotiate class and gender anxieties through racial impersonation (75). Although women did eventually perform in blackface, the core conventions of these impersonations were established in and by male troupes, making even Black womanhood a masquerade performed by men. This reduction of Black women to blackface drag caricatures underscores Collins' observation that controlling images strip Black women of authorship over their identities, transforming them into costumes. "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history," Collins writes. "As objects, one's reality is defined by others" (71). Minstrel caricatures not only demeaned but also disciplined audiences on how (and how not) to see Black people as humans, intertwining race, class, and gender in the process.

This theatrical grotesque did not exist in isolation; it both drew from and reinforced broader contemporaneous intellectual and scientific discourses that cast Black bodies as objects of study and derision. The grotesque in minstrelsy converged with Enlightenment racial "science," which pathologized African bodies to justify slavery and colonialism. Much of this scientific racism was targeted specifically toward Black women. Sabrina Strings demonstrates how 18th- and 19th-century European thinkers cast traits like curvaceous and fat flesh as markers of barbarism and gluttony (89). The most infamous case was Saartjie "Sara" Baartman, the Khoikhoi woman exhibited in Europe as the "Hottentot Venus." Baartman's large buttocks were fetishized and mocked as a freak of nature in early 1800s London and Paris (92). European spectators gawked at her "grotesquely oversized" flesh, constructing Baartman as a living caricature of Black female corporality (92). Through colonial eyes, her Blackness and fatness combined into an icon of deviant bodily excess. This spectacle not only titillated audiences but also fueled emerging racial science: Baartman was prodded and studied by anatomists like Georges Cuvier, "the man responsible for turning Sara into an internationally

recognized totem of racial and sexual savagery” (93). In short, the Black female body was fetishized and objectified as grotesquely fertile, voluptuous, and alien — a direct contrast to the slim, “civilized” white body (98).

Collins’ framework makes clear that Baartman’s treatment was not an anomaly but a cornerstone of racial ideology. Binary thinking, she explains, defines Black women not as different but as oppositional: “Whites and Blacks, males and females, thought and feeling are not complementary counterparts — they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites” (70). Baartman’s “excess” flesh rendered her the Other against which white slender femininity defined itself. Strings underscores this point, noting how fatness was increasingly coded as “coarse,” “immoral,” “Black,” and “Other,” thereby elevating slenderness as the mark of elite white femininity (212–13). The fear of the Black female body — with its supposed unrestrained appetites and grotesque fertility — became integral to the emergence of the slender aesthetic in the West. Collins adds that such controlling images serve to “justify the matrix of domination in the United States” (84). The grotesque display of Baartman and others like her cemented the ideological fusion of Blackness, fatness, and deviance.

From this colonial and minstrel backdrop emerged the archetypes that Collins identifies as central controlling images of Black womanhood: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire/Matriarch. Mammy — the “first controlling image applied to U.S. Black women” — represented the “good” Black woman, the “faithful, obedient domestic servant” and enslaved woman (72). She was consistently depicted as dark-skinned, fat, and asexual — “so dark, so thoroughly black that it is preposterous even to suggest that she be a sex object” (Bogle 11). Thus, she could be seen as a comforting caricature who embodied the “ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power” by caring for white families better than her own (72). She was, as historian Donald Bogle puts it, “usually big, fat, and

cantankerous” (6). Mammy’s fatness was central to her caricature: her bulk symbolized nurturing abundance even as it coded her as primitive, unattractive, maternal, and safely desexualized. Feminist critic Barbara Christian observes that “all the functions of mammy are magnificently physical [...] Mammy, then, harmless in her position of slave, unable because of her all-giving nature to do harm, is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female” (2). In this sense, the Mammy figure consolidated anxieties about race, gender, and the body into a single, seemingly harmless form, while ensuring that Black women’s visibility remained tightly bound to servitude and subordination.

If Mammy was the desexualized servant, Jezebel was the hypersexual deviant. Collins explains that Jezebel originated under slavery as “a sexually aggressive wet nurse” image, used to rationalize sexual assault by portraying Black women as insatiable (81). By insisting that they “just can’t get enough,” white society reframed rape as explained by inherent hypersexual racial type. Jezebel’s function was to relegate many Black women “to the category of sexually aggressive women” (81). This image marked Black women as embodying unrestrained lust, further contrasting Black women with supposedly virtuous white femininity. Collins traces the Jezebel trope into its modern forms — the “hoochie mama” and “hot momma” — from 2 Live Crew’s “Hoochie Mama” to music videos where Black women’s sexuality is depicted as purchasable excess (82–83). Like Mammy, Jezebel was a grotesque controlling image, but instead of desexualization she encoded *hypersexuality* as the natural state of Black women.

The Sapphire or Matriarch trope offered yet another foundational controlling image, one that blended aggression with grotesque humor. Collins identifies the Matriarch as the “bad Black mother,” a failed Mammy whose strength was reframed as pathology (76). Popularized by the Moynihan Report in 1965, the Matriarch explained poverty and emasculation as the product of domineering Black

women rather than structural racism (77–78). In media caricature, this figure overlapped with the Sapphire stereotype. As LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant explains, Sapphire was consistently staged as the attitudinal Black woman — “hands on hips pose,” voice raised, making sure everyone knew she was in charge” (58). Popularized through Ernestine Ward’s role in *Amos ’n’ Andy* (1951–1960), this figure was written as spiteful and domineering, the type who cut men down to size (58). Her exaggerated aggression was not simply a punchline in itself but a device that made audiences pity or sympathize with the beleaguered, henpecked males around her (58). Collins emphasizes that these stereotypes reinforced patriarchal control: “aggressive, assertive women are penalized — they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine” (77). The (often fat) Black woman here became not only laughable but threatening, a grotesque emasculator.

By the mid-20th century, blackface had declined, but these images had become entrenched in American culture — the Mammy most of all. Hollywood films helped ensure its persistence by repeatedly casting fat Black women in roles that demanded cheerful servitude and maternal devotion. 1934’s critically acclaimed *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl) dramatized this pattern with Louise Beavers playing a loyal domestic worker whose very livelihood was tied to pancakes and syrup, echoing the marketing iconography of Aunt Jemima.^{68, 69} The films fused melodrama with stereotype, presenting Black women’s suffering as noble sacrifice in ways that reassured white audiences. Just a few years after the original *Imitation of Life*, Hattie McDaniel played a character literally called Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), which cemented the image’s cultural authority. Her Oscar win made history, but it also confirmed Hollywood’s embrace of Mammy as the most acceptable — and

⁶⁸ Aunt Jemima, a long-running brand icon, took Mammy from the plantation kitchen to the supermarket shelf. Cheerful, rotund, eternally devoted, Aunt Jemima epitomized Collins’ point that “contemporary mammies should be completely committed to their jobs” (74). Donald Bogle describes Aunt Jemimas as an “offshoot” of the Mammy image, “toms blessed with religion” (7).

⁶⁹ *Imitation of Life* was remade by director Douglas Sirk in 1959. The pancake plotline was dropped in favor of a more progressive depiction of Juanita Moore’s domestic servant character, Annie.

profitable — role for a Black woman. As Collins notes, the Mammy image “buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood” by defining white femininity via contrast to Black women’s asexual servitude (74). Together, this profitable iconography shows how deeply ingrained the Mammy figure had become by mid-century, shifting from stage caricature to advertising mascot to melodramatic and Oscar-winning performances that defined how Black women could appear on screen.

Comedy stages likewise echoed these scripts. Moms Mabley, one of the most influential Black woman comedians of the 20th century, built her persona around being an eccentric, aging, and often unattractive woman — a role that allowed her to comment on politics and race but still drew laughter from the grotesque incongruity of her body and demeanor (“Moms Mabley”). LaWanda Page’s Aunt Esther in *Sanford and Son* (1972–77) revived the Sapphire caricature in full force: brash, nagging, emasculating. The Jim Crow Museum directly refers to her as a “Bible-swinging, angry [...] Sapphire character” (“The Sapphire Caricature - Anti-black Imagery”). Page’s humor resonated, but it did so by leaning into the very stereotype Collins critiques as the “matriarch,” the “bad Black mother” blamed for Black poverty and dysfunction (75). Around the same time, *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970–74) brought this dynamic to prime-time variety. Wilson’s drag alter ego Geraldine Jones — “overtly sexual and dominating,” blending “a long lineage of stereotypes in pastiche” — became a flashpoint for both critique and caricature (Sutherland 63).⁷⁰ As media scholar Meghan Sutherland observes, Wilson’s use of vaudeville-style mimicry and drag “primarily [critiqued] the representational politics of television” while producing “varied and unpredictable [...] political ripples” (62–63). Sutherland explains that Geraldine’s “trademark admonishment of guests who assume too much familiarity with her male body” — expressed in her recurring lines, “You don’t know me that well!” and “What you see is what

⁷⁰ Flip Wilson’s mainstream visibility underscores the power of these televised images. In January 1972, *Time* magazine featured Wilson’s face on its cover, declaring him “TV’s First Black Superstar,” a recognition that, as Sutherland notes, simply confirmed “what an unprecedented number of television fans spanning races, regions, and generations already knew” (xvii).

you get!” — made the performance’s artifice explicit, reminding (often white) viewers that what they were laughing at was itself a constructed (and controlling) image of Black femininity (66–67).

The turn of the 21st century witnessed a new technological update of these archetypes. Prosthetic fat suits and makeup allowed comedians to embody grotesque Black female caricatures with renewed realism. These performances were billed as comic transformations, but they drew directly from the centuries-long lineage of controlling images. Collins warns that “taken together, these prevailing images of Black womanhood represent elite White male interests in defining Black women’s sexuality and fertility” (83). For *Big Momma*, *Madea*, the Klump matriarchs, and *Rasputia* most of all, fatness, Blackness, and femininity intersect as the butt of the joke, reaffirming that Black women’s bodies are grotesque objects for entertainment.

By the time *Norbit* was conceived, a template was firmly in place. The filmmakers could draw on a long lineage of controlling images of fat Black women —images at once risible and frightening — and know that audiences would readily recognize them. As Collins observes, “even when the initial conditions that foster controlling images change, the images themselves endure” (69). Black fat suit drag, embodied most visibly by Eddie Murphy under prosthetics, is not an anomaly of a single film but rather the culmination of representational practices that have been centuries in the making.

III. Imitation Politics: Minstrelsy’s Afterlife and Performative Analogs

The endurance of these stereotypes is inseparable from the performers who enact them. When comedians like Eddie Murphy or Martin Lawrence don prosthetic fatness to channel grotesque femininity, they extend a long tradition of dominance through impersonation. The question of representation, then, is not only about the images themselves but also about the actors who are granted permission to embody them. The question of who gets to play whom is not an aesthetic footnote but

an index of power. Casting is never merely a matter of artistic freedom: it is a site where the authority to represent is distributed unevenly. Across Anglo-American performance history, practices of impersonation — blackface, yellowface, brownface, “cripping up,” cis actors playing trans roles, and thin actors donning fat suits — have functioned as technologies of representation that shore up existing hierarchies of race, gender, ability, sexuality, and size. When a dominant body puts on a marginalized embodiment “for the part,” the act draws upon and refreshes older scripts of ridicule and exclusion. bell hooks identifies such processes of cultural consumption as “eating the Other”: difference becomes a commodity to be tried on by privileged actors, a “spice” and “seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (*Black Looks* 21). Similarly, philosopher Linda Alcoff writes about “the problem of speaking for others,” where “the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (7). “Trying on” difference turns identity into a temporary costume, a way for privileged actors to signal depth or daring without risk.

Among the clearest illustrations of these dynamics is found in disability representation. Disability theorists have long critiqued the practice of casting nondisabled actors in disabled roles, emphasizing both the cultural distortions it produces and the industrial structures it reinforces. Disability scholar Tobin Siebers captures the core problem by describing such performances as “disability drag,” noting that “the modern cinema often puts the stigma of disability on display, except that films exhibit the stigma not to insiders by insiders, as is the usual case with drag, but to a general public that does not realize it is attending a drag performance” (115). Audiences mistake exaggeration for authenticity, and the effect is compounded by what Siebers calls disability’s status as a “spoiled identity” (115). On the one hand, he acknowledges that “the advantage of disability drag is that it prompts audiences to embrace disability,” but its larger effect is corrosive: “disability appears as a

facade overlaying able-bodiedness. The use of able-bodied actors, whose bombastic performances represent their able-bodiedness as much as their pretense of disability, not only keeps disability out of public view but transforms its reality and its fundamental characteristics” (116). By substituting nondisabled actors for disabled ones, Siebers argues, cinema renders disability invisible, which he directly links to the practice of blackface in minstrel shows as well as straight actors performing “fag” for comic effect (115). In this calculus, disability becomes a measure of the actor’s skill: “the more disabled the character, the greater the ability of the actor” (116).

This dynamic is not just theoretical but has concrete consequences for how films are made and received. Siebers points to Dustin Hoffman’s performances in *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982) and *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988) to highlight the double standard: “Audiences [...] know the first performance is a fake but accept the second one as Oscar worthy — and yet Hoffman’s performance in *Rain Man* is as much a drag performance as his work in *Tootsie*” (115). Likewise, he critiques *I Am Sam* (Jessie Nelson, 2002), where Sean Penn plays a man with the cognitive abilities of a child, observing that “regardless of the power of his Oscar-nominated performance, it is difficult to agree that the film portrays disability accurately because accuracy does not lie only in the performance of actors but in the overall narrative structure and plot of films” (116). Still, these performances are very popular and often critically acclaimed. As disability scholars Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić note, nondisabled actors who “play” disabled are routinely “rewarded for their (overly sentimentalized, yet assumed-to-be verisimilitude) role with a shared Oscar win,” a pattern so entrenched that, “the safest nomination bets for Oscar gold, year after year, are disability flicks” (115; Riley 70).⁷¹ Disability scholar

⁷¹ I mentioned 2008’s *Tropic Thunder* earlier for its parody of fat suits and blackface, but the film also targets Hollywood’s obsession with disability-as-awards-bait. In the fake trailer “Simple Jack,” Ben Stiller’s character dons a bowl haircut and protruding teeth, stammers, and struggles to hold basic conversation — a performance that, both within the film and in critical response, was faulted for being “too disabled and thus not palatable to an able-bodied audience” (Lopez). This satirical send-up was so on the nose that it sparked backlash from disability advocates, “with boycotts planned and disabled advocates decrying the film” (Lopez). There is a scene in the film where Downey Jr.’s character, in blackface, criticizes

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's account of "staring" helps explain why: cinema offers audiences license to look, or even gawk, at disabled bodies without censure, inviting reactions of pity, discomfort, or fascination (19–20). Awards culture, in turn, converts these voyeuristic encounters into cultural capital for nondisabled stars. What emerges is a system in which disability becomes a spectacle that generates prestige for others while denying disabled actors a seat at the table.

This structural invisibility is borne out by industry research. In 2016, the Ruderman Family Foundation released a report on employment of actors with disabilities in television, which found that 95% of disabled characters were played by nondisabled actors, offering quantitative evidence of the imbalance that Siebers and others describe (Woodburn and Kopic). This stark figure highlights not only symbolic misrepresentation but also material exclusion: the systematic denial of roles, wages, and visibility to disabled performers. At the same time, difficult questions emerge. For instance, what about characters whose disabilities might make it nearly impossible to perform under Hollywood conditions — severe cognitive disabilities, degenerative illnesses, or circumstances that demand constant medical support? Would it be better for such stories never to be told in lieu of authentic casting? Or might there be ways of collaborating and adapting production practices so that these stories can be told without resorting to complete erasure? Moreover, it can be argued that insisting on identity-matched casting in every instance risks reducing complex identities to essentialist categories, where actors are only ever permitted to play themselves.

During an interview with *American Masters* PBS, Japanese American actor Daniel Dae Kim articulated a similar concern, noting that Asian and Asian American actors are often held to more

Stiller's character for taking the role of Simple Jack, advising him never to go "full retard." He mentions that actors get Oscars only when they are partially disabled, like Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump* or Hoffman in *Rain Man*. Disabled critic Kristen Lopez argues that this was a razor-sharp satire of Hollywood precisely because studios and audiences only embrace stories with characters who are not "too disabled" ("Ten Years of Missing the Point of 'Tropic Thunder's' Thoughts on Mental Disability").

specific standards than others. Kim acknowledges that there are contexts where cultural specificity in casting matters — language, historical figures, or culturally specific narratives — but cautions against needlessly rigid casting practices that foreclose opportunities when the role itself does not require such precision. Kim encourages casting directors to be “a little bit more sophisticated now about how we can open opportunities to actors” (American Masters PBS). His argument reminds us that calls for authenticity must be balanced with an awareness of industrial contexts, where the very scarcity of roles for marginalized actors makes overcorrection a potential harm. The problem is not simply who plays whom, but who writes the roles, who shapes the stories, and whose perspectives frame the narratives in the first place.

The ethical question, then, is less about “forbidding” all cross-casting and more about correcting the asymmetry and bringing in nuance. Authentic representation requires restructuring the industry so that marginalized people are not just in front of the camera but also behind it, shaping the stories, images, and narratives that circulate. Thus, authentic representation requires authentic authorship, where stories are not borrowed but borne: when fat people inscribe their own experiences, disabled people reframe their realities, trans people shape the contours of trans life, and people of color speak their histories into being. As film scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam observe, when dominant identities are cast to play marginalized roles and denied influence behind the scenes the effect can be a “triple insult,” suggesting that a community is “unworthy of representing itself,” incapable of producing capable performers, and powerless against the authority of producers (190). Their point is not simply that miscasting offends, but that it encodes structural exclusion and tells marginalized groups that their realities can only ever be mediated through dominant voices. Representation, in this sense, is not reducible to the actor in front of the camera but includes the entire ecology of storytelling — writing, directing, producing, editing.

This broader perspective helps explain why authentic authorship can mitigate the harms of impersonation even when perfect identity-matching is not possible. In the television show *Pose* (2018–21), for example, the casting of trans women of color in major roles was complemented by trans and queer writers, directors, and producers, ensuring that the stories were not only embodied but also told from within the community (Mock). By contrast, a film like *The Whale*, which centered a superfat character played by a thin actor in a prosthetic suit, was written, directed, and produced without the involvement of superfat people. Lindy West, writing for *The Guardian*, describes the experiences of fatness in *The Whale* as written and performed “by one thin man for another thin man in a fat suit to deliver under the direction of a third thin man, and then they all get an award” (“The Whale is Not a Masterpiece”). The difference lies not only in who plays the part but in whose cultural authority shapes the narrative.

The dialectic, then, is not between authenticity and artistic freedom as mutually exclusive poles, but between exclusion and inclusion as structuring conditions. Casting nondisabled actors in disabled roles, or cis actors in trans roles, is not inherently problematic, but when it occurs in industries where disabled and trans actors are systematically excluded from other opportunities, it reproduces injustice. Authenticity matters, *not as an essentialist imperative*, but as part of a larger ecology of representation.

Representation is a practice that produces cultural meaning; thus, we can see that the effects of impersonation practices extend far beyond individual performances. They encode assumptions about whose identities are detachable, whose lives are costumes, and whose voices are dispensable. This logic is not abstract but directly entangled with the histories of fatness and Blackness traced in the previous section. The reversibility of impersonation — the nondisabled actor shedding the cane, the cis actor stepping out of the dress, the white actor wiping away the greasepaint, the thin actor peeling off the prosthetic — reassures audiences that normative supremacy remains intact, even as

Otherized bodies, like the fat Black female body, are figured as inherently excessive, grotesque, and never allowed the dignity of reversibility.

IV. The Fat Black Drag Boom

Scholar Paul Campos coined the term “fat drag” in his influential 2004 book, *The Obesity Myth*. Campos describes “fat drag” as a “phenomenon [...] in which very slim Hollywood stars (a nearly redundant phrase) pretend to be fat” (83). But it’s important to note that many of the performances that Campos refers to in his discussion of fat drag are not just actors donning fat suits; they are actors donning fat suits *and* drag, as in men dressing up as fat women. It is not incidental that the most visible fat suit performances of turn of the millennium Hollywood centered fat Black women in particular, and in every instance they were performed by men. Between 1996 and 2007, mainstream Hollywood films that featured Black men in fat drag include *Big Momma’s House*, *Big Momma’s House 2* (John Whitesell, 2006), *The Nutty Professor*, *The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*, *Norbit*, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Darren Grant, 2005), and *Madea’s Family Reunion* (Tyler Perry, Elvin Ross, 2006). *Big Momma’s House* and Tyler Perry’s *Madea* franchise were the cornerstones of this moment, even though they fell outside the gross-out cycle proper (see fig. 42). They marketed themselves differently from their more explicitly gross-out cousins — the former as a family-friendly action-romance about an undercover FBI agent, the latter as a church-inflected melodrama blended with clowning. Yet, both depended on prosthetic exaggeration and a boisterous male star in prosthetics playing an older, heavysset Black woman. Their success normalized a visual language that studios and audiences quickly learned to read. When *Norbit* arrived later in the decade, the template was familiar enough that it needed little setup. The laughter, the disguise, the gags were already cues that mainstream viewers had been trained to take in stride.

In these films as well as their gross-out counterparts, the fat body emerges as comic via pratfalls, clumsy furniture breaks, and other corporeal routines, flirting with subversion but ultimately retreading well-worn territory. While they pull in familiar gross-out elements, they remain generally more family-friendly than the Eddie Murphy films that bookend them. There is a bathroom scene in *Big Momma's House*, for instance, that leans heavily into the popular raunchy sensibilities of the time: Big Momma farts, defecates, and strips, her fat, nude body leveraged to elicit disgust. Roger Ebert described the scene as “featuring the biggest evacuation since we pulled out of Vietnam” and called it “a grisly example” of unearned bad taste (“Big Momma’s House Movie Review”). But this moment is not the centerpiece of the film. Rather, the centerpiece is Big Momma herself, and the spectacle of Martin Lawrence’s fat drag. Explicit gross-out gags take a back seat. The combination of (literal) bathroom humor, drag masquerade, and eventual narrative reassurance proved marketable because it promised both (very light) transgression and safety.



Fig. 42. Posters for *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* and *Big Momma's House*.

That balance helps explain the box-office pull: *Big Momma's House* opened to \$25.7 million and finished with about \$117.6 million domestic and \$174 million worldwide, spawning two sequels and a total franchise gross of \$225.6 million in North America (“Big Momma’s House - Box Office Mojo”; “Big Momma’s House Franchise Box Office History - the Numbers”). The second film still debuted at number one with \$27.7 million and ended with \$70.2 million domestic and \$141.5 million worldwide (“Franchise: Big Momma - Box Office Mojo”). The lesson was plain: a latex grandmother persona could carry a PG-13 studio comedy to nine-figure grosses. Perry’s *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* opened in 2005 with \$21.9 million on a \$5.5 million budget, finishing with \$50.6 million domestic (“Diary of a Mad Black Woman - Box Office Mojo”). *Madea’s Family Reunion* topped that with \$63.3 million domestic and \$63.4 million worldwide, almost entirely from U.S. audiences (“Madea’s Family Reunion

- Box Office Mojo”). Trade headlines captured the appeal in shorthand: “Gun-toting, big-boned grandma Madea kicked the grits out of the competition” (Gray). These were low-risk, high-return projects.

Yet, these films were lambasted by critics. Reviews often circled around tone, registering discomfort with how these films stitched slapstick onto melodrama or action plots. Roger Ebert described *Big Momma’s House* as a recycled “how-did-they-do-that stunt” that still hits some high points. Ebert wrote that “Any movie that employs an oven mitt and a plumber’s friend in a childbirth scene cannot be all bad,” while still adding, “It can be appalling when bad taste thinks it is being redeemed by comedy, and is wrong” (“Big Momma’s House Movie Review”). Ebert’s review of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was harsher: “the Grandma from Hell” barges into a promising melodrama and derails it, a one-star verdict (“Mad Grandma Mixes up ‘Diary’ Movie Review”). *Diary* currently holds a 15% from critics on Rotten Tomatoes (“Diary of a Mad Black Woman | Rotten Tomatoes”). Yet CinemaScore polling (which comes directly from audiences) gave *Diary* an A+, which according to *The Hollywood Reporter* only happens for about two films per year (McClintock).

These films, wildly popular as they were, recycled a repertoire of routines: having fat-suited Black male bodies in drag transgress normative feminine behaviors, such as physically taking down large men; pratfalls that turn props fragile in the face of size; sudden switches from wig-askew slapstick to a tearful sermon about forgiveness. This tonal whiplash allows a scolding matriarch to flatten a scene with a frying pan one moment and deliver moral clarity the next. That structure broadens audience reach — families laugh at the clowning, churchgoers nod at the sermon — and it complicates critical evaluation. After all, “Tyler Perry tenaciously emerged as the era’s most prolific and most discussed African American filmmaker” (Bogle 429). The very fact that viewers could read the same gag as either cruel or affectionate (or both) has to do with how the films frame women’s bodies. As

Mia Mask observes, “it is often the female characters (read: women’s bodies) that are intended as the primary narrative vehicles for slapstick in fat-suit films,” almost always embodied through Black male actors in drag (161). This masquerade is, she notes, “reminiscent of the nineteenth-century minstrel theater in which white men (and later black men) not only wore blackface, but also cross-dressed as women” (161). In *Big Momma* and *Madea*, those echoes surface most clearly in the Mammy’s overbearing nurturance and the Sapphire’s sharp-tongued aggression, racist archetypes that structure the humor even when repackaged for family-friendly audiences.

By situating these performances within the lineage of minstrelsy, Mask helps explain why figures including Spike Lee condemned Perry’s films as “coonery and buffoonery,” warning that characters like *Madea* were a throwback to *Amos ’n’ Andy* (Black Enterprise). Perry fired back that *Madea* was “bait” to lure audiences in to talk about what he feels the films are truly about: “God, love, faith, forgiveness, family” (Yamato). Bogle places this quarrel in a long lineage of disputes over Black screen images, where one generation sees progress in visibility and another sees regression in stereotype (424–427). The stark divergence of opinion illustrates how heavily these films relied on controlling images and racial caricature.

The contrast between *Big Momma* and *Madea* is not simply one of tone or comic style but one of industrial design. Mia Mask situates *Big Momma’s House* within the “temporary transvestite” film, where audiences enjoy cross-dressed ruse because it is instrumental and brief, enabling a flirtation with transgression that is ultimately folded back into normative closure (166). The structure guarantees a return to heterosexual couple form once the wig and prosthetics are removed, which makes the disguise a repeatable studio “stunt” that is legible in trailers and easy to market as safe fun even after moments of ambivalence or taboo (166).

Tyler Perry's films function differently. Mask emphasizes that Madea is not a ruse to be exposed inside the story but a continuing character who "exists in the diegesis," even as audiences beyond the story speculated about whether Perry himself was in the suit across films and media (167–168). In other words, the persona performs for characters and for viewers at once, which converts a one-off disguise into durable character IP. The move from a temporary impersonation to a stable drag matriarch shifts the industrial promise from a single-film reveal to a franchiseable brand that can travel across formats without losing recognition value.

The result is two distinct franchises that rely on the same latex silhouette. For studios and for Martin Lawrence, *Big Momma* is a star vehicle that extends Lawrence's persona into PG-13 family space and packages the cross-dressed gag as a summer-friendly hook that resolves with the costume coming off. For Perry, Madea becomes the core asset of a vertically organized enterprise, originating in the "chitlin' circuit" stage economy and carried forward through film and later television, with Perry writing, producing, directing, and starring, so that the persona anchors a repeatable slate rather than a single tentpole (Bogle 424; Pilkington). According to Bogle, that difference in authorship and control is part of Perry's significance, where he charts Perry's speed and scale as an entrepreneur who builds not only features but a production machine around a matriarchal character he owns (424–29).

This divergence also helps explain audience response. *Big Momma's House* is positioned as mainstream PG-13 comedy with action beats and romance, dependent on a wide opening-weekend suburban turnout that recognizes Lawrence's star image and accepts the disguise as a harmless complication to be shed before the kiss (Mask 164–66). Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* enters a different marketplace, one that Perry spent years cultivating through touring plays, pastor networks, and Black neighborhood theaters (Pilkington). Press coverage at the time describes how he mobilized church-centered constituencies and stage followers who already knew the character and would turn

out without conventional saturation marketing (Pilkington). In Mask's terms, the continuity of the persona across stage and screen is part of the industrial design. Madea is not the reveal. She is the product line (167).

Both models depend on the same conceit — Black men in fat suits playing domineering grandmothers — but their industrial consequences diverge. For *Momma* and 20th Century Fox, the stunt sustained a short franchise run before returns diminished. For Perry, Madea underwrites a prolonged production slate and quick expansions into television formats like *House of Payne* (2006–present) and *Meet the Browns* (2009–2011), where, as Bogle notes, “a collection of rigid, embarrassing types” is iterated at scale for a loyal base despite critical resistance from within Black film culture (427).⁷² The latex Mammy is thus a hedge against the risk that has historically constrained Black-led projects because her presence signals a known tone and a predictable turnout pattern even when critics balk.

Mask tracks how unruly female comic personae — drawing from Rowe's “unruly woman” — become more bankable once relocated to male performers in latex, which turns embodied feminist misrule into a controlled commodity owned by stars and studios (160–62). Where earlier women comics used age, voice, and size to punch up and critique, twenty-first-century films monetize those same signs as a cross-gender impersonation, shifting profits and authorship to men while keeping the outsized grandmother image in circulation for mainstream comfort (160–62). Mask pushes this further with a Kristevan account of abjection to name the structural position of these characters. The fat-suit matriarch is written and filmed as the “abject-object-subject,” a figure neither fully subject nor object and therefore positioned for both scorn and need within the story world (160). That ambivalent status

⁷² In 2012, *House of Payne* nabbed the record for the longest-running sitcom with a predominantly Black cast — surpassing *The Cosby Show* (201 episodes), *Family Matters* (215 installments), and *The Jeffersons* (253 episodes) (Kimball). *House of Payne* is still on the air, with 385 episodes at the time of this writing.

is part of what makes the persona sellable. She can be blamed for bad taste when the gag turns ugly and praised as moral anchor when the sermon lands, all while remaining a removable mask that keeps the star intact under the latex (161). The abject frame clarifies how the films can toggle between bathroom humor and uplift without industrial penalty. The persona absorbs the contradiction. The actor keeps the credit.

Mask also underlines the opportunity costs of the boom. She points to Directors Guild of America figures and to distribution patterns in 2009 to argue that “crassly commercial” Black-themed films crowded out documentary, experimental, and serious dramatic work at the very moment studios claimed to be serving Black audiences (160). In her account, the success of fat-suit comedies helped set market expectations for what Black cinema should look like in the late 2000s, which narrowed the slate to a handful of repeatable types with proven turnout, Madea chief among them (160–61). That is an industrial story as much as a representational one. What sells defines what is greenlit.

Within Perry’s corpus, Bogle identifies other industrially relevant through-lines that do not reduce to the drag alone. He reads *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* as staging intraracial class and color politics — the male protagonist’s pursuit of a lighter-skinned, “exoticized” partner as a symptom of aspiration — alongside Madea’s disciplinarian charge, which grounds the character’s authority in recognizable community concerns rather than in service roles of earlier Mammies (424–27). Mask reads this same thread through Pierre Bourdieu’s “physical capital,” noting how casting signals desirability hierarchies that the films both exploit and critique. She also records the pushback from viewers who complained about Perry’s manipulation of color consciousness in the name of uplift, a reminder that the audience base that sustains the brand is not monolithic in its taste or its politics (168).

These films did not just reflect a taste for fat Black drag. They helped set the terms of what Black-centered commercial cinema looked like after the 1990s, and they did so by elevating impersonation over embodiment, star control over collective authorship, and repeatable caricature over riskier forms. The figure has become ordinary. The stunt has become a product line. The market has been taught what to expect, and what to buy. Taken together, these films consolidated fat Black drag as a mainstream commodity. They relied on controlling images with deep histories yet presented them as harmless fun. They reassured audiences that no harm was done because the disguise would be removed and the narrative reset. They gave studios and distributors proof that these routines could be repeated for profit. The net effect was normalization. By the mid-2000s, a fat Black grandmother in prosthetics was a bankable star persona in its own right.

That normalization created space for a film that used the same toolkit without the guardrails. Once audiences had been taught to see the fat Black female body as a safe source of spectacle, it was possible to turn the same prosthetic into a target of unmitigated humiliation. The sermon, the romance, the communal cushion could fall away. The gags could remain intact, yet sharper and meaner. The films discussed here did not always cross that line, but they made the line more distinct. They set the stage for a character who would push the formula past its limit.

V. Millennial Minstrelsy and the Sapphommabel in *Norbit*

In the decade between *The Nutty Professor* and *Norbit*, Eddie Murphy transformed his public persona. Once celebrated as a sharp, adult-oriented comic in the 1980s — headlining *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present), selling out arenas with stand-up specials including *Raw* (Robert Townsend, 1987), and starring in R-rated blockbusters such as *48 Hours* (Walter Hill, 1982), *Trading Places* (John Landis, 1983), *Beverly Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984), and *Coming to America* (John Landis, 1988) — Murphy had

built his reputation on edgy energy and cultural bite. The mid-1990s brought a shift. After a string of box office disappointments, *The Nutty Professor* marked his comeback, reestablishing him as a bankable comedy star while also signaling a pivot toward broader, family-friendly fare. Voice work in *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft, Barry Cook, 1998), *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001) and its sequels, along with PG-rated successes such as *Doctor Dolittle* (Betty Thomas, 1998), *Daddy Day Care* (Steve Carr, 2003), and *The Haunted Mansion* (Rob Minkoff, 2003), cemented Murphy's appeal to younger audiences, even as critical reception grew uneven. By 2007, Murphy's experimentation had produced two radically different performances in the same year: the Oscar-nominated soul of *Dreamgirls* (Bill Condon, 2006) and the prosthetic grotesquerie of *Norbit*.

If *Dreamgirls* showed Murphy at his most critically acclaimed, *Norbit* revealed him at this most critically derided. Critics lined up to condemn it: Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* admitted she “wanted to gnaw [her] arm off while [she] watched this,” prompting Richard Roeper to say that watching her gnaw her arm off would have been preferable to watching *Norbit* (“Norbit, Factory Girl, the Astronaut Farmer, Because I Said So, the Situation”). Scott Tobias quipped in *The A.V. Club* that “it probably isn’t possible for a single movie to reverse all social progress made since the civil-rights era, but *Norbit* [...] does its best to turn back the clock” (“Norbit – AV Club”).⁷³ Some critics called out the film’s use of reductive, anti-Black stereotypes, identifying *Norbit* as “a millennial minstrel show” (“Audiences Love Norbit, Millennial Minstrel Show”). MTV critic MaryAnn Johanson went so far as to say that by doing this film, Eddie Murphy “embarrasses himself and the entire human race” (“Audiences Love Norbit, Millennial Minstrel Show”). The film holds a 9% from critics on *Rotten Tomatoes* and swept the Razzies, winning “Worst Actor,” “Worst Actress,” and even “Worst Actor of

⁷³ For what it’s worth, not everyone despised *Norbit*. In a 2007 interview, Beach Boys co-founder Brian Wilson was asked if he had seen any good movies lately. His answer: “Well, I’ve only seen one in the last couple of years. It’s called *Norbit* by Eddie Murphy.” The interviewer then asked, “What’s your favorite movie?” Wilson responded, “*Norbit*” (Cook-Wilson).

the Decade” for Murphy (“Norbit | Rotten Tomatoes”; “Murphy & Lohan All But Shut Out Competition at 28th Worst Film Awards”).⁷⁴ Yet audiences showed up in droves: *Norbit* opened at number one with \$34.2 million, Murphy’s fourteenth film to debut at the top, and ultimately grossed \$159 million worldwide (“Norbit’ Laughs All the Way to Box Office Bank”; “Norbit - Box Office Mojo”). The paradox deepened when the Academy nominated the film for “Best Makeup,” a nod that tacitly legitimized the very prosthetic fat suit so central to its ridicule. In this collision of critical disdain, commercial profitability, and institutional recognition, *Norbit* encapsulates both the height and unraveling of the fat suit comedy’s cultural power.

The film unfolds as a prosthetics-driven farce built around Murphy’s multi-role performance. *Norbit* follows the titular Norbit Albert Rice (Eddie Murphy), a meek and hapless orphan raised by Mr. Wong (Murphy again, in yellowface), grows up longing for affection but settling for domination.⁷⁵ As an adult, he is swept into marriage with Rasputia Latimore (Murphy in a fat suit in drag), a fat, loud, violent figure (whose name evokes Russian mystic Grigori Rasputin) flanked by her three muscle-bound brothers. Rasputia rules the household via emotional and physical abuse, turning Norbit into a comic punching bag. The return of Norbit’s childhood sweetheart Kate (Thandiwe Newton), a very slender and light-skinned Black woman, sets the story into motion. Kate dreams of transforming the orphanage that she and Norbit grew up in into a community center, but her fiancé Deion (Cuba

⁷⁴ The Golden Raspberry Awards, commonly called the Razzies, are an annual parody award ceremony to recognize what voters consider the worst achievements in film.

⁷⁵ The same year *Norbit* premiered, Adam Sandler’s *I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry* (Dennis Dugan, 2007) also trafficked in prosthetic grotesquerie, pairing yellowface with a cruel fat-suit gag. Rob Schneider appears in yellowface as an “Asian” wedding officiant — a caricature that mirrors Murphy’s Mr. Wong — while an early sequence stages an exaggerated rescue of a “superfat” man from a burning building. The scene’s humor derives entirely from the fat suit’s dehumanizing spectacle: firefighters Chuck and Larry (Sandler and Kevin James) joke about dismembering the man to carry him out, nickname him “Shamu,” and end up tumbling down a staircase with Sandler’s face lodged in the man’s crotch before the character farts, sealing the gag through the lower bodily stratum (and echoing the cheerleading gag in *Dodgeball*). Once “rescued,” the fat-suited figure is hoisted away on a forklift, screaming that he is starving. The scene’s fat suit and costume design — gray sweatpants, sweat-stained T-shirt, and food-smear torso — even anticipates *The Whale*’s costuming, suggesting a visual lineage of pathologized fat embodiment carried forward from 2000s gross-out aesthetics.

Gooding Jr.) plots with the Latimores to seize the property and transform it into a strip club called “Nippopolis.” The film’s stakes, such as they are, hinge on whether Norbit will find the courage to defy Rasputia and reunite with Kate. The plot becomes a contest between Norbit’s longing for the conventionally attractive Kate and Rasputia’s fat-suit-enhanced violent control. That dynamic begins in childhood.

The film first introduces Norbit and Rasputia as young children on an outdoor playground. Two red-haired boys are beating Norbit, who is small and frightened. Before we see young Rasputia’s face, we see a heavy shadow slide across the blacktop. As Rasputia approaches, each step lands with an exaggerated thud on the soundtrack, louder than ordinary footfalls. In this first beat, size is announced through angle and sound rather than dialogue. Rasputia reaches the bullies and lifts them — one in each hand — without strain. Legs dangle. She knocks their heads together with a hollow comic clack, then flings them out of frame. For a moment the rescue looks like relief. Then the scene pivots. She takes Norbit by the wrist and drags him across the asphalt, physically claiming Norbit as her own. There is then a brief montage of the two characters getting to know each other, which allows the filmmakers to fit in more fat jokes. Norbit pushes Rasputia on a swing set, only for her fat body to swing backwards at high velocity and slam him out of frame. Within one minute of her character’s introduction, Rasputia has already used her girth and strength to literally smash others out of the film. Just as we’ve seen across all the focal films in this study, the introductory sequence uses formal elements to turn fatness into formidable and exaggerated presence. Rasputia is shot from either extreme low or high angles, emphasizing her large size while emphasizing Norbit’s timidity (see fig. 43). The sound design booms. The camera favors body over face and teaches the audience to read footsteps, shadows, and collisions as character. The choreography pairs care with control. Rasputia stops a beating, then immediately moves Norbit’s body as if he were hers.



Fig. 43. Extreme high and low angles to emphasize young Rasputia's size in Norbit.

But before those patterns harden into prosthetic spectacle, the film makes a revealing choice. It begins not with latex or digital trickery, but with the body of a real fat child. There is no comic “reveal” of a performer under rubber and foam. The real-life body that takes up space is the joke’s target. And making fun of a real-life fat child is not isolated to this opening scene. Later, when adult

Norbit laments his life with Rasputia, the camera cuts to a sight gag of a young fat girl perched on a miniature horse. Norbit sighs, “I understand, little pony. I know your pain.” The horse whinnies and sheds a single tear. This young fat girl is unnamed and never seen again, her body simply thrown into a scene for a punchline. Across these moments the film collapses real and prosthetic fatness into the same joke, priming viewers to see disgust as seamless no matter whose body is on screen.

As LeBesco argues, fat suit performances offer the thin stars a safe exit while inviting audiences to enjoy the abjection the suit displays (238). Yet Ivy Snitzer bore the real consequences. The “safety” only applied to the star. In *Norbit*, the calculus is crueler still: the fat child is not doubling anyone, not shielded by any disguise. She is asked to embody the very figure Murphy will later exaggerate into a fantasy of anti-Black, anti-fat, misogynistic stereotypes. The effect is to collapse real fatness and prosthetic fatness into the same punchline, making the audience’s disgust feel seamless across both — which raises serious ethical concerns. When Murphy plays Rasputia, he is an adult who can peel off the latex and move on with his career. The fat child cannot walk away from her body or from the memory of being cast as the prototype of a joke the film will hammer into a vile caricature. The message is that fatness itself is funny, whether it belongs to a child or to a character manufactured in a makeup effects lab. By starting with an actual fat girl, the film makes clear that the joke does not stop at artifice. It lands on real bodies, with real consequences.

Those ethical concerns set the stage for how Rasputia appears once Murphy takes over the role. Rasputia’s first entrance as an adult comes during her and Norbit’s wedding ceremony. We begin with a medium full shot of a veiled bride beside Norbit. Her body is framed to maximize contrast in scale and to signal, before any face is shown, that size is the joke (see fig. 44). When Norbit lifts the veil, the camera holds long enough for the audience to register Eddie Murphy’s contorted, prosthetic face — glossy foundation, heavy penciled brows, lipstick spread onto the teeth — before cutting to a

reaction shot that instructs us how to feel (see fig. 45). That reaction shot is Murphy again, now in yellowface as Mr. Wong, grimacing in disgust (see fig. 46). The sequence triangulates three performances of masquerade — thin Black man as fat Black woman; Black man as Asian caricature; and Murphy-as-Murphy, the constant presence that ties the disguises together — and invites the laugh through that layered recognition. The edit then returns to the couple. After the pastor announces that Norbit may kiss the bride, Norbit leans in tentatively. Rasputia barks, “Open your mouth!” and lunges forward, forcing an exaggerated, sloppy kiss (see fig. 47). The camera cuts to guests recoiling and groaning, while the sound mix magnifies the wetness. The gag is that the sight of this woman up close is meant to disgust, and the kiss is weaponized as proof. This also sets the precedent of Rasputia’s rapacious sexuality.



Fig. 44. First shot of adult Rasputia in Norbit, showing Murphy with Murphy to contrast size.



Fig. 45. Murphy-as-Rasputia face reveal shot in Norbit.



Fig. 46. Murphy in yellowface as Mr. Wong in Norbit, reacting in disgust to Rasputia's face.

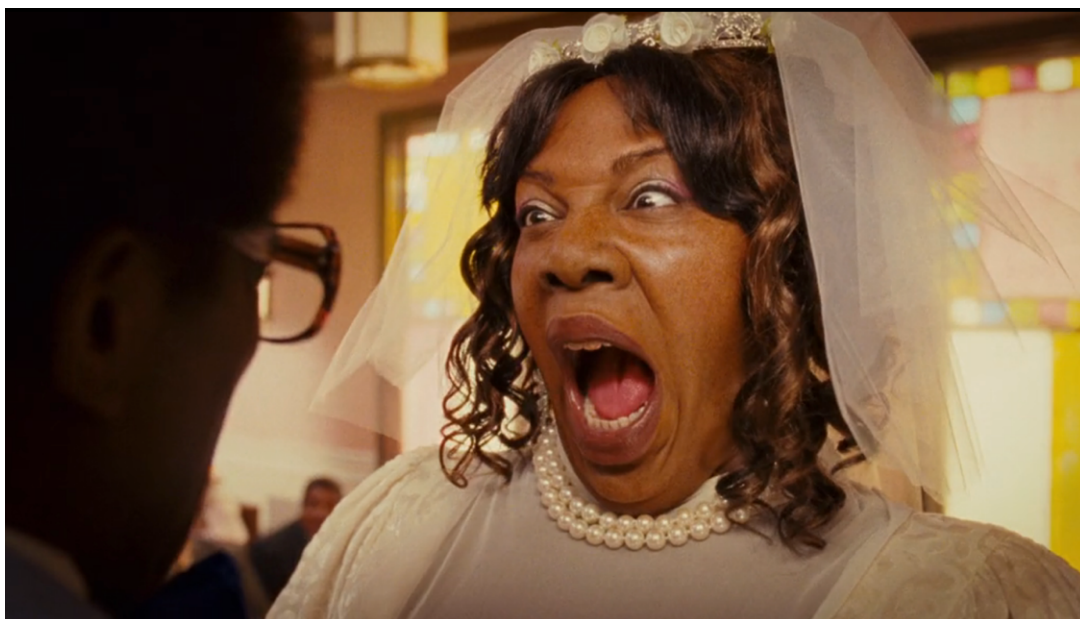


Fig. 47. Rasputia forcing an obnoxiously aggressive kiss from Norbit.

Plotz’s reading of *Norbit* helps clarify what the unveil puts into motion. She emphasizes dominance — over Norbit, over mise-en-scène, over props — as a central source of humor and shows how the film’s marketing pre-teaches this expectation. The poster places Rasputia in a pink negligee crouched atop a prone, anxious Norbit; the grin and position signal sexual pursuit and control (Plotz 83) (see fig. 48). The poster’s tagline — “Have you ever made a really big mistake?” — provides a requisite fat joke.

Plotz ties the film to a long comic pattern of “marital combat,” noting that the narrative builds toward the public defeat of the domineering wife and the restoration of normative coupling (85). The wedding primes that arc on day one of the marriage: public embarrassment of the groom and public sanction of the bride’s excess.



Fig. 48. Movie poster for Norbit.

In *Norbit*, that “marital combat” structure is magnified by the fat suit. Plotz notes that Rasputia “dominates not only her husband” but also everyone and everything around her, even over props and spaces that seem too small to contain her (85). The wedding scene makes that dominance a spectacle, signaling to the audience that this will be a running theme of the marriage. This is the unruly woman repackaged as parody. As we saw in the previous chapter, Rowe describes how women who are deemed too loud, too aggressive, or too big threaten cultural expectations of femininity. Plotz argues that *Norbit* builds on that threat and attaches it to fatness and Blackness so the jokes about Rasputia’s excess feel immediate (85–86). The film’s structure relies on that excess being temporary, something the story will eventually manage or undo. By introducing her with such force at the altar, the film both exaggerates her unruliness and foreshadows that the “marital combat” will lead to her eventual downfall.

The wedding night sequence also introduces another framework for understanding Rasputia: what LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant calls the “sapphimmibel.” Manigault-Bryant defines this figure as “a hybridization of sapphire, jezebel, and mammy” (59). It is not simply that Rasputia resembles one stereotype in one scene and another stereotype in a different moment. Rather, she is constructed from the start as an amalgam of all three, a controlling image in which Black womanhood is exaggerated into even more grotesque extremes. As Manigault-Bryant explains, “*Norbit’s* Rasputia is remarkable for the ways she merges these stereotypes” (59). As “the bully, she simultaneously brings sapphire and jezebel to the screen by using her words, will, and body to dominate the men, including her brothers and her husband,” while her “size, complexion, and stature lend themselves to reading her as mammy” (59). For Manigault-Bryant, this blending is what makes the caricature so effective. The sapphimmibel is not just a stereotype but a composite figure, difficult to disentangle because it collapses multiple racist archetypes into one body at once.

The wedding night is the first time the film shifts its focus from Rasputia's public dominance to her private life with Norbit, and it wastes no time turning their marriage into a running gag. The bedroom becomes a stage for excess, framed less as intimacy than as assault-as-comedy. A rapid-fire montage shows the rhythm of their sex life through repeated sight gags, each one designed to emphasize Rasputia's size, sexual appetite, and domination. The sequence follows the same grammar repeatedly. A close-up on Norbit's face shows him frozen in dread. A cut to Rasputia reveals her in lingerie or a comic role-play costume. A wide shot shows her charging across the room and leaping onto him. The punchline is another close-up, Norbit grimacing in pain under her weight. Costumes add a layer of escalation, each outfit pushing the joke further into caricature of Jezebel's hypersexuality — a skimpy Christmas elf getup, a robber's mask and black lingerie, and even an antebellum "slave" costume, complete with chains (see fig. 49). Rasputia's costume design amplifies the Jezebel connections throughout the film, not just during sexual encounters. Across scenes, Rasputia appears in leopard prints, neon fabrics, and tight tops stretched over her prosthetic chest. The fat suit design leaves her nipples prominently visible beneath thin blouses, exaggerating her body for gross-out effect. Her makeup is heavy and clownish, with overdrawn lips and eyebrows, and her wigs changing constantly, suggesting both artifice and instability. These visual choices combine sexualized iconography with garish spectacle, further linking Rasputia's excess to the Jezebel image.



Fig. 49. One of Rasputia's revealing outfits in Norbit, connecting her to the hyper-sexual Jezebel.

At the same time, this bedroom montage underscores Sapphire's dominance. Rasputia commands the room, sets the pace, and leaves Norbit's body as little more than a crash pad. The bed itself finally breaks under the routine, only to reappear propped up on cinderblocks, emphasizing Plotz's point about Rasputia's dominance not only "over people" but over everything around her (85) (see fig. 50). Even the furniture must be reinforced to survive her. In this way, the film translates the "marital combat" set up at the altar into a visual routine that repeats with each cut. It is an infantilizing and emasculating scenario, directly out of the Sapphire playbook (recall that Sapphire caricatures were often used to evoke sympathy for the Black men they "emasculate") (Manigault-Bryant 58). Murphy and the filmmakers dial this up, having Rasputia not only emasculate Norbit verbally but literally mount him — turning a consensual act (marital sex) into a sight gag of near-rape by a monstrous woman. This is played as malicious humor, reinforcing the idea that a fat Black woman's sexuality is something animalistic and predatory (Strings 53).



Fig. 50. Rasputia as Sapphire: crushing Norbit under her weight, the bed supported by cinderblocks.

As noted, Rasputia’s characterization also draws from the Mammy figure, though here that lineage is doubly distorted. She is a funhouse mirror of a funhouse mirror: a grotesque exaggeration of a caricature that was already warped to begin with. Rasputia bears the Mammy’s “size, complexion, and stature,” which cue viewers to recognize her as descended from that archetype — she’s a large, dark Black woman who, in another era, might have been costumed in an apron and headrag (Manigault-Bryant 59). The Mammy’s protective instinct survives in Rasputia’s early guardianship of Norbit — but this protection quickly becomes possessive and abusive, a suffocating parody of care. In every other respect, her personality aligns with the Sapphire and the Jezebel: domineering, sexualized, and volatile. She rules her household with an iron fist and no affection, embodying what Collins calls the “matriarch,” the bad Black mother who refuses submissiveness (74–75). As Manigault-Bryant notes, Rasputia “is disloyal to and hostile toward black Christianity” and, thereby, any virtuous matriarchal role; she and her brothers attend church only for appearances, not conviction (64). In rejecting the faint moral grounding or community care sometimes afforded to Mammies or

Matriarchs or seen in Perry's films, Rasputia becomes a figure of pure excess. She is Mammy in body alone, stripped of presumed love, piety, and purpose — an image that weaponizes her form while hollowing out her humanity. If the Mammy is the loyal, self-sacrificing caregiver, Rasputia is her evil twin: selfish, tyrannical, and voracious. Yet the visual coding (her size, her dark skin) still taps into the Mammy image enough to be easily recognizable.

Manigault-Bryant also reminds us that the packaging matters for how these figures circulate. These are “black fat drag films,” built on a star in a suit, and they travel as box-office hits (61). That combination — fat drag, high gloss, big audiences — helps normalize the composite, as we saw with *Big Momma* and *Madea* films. It looks familiar. It sounds like church one moment and a bedroom farce the next. As Manigault-Bryant puts it, these films “reinscribe long-standing stereotypes of black womanhood” while making the reductions “palatable, even seductive,” which helps explain why viewers carry the image away as a fact of Black life rather than a built caricature (66). So, the bedroom montage is not a throwaway bit. It is the first place the sapphimmabel fully arrives on screen.

This fusion of tropes plays directly into “misogynoir,” the specific intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny that Black women face. The term was coined by media scholar Moya Bailey, who defined it in her 2013 doctoral dissertation:

[Misogynoir] is a combination of misogyny, the hatred of women, and noir, which means black but also carries film and media connotations. It is the particular amalgamation of anti-Black racism and misogyny in popular media and culture that targets Black trans and cis women.
(25)

Rasputia is not simply a comedic “battle-axe” wife; she embodies what misogynoir imagines a Black woman to be when she is “too much.” The film pointedly contrasts Rasputia with Norbit's true love interest, Kate, who is petite, light-skinned, gentle, and conventionally attractive. The contrast maps

onto what Plotz observes about cinema's beauty standards: normative femininity in film has long been aligned with whiteness and slenderness, automatically positioning Black women — especially fat, dark-skinned women — as unattractive or excessive by default (69). Rasputia is engineered to be the ultimate abject Other: her dark complexion, superfat figure, and unfeminine behavior mark her as the opposite of the cherished ideal.

Rasputia is, thus, the controlling image incarnate, positioned so far outside the bounds of acceptable womanhood that she becomes more monster than woman, a comedic grotesque. This portrayal reflects what Collins calls the binary thinking of racist patriarchy: defining slim, white women as good and beautiful via the contrasting depiction of Black women as the ugly foil (71). Collins explains that oppositionality forms the “essential underpinning for this entire system of thought,” and that binary concepts “invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression” (71). Rasputia's body thus becomes a visual shorthand for this hierarchy, her excess marking not individuality but the materialization of social difference itself.

Still, one might argue that having a beloved comedian portray a fat Black woman could invite empathy or at least visibility for that figure. The narrative even offers moments where Rasputia's overconfidence and audacity border on a kind of campy parody empowerment — she owns her bigness and brashness, arguably lampooning society's discomfort with women like her. For instance, in one scene she deliberately honks a car horn with her breasts, declaring, “When I inhale, my titty makes the horn honk. Listen.” Though framed for laughter, the moment gives Rasputia command over sound and space — she fills the frame, seizes the car, and controls the scene's rhythm with her own body. A later moment, set to Kelis's “Milkshake,” shows Rasputia washing a car in a hyper-sexual manner, parodying familiar images of feminine allure. She frequently mentions how sexy she is (as did

Fat Bastard). Whatever she is lacking, confidence is not it. Her brashness and physical dominance evoke the “unruly woman”: loud, excessive, and resistant to decorum. These moments let Rasputia appear as a fat, Black figure who confidently revels in her own audacity, something that is strongly policed under patriarchy.

However, as bell hooks notes, the mix of “revolutionary and conservative viewpoints” in such texts often “makes it hard for audiences to critically ‘read’” the text (*Reel to Real* 3). In a behind-the-scenes featurette, director Brian Robbins explained his intent by saying, “I wanted Rasputia to, like, think she was hot [...]. I wanted her to think she was a sexy woman” (“The Making of *Norbit*”). The comment is tellingly ironic: Rasputia’s belief in her desirability is the joke. The film repeatedly constructs scenes where she acts as though she is attractive or self-assured, only for the camera and sound design to mark her confidence as delusion. When she dominates her surroundings, such as when she honks the car horn with her breasts, the gag depends on her body being too large and too ridiculous for the space it occupies (see fig. 51). Similarly, during the “sexy car wash” scene, Rasputia imitates the poses of video vixens and commercial pinups, yet she is dressed and framed in a way to magnify rather than glamorize her body — pressing her wet t-shirt-clad breasts against the windshield, distorting her prominent nipples, and framing her movement as grotesque rather than seductive (see fig. 52). It is a scene that is simply meant to disgust audiences. And the needle drop is telling: recall that Kelis’s “Milkshake” — a song that celebrates female sexual power and irresistible allure — also recurs ironically in the post-credits scene of *Dodgeball*, where White Goodman’s defeated dance undercuts those lyrics of confidence. In both films, the soundtrack mocks the body it accompanies: what should signal desirability instead amplifies abjection. The use of “Milkshake” turns a declaration of self-assured sensuality into evidence of delusion, reinforcing how narrowly the culture defines who gets to be seen as sexy.



Fig. 51. Rasputia's breasts honking the horn of her car in Norbit.



Fig. 52. Rasputia during a "sexy" car wash scene while "Milkshake" plays on the soundtrack in Norbit.

Even seemingly minor moments follow this pattern. In one scene, Rasputia is shown eating a jelly donut while Norbit introduces her to another character. The camera isolates her mid-bite, lingering as she theatrically sucks the filling out of the pastry, smearing jelly around her mouth. Several more donuts hang from her fingers, lined up to be devoured next (see fig. 53). Norbit identifies her

not by name or relation but as “the one sucking the jelly out of them donuts.” Here again we see Plotz’s “Fat Eater,” a figure defined by consumption itself. Across these examples, the film stages self-confidence only to convert it into ridicule. Robbins’s “she thinks she’s hot” is not a gesture toward empowerment but a setup for humiliation: Rasputia’s belief in her attractiveness is framed as evidence of her foolishness. Any invitation to “laugh with” a confident fat Black woman is swiftly withdrawn, replaced by cues that the audience should laugh *at* her.



Fig. 53. Rasputia “sucking the jelly out of them donuts” in *Norbit*

The spectatorship encouraged by *Norbit* is thus largely uncritical. As established, these fat drag comedies enjoyed massive commercial success across diverse audiences. Their popularity points to a crossover appeal where non-Black audiences also participated in the joke. Manigault-Bryant warns that the “composite figure” of the sapphimmabel generates “a type of uncritical spectatorship” (57). Viewers are invited to turn off sensitivity and simply guffaw at the outrageous caricature, with little encouragement to question the imagery. In *Norbit*, the cinematic language reinforces this. The film’s tone makes it clear that *Rasputia herself* is the joke. This fosters a spectator gaze akin to a freak show,

echoing Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's account of "staring" mentioned earlier (19–20). It is a continuation of the long history of voyeuristic gazing at Black women's bodies as exotic or other, from the notorious exhibition of Saartjie Baartman to present-day media. The white gaze (and broadly, the mainstream gaze) still views Black women's body as spectacle, and *Norbit* transmits that gaze directly to its audience.

VI. *Norbit's* Digital Dismemberment and Human Fat Suit

The film's spectacle of Rasputia does not end with costuming or performance. Behind the scenes, her body was manufactured through a combination of makeup, prosthetics, and digital compositing. The same team that inflated Sherman Klump in *The Nutty Professor* returned for *Norbit*, led by Rick Baker. He designed the elaborate fat suit that gave Murphy his bulk in many scenes of *Norbit*, and he also supervised the visual-effects process that attached Murphy's prosthetic-covered face to another performer's body. The result blended traditional makeup with digital compositing, turning a real woman's body into part of the disguise and extending the same fat suit logic through new technology.

Norbit's infamous waterpark set piece captures the film's approach to building Rasputia from parts. Every element of the scene — the costume, the staging, the digital touch-ups — turns her body into a heightened spectacle that amplifies the stakes established in fat suit precursors. What makes the waterpark sequence so striking is how it was built. The filmmakers shot the sequence using a real fat woman's body, then digitally grafted Eddie Murphy's prosthetic-covered face onto her ("The Making of *Norbit*"). *Norbit* doesn't just dress Murphy in latex; it uses an actual woman's body as the base layer of his disguise. This is what I call "digital dismemberment" — the process of turning a real body into a kind of visual prosthetic. It is, in short, using an actual human's body as a *de facto* fat suit. Through

face replacement, the film splits body from self and converts a real Black woman's presence into special effect. The result is a character who in some ways looks more "real" than the molded suits of earlier comedies, yet is built from the same logic of substitution. This substitution does more than merge two performances; it literalizes the genre's tendency to treat fat bodies as interchangeable parts.

Unlike typical digital head replacement or modern deepfake techniques, which aim to create seamless illusions, digital dismemberment draws attention to the mismatch. In most cases of head replacement, the goal is continuity — to make the audience forget that another body was used. The stunt performer or stand-in is meant to disappear. But with digital dismemberment, the borrowed body stays visible as part of (or the focus of) the joke. The humor depends on seeing the substituted body and recognizing it as incongruous. We saw a small example of this in my discussion of *Dodgeball*, where White Goodman's "before" photo shows Ben Stiller's head pasted onto an actual fat man's body — a photoshopped image the filmmakers mention in the Blu-ray commentary (*Dodgeball*). *Norbit* takes this even further, alternating between Eddie Murphy in a prosthetic fat suit and a real fat woman's body with his face digitally grafted on. The result treats the fat body as interchangeable, a piece of technology that can be swapped in or out depending on the needs of the scene. This is what makes *Norbit* especially troubling: it collapses the boundary between digital and practical effects to turn a real person's body into part of the masquerade. Though not as common as actual prosthetic fat suits, similar uses appear in films such as 2016's *Central Intelligence* (also directed by *Dodgeball*'s Rawson Marshall Thurber), where Dwayne Johnson's muscular face is digitally mapped onto a fat man's nude body for a scene of humiliation. In each case, the body is not just a stand-in — it's the spectacle itself, foregrounded for ridicule rather than concealed for realism.

In *Norbit*, the real-life fat actress's presence is reduced to an expendable prop — her face is literally erased from the frame, rendering her an anonymous body, a technologically enhanced version

of the “headless fatty.” Yet, unlike the traditional headless fatty, she still gets a face: Eddie Murphy’s. His face carries all the persona and expression, underscoring that the character’s identity belongs to the (male, thin) actor, while the fat female body is just a costume or effect. Film scholars have long noted how cinema can fragment women’s bodies — panning slowly over a figure, for instance, turning a woman into dismembered parts for the (male) gaze.⁷⁶ *Norbit* makes this fragmentation concrete through CGI. The effects team boasted that Rasputia’s head replacements were “invisible” and seamless (“Digital Dimension Provides Effects for ‘Norbit’”). That seamlessness, however, is precisely the issue because the audience doesn’t consciously register the disconnect, while unconsciously they are confronted with an almost Frankensteinian creation — a sapphimmibel chimera. Rasputia is an assemblage of Murphy’s prosthetically enhanced and femininely made-up mug and another woman’s fat physique, stitched together in the service of a joke.

The triple-layered construction of Rasputia’s body (actor + fat suit + CGI + stunt double) is a technological echo of the sapphimmibel concept itself: just as sapphimmibel is a composite stereotype, Rasputia is a composite *physical* creation. She is literally assembled out of parts to embody an idea. As Manigault-Bryant highlights, films like *Norbit* and *Big Momma’s House* make fatness and Black femininity central, yet “without including actual fat women” in central roles (63). Instead, when actual fat Black women appear, they used as physical doubles for the sake of digital dismemberment. Mainstream Hollywood has a long-standing aversion to truly centering fat women, especially fat Black women. By keeping the portrayal in the hands of a male star in a disposable suit, the film maintains a critical distance: the audience always knows that this isn’t really a fat Black woman, it’s Eddie Murphy underneath. This sends a message that fat Black women are acceptable only as caricatures, not as

⁷⁶ See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (6–18). Mulvey’s foundational essay theorizes how classical Hollywood cinema fragments and objectifies women’s bodies through the “male gaze,” turning them into fetishized parts rather than autonomous subjects.

authentic voices or protagonists, and absolves the audience and creators of grappling with the real lived experiences of fat Black women. In this sense, *Rasputia* is a controlling and controlled image — controlled by those not of her demographic, designed to elicit specific reactions that do not threaten the status quo. The controlling images Collins wrote about have simply donned new digital-age costumes. *Mammy*, *Sapphire*, and *Jezebel* have been remixed into a single figure, given a rubber and foam suit and CGI polish, but they persist to reinforce “binary thinking, oppositional difference, objectification, and social hierarchy” (Collins 71). *Rasputia*, as a sapphimmibel, is both a relic of archaic stereotype and a product of contemporary filmmaking that presents the stereotypes with a new gloss.

To achieve the digital head replacement, the crew filmed a real fat performer, Lauren Miller, whose body provided the base for *Rasputia*.⁷⁷ Miller had been cast after a search for someone who matched the character’s size and shape. Once she was on set, the team filmed her full-body movements, then digitally grafted Eddie Murphy’s face onto each shot. Miller said of her experience, “I just thought I don’t always get a chance to, I guess, show off my weight or use my weight in a way I can make a living out of it. So, I figured why not” — a remark that captures the uneasy exchange at the heart of this process. Her work is visible in many frames, yet her identity disappears the moment Murphy’s face is composited over hers. Baker’s crew spent months refining both the digital and practical effects. For the practical fat suit, the team switched from silicone to foam so the prosthetic face would flex naturally under sunlight, and Murphy spent roughly two-and-a-half hours in the chair each morning to match Miller’s on-set footage (“Man of 1000 faces”). The finished shots fuse two bodies into one, a digital seam that erases the identity of the woman who did the physical labor.

⁷⁷ All the behind-the-scenes information about the waterpark set-piece in the following two paragraphs comes from the Blu-ray featurette “The Making of *Norbit*” unless otherwise indicated.

Rasputia's arrival at the waterpark introduces the audience to the film's most extended use of digital dismemberment. The sequence opens with her walking toward the entrance in a neon-pink two-piece swimsuit, her exposed stomach framed in medium shots. A park employee, visibly repulsed, stops her and asks, "Are you wearing bottoms?" The employee is shot from a distance, his face contorting in disgust, with Rasputia's abdomen in close-up, filling the right side of the frame, her hands on her bare hips (see fig. 54). It cuts to a full shot of Rasputia, who lifts her stomach to reveal her bikini bottoms, a wet, squelching sound effect punctuating the motion (see fig. 55). The filmmakers mention that they used head replacement throughout this moment and much of the waterpark sequence, since, as Baker said, "A 400-pound woman wearing a bikini, I thought this is something we really can't do well [with a practical fat suit]" ("The Making of Norbit").



Fig. 54. Rasputia's rolls in close-up while the employee looks on in disgust in Norbit.



Fig. 55. Rasputia proving that she's "wearing bottoms" by lifting her stomach in Norbit. Note the digitally replaced head.

The digital manipulation in this scene did not stop at head replacement. The VFX artists explained that they digitally "hid" Rasputia's bright pink bottoms by extending her stomach in order to make the visual gag land ("Digital Dimension Provides Effects for *Norbit*"). To achieve this, they used a "grid warp" tool to stretch her midsection and mimic the jiggle of flesh as she walks ("Digital Dimension Provides Effects for *Norbit*"). In doing so, they treated her body as pliable matter,

something to be distorted for comic effect. This is a very literal form of objectification: Rasputia’s stomach is no longer part of a human being, but an autonomous comedic device, digitally puppeteered to elicit audience disgust. After the exchange, Rasputia storms through the gate, her body colliding with and struggling to fit through the revolving turnstile. The cinematography here focuses on her torso and thighs banging and jiggling against the turnstile (see fig. 56). The bars bend and spin out of control after she breaks through — another sign that her size itself is the spectacle.



Fig. 56. Rasputia getting stuck in the turnstile in Norbit.

The waterslide sequence is the film’s signature set piece — the moment that defines *Norbit* both narratively and in its marketing. It appears prominently in the trailer and is repeatedly showcased in the behind-the-scenes featurettes, where the filmmakers describe it as the most technically ambitious and physically demanding scene of the shoot (“*Norbit*’ Stunt Featurette”).⁷⁸ The Blu-ray itself opens with an animated splash sequence drawn from this moment, signaling to viewers that the waterslide gag is *the* image of the film. For this scene, Rasputia makes her way up the steps to the

⁷⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all behind-the-scenes information from this paragraph comes from the “*Norbit* Stunt Featurette” featured on the Blu-ray.

park's main attraction — a towering waterslide. The stunt coordinator, Andy Gill, shot the sequence at Raging Waters, where signs clearly state a 250-pound limit. To prepare for the gag, Gill brought in Lauren Miller to perform test runs and capture footage that would guide the camera angles and effects work. Before the test, Miller confirmed her real weight — “Right now I’m 376” — giving the crew a sense of how her body would move on the course. Despite the posted restriction, they proceeded to test the slide with Miller anyway, effectively using her body to gauge how much force and splash the structure could withstand. Gill explained that they coated the sides of the slide with lubricant so her arms and legs would glide smoothly rather than catch on the turns. Once the test footage was complete, the visual-effects team at Digital Dimension recreated Miller’s movement and composited Eddie Murphy’s prosthetic-covered face onto the footage. They then amplified the sequence with digital embellishments, adding sprays of water as Rasputia barrels down the slide.

The test runs that Lauren Miller performed give a sense of how much the final version would rely on spectacle. As Rasputia climbs the stairs toward the slide, each step lands with an exaggerated thud that echoes through the park. The soundtrack erupts with “Ride of the Valkyries,” a cue instantly recognizable from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), where it accompanied helicopter assaults on a Vietnamese village. Here, the same music recasts Rasputia’s ascent as an act of destruction, linking her movement to the chaos of war. Her body is framed from a low angle, her body looming over the scene like a bomb about to drop (see fig. 57). When she nears the top, a nervous attendant tries to stop her, warning that the slide’s weight limit is 300 pounds. Rasputia glares back and insists that she “only weighs 165,” a line played for absurdity as the creaking metal framework groans under her steps. The music swells into operatic vocals, signaling doom. When she sits at the mouth of the slide, the lens shifts to ground level, capturing her descent from behind. Her buttocks fill the frame, her butt crack peeking out from her too-tight two-piece, and the moment her body hits

the slick surface, a loud plopping sound echoes through the mix (see fig. 58). The emphasis is entirely on mass and motion — the camera waits for impact, and the soundtrack responds. As she barrels down the slide, Norbit mutters, “Mary, Mother of God,” and the music crescendos. Rasputia launches past the endpoint, bursting through the wooden wall, then soars across the park like a projectile. The camera cuts to the children’s pool, where her shadow eclipses a small girl just before she crashes down. A torpedo sound effect accompanies her fall, and when she hits, a tidal wave empties the pool. When the chaos clears, Rasputia sits in the empty basin beside a lone little white child (see fig. 59). She turns to her and chirps, “How *yer* doin’?” — a forced sassy catchphrase used throughout the film that lands as both nonsensical and unsettling after the destruction she has caused.



Fig. 57. Rasputia looming over atop the waterslide in Norbit.



Fig. 58. *Rasputia's* backside filling the frame in *Norbit*.



Fig. 59. A shot of digital dismemberment in *Norbit* and the resulting destruction from *Rasputia's* body.

The waterslide sequence recalls the pool scene from *Shallow Hal*, where Rosemary's dive turned a fat woman's body into a force of chaos. Both films imagine fatness as disaster: a body that disturbs the environment, floods the frame, and imperils a child, except *Norbit* amplifies the formula through scale and technology. In each case, the filmmakers pair near-identical imagery — a creaking structure,

a lingering rear view, a two-piece swimsuit that maximally exposes flesh, a tidal wave of water, and an endangered child found safe to cap the scene off — with sound effects that turn the woman's size into an explosive threat. These repetitions suggest a shared cultural fantasy rather than isolated invention. They reveal how these films imagine where fat bodies do or do not belong. Pools and beaches are already distressing sites for many fat people, places governed by social scrutiny and the demand for "beach bodies." These are social spaces where fatness is most visible and highly policed, where simply existing in a swimsuit can feel like an act of defiance. By setting major comedic set pieces in these environments, both films exploit that vulnerability for laughs. The women's revealing swimsuits, the buckling structures, and the peril their fat bodies present to those around them all serve to turn everyday anxieties about exposure into spectacle. And both scenes take place in films that merge shots of real fat women with prosthetics or digital composites so that audiences cannot tell who/what is real.

This point is accentuated by another scene at the waterpark, which shows *Rasputia* and *Kate* stretched out side by side on beach chairs in a medium two shot — *Kate* in a modest one-piece, *Rasputia* overflowing from her flashy two-piece (see fig. 60). The image makes the contrast literal: *Norbit's* morally righteous love interest is contained and composed, while *Rasputia's* body spills beyond the frame. The filmmakers themselves emphasized this opposition. In a making-of featurette, director *Brian Robbins* explained that he wanted a leading lady who was "smaller in stature than *Rasputia*," admitting, "I don't want to say it, but, I guess, smaller [...] so physically, when you saw *Eddie* as this big woman, *Thandie* was this beautiful, petite woman. It was this outrageous contrast." *Newton's* co-star *Lester Speight* put it more bluntly, describing her as "the size of my index finger" ("The Making of *Norbit*"). The film's casting thus codifies thinness as moral grace and modesty at a glance. This is visually reinforced again by having *Kate* drinking from a petite water bottle with a cute

little straw while Rasputia guzzles from a massive gas station ICEE. In the scene, Rasputia mocks Kate as “emaciated” and “skin and bones,” telling her she needs to eat, while Kate responds gently that everyone is made differently. Rasputia fires back that she’s a Christian and doesn’t want Kate “blaming God” for how she looks — a line played for irony, as Rasputia’s self-assurance is repeatedly framed as delusion. The humor depends on audience recognition — on the assumption that viewers will share the film’s disgust, not see this as connected to God, and laugh at her expense. But for many, the experience of watching Rasputia is not simple laughter. Her body, her voice, and her faith all become tools for ridicule, collapsing real forms of identity and expression into punchlines.



Fig. 60. Two shot contrasting the size of Rasputia with Norbit's conventionally attractive love interest.

It is telling that many Black women in the real world have responded negatively to Rasputia’s image. In a qualitative study of thirty-six African American women, researchers found that participants overwhelmingly described “male mammy” characters like Rasputia, Madea, and Big Momma as deeply insulting, particularly because they were played by men in fat suits rather than by real women (Chen et al. 115–16). The women reported feeling conflicted and hurt by these exaggerated depictions, which

seemed to mock their bodies rather than reflect them. Many said such portrayals robbed them of “positive associations” with familiar matriarchal figures, transforming potentially relatable images into an “absurdity portrayed by men” (125). Others described these depictions as “hurtful,” “mocking,” even leaving respondents feeling as though such characters “raped us of our identity,” noting that these caricatures rendered authentic Black womanhood invisible (125–26). According to the authors, this sense of dissonance arose from being “caught between” two dominant but incompatible images: a white cultural ideal of ultrathinness and a persistent media coding of Black women as inherently fat, a tension that left respondents feeling that their bodies could never be represented with dignity (125). The researchers conclude that fat drag Mammies like Rasputia intensify this injury — amplifying both the ridicule of Black women and the effeminization of Black men — and thus function as one of Hollywood’s most “hostile concoctions” for shaping how Black women come to see themselves (130).

The spectatorship of *Norbit* thus operates on two levels. The general audience — many likely non-Black, given the film’s mainstream marketing — is positioned to laugh freely at Rasputia’s expense, experiencing an “uncritical acceptance of negative representations” (Manigault-Bryant 62). Meanwhile, Black viewers (especially Black women) are left in the uncomfortable position of either laughing along uneasily or feeling the sting of recognition and offense. Some may practice what José Esteban Muñoz terms disidentification — neither fully rejecting the image nor embracing it, but negotiating it in complex, ambivalent ways. As Muñoz explains, disidentification is “a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology,” a way for marginalized viewers to engage representations not made for them (11). They read *against the grain*, salvaging fragments of recognition or pleasure from texts that might otherwise erase or ridicule them (11). Rather than simple acceptance or refusal, disidentification involves reworking a harmful image from within, finding in it traces of possibility even as one remains critical of its violence (11). For instance, a Black female viewer might disidentify

with Rasputia — laughing at her exaggeration while also recognizing, however uneasily, a trace of power or visibility in a world that usually erases women like her. In any case, *Norbit* offers little invitation for a compassionate or nuanced gaze upon Rasputia. She is deliberately drawn without interiority or redeeming qualities, existing primarily as a foil and a farce. By the end, when Rasputia is defeated (humiliated publicly and run out of town, which I discuss below), the audience is meant to cheer. The fat, dark-skinned sapphimmibel has been vanquished, restoring order and clearing the path for the sentimental happy ending between Norbit and the lighter, thinner Kate.

Chen et al.'s findings clarify the stakes of Rasputia's portrayal. What the respondents describe — the sense of being mocked, distorted, and written out of their own image — is precisely what the film's narrative enacts. By the final act, *Norbit* transforms those feelings of erasure into spectacle, turning symbolic injury into literal punishment. The closing scenes deliver what the film frames as justice: Rasputia's public humiliation, her body targeted and expelled, the audience invited to laugh as order is restored.

During the climax, Norbit and Kate have gathered in a church for their wedding ceremony, the culmination of Norbit's attempt to build a life free from Rasputia. Rasputia and the Latimore brothers break in mid-vow, declaring that Norbit "belongs" to her and violently disrupting the proceedings. She chases Norbit through the aisles, overturning pews and striking guests, her body framed as a chaotic force overwhelming the space. As the confrontation spills outside, Rasputia charges again at Norbit and the assembled crowd, prompting Mr. Wong — who has stepped in as a self-appointed protector — to intervene. Rasputia's defeat comes when Mr. Wong fires a harpoon into her backside, shouting "Whale, ho!" and, as she collapses, "Right in the blowhole!" The image is both literal and symbolic, completing her reduction from human to nonhuman animal. The scene plays as slapstick justice — a final comeuppance that reassures viewers that her unruly presence has

been contained. In the coda, she reappears in exile, working as a stripper in Mexico and dancing to “Don’t You Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me” (see fig. 61). The final shot recreates the famous *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983) pose: Rasputia arches her back on a chair as water pours down (see fig. 62). The choice of both song and imagery doubles the mockery. “Don’t You Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me” and the iconic *Flashdance* tableau are cultural shorthand for mainstream sex appeal — moments meant to celebrate desirability, self-expression, and feminine power. But *Norbit* retools them as punchlines. When Rasputia strikes the pose, her soaked body becomes a grotesque parody of cinematic sensuality, a gag that depends on the viewer’s recognition that she does not belong in this erotic script. The same logic underlies the earlier “Milkshake” montage: songs that proclaim confidence and allure are repurposed to underscore her supposed absurdity. In each instance, Rasputia’s attempts at sexuality are framed as delusional — gestures that invite not admiration but ridicule. By ending here, *Norbit* turns cruelty into closure. The fat Black woman is punished, sexualized, and cast out; the world is set right as Norbit is reunited with Kate — thin, light-skinned, feminine — a pairing that restores both heteronormativity and visual balance. Rasputia’s removal functions as a moral and aesthetic correction, assuring the audience that disorder has been expelled and harmony restored.



Fig. 61. Rasputia exiled to be a stripper in Mexico at the end of Norbit.



Fig. 62. The final shot of Norbit, an ironic homage to Flashdance.

To catalogue every fat joke in *Norbit* would be nearly impossible — and perhaps redundant, since their repetition is the point. The film's structure depends on an endless churn of mockery that revisits all the tropes that Plotz identifies, especially the Funny Fat Body, the Fat Eater, and Female Fatness as Non-Normative Femininity. Rasputia's every gesture becomes a setup for laughter — her

appetite (devouring her wedding cake before they even cut into it, inhaling ribs “extra sauce, don’t trim the fat,” ordering four entire pizzas just for herself), her sexuality (claiming pregnancy because of her belly, farting out her “child,” having an extramarital affair with her workout instructor who is disgusted by her), her mobility (crashing through doors, flattening mail carriers, deflating a bouncy castle, overflowing a bathtub). Her body is relentlessly gross (she gets her anus waxed in one scene, looks down at the massive ball of hair and exclaims, “Ooh, I was looking for Norbit’s police whistle!”) and even her sleep becomes spectacle, her snores rendered animalistic growls. It is a repeated sight gag that she takes up ninety percent of a king-size bed, leaving Norbit crammed against the edge (and even crushing him in her sleep in one scene) (see fig. 63). The result is a film so saturated with anti-fat ridicule that isolating individual instances risks missing the larger mechanism: *Norbit* constructs its world through a steady rhythm of disgust and laughter, training viewers to find Rasputia’s body itself as the punchline.



Fig. 63. Rasputia taking up the entire king size bed in *Norbit*.

If the sheer quantity of these gags numbs the viewer, that numbing is part of the film's design. *Norbit* operates through saturation: each repetition reaffirms a worldview in which fatness signifies disorder and disgust and must be laughed back into place. Every pratfall, every sight gag, replays the same moral fable that governs the film's ending — that fatness and non-normative femininity are incompatible with romance, dignity, or humanity. The humor naturalizes cruelty by embedding it in rhythm and expectation. Rasputia's body becomes a metronome for ridicule, setting the pace for the film's moral universe. By the time she is harpooned, humiliated, and exiled, the audience has been conditioned to see her downfall as satisfying comeuppance — a final release from the excess the film has spent nearly two hours inflating.

VII. Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that *Norbit* marks both the height and the unraveling of the fat suit gross-out cycle. The timing is noteworthy: Murphy received his first and only Academy Award nomination for *Dreamgirls* just as *Norbit* was being released, and the industry quickly coined the phrase “the Norbit effect” when he failed to take home the gold. Zack Sharf wrote in *Variety*:

As the story goes, Murphy received his Oscar nomination for “Dreamgirls” just over a week before “Norbit” opened in theaters. He had emerged as the season's supporting actor frontrunner after winning prizes from the Golden Globes and Screen Actors' Guild Awards. Then “Norbit” opened to abysmal reviews from critics. Alan Arkin ended up winning the Oscar for best supporting actor for “Little Miss Sunshine.” The industry was quick to blame the “Norbit effect” for why Murphy lost the Oscar. (Eddie Murphy Defends ‘Norbit’)

Whether or not the film truly cost Murphy the Oscar is not something we will likely ever know, but the idea caught on because it felt plausible. By 2007, audiences and critics alike seemed weary of the

gag. What once read as technical virtuosity was starting to look stale, and what once passed as harmless fun was landing with discomfort.

Still, as recent as 2025, Murphy continued to defend the film. “I love *Norbit*,” he insisted, recalling that he and his brother Charlie wrote it because “we think *Norbit* is funny” (Complex). He rejected the Oscar narrative outright: “They’re two different movies.” And on the Razzies, he laughed, “Come on now, shit ain’t that bad” (Complex). In his view, the backlash went too far, and the laughter was still real. His defense underscores that the film was never a failure at the box office. Yet the cultural afterlife tells a different story, one where *Norbit* has become shorthand for excess gone wrong. The very prosthetics that earned an Oscar nomination for “Best Makeup” were also the ones that critics and audiences cited as proof that the joke had run its course.

Perhaps this dissonance helps explain why the cycle of fat suit gross-out comedies slowed soon after. The “*Norbit* effect” does not provide a neat cause-and-effect story so much as a sign that the genre had reached its limits. The prosthetic masquerades no longer felt surprising, and the stereotypes they drew on were harder to dismiss as innocent fun. That does not mean fat suits disappeared altogether. As I noted in my introduction, they have reappeared in different registers — from tragic melodramas like *The Whale* to blockbuster tentpoles like *Dune* that still treat fatness as an obstacle to be defeated or pitied. Even Tyler Perry’s matriarch continues to lead films, with 2025’s *Madea’s Destination Wedding* (Tyler Perry) released on Netflix, marking the thirteenth film in the “Madea Cinematic Universe.” The suit remains, but the raunchy comedic mode that dominated the late 1990s and early 2000s has faded.

If *Norbit* represents the collapse of fat suit comedy at its peak, it also sets the stage for the next set of questions. The prosthetic body remains, but its cultural role has changed. What does it mean when a device once used for laughs becomes a vehicle for pity, fear, or moral uplift? How might

comedy remake itself without leaning on caricature? And what would it take for fat representation to move past both ridicule and pity into something more expansive — something that allows for joy, desire, and complexity? These questions form the hinge of my concluding thoughts, where I turn to the afterlife of the fat suit gross-out comedy and explore how fatness might be reimagined once the suit is set aside.

CONCLUSION: ECHOES OF CRUELTY, HORIZONS OF DIGNITY

In season 3, episode 19 of *Black-ish* (2014–2022), Dre Johnson (Anthony Anderson) and his mother Ruby (Jenifer Lewis) argue over the legacy of Lincoln Perry, better known by his screen persona Stepin Fetchit. Dre insists, “All I’m saying is that without Lincoln Perry paving the way, we might not have a Denzel.” Ruby, unimpressed, retorts, “And all I’m saying is that without Stepin Fetchit, I might be comfortable napping in front of white folk.” This exchange condenses a long-running debate in Black film history: can demeaning representation still be justified as a steppingstone to visibility and opportunity? And if so, at what cost?

The Fetchit persona embodied the “coon” stereotype, a set of racist images meant to amuse white audiences: the lazy, illiterate Black man with a “dim-witted, tongue-tied stammer” and “slow-lazyman shuffle” whose every gesture reinforced his inferiority (Bogle 32). Yet Perry was “the best known and most successful black actor working in Hollywood” and the first Black actor to earn a screen credit (32). On one hand, his visibility undeniably opened the door for later performers, even if only slightly. On the other, that visibility was tethered to roles that confirmed white supremacy’s most demeaning caricatures. Ruby’s retort in *Black-ish* resonates because it captures this bind: the very representation that Dre celebrates is inseparable from the indignities that Ruby has experienced in her real life.

Donald Bogle has emphasized this duality in his work on early African American representation. Writing about Hattie McDaniel’s Oscar-winning performance as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), Bogle notes that through “the force of her own personality, McDaniel’s character became free of the greatest burden that slavery — on screen and off — inflicted on blacks: a sense of innate inferiority” (78). Even within a role steeped in racist stereotype, McDaniel conveyed “a self-righteous grandeur that glows,” transforming Mammy into a figure of strength and wit. For Bogle, her

“mammoth presence” and “strong, hearty voice” made her “an actress larger than her lines, bigger than her role” (78). These moments of embodied resistance complicate otherwise flat caricatures, testifying to the capacity of Black performers to smuggle fragments of frustration, humor, and dignity into two-dimensional parts.

The logic of “steppingstone” representation thus hinges on the fact that real Black performers stood on the screen. Even when the roles were demeaning, they were embodied by people who carried within them histories, communities, and artistry that exceeded the script. Perry himself defended his career along these lines, claiming later in his life, “It was Step, who elevated the Negro to the dignity of a Hollywood star” (Bogle 37). Hattie McDaniel likewise insisted that her roles, however limited, created space for Black presence in an industry that had previously erased it entirely. She insisted, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making seven dollars a week actually being one!” (Bogle 72). Yet these arguments remain fraught. McDaniel was barred from her own film’s whites-only Atlanta premiere, segregated at the Academy Awards, and honored for a performance in a film that civil rights groups condemned for romanticizing slavery (Abramovitch; Leff). The “opportunity” she represented was profoundly constrained.

This history matters for how we think about fat suits. On the surface, the analogy between Stepin Fetchit and the fat suit tradition is tempting. Both involve demeaning caricatures that have long defined mainstream comedy. Both pose the question of whether such representation, however harmful, nevertheless “paves the way” for something better. Yet the analogy falters in crucial ways. What Perry, McDaniel, and their contemporaries offered — however compromised — was *real presence*. Their bodies, voices, and histories entered the cinematic record, creating fissures in which more complex representation might one day grow. Fat suits, by contrast, offer displacement and fabrication.

They erase fat characters to substitute prosthetic caricatures. No embodied experience seeps through because no fat are actors involved.

And yet, fat suit comedies also illustrate the brutal scarcity of authentic fat representation. When I was a young fat boy watching Eddie Murphy or Gwyneth Paltrow appear in prosthetics, I was, in effect, learning how to be fat from these films. I was learning the scripts of fatness, the scripts of shame. I internalized those scripts because they were all that was available to me. Still, I cannot deny that I recognized myself, however distortedly, in those performances. I lacked the education or sophistication to critically interrogate these images, let alone to meaningfully disidentify with them. What mattered was that in scenes of ridicule or humiliation, I could glimpse something of the pain I carried every day as a fat person in a world constructed to despise my body. *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal* were some of the few films available to me that even attempted to engage with the fat experience, however poorly. I saw myself in Sherman's desperate adoption of extreme diets and weight loss regimens; I connected with Rosemary's perpetual self-consciousness and insistence that she will "never be beautiful." The fact that I reached out and connected with what were ultimately mocking and mean-spirited representations of fatness only underscores how desperate the need for representation is: people will see themselves, and sometimes come to hate themselves, based on whatever images culture provides.

This is why the "better than nothing" argument has such traction. In a representational desert, even caricature can feel like a reflective oasis. Fat suit films function as "all we get" not because they offer authentic stories but because the culture has refused to produce better ones. For superfat people especially — bodies rarely seen on screen outside of medical reality shows or demeaning news segments — the grotesque prosthetic may be the only approximation of their size to appear in mainstream media, which can feel particularly appealing when those characters have a modicum of

pathos or likability, as is the case with Sherman Klump. But approximation is not the same as presence. Unlike McDaniel's Mammy, which hinted at an interior life even within a racist frame, fat suit roles foreclose interiority from the start. They preclude fat people from being the authors of their own representation, substituting instead a grotesque funhouse mirror of their bodies performed by thin actors.

Donald Bogle writes about how, in the early days of cinema, "when most important black characters were still portrayed by white actors in blackface," that the characters were strictly stereotypical:

[T]here was nothing but the old character types. They sat like square boxes on a shelf. A white actor walked by, selected a box, and used it as a base for a very square, rigidly defined performance. Later, when real black actors played the roles and found themselves wedged into these categories, the history became one of actors battling against the types to create rich, stimulating, diverse characters." (2)

Bogle's account reveals how even roles built from stereotype could be reworked once Black performers gained access to them. Fat suits deny that same trajectory. The fat boxes remain on the shelf, but fat actors are too often barred from reaching them. Instead, thin performers walk by, select a box labeled "fat," and build a performance from it — rigid, predefined, and safely detachable. In this system, there can be no "history of actors battling against the types," because fat actors are never invited to enter the frame at all.

In this sense, the *Black-ish* exchange provides a productive but limited framework. Dre's defense of Fetchit appeals to the idea of history bending toward progress, however unevenly. Ruby's retort reminds us of the costs carried along the way. But when the analogy is extended to fat suits, the terms shift. There is no Denzel waiting on the other side of the prosthetic, because the very structure

of the fat suit denies the possibility of authentic presence. Like blackface, what it ensures instead is caricature over character. And for those of us who grew up reaching for a sense of self in those caricatures, the consequence is devastating: we were trained to recognize ourselves in distortions and to internalize shame as the price of recognition.

If fat suit films once stood in for the absence of genuine fat representation, they did so within a larger genre ecosystem that has itself faded from prominence: the gross-out comedy. The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the form's apex, when box office juggernauts like *There's Something About Mary*, *American Pie*, and *The Nutty Professor* redefined studio comedy through spectacle, humiliation, and bodily excess. By the time *Norbit* premiered in 2007, the joke had worn thin. Its critical drubbing and commercial underperformance signaled that what once seemed edgy or bankable had curdled into embarrassment, even fueling rumors that it can cost actors awards. What had been an engine of Hollywood profitability suddenly looked like a curse.

In the years since, Hollywood comedy has shifted away from the prosthetic grotesquerie of fat suits and the set pieces of vomit, excrement, and sexual humiliation that defined the genre. Studio-backed comedies in the 2010s leaned instead on Apatowian “dramedies” that foregrounded awkwardness and sentiment (e.g., *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Trainwreck* (2015)), or television-driven “Nicecore” sensibilities that emphasized sincerity and warmth (e.g., *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), *The Good Place* (2016–2020), and *Abbott Elementary* (2021–present)). Theatrical comedy, in particular, retreated from the kinds of laughs that depend on exaggerated bodily spectacle. Even when slapstick returned, as in the recent reboot of *The Naked Gun* (Akiva Schaffer, 2025), it arrived wrapped in nostalgia, promising goofy sight gags, pratfalls, and puns rather than forays into bodily disgust. Its box-office success signals an appetite for lighthearted absurdity, but one largely rooted in revisiting the past rather than reinventing the form. This has all occurred against a backdrop of cinema-going's

decline, which has led to fewer and fewer studio comedies being greenlit in the first place. “Mid-budget films — an umbrella under which comedies largely fall — have all but given way to nine-figure blockbusters and comic-book tentpoles,” explains Jack King in a 2025 *GQ* report (“Where Did All the Big-Screen Comedies Go?”).

Gross-out comedy, however, has not vanished; it has migrated and shifted form. As I mentioned in the introduction, William Paul suggests that “it is perhaps only in a time of comfort that the utopian project of gross-out comedy is possible” (33). The sub-genre’s retreat from mainstream prominence may in part reflect the loss of that comfort. In an era defined by political instability, social precarity, and an exhaustion with irony and transgression, the utopian charge of gross-out humor feels mismatched with the zeitgeist. Its gleeful irreverence — once marketed as a liberating break from middle-class decorum — now reads as callousness in a world saturated with real cruelty. Today its energy can be found less in multiplexes than in online spaces and right-leaning comedy outlets. Comedies with raunchy sensibilities will sometimes gain traction on streaming services (e.g., *Bottoms* (Emma Seligman, 2023) and *No Hard Feelings* (Gene Stupnitsky, 2023)) but these tend to be smaller-scale or one-off experiments, rarely anchoring a cultural conversation. The more potent inheritors of gross-out are shock-jock comedians, YouTube personalities, and podcasters whose humor courts outrage as part of their brand. Figures like Andrew Dice Clay in the 1980s and Howard Stern in the 1990s laid much of the groundwork for what would become today’s shock-driven comedy. Their acts reveled in vulgarity and boundary-pushing, often through routines laced with racism, misogyny, homophobia, and fatphobia. What was once marketed as transgression against “respectability politics” is now a template for online shock humor, where the same cruelties circulate with fewer constraints and wider reach. In this sense, contemporary YouTubers, podcasters, and stand-up comics have not

invented a new mode of humor so much as extended and normalized the hostile energies Clay and Stern helped popularize, with marginalized people being the central targets more than ever.

This is a crucial amplification. Classic gross-out comedies, for all their cruelty, frequently styled themselves as irreverent attacks on authority. As we saw throughout my chapters, *Animal Comedies*, from *Animal House* to *Dodgeball*, framed themselves as rebellions against elites, upending stuffy hierarchies, professional decorum, and middle-class restraint. Their humor, at least in theory, “punched up.” The cruelty to women, queer people, and fat bodies was often treated as incidental — ugly byproducts of a genre that claimed to valorize outsiders, made in an era where it was not as common to question marginalizing dynamics. The reality was more complicated, of course, but the rhetoric of transgression still carried a populist charge.

By contrast, contemporary shock and gross-out humor often does the opposite. Its transgression is not against elites but against the perceived overreach of “political correctness,” developing its momentum by “being offensive just to be offensive.” Punching down is a feature not a bug. Jokes about trans people, immigrants, and disabled or fat bodies function not only as humor but as political signals: a declaration of allegiance in a polarized cultural landscape. Laughter becomes part of a political identity, a way of affirming membership in a community defined by its rejection of “wokeness.” Fat jokes in these spaces are not the side effect of lazy writing but a calculated way of affirming cruelty as a mode of belonging.

In this sense, gross-out comedy has not disappeared so much as metastasized into the culture wars. The decline of the comedic fat suit on Hollywood screens does not mean fatphobia has lost its comedic currency. Rather, it has shifted venues, attaching itself to political discourse where cruelty toward marginalized groups is recast as free speech, “edginess,” or truth-telling. Where once a fat suit might have anchored a summer comedy marketed to teenagers, today the same sensibility is more

likely to appear in a comedian's stand-up special railing against "body positivity" or a podcaster sneering at fat activists. The humor is meaner, more deliberate, less disguised as the collateral messiness of a genre that also lampooned elites. Right-wing influencer Steven Crowder illustrates the shift. In 2022, he released a video "exposing" an academic Fat Studies conference by donning a fat suit and performing as a fictional activist (Crowder). The entire segment is steeped in contempt. He opens by describing Fat Studies as "bursting at the seams with self-love, acceptance, and... well, just bursting at the seams" (Crowder). Later, he sneers that the conference had been forced online during COVID, quipping, "the floorboards thanked us" (Crowder). At the video's close, he ratchets up the disdain, mocking fat people as "350-pound land whale patients" whose lives, he claims, will be "traded to preserve the fragile egos" of academics (Crowder). Taken together, these moments show that the video isn't merely "joking around" but structured to strip fat people of dignity.

This video alone has been viewed more than 1.4 million times, its comment section teeming with gleeful cruelty.⁷⁹ Crowder has released many such videos targeting fat people and fat activism, cumulatively drawing tens of millions of views. While these are not Hollywood blockbusters, the reach and influence are undeniable. In the fragmented media landscape of YouTube and podcasts, such content spreads faster and embeds deeper than any studio comedy could today. Crowder's fat suit performance is calculated derision. The prosthetic becomes a prop in a broader political theater where cruelty is the point: the laugh comes not from incongruity or silliness, but from the sheer dismissal of fat embodiment as absurd, dangerous, or laughably unworthy of serious study. This is where the lineage of gross-out comedy has landed. Instead of Eddie Murphy's *Rasputia* anchoring a blockbuster, we find Crowder in a fat suit on YouTube, recirculating old tropes with sharper teeth. This migration

⁷⁹ Influential Fat Studies scholar Cat Pausé, who sadly died in 2022, was featured in Crowder's video. Unsurprisingly, many of the cruelest comments are aimed at Pausé and her passing, with commentors claiming that she deserved to die for glorifying obesity. One comment with more than 600 upvotes says, "Turns out positivity can't overcome biology, and maybe those doctors were right" (Crowder).

is why the decline of fat suit gross-out comedies cannot be read as progress on its own. For those of us who grew up reaching for a sense of self in these caricatures, the disappearance of such roles from multiplexes might feel like relief. But absence is not the same as presence.

The cruelty of this message is intensified by the broader political climate. In the United States, recent years have seen concerted efforts to roll back diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in schools, universities, and workplaces. Politicians frame these efforts as resisting “indoctrination” and reclaiming “free speech.” Within this discourse, fields that prioritize the study of marginalized peoples (fields like Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, Disability Studies, and Fat Studies) are often singled out as a symbol of academic overreach, painted as frivolous or dangerous.⁸⁰ That Crowder chose to lampoon a Fat Studies conference rather than, say, a conference on Film Theory or Physics is telling. Fatness is an easy target precisely because fat people are already positioned as lacking cultural legitimacy. Ridiculing Fat Studies is easy because ridiculing fat people is easy, and doing so functions to perform one’s allegiance to a politics of disdain. For fat people, the persistence of fat suits in this context confirms that our bodies remain available for dehumanization.

This politics of disdain dovetails with a wider cultural resurgence of anti-fat initiatives masked as concern for “health.” The rise of GLP-1 weight-loss drugs (like Ozempic, Wegovy, and others) has become one of the most potent symbols of this moment. Originally approved to treat Type-2 diabetes or “obesity” with comorbid conditions, their weight-loss effects have propelled them into status objects — celebrity endorsements, social media fascination, before/after photos, etc. (Alam). But with the hype comes real risks: adverse side effects (nausea, gastrointestinal issues, malnutrition,

⁸⁰ In March of 2025, Donald Trump said, “We have ended the tyranny of so-called diversity, equity and inclusion policies all across the entire federal government and, indeed, the private sector and our military. And our country will be woke no longer” (Guynn). For more on the Trump administration’s dismantling of DEI and targeting of higher education, see Blinder, Guynn, and Smith-Schoenwalder.

hypoglycemia); insufficient long-term data; and the possibility of rebound weight gain when people stop treatment (Niewijk).

Access to these drugs remains deeply unequal — and in many ways they are less about public health and more about visibility. This is “Ozempic for the rich, body positivity for the poor” (Alam). The popularity of Ozempic (and its GLP-1 kin) has exploded partly because celebrities and influencers have turned it into a cultural trend. TikTok users posting under hashtags like #Ozempic, #OzempicWeightLoss, and similar have clocked up hundreds of millions of views as people share rapid weight loss stories (Sommi). Yet this trend masks the structural inequalities baked into Ozempic’s use. The cost remains prohibitive for many, as factors like race, income, and insurance status determine who gets access (Alam).

At the same time, broad political programs like the MAHA (“Make America Healthy Again”) initiative under RFK Jr. are backing anti-fatness ideologies in ways that often blur the line between health policy and moral expectation and hearken back to the moral panic at the early days of “the obesity epidemic.” The 2025 MAHA report identifies ultra-processed foods, environmental chemicals, lack of physical activity, and chronic stress as primary drivers of the rise in childhood chronic disease (“MAHA Report”). But the report has been criticized on several fronts: scientific rigor (it contained broken links, mis-attributed or nonexistent citations, and questions about whether parts of it were generated by AI tools), ambiguous claims, and policy proposals that lean toward individual responsibility over structural inequality (Weber). The rhetoric of MAHA, much like the hype around weight-loss drugs, reinforces that fatness should be mutable, that bodies are projects to be managed, fixed, optimized. Fat remains and is amplified as a symbol of moral failing.

Unsurprisingly, fat suits in cinema have persisted in this climate. They appear across genres as devices that reinforce fatness as pathology or problem. In biopics, prosthetics are used to create

“accurate” historical figures even when fat actors could play the role, as in *Darkest Hour* (Joe Wright, 2017), *Vice* (Adam McKay, 2018), *Elvis* (Baz Luhrmann, 2022), and *Bombshell* (Jay Roach, 2019). In thrillers and children’s films, fat suits are repeatedly deployed to craft villains, with size coded as grotesque or corrupt: Colin Farrell’s Penguin in *The Batman* (Matt Reeves 2022), Scott Adkins’ Killa in *John Wick: Chapter 4* (Chad Stahelski, 2023), Emma Thompson’s Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda the Musical* (Matthew Warchus, 2022), and Stellan Skarsgård’s Baron Harkonnen in *Dune* (Denis Villeneuve, 2021). Even the biggest cinematic events of this generation have exploited the fat suit: it was used as a visual shorthand for Thor’s (Chris Hemsworth) failure and depression (not dissimilar to White Goodman’s fall from grace in *Dodgeball*) in the to-date second-highest grossing film of all-time, *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019) (“Top Lifetime Grosses - Box Office Mojo”). The muscular and conventionally attractive Hemsworth was hidden under a prosthetic fat torso for much of the film, which led to a flurry of fat jokes throughout the runtime. And, of course, award-winning fat suits appear in prestige dramas as well, as is the case with *The Whale*. On television, the same logic plays out in projects like *Insatiable* (2018–2019) and Sarah Paulson’s turn in *Impeachment: American Crime Story* (2021).⁸¹

The migration of fat suits into these genres illustrates continuity as much as change. Gone are the broad slapstick set pieces of *Norbit*, but oftentimes fatness remains represented through prosthetic exaggeration rather than through the presence of fat actors. Whether deployed to signal villainy, lend

⁸¹ As mentioned in the introduction, many of these productions have been met with protest (or at least exasperation) over their use of fat suits. In some cases, the celebrities wearing the fat suits have responded to the controversy, as is the case with Paulson, whose fat-suited performance as Linda Trip in *Impeachment* garnered controversy. Paulson told the *LA Times*: “There’s a lot of controversy around actors and fat suits, and I think that controversy is a legitimate one. I think fat phobia is real. I think to pretend otherwise causes further harm [...]. I think the thing I think about the most is that I regret not thinking about it more fully. You can only learn what you learn when you learn it. Should I have known? Abso-fucking-lutely. But I do now. And I wouldn’t make the same choice going forward” (Villarreal).

gravitas to a biopic, or stage tragedy and sympathy, the prosthetic ensures that fatness remains something to be simulated and discarded — not embodied or dignified.

If fat suits have so often functioned as instruments of derision, displacement, and caricature, it is worth asking whether they could ever be repurposed toward liberatory or ironic ends. The question matters because camp aesthetics, drag performance, and queer art have long embraced exaggeration and parody as tools of resistance. Fat suits are technologies of exaggeration, and exaggeration can destabilize as well as demean. The crucial difference lies in who wields it. When prosthetics are used by thin actors, exaggeration erases fat people, reducing them to grotesque caricature. When exaggeration is embodied by fat performers themselves, it can affirm, destabilize stigma, and build new cultural possibilities.

Fat drag and burlesque artists like Big Dipper, a queer rapper and burlesque performer, and Meatball, a drag queen and nightlife host, make this distinction clear. Big Dipper's music video *Lookin'* (Tobín del Cuore, 2018) opens with the rallying cry, "Fat boys: make some noise," immediately centering fat men as the stars of a campy, celebratory spectacle (Dean). The video riffs on the familiar "sexy car wash" trope — gags we saw used in *Norbit* and *Dodgeball* — but flips its meaning. Instead of using soap and sweat as punchlines, *Lookin'* revels in the sexiness of fat queer bodies, playful and unashamed (see fig. 64). Here, the fat body itself is a site of glamor and desire. Similarly, Meatball hosts her recurring "Fat Slut" parties, nightlife events that blend drag, dance, and unapologetic fat celebration (Moguls of Media) (see fig. 65). In both cases, exaggeration and camp are tools not of mockery but of joy.



Fig. 64. Big Dipper's *Lookin'* music video celebrating fat bodies.

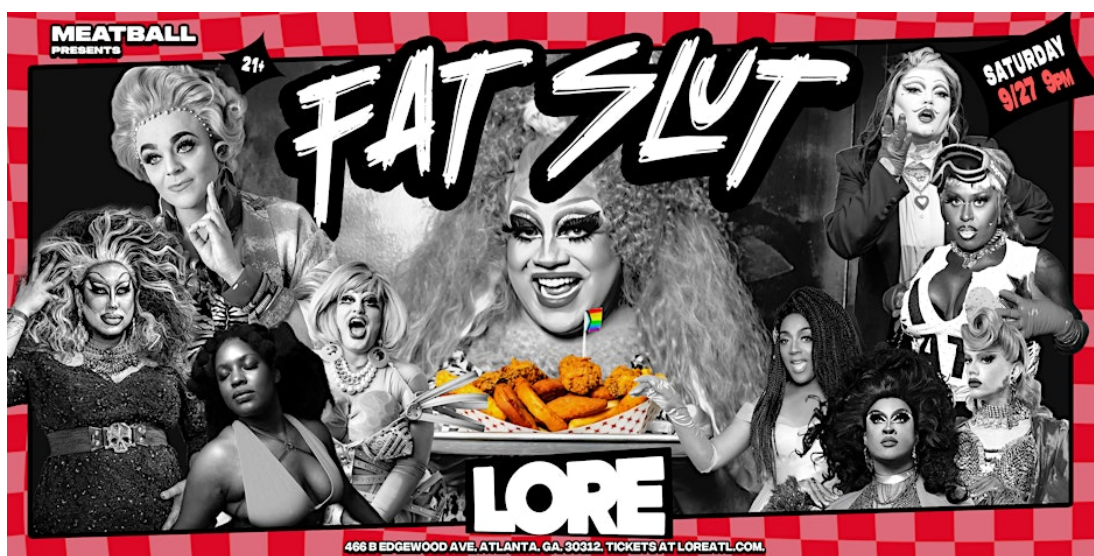


Fig. 65. Ad for one of Meatball's "Fat Slut" parties.

These examples highlight what Hollywood fat suits foreclose: the possibility of fat people exaggerating, parodying, and playing with their own bodies on their own terms. Divine offered an earlier model of this subversive potential, exploding norms of gender and respectability in John Waters's films. But today, performers like Big Dipper and Meatball extend that legacy by showing that the very aesthetics of excess, when embodied by fat people themselves, can become sources of pleasure, pride, and community. Where Hollywood fat suits simulate fatness to contain and moralize it, these performers embody fatness to celebrate and liberate it. Still, even these ironic or campy uses

underscore the problem: fat people themselves are rarely the ones invited to shape and guide representations of fatness. The liberatory potential of fat suits and fat camp cannot be realized if the tradition continues to exclude fat performers. In the spirit of disability activism’s rallying cry — “Nothing About Us Without Us” — fat representation, too, demands that fat people be active participants in telling their own stories.⁸² Without fat presence, irony collapses back into caricature, and the gesture risks reproducing the very harms it seeks to expose. What is needed, then, is not merely a clever retooling of prosthetics but a transformation of who gets to appear, to speak, and to create.

This is why calls for complex fat representation remain so urgent. The persistence of fat suits across genres, even after the decline of gross-out comedy, demonstrates how central prosthetic fatness remains to the cultural imagination. If prosthetics were unnecessary — if fat actors were invited to play complex roles across genres — the fat suit would fade into obsolescence. Its stubborn survival signals that Hollywood and other media industries still find it easier to simulate fatness than to dignify it. Against this backdrop, the emergence of more nuanced fat representation in television and film feels both fragile and necessary. Characters like Mavis Beaumont (Michelle Buteau) in *Survival of the Thickest* (2023–present) or Annie Easton (Lindy West) in *Sbrill* (2019–2021) gesture toward the possibility of fat protagonists whose stories are not reducible to weight loss or humiliation but still engage with the complexities of existing as a fat person in a fatphobic world.

For those of us who grew up seeing primarily prosthetic mockery, the difference is immense. To watch Aidy Bryant craft a character who dates, works, and struggles without being collapsed into

⁸² The slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us” originates in disability activism and articulates the demand that marginalized people be active participants in shaping the narratives and policies that affect their lives. As disability theorist James I. Charlton explains, “a growing number of people with disabilities have developed a consciousness that transforms the notion and concept of disability from a medical condition to a political and social condition. ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ requires people with disabilities to recognize their need to control and take responsibility for their own lives. It also forces political-economic and cultural systems to incorporate people with disabilities into the decision-making process and to recognize that the experiential knowledge of these people is pivotal in making decisions that affect their lives” (17).

caricature is to glimpse a world in which fatness is not automatically equated with excess or shame. To watch these characters is to recognize the power of actual fat embodiment on screen. These performances reveal what prosthetics always obscure: that fat people contain multitudes. We are not simply symbols of revulsion, nor cautionary tales, nor shorthand for corruption. Representation that acknowledges this does not only affirm fat audiences — it reshapes cultural common sense about what bodies are worthy of narrative attention.

Fat Studies has already produced a rich body of work charting the politics of fat embodiment, from the medicalization of “obesity” to the intersections of fatness with race, gender, sexuality, and disability. But the specific history of fat suits remains under-examined. My project has explored aspects of their role in the golden age of gross-out comedy, and much more remains to be done. How, for example, do fat suits function cross-generically, on television and in global cinemas? How do prosthetic practices in theater or opera intersect with their cinematic cousins? What can archival research uncover about the technical design of fat suits, the labor of costume departments, or the economic incentives that have kept them in circulation? How do early cinema, vaudeville, or circus traditions foreshadow fat suits’ logics of bodily exaggeration? How do various audiences, fat and thin alike, describe their experiences of watching prosthetic fatness on screen? Each of these questions points toward a fuller history, one that situates fat suits not as mere curiosities of a comedic fad but as technologies of representation whose impact reverberates across genres, decades, and media forms.

The hope that animates this work is that better stories can change how we see fatness. Representation alone will not dismantle fatphobia, but it shapes the cultural scripts through which people understand fat bodies. For decades, fat suits have rehearsed the same lessons: that fatness is comic, tragic, and grotesque. Those scripts have consequences, training audiences to see fat people through reduction rather than complexity. To study fat suits is to trace how those distortions have

been staged, but it is also to open the question of what else might take their place. What would it mean to have stories where fat people are visible, complicated, and unapologetic?

Changing stories is not the same as changing structures, but it can help make such change imaginable. When fat characters are written with dignity, it unsettles the idea that fatness is only a problem to be solved. It creates space for fat children to see themselves without shame, for audiences to recognize connection instead of cruelty, and for fat actors to claim presence on screen. Hope here is not naïve; it is a practice of looking toward possibility. That horizon — of dignity, complexity, and flourishing — remains in view but not yet reached. It is where the ongoing work of fat representation may be directed, as one part of a broader struggle for justice.

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An American Werewolf in London. Directed by John Landis, Universal Pictures, 1981.

Animal House. Directed by John Landis, Universal Pictures, 1978.

Apocalypse Now. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, United Artists, 1979.

Around the World in 80 Days. Directed by Frank Coraci, Walt Disney Pictures, 2004.

Austin Powers in Goldmember. Directed by Jay Roach, New Line Cinema, 2002.

Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery. Directed by Jay Roach, New Line Cinema, 1997.

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Avengers: Endgame. Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo, Marvel Studios, 2019.

Babes in Arms. Directed by Busby Berkeley, Loew's, Inc., 1939.

Back to School. Directed by Alan Metter, Orion Pictures, 1986.

The Batman. Directed by Matt Reeves, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2022.

Beverly Hills Cop. Directed by Martin Brest, Paramount Pictures, 1984.

Beverly Hills Cop III. Directed by John Landis, Paramount Pictures, 1994.

Big Momma's House. Directed by Raja Gosnell, 20th Century Fox, 2000.

Big Momma's House 2. Directed by John Whitesell, 20th Century Fox, 2006.

The Birth of a Nation. Directed by D.W. Griffith, Epoch Producing Co., 1915.

Bombshell. Directed by Jay Roach, Lionsgate, 2019.

Boomerang. Directed by Reginald Hudlin, Paramount Pictures, 1992.

Bottoms. Directed by Emma Seligman, Orion Pictures, 2023.

Bridesmaids. Directed by Paul Feig, Universal Pictures, 2011.

Caddyshack. Directed by Harold Ramis, Orion Pictures, 1980.

Caddyshack II. Directed by Allan Arkush, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1988.

Central Intelligence. Directed by Rawson Marshall Thurber, Universal Pictures, 2016.

Chicago. Directed by Rob Marshall, Miramax, 2002.

Chimes at Midnight. Directed by Orson Welles, Alpine Films, 1965.

Coming to America. Directed by John Landis, Paramount Pictures, 1988.

Daddy Day Care. Directed by Steve Carr, Columbia Pictures, 2003.

Darkest Hour. Directed by Joe Wright, Focus Features, 2017.

Diary of a Mad Black Woman. Directed by Darren Grant, Lionsgate, 2005.

Doctor Dolittle. Directed by Betty Thomas, 20th Century Fox, 1998

Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story. Directed by Rawson Marshall Thurber, 20th Century Fox, 2004.

Dreamgirls. Directed by Bill Condon, DreamWorks/Paramount Pictures, 2006.

Dumb and Dumber. Directed by Peter Farrelly, New Line Cinema, 1994.

Dune. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2021.

Easy Money. Directed by James Signorelli, Orion Pictures, 1983.

Elvis. Directed by Baz Luhrmann, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2022.

The Fast and the Furious. Directed by Rob Cohen, Universal Pictures, 2001.

Flashdance. Directed by Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures, 1983.

Forgetting Sarah Marshall. Directed by Nicholas Stoller, Universal Pictures, 2008.

Freddy Got Fingered. Directed by Tom Green, 20th Century Studios, 2001.

Funny People. Directed by Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, 2009.

Get Smart. Directed by Peter Segal, Warner Bros., 2008.

Ghostbusters. Directed by Ivan Reitman, Columbia Pictures, 1984.

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Good Luck Chuck. Directed by Mark Helfrich, Paramount Pictures, 2007.

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I Love You, Man. Directed by John Hamburg, DreamWorks Pictures, 2009.

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John Wick: Chapter 4. Directed by Chad Stahelski, Lionsgate, 2023.

Junior. Directed by Ivan Reitman, Universal Pictures, 1994.

Jurassic Park III. Directed by Joe Johnston, Universal Pictures, 2001.

Just One of the Guys. Directed by Lisa Gottlieb, Columbia Pictures, 1985.

Knocked Up. Directed by Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, 2007.

Madea's Destination Wedding. Directed by Tyler Perry, Tyler Perry Studios, 2025.

Madea's Family Reunion. Directed by Tyler Perry, Lionsgate, 2006.

Matilda the Musical. Directed by Matthew Warchus, Netflix, 2022.

The Meaning of Life. Directed by Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam, Universal Pictures, 1983.

Meatballs. Directed by Ivan Reitman, Paramount Pictures, 1979.

Meet the Fockers. Directed by Jay Roach, Universal Pictures, 2004.

Monster House. Directed by Gil Kenan, Columbia Pictures, 2006.

Mrs. Doubtfire. Directed by Chris Columbus, 20th Century Fox, 1993.

Mulan. Directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, Walt Disney Pictures, 1998.

No Hard Feelings. Directed by Gene Stupnitsky, Columbia Pictures, 2023.

Norbit. Directed by Brian Robbins, DreamWorks Pictures, 2007.

The Nutty Professor. Directed by Tom Shadyac, Universal Pictures, 1996.

The Nutty Professor II: The Klumps. Directed by Peter Segal, Universal Pictures, 2000.

Pink Flamingos. Directed by John Waters, New Line Cinema, 1972.

Police Academy. Directed by Hugh Wilson, Warner Bros., 1984.

Polyester. Directed by John Waters, New Line Cinema, 1981.

Porky's. Directed by Bob Clark, 20th Century Fox, 1981.

Precious. Directed by Lee Daniels, Lionsgate, 2009.

Rain Man. Directed by Barry Levinson, United Artists, 1988.

Revenge of the Nerds. Directed by Jeff Kanew, 20th Century Fox, 1984.

Shallow Hal. Directed by Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly, 20th Century Fox, 2001.

Starsky & Hutch. Directed by Todd Phillips, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2004.

Step Brothers. Directed by Adam McKay, Columbia Pictures, 2008.

Stripes. Directed by Ivan Reitman, Columbia Pictures, 1981.

The Terminal. Directed by Steven Spielberg, DreamWorks Pictures, 2004.

There's Something About Mary. Directed by Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly, 20th Century Fox, 1998.

Tootsie. Directed by Sydney Pollack, Columbia Pictures, 1982.

Touch of Evil. Directed by Orson Welles, Universal Pictures, 1958.

Trading Places. Directed by John Landis, Paramount Pictures, 1983.

Trainwreck. Directed by Judd Apatow, Universal Pictures, 2015.

Tropic Thunder. Directed by Ben Stiller, DreamWorks Pictures, 2008.

Uncle Buck. Directed by John Hughes, Universal Pictures, 1989.

Vampire in Brooklyn. Directed by Wes Craven, Paramount Pictures, 1995.

Vice. Directed by Adam McKay, Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

Wanted. Directed by Timur Bekmambetov, Universal Pictures, 2008.

Wedding Crashers. Directed by David Dobkin, New Line Cinema, 2005.

The Whale. Directed by Darren Aronofsky, A24, 2022.

White Chicks. Directed by Keenen Ivory Wayans, Columbia Pictures, 2004.

Television Show List

30 Rock. Created by Tina Fey, NBC, 2006–2013.

Abbott Elementary. Created by Quinta Brunson, ABC, 2021–present.

Alice. Created by Robert Getchell, CBS, 1976–1985.

The Bachelor. Created by Mike Fleiss, ABC, 2002–present.

The Bachelorette. Created by Mike Fleiss, ABC, 2003–present.

Big Bang Theory. Created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, CBS, 2007–2019.

The Biggest Loser. Created by Ben Silverman, Mark Koops, and Dave Broome, NBC, 2004–2020.

- Black-ish*. Created by Kenya Barris, ABC, 2014–2022.
- Bosom Buddies*. Created by Robert Boyett, Thomas L. Miller, and Chris Thompson, ABC, 1980–1982.
- Brooklyn-99*. Created by Michael Schur and Dan Goor, Fox/NBC, 2013–2021.
- The Cosby Show*. Created by Bill Cosby and Ed. Weinberger, NBC, 1984–1992
- Family Matters*. Created by William Bickley and Michael Warren, ABC/CBS, 1989–1998.
- Fear Factor*. Created by Randall Einhorn, Mark Perez, and J. Rupert Thompson, NBC, 2001–2012.
- The Flip Wilson Show*. Created by Flip Wilson, NBC, 1970–1974.
- Friends*. Created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, NBC, 1994–2004.
- Gimme a Break!* Created by Mort Lachman and Sy Rosen, NBC, 1981–1987.
- The Golden Girls*. Created by Susan Harris, NBC, 1985–1992.
- The Good Place*. Created by Michael Schur, NBC, 2016–2020.
- House of Payne*. Created by Tyler Perry, TBS, 2006–2012, 2020–present.
- How I Met Your Mother*. Created by Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, CBS, 2005–2014.
- Impeachment: American Crime Story*. Created by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, FX, 2021.
- Insatiable*. Created by Lauren Gussis, Netflix, 2018–2019.
- The Jeffersons*. Created by Norman Lear, CBS, 1975–1985.
- The King of Queens*. Created by Michael J. Weithorn and David Litt, CBS, 1998–2007.
- Malcolm in the Middle*. Created by Linwood Boomer, Fox, 2000–2006.
- Mama's Family*. Created by Dick Clair and Jenna McMahon, NBC/Syndicated, 1983–1990.
- Married... with Children*. Created by Michael G. Moyer and Ron Leavitt, Fox, 1987–1997.
- The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Created by James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, CBS, 1970–1977.
- Maude*. Created by Norman Lear, CBS, 1972–1978.

Meet the Browns. Created by Tyler Perry, TBS, 2009–2011.

Mom. Created by Chuck Lorre, Eddie Gorodetsky, and Gemma Baker, CBS, 2013–2021.

My 600-lb Life. Created by Jonathan Nowzaradan, TLC, 2012–present.

New Girl. Created by Elizabeth Meriwether, Fox, 2011–2018.

Parks and Recreation. Created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, NBC, 2009–2015.

Pose. Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, Steven Canals, Fox, 2018–2022.

Raising Hope. Created by Greg Garcia, Fox, 2010–2014.

Saturday Night Live. Created by Lorne Michaels, NBC, 1975–present.

Shrill. Created by Aidy Bryant, Alexandra Rushfield, and Lindy West, Hulu, 2019–2021.

The Simpsons. Created by Matt Groening, FOX, 1989–present.

Survival of the Thickest. Created by Michelle Buteau and Danielle Sanchez-Witzel, Netflix, 2023–2025.

That 70s Show. Created by Bonnie Turner, Terry Turner, and Mark Brazill, Fox, 1998–2006.

The Carol Burnett Show. Created by Carol Burnett, CBS, 1967–1978.

This is Us. Created by Dan Fogelman, NBC, 2016–2022.

Will & Grace. Created by David Kohan and Max Mutchnick, NBC, 1998–2006.