

WHALES, FATTIES, AND FAT BALLS. THE STEREOTYPED REPRESENTATION OF OBESITY IN TELEVISION AND CINEMA

ILARIA PARINI

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DEL PIEMONTE ORIENTALE

ilaria.parini@uniupo.it

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Abstract: The representation of individuals with obesity in film and television has sparked significant debate over the years, highlighting the media’s critical influence on societal perceptions of body image and weight. As potent forms of cultural expression, film and television have frequently depicted obese characters across comedic and dramatic genres, shaping public opinion and reinforcing social norms. This essay aims to examine how obesity has been portrayed in various media contexts, with a particular focus on the sociocultural implications. Indeed, it is essential to recognize the impact of these portrayals on public attitudes toward obesity, their role in perpetuating stereotypes and biases, and the broader effects on the dignity and self-esteem of individuals with obesity.

Keywords: disability; obesity; media representation; stereotypes; perception.

1. Introduction

Is obesity a disability? According to the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH), drawn up by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 1980 (Annex 1, Article 1), disability is defined as “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being”.

As far as its characteristics are concerned, the ICIDH (1993: 28) maintains that disability is:

characterised by excesses or deficiencies of customarily expected activity performance and behaviour, and these may be temporary or permanent, reversible or irreversible, and progressive or regressive. Disabilities may arise as a direct consequence of impairment or as a response by the individual, particularly psychologically, to a physical, sensory, or other impairment. Disability represents objectification of an impairment, and as such it reflects disturbances at the level of the person¹.

In other words, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), disability is defined as the negative outcome of the interaction between a person's health condition and the contextual factors, both environmental and personal, which influence their way of life. In recent decades, the link between obesity, as measured by body mass index (BMI), and various degrees of disability, assessed as functional limitations in activities of daily living (ADL), has become increasingly evident. This link is present regardless of the presence of other chronic conditions, with an odd ratio (OR) of 2.2 in men and 2.4 in women, attributable to both physical causes, such as difficulty walking or climbing stairs, and symptoms such as pain, dyspnoea or sleep problems (Peytremann-Bridevaux and Santos-Eggimann, 2007).

Obesity affects more than one billion people worldwide, representing a true epidemic, so much so that in 2001 the WHO coined the neologism “globesity”, a blend word formed from “global” and “obesity”. Obesity is a chronic condition that carries an increased risk for numerous diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer, and adversely affects the quality and length of life. Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of mortality among obese patients. However, thanks to advances in drug therapies and health interventions, the mortality rate from this cause has decreased in recent decades. The risk of death from diabetes, the second most common complication among obese patients, has also decreased significantly. Currently, there is an increase in osteo-articular pathologies among obese people, particularly in the knees and spine, which cause pain and significant functional limitations. This increase leads to an increase in disability, resulting in higher social costs, but without an increase in mortality. According to a global analysis published in the journal *The Lancet* on the occasion of World Obesity Day on 4th March, based on data from 2022, there are 159 million obese children and adolescents and 879 million

¹ https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/41003/9241541261_eng.pdf

obese adults. The authors of the research point out that these numbers are steadily increasing, indicating a worrying global trend.

As far as the Italian context is concerned, this concept was already taken up in the Report of 03/06/2010 of the National Federation of the Orders of Surgeons and Dentists, which states that “obesity must be considered a disability”. The report also states that “obesity is a social emergency that must be considered to all intents and purposes a form of disability, so that obese people must be guaranteed access to treatment and access to social services”, as the Italian Obesity Society (SIO) maintains (2010, online)².

However, unlike other disability categories towards which a certain sensitivity has developed in recent decades, also reflected in the use of language, obese people still tend to be often mocked, offended and discriminated against, as is discussed at length in the book *P(r)eso di mira. Pregiudizio e discriminazione dell'obesità* (Baggiani 2015)³. Other studies that deal with the topic are, for instance, Brookes and Baker (2022) and Coltman-Patel (2023), which provide corpus-assisted and discourse-analytical insights into how obesity is framed in the press, with emphasis on metaphor, stigma and ideological bias. Moreover, Eli and Uliaszek (2014) also offer an interdisciplinary account that connects media framings with social anxieties and policy discourses. Furthermore, Balirano and Hughes (2020) explore digital hate speech and discriminatory discourse against fat people, applying a critical discourse studies approach which is surely relevant to this paper's focus on mediated stigma and body representation.

Indeed, the portrayal of obese people in films and television products has been the focus of heated debates for decades, emphasising the crucial role of the media in shaping social perceptions regarding the body and weight. Film and television, being powerful tools of cultural communication, have often portrayed obese characters in both comedic and dramatic contexts, significantly influencing public opinion and social norms.

This essay aims to explore the ways in which obese people have been portrayed in the media, both in comedies and dramas, analysing the sociocultural implications of such portrayals. It is indeed extremely important to acknowledge how these cinematic portrayals have the potential to influence the public perception of obesity, how they contribute to the formation of stereotypes and prejudices, and affect the dignity and self-esteem of obese people.

2. Comedy representation

In film comedies, obese characters are frequently used as vehicles of humour. This trend is evident in numerous films, where the fat body becomes an object of derision. For example, in films such as *The Nutty Professor* (directed by Tom Shadyac in 1996), Eddie Murphy embodies an obese professor whose physical transformation is the pivotal element of the plot, often highlighting the character

² <https://portale.fnomceo.it/report-lobesita-va-considerata-una-disabilita/>

³ “*Weight targeted. Prejudice and discrimination against obesity*” (my translation).

through comedy related to his weight. Murphy plays Sherman Klump, an overweight chemistry teacher who experiences deep discomfort with his body image and suffers from low self-esteem. Klump's figure is characterised by a complexity that shows both his vulnerabilities and his positive traits. At the beginning of the film, Sherman is presented as a clumsy and insecure character, frequently ridiculed by his students and the people around him. This portrayal reflects established stereotypes about obesity, which tend to associate a larger body size with less attractiveness and difficulties in social and romantic relationships.

The narrative takes a significant turn when Sherman, through a potion he created, transforms himself into the charismatic and slender Buddy Love, a confident alter ego. The duality between Sherman and Buddy allows us to explore the theme of self-acceptance and identity construction. Buddy Love, embodying the social ideals of beauty and success, prompts the viewer to reflect on the authenticity and intrinsic worth of the individual. Although Buddy is initially perceived as charming and self-assured, his selfish and superficial characteristics soon emerge, in contrast to Sherman's affectionate and genuine nature. Through the character of Sherman Klump, *The Nutty Professor* combines comic elements and deep reflections, offering a perspective on the value of accepting and understanding others. Sherman's transformation emphasises how a person's value should not be reduced to physical appearance alone but include moral and human qualities. Although the film has elements of comedy and adheres to stereotypes, it conveys a message of great depth: authenticity and self-acceptance are more valuable than superficial expectations imposed by society.

Similarly, the film *Shallow Hal* (Farrelly brothers, 2001) addresses the issue of obesity as an obstacle to be overcome in order to achieve acceptance and happiness, presenting a critique of superficiality through the character of Hal Larson (the adjective "shallow", in fact, means "superficial"). Played by Jack Black, Hal embodies a distorted view of love, influenced by aesthetic stereotypes. His perception changes radically when he meets Rosemary, an obese woman played by Gwyneth Paltrow, and begins to perceive her "inner beauty" thanks to the intervention of a guru. This dramatic development underlines how outward perception and true attraction should be based on intrinsic qualities, such as intelligence and kindness, rather than on aesthetic criteria. The film invites viewers to critically reflect on how society imposes judgments on physical appearance and how these condition relationships. However, *Shallow Hal* has raised criticism for the way it treats obesity: Hal's perceptual transformation may imply that only a distorted view can make it acceptable to be attracted to an obese person, thus perpetuating a stigmatising perspective. In sum, Hal represents a search for authenticity, but the film raises questions about how popular culture handles the representation of obesity, calling for deeper reflection on the recognition of the individual for his or her intrinsic worth, regardless of outward appearance.

With regard to the portrayal of obese characters in comic TV series, going back in time one can only think of *Roseanne* (Matt Williams, 1988-1998). The series offers a meaningful and often realistic portrayal of a working-class American family, dealing with issues of everyday life, economic challenges and

family dynamics. The main characters, Roseanne Conner (played by Roseanne Barr) and Dan Conner (played by John Goodman), are portrayed as flawed but loving parents who struggle to keep their family together despite adversity. Both are overweight people, which probably contributed to the Italian distributors' choice to name the series *Pappa e Ciccio* in the Italian version, inserting a reference to weight that was absent in the original⁴. Roseanne (who is called Annarosa in the Italian version) is the central figure of the series, portrayed as a strong and outspoken mother with a sharp humour and a lively personality. Unlike many other female representations of the time, Roseanne does not try to conform to traditional ideals of beauty and behaviour: she is a woman who faces life with authenticity, expressing frustrations, vulnerabilities and joys. Her portrayal helped give visibility to a narrative that reflects the experiences of many working-class women, bringing forth themes of resilience and realism. Furthermore, it is interesting to analyse the representation of obesity in the sitcom. As already mentioned, Roseanne is a plus-sized woman, and the programme deals with this issue lightly but also sensitively. Interactions between characters often include jokes and references to weight, but the series manages to balance humour with moments of genuine humanity and acceptance. In this way, the series offers a more complex portrayal of obesity, showing that the characters are much more than their physical appearances.

Still in the field of TV series, it is worth mentioning the character of Monica Geller in *Friends* (David Crane and Martha Kauffman, 1994-2004), played by Courtney Cox. In fact, her character has a storyline that includes several flashbacks of her adolescence, where she is shown as an overweight girl. This aspect of her youth is often used to create comic moments or comparisons with her adult self, which has instead become very health and fitness conscious. "Fat Monica", as she is called by the characters themselves in the series, is presented as a likable and cheerful, but also awkward and insecure character who has a compulsive relationship with food (among the various anecdotes related to her as an obese teenager, her brother Ross reveals to the others that once she had eaten pasta covered in glitter and glued to a jewellery box when she had been sent to her room because she had been grounded). After a flashback episode in which Chandler mocks her because of her weight, Monica, who feels humiliated, loses dozens and dozens of kilograms, completely transforming her body. However, this physical transformation leads her to shift her obsession with food in another direction, namely an obsession with order, cleanliness and control. After losing weight, Monica becomes more confident, linking her physical change to her personal and social acceptance. However, from time to time the fat Monica that is still inside her seems to pop out and many of her character's comic moments concern her relationship with food and physical appearance, elements that become a central part of her transformation process.

It should be noted that this portrayal raised criticism, especially in the years following the end of the series. Some scholars and critics have pointed out that

⁴ "Essere pappa e ciccio" is an idiomatic expression which actually means "to be best friends". However, the word "ciccio", in informal Italian, refers to "fat", and the Italian title of the series plays on the pun contained in the idiomatic expression, as the main characters are not best friends but they are husband and wife.

the way Monica's weight is treated in flashbacks fuels negative stereotypes of overweight people. In the essay "Fat Monica, Fat Suits, and Friends", Gullage (2014) discusses how Monica's body is used as a comic tool in the series, emphasising the idea that thinness is associated with success and acceptance. This leads to reducing the character to a series of physical jokes related to her appearance. Ross's comment, "Hey, I grew up with Monica! If you didn't eat fast, you didn't eat at all!" is an example of how the series leveraged jokes related to physical appearance to elicit laughter. According to Knox and Hanno Schwind (2019: 75), when "Fat Monica" appears in flashback scenes, the humour of the situations is often based on her character, with jokes and laughter in the background that seem to prompt viewers to laugh at her appearance and her awkward movements, for example in episode 10.11, as she clumsily dances around eating a pizza before collapsing onto a beanbag chair.

These comic portrayals tend to reinforce negative stereotypes, representing obese people as gawky, incapable, and deserving of ridicule. This type of humour not only perpetuates prejudices, but it can also have a negative impact on the self-esteem of obese people in real life. As noted by Saguy and Ward (2011), the media tend to portray obesity in moralistic terms, often ridiculing or blaming individuals for their weight, thus contributing to stigmatisation and the maintenance of discriminatory attitudes in society.

3. Dramatic representation

There are also numerous portrayals of obese characters in television and film productions belonging to the drama genre. In the television series *This Is Us* (Dan Fogelman, 2016-2022), the character Kate Pearson, played by Chrissy Metz, deals with the subject of obesity in a profound and realistic manner. Unlike many other television portrayals, Kate's weight is not used as a source of comedy, but rather as a fundamental part of her identity and personal struggle. The series sensitively explores how obesity affects her relationships, her self-esteem and her connection with the world, making her experience central to her journey of growth. One of the most significant aspects of Kate's character is her constant inner conflict with her body. From a young age, she is shown struggling with her self-esteem, fuelled by social expectations and the desire to be accepted. Kate's childhood is marked by the family dynamic with a decidedly beautiful mother who is very attentive to her body shape. In addition, Kate constantly feels compared to her twin brother Kevin, who, in contrast to her, has always been very attractive and popular, from adolescence to adulthood, when he becomes a famous actor, thanks in part to his physical appearance. What makes Kate's portrayal unique is the fact that the series does not reduce her story to a desire to lose weight in order to conform to beauty standards. Although Kate participates in weight loss support groups and is committed to this goal, *This Is Us* highlights that her struggle is also emotional and psychological. As Chrissy Metz herself observes, "So many people are defined by a number. If there was going to be a pioneer of the plus-size girl of my shape on TV, why not me? We're not defined by our weight or what we wear but this is a very poignant story that

needs to be told” (Cavassuto, 2016, online). This approach humanises the character and allows the audience to understand the complex link between weight, mental health and self-esteem.

Furthermore, *This Is Us* challenges some of the traditional stereotypes about obesity. For example, Kate has a career, romantic and family desires, and faces personal challenges that go beyond her body weight. In this way, the series demonstrates that a person’s weight does not define who they are, while acknowledging the importance of weight in Kate’s life. Indeed, Kate is one of the few modern portrayals of an obese woman who is not ridiculed or relegated to a marginal role.

In summary, *This Is Us* succeeds in creating a complex and realistic portrayal of obesity through the character of Kate, highlighting the everyday difficulties associated with the condition, but also the journey towards self-acceptance, breaking with traditional TV clichés and making room for a more empathetic and inclusive narrative. Kate, indeed, does not lack love. In fact, she even gets married twice. The first time to a man who is obese like her at the beginning of the story (although he manages to slim down considerably over time) and the second time to a normal-weight man for whom Kate’s overweight body is no problem.

In the dramatic film context, the representation of obese people tends to be more articulate and multidimensional. In the film *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick 1987), the character of private Leonard Lawrence (played by Vincent D’Onofrio) represents one of the most disturbing and tragic aspects of the psychological transformation that soldiers undergo during military training. Nicknamed Gomer Pyle by Sergeant Major Hartman, he is an awkward, overweight and initially unfit recruit soldier in the discipline of the Marine Corps. Gomer Pyle was a television character played by Jim Nabors and first introduced to the public in 1962, midway through the third season of *The Andy Griffith Show* and later in the series *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* (1969). Gomer Pyle is a sweet but clumsy man, dull-witted and naive, who often gets simple tasks wrong in the Marines. By calling Private Lawrence “Gomer Pyle”, Hartman implies that he considers him incompetent, slow and out of place in the rigorous environment of Marine training. The nickname underlines Lawrence’s lack of military fitness, making him a target for Hartman’s relentless harassment and ultimately contributing to the psychological decline that drives his character arc. Interestingly, in the dubbed Italian version, the sergeant calls Private Lawrence “Palla di lardo”, literally meaning “fat ball”. The decision not to retain the original reference was presumably due to the fact that in Italy the series in which the character appears have never been broadcast, so the Italian audience would not be able to grasp all the connotations attached to this nickname. However, it is worthy of attention that the Italian dubbing opted to characterise, and consequently mock, the soldier because of his excessive weight, instead of focusing on his incompetence. This could have been avoided by using a substitution strategy, e.g. by replacing the original reference with one better known to the Italian audience that retained the same connotations as the original (moreover, Gomer Pyle’s character is by no means overweight).

Private “Gomer Pyle” is subjected to brutal and relentless training that progressively pushes him towards mental collapse. The soldier’s transformation is visible in both his body and his psyche. At the beginning of the film, he is the symbol of the unfit and vulnerable individual, not only because of his physical appearance but also because of his lack of discipline and self-control. However, under the influence of the psychological and physical violence of training, Lawrence begins to change. As he becomes more physically able, however, he gradually loses his sanity. This change culminates in an iconic and devastating scene: having fully internalised the violence inflicted upon him, the soldier commits suicide, after killing Sergeant Hartman.

Another example of the representation of obesity in dramatic cinema can be found in the film *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* (Lasse Hallström 1993). The obese person in question is Bonnie Grape (played by Darlene Cates), the mother of the protagonist Gilbert (played by Johnny Depp). In this case, obesity is one of the central elements of the narrative and symbolises the immobility and emotional burden on the whole family. Bonnie suffers from morbid obesity and is physically and mentally blocked by her condition, becoming a visible reflection of family dysfunction and unresolved grief. In fact, Bonnie lives in isolation and has practically withdrawn from the outside world since the death of her husband, who committed suicide some years earlier. Her obesity is described as one of the consequences of this trauma, and she spends most of her time sitting on a sofa, unable to move. Her condition and immobility have become a kind of prison for her and her children, especially Gilbert, who feels trapped in having to care for her and his younger brother Arnie, who suffers from a mental developmental disorder. Bonnie’s obesity is not only a physical condition, but a symbol of the emotional burden that oppresses the family. As Santos (2009) notes, Bonnie represents the emotional burden and sense of responsibility that weighs on Gilbert, who is trying to escape a life that seems destined for stagnation and suffering. The house itself, with Bonnie at its centre, becomes a place of confinement for the characters, and its immobility symbolises the family’s inability to move forward.

The film also explores how the community views Bonnie, highlighting the stigma associated with obesity. When Bonnie leaves the house for the first time in many years in order to go and get Arnie released from prison, her appearance becomes a spectacular event for the townspeople. People look at her with curiosity and mockery, emphasising how extreme obesity is often treated as some sort of anomaly or spectacle. In this sense, Bonnie is dehumanised in the eyes of the community, reduced to a curiosity to be observed rather than seen as a person with a history of pain and suffering.

Despite her immobility and state of health, Bonnie is also portrayed as a strong and loving figure who cares deeply for her children, even if she is unable to express this love in a traditional way. Her decision to go upstairs for the first time in years towards the end of the film, despite knowing that this might cause her death, is an act of will and love for her family. After her death, her children decide to burn down the house with her body inside, as the thought of Bonnie coming out of the house as a public spectacle would be unbearable (when making this decision, in fact, Gilbert keeps repeating “She’s not a joke”, dubbed in Italian

as “Non è un fenomeno da baraccone”, literally meaning “she’s not a freak show”).

The portrayal of Bonnie challenges certain stereotypes about obesity, showing her not only as a tragic figure, but as a mother who, despite her condition, maintains a strong emotional influence on her children. As Lupton (2018: 59) notes, Bonnie’s obesity is both a physical manifestation of the trauma she has suffered and a symbol of her family’s difficulties, which are rooted in a past of pain and loss. Obesity thus becomes not only a physical problem, but a central element of the narrative fabric representing the complexity of family dynamics. In conclusion, the portrayal of Bonnie Grape’s obesity in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* is powerful and symbolic. It reflects both personal trauma and the emotional suffering of the family, and it raises questions about the social stigma associated with obesity. Bonnie is not just a character defined by her body, but a complex figure who embodies the struggle between pain and love in a difficult family context.

The theme of obesity, and the complexities associated with it, is also found in the film *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009), based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire. The obesity of the main character, Claireece “Precious” Jones (played by Gabourey Sidibe), is not simply a physical aspect, but a symbol of deeper dynamics of oppression, trauma and marginalisation. The portrayal of obesity in *Precious* becomes a means to explore themes of poverty, abuse and racism, positioning the protagonist’s body as a visible instrument of her inner and outer struggles. Precious is a young African American woman living in extreme poverty in Harlem in the 1980s, physically, sexually and emotionally abused by her mother and father. Her body, marked by obesity, becomes a metaphor for the weight she carries, both physical and emotional. As Hooks (2013) notes, Precious’s body is a symbol of her social invisibility: through her weight, society seems to see her only as a worthless, forgotten and neglected figure. Obesity, therefore, is not just an aesthetic issue, but reflects the complex set of traumas, sufferings and social conditions that crush the protagonist. Precious’s mother uses her daughter’s obesity as a further tool of abuse and control. In one of the film’s most powerful scenes, the mother harshly criticises Precious’s body, projecting her own hatred and insecurities onto her. This verbal abuse becomes a form of psychological violence that is intertwined with physical violence, with Precious’s obesity serving as a visible target for her mother’s and society’s criticism. In the film, Precious’s obesity is also linked to her relationship with food, which she uses as a survival mechanism to cope with trauma and abuse. Indeed, for Precious, food becomes a refuge, a way to fill the emotional void and protect herself from a hostile world that rejects her. As we have already seen in the examples analysed in the previous pages, this dynamic is common in the cinematic representation of obese people, where food is often shown as a response to trauma or deep emotional emptiness. However, *Precious* does not reduce the character solely to her obesity. As the plot develops, she begins a journey of redemption, finding support through education and new positive relationships, such as the one with her teacher Ms. Rain. The film shows how the character struggles to regain her dignity and worth, despite her extreme circumstances. This personal redemption goes beyond her physical appearance:

although her body remains the same, Precious's inner change is what marks her evolution.

The film partly challenges typical narratives that link obesity to moral failure, showing instead how it is the result of a series of traumas and oppressive living conditions. In this way, *Precious* contributes to a broader discussion of obesity as a complex condition interconnected with social and psychological issues, offering a multifaceted and human view of the character, rather than merely representing her through common stereotypes. In short, in the film *Precious*, the protagonist's obesity becomes a powerful symbol of her suffering and the marginalisation she suffers, but at the same time the film explores her journey towards self-determination, without reducing the character to her physical condition. Precious manages to overcome, at least in part, the barriers posed by her environment, demonstrating that her strength and worth are not defined by her body, but by her capacity for resilience and healing.

Finally, it is impossible not to mention the film *The Whale* (Darren Aronofsky, 2022), based on the namesake play by Samuel D. Hunter. The central and symbolic meaning of the obesity of the protagonist, Charlie (played by Brendan Fraser), is clear from the title itself of the film. The whale, in fact, refers to the extremely obese body of the protagonist, although it also has a connection with one of the themes of the film, that is an essay about Moby Dick. Like Bonnie in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, Charlie is also a person who suffers from severe obesity and lives in almost total isolation, locked up in his flat. The film uses his physical condition as a visible manifestation of the emotional and psychological pain the character carries within, exploring themes of guilt, redemption and self-destruction.

Charlie's obesity is deeply linked to his inner suffering. For Charlie, as for Bonnie, the onset of his condition originates from a bereavement event. In fact, after the death of his partner, Charlie takes refuge in food as a coping mechanism, developing an eating disorder that leads him to weigh over 270 kilograms. His body becomes a symbol of his unresolved grief and guilt, as he feels responsible for both the death of his partner and the abandonment of his daughter, Ellie. Again, therefore, it emerges how obesity, in representations such as this, is a physical sign of emotional trauma, an outward manifestation of an inner emptiness. Food, therefore, becomes a form of self-harm and self-punishment.

A relevant aspect of Charlie's portrayal is his isolation. Unlike Bonnie, however, Charlie has no family to care for him. The character never leaves the house and only interacts with the outside world through a few people, such as his nurse and friend Liz, and, very sporadically, with his ex-wife and daughter. Charlie's extreme obesity makes him almost a prisoner of his own body, accentuating his physical and emotional isolation. As acknowledged by several scholars, social isolation is one of the most devastating consequences of the weight stigma that often accompanies obesity, worsening mental and physical health problems (Bacon 2010; Hajek, Kretzler and König 2021). This isolation is made tangible in the film through the claustrophobia of Charlie's flat, a closed environment that reflects his emotional state.

Although the film offers a complex depiction of obesity, it has attracted criticism for the way it is treated. Some viewers and critics felt that *The Whale* perpetuates the stigma attached to obesity, reinforcing the idea that obese people are essentially broken, unhappy and unable to change. Critic Katie Rife, for example, expressed her thoughts in a tweet on 12 September 2022, where she claimed “I can’t recommend in good conscience that fat people watch *The Whale*. I can’t recommend that skinny people watch it either, since it reinforces the notion that fat people are objects of pity who have brought their suffering upon themselves through lack of coping skills”. The choice to use a prosthetic body to transform Brendan Fraser has raised further questions about the use of non-obese actors to portray people with severe obesity, a practice that some consider problematic because it risks further dehumanising the subjects depicted. To this criticism, the director responded by stating that he had initially sought out actors who were genuinely obese and could play this character, but that this search had become an impossibility (McArdle 2022)⁵. On the other hand, other critics praised Fraser’s performance for its delicacy and humanity. Fraser plays Charlie not only as a victim of his body, but as a deeply empathetic and loving person whose guilt and pain have led him to a situation of self-destruction. His final struggle to seek a connection with his daughter is presented as an attempt at redemption, a last-ditch effort to regain a sense of dignity and worth in his life.

In this sense, *The Whale* is not only a story about obesity, but also a broader reflection on the burden of suffering and loneliness. The film explores the boundaries between body and spirit, asking questions about how pain and loss can manifest physically and how redemption can be found even in the most desperate situations. In summary, the representation of obesity in *The Whale* is complex and controversial. The film uses Charlie’s body as a symbol of his inner pain and struggles, but at the same time raises questions about the effect this representation has in perpetuating the stigma of weight. However, through Charlie’s story, the film manages to explore universal themes of loss, remorse and the search for redemption, making his obesity an integral, but not exclusive, part of his emotional journey.

Films such as *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*, *Precious* and *The Whale* provide a more empathetic and realistic view of the challenges faced by obese individuals. *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* describes the life of a woman who becomes obese following her husband’s suicide. *Precious* tells the story of an obese young woman battling abuse and poverty, offering an in-depth analysis of the psychological and social difficulties associated with obesity. Finally, *The Whale* explores the life of an obese man trying to reconcile with his family, dealing with themes of shame, acceptance and redemption. In all these cases, one or more traumas are evident at the origin of the characters’ condition. These dramatic films not only make the audience aware of the difficulties faced by obese people, but also counteract the simplistic narratives presented in comedies. As noted by Murray (2005), dramatic portrayals can foster a more humane and compassionate

⁵ <https://people.com/movies/the-whale-director-said-search-for-obese-actor-before-brendan-fraser-casting-was-impossible/>

understanding of obesity, promoting greater empathy and contributing to the reduction of associated stigma.

4. Sociocultural implications

Television and film portrayals of obese people have significant sociocultural implications. When audiovisual products perpetuate negative stereotypes through comedy, they contribute to the normalisation of the stigma associated with obesity. Such comedic portrayals often reinforce existing prejudices, portraying obese people as objects of ridicule and mockery, and fuel a culture of discrimination based on weight. As pointed out by Puhl and Heuer (2009), obesity-related stigma can lead to severe forms of discrimination and prejudice, which negatively affect the mental and physical health of obese individuals. Stigma can manifest in various social contexts, including education, employment and healthcare, limiting opportunities and contributing to a cycle of social exclusion and health deterioration.

In contrast, more sensitive and complex dramatic representations can play a key role in combating these stereotypes. Audiovisual products that treat obesity with respect and narrative depth promote a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of obese people. These dramatic narratives can challenge simplistic and reductive perceptions of obesity, fostering a positive change in social perceptions and contributing to the reduction of prejudice. For example, Murray (2005) points out that dramatic representations of obesity, which avoid ridicule and instead explore the psychological and social realities of individuals, can promote greater empathy in the audience. Therefore, these products provide a space for critical reflection and understanding, encouraging viewers to look beyond superficial prejudices and recognise the complexity of the lives of obese people.

It is therefore clear that film and television have the power to profoundly influence social perceptions of obesity. While comedic portrayals can contribute to the perpetuation of stigma and prejudice, sensitive and respectful dramatic narratives can promote greater understanding and acceptance, thus contributing to a positive change in the public perception of obesity.

Although this essay focused on the representation of obesity in a selection of films and TV shows, it is worth noting also that factual television plays a significant role in shaping public understanding of obesity. Indeed, also in this case its portrayals are often reductive and contribute to social stigma. Research shows that portrayals of individuals with obesity in non-fiction television tend to be limited in number and heavily stereotyped. Characters who are overweight or obese are commonly depicted as socially isolated, unattractive, or the subject of humour, and they are seldom granted complex narratives or romantic storylines. Even though this pattern is most evident in fictional programming, as seen in the previous pages of the article, similar tendencies appear in factual formats, where obesity is frequently framed through narrow thematic lenses.

News coverage and documentary-style programmes typically present obesity primarily as a health crisis, emphasising associated medical risks and positioning

the issue as a matter of personal responsibility. This framing foregrounds behavioural explanations – poor diet, lack of exercise, and insufficient self-discipline – while often neglecting broader determinants such as socioeconomic conditions, the built food environment, genetic predispositions, and psychological factors. As a result, obesity is repeatedly cast as a moral and individual failing rather than a multifactorial public-health challenge. Such narratives have been shown to reinforce weight stigma, shaping societal attitudes and influencing how individuals with obesity perceive themselves.

Reality-based health programmes offer similarly mixed contributions. While some documentaries aim to present the lived experiences of individuals with obesity and acknowledge the complexity of the condition, many popular weight-loss shows adopt a competitive, transformation-focused format. These programmes often reinforce the notion of complete personal control over body weight and have been shown to increase viewers' bias toward people with obesity. Even documentaries that aspire to educate may oversimplify causal factors or rely on emotionally charged storytelling that inadvertently perpetuates stigma.

Despite these shortcomings, there is a gradual shift toward more nuanced representations. Some recent documentaries present obesity as a chronic medical condition shaped by biological, psychological, and structural forces. Scholarly and public-health critiques have also contributed to a growing awareness of the harm caused by oversimplified or moralistic portrayals, prompting calls for more accurate and empathetic representations.

Overall, while factual television has the potential to contribute meaningfully to public understanding of obesity, it more often reinforces simplistic and stigmatising narratives, just as fictional representations tend to do. A more responsible approach would foreground the complexity of the condition, recognise the diverse experiences of individuals living with obesity, and avoid depictions that rely on blame or moral judgment. Such a shift would not only improve media discourse but also support more informed and compassionate public attitudes.

5. Concluding remarks

The portrayal of obese people on the small and big screen varies widely between the genres of comedy and drama, with profound implications for the social and cultural perception of obesity. Comedy portrayals often tend to perpetuate negative stereotypes, reinforcing the stigma associated with obesity. Such depictions reduce obese people to objects of derision, painting them as clumsy, incapable and deserving of ridicule. This type of portrayal not only perpetuates existing prejudices, but it can also negatively affect the self-esteem and mental health of obese individuals. This is also highlighted by Puhl and Heuer (2009), who point out that obesity stigma can lead to systematic discrimination and prejudice, affecting various aspects of people's lives, from mental and physical health to socio-economic opportunities.

In contrast, dramatic narratives offer a more nuanced and complex portrayal of obese people, fostering greater understanding and empathy. TV series such as *This Is Us* and films like *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *Precious* and *The Whale* present obese characters in contexts that deeply explore their psychological and social experiences, dealing with themes of shame, acceptance and redemption. These dramatic films can challenge the simplistic narratives offered by comedies, promoting a more humane and compassionate view of obesity.

It is therefore crucial that audiovisual products continue to evolve, representing obesity in ways that respect the dignity and complexity of human experiences. This approach can contribute to a more inclusive and less prejudiced society by reducing stigma and promoting greater empathy towards obese people. Indeed, dramatic representations can play a crucial role in promoting positive changes in social perceptions and reducing prejudice.

In conclusion, it is paramount to emphasise that the portrayal of obese people in the media has a significant impact on public perception and social norms. It is extremely important that people working in television and film recognise the importance of representing obesity in a respectful and realistic manner, contributing to greater equity and respect in society.

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