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'Am I disgusting?'
Exploring the Spatial Embodiment of Gay Fatqueer Body in Cinema

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Abstract

This paper argues that the experience of being both fat and queer, in a fatphobic and queerphobic society, entails the overlapping of corporeal shame and exclusion from both the heteronormative and queer physical and affective spaces in which fatqueer identities live. Largely, in cinema, the representation of queer people follows a certain aesthetic that is associated with glamorous characters who are conventionally attractive, physically toned, and neurotypical. Such representations further reinforce the denial of physical, social, and cultural space to fatqueer people by restricting their bodily autonomy and demanding a compulsory performance of attractive queer corporeality to access inclusivity. Integrating theoretical insights from Queer Spatiality and Fat Studies, this paper builds a consolidated critical framework to analyse the morbidly obese fatqueer character of Charlie in Darren Aronofsky's film *The Whale* (2022). Aronofsky's film is one of the very few mainstream cinematic representations that portray a gay fatqueer character. The analysis explores Charlie's spatial experience as an instance of 'queering' space through fatness, immobility, and disembodiment. In the paper I critique the effectiveness of epistemic intervention made by the film in addressing the experience and desires of Charlie. I examine aspects of bodily normativity within spatial environments where Charlie's fatqueer sexual and bodily identity unfolds and accentuates how spatial metaphors such as confinement and disorientation are used to narrate his experience.

Keywords: Aronofsky, Embodiment, Fatqueer, Identity, Sexuality, Spatiality, *The Whale*

Introduction: Cinema and fat(queer)ness

In human interaction, the question of self-perception versus societal judgment often reveals the fragile interplay between identity and external validation. This tension is poignantly crystallised in Darren Aronofsky's film *The Whale*, where Charlie asks Thomas, 'Am I disgusting?'[1] after the latter has mistaken him for a pervert who wants to get intimate with him. When forced by Charlie thrice to answer the question, Thomas replies, 'Yes, you are disgusting.'[2] This short dialogue between Charlie and Thomas encapsulates the conflict between one's identity and the social validation of that identity. Here, Charlie's vulnerable

[1] Darren Aronofsky, Director, *The Whale*, A24, 2022, 1hr 56min, MKV file, 00:55:11.

[2] Aronofsky, *The Whale*, 00:59:21.

inquiry about his physical and sexual identity confronts Thomas' harsh rejection, but also the layered attitudes toward fatness and queerness that are implicit in this confrontation. Charlie's question reflects his vulnerability and internalised shame, likely shaped by societal stigmas surrounding fatness and queerness. Thomas's response, confirming Charlie as 'disgusting,' reveals his own biases, discomfort, and prejudices that equate fatness with moral failure and queerness with deviance. Charlie's desperation for validation suggests a struggle with self-worth in a world that often marginalises individuals who deviate from conventional norms of attractiveness or masculinity. This interaction highlights the subjective nature of disgust, as well as the constructs that dictate moral and physical acceptability in both physical and virtual spaces where humans and characters respectively reside.

Cinema is one such virtual representative space where non-normative identities are allowed to unfold their nuances. It stands out as a site where non-normative identities are not just represented but negotiated, embodied, and often regulated. As a work of cinema, *The Whale* reveals the emotional exposure of Charlie as an epistemology of bodily presence, which is shaped by embodied vulnerability, spectacle, and affect, whose nuances lie within and outside the cinematic aesthetics. In 2006, writing about Cinema in *The Corporeal Image*, film scholar David MacDougall argues that 'Symbolic hierarchies reveal themselves in cinema by regulating what can and cannot be seen.... Attraction to (and identification with) the bodies of others in the cinema remains a more multifaceted matter than one of gender, or even of age, physique, nationality, sexuality or class.'[3] Thus, as cinema constructs and regulates visual hierarchies, MacDougall's argument refers to a renewed interest in understanding how certain bodies are privileged while others, such as fatqueer, are marginalised or rendered invisible because of the systemic biases embedded in body politics in cinematic representations. In this sense, the corporeal excess of Charlie in *The Whale* becomes both spectacle and shield, a framing that invites a deeper inquiry into how bodies mediate knowledge and intimacy. MacDougall's claim on the tactile dimension of visual anthropology offers a counterpoint to this cinematic portrayal, urging us to consider not just what we see, but how we feel through what is shown. Following MacDougall, we also understand that the visual politics of cinema do more than reflect societal biases as they also reproduce them, rendering fatqueer bodies invisible or hypervisible depending on the symbolic economy of the film. In addition, MacDougall's focus on attraction and identification challenges traditional assumptions about audience engagement, suggesting that the relationship between viewers and on-screen bodies transcends reductive categories like gender or class.[4] This opens a conversation about how fatqueer characters in cinema resonate with viewers, whether through empathy, discomfort, or the disruption of norms.

Cinema has long served as a mirror to societal norms, prejudices, and aspirations, often amplifying the voices of the marginalised or, conversely, perpetuating their erasure.[5] However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that cinema, both mainstream and queer, has always been obsessed by bodily thinness and a 'normative bodily aesthetic.'[6] Among a variety of underrepresented and misunderstood identities are those of morbidly obese queer

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[3] David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 19–20, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400831562.

[4] MacDougall, *The Corporeal*, 21.

[5] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (Routledge, 2014), 76, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315771441.

[6] Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking*, 70.

individuals whose representation in cinema seems to be few and far between,[7] placing them in a further disadvantageous visual spatial position. These queer identities, shaped by fatness, while distinct, intersect in profound ways because of their lived experience of queerness; challenging conventional narratives of a stereotypical queer bodily identity, spatial embodiment, and sexual belonging. With this understanding, in this paper I consider how spatial and cinematic regimes of visibility and invisibility shape the embodied experiences and narrative trajectories of Charlie's gay fatqueer body and how the presence (or absence) of such bodies in representational spaces such as *The Whale* influences cultural and spatial understanding of attraction, identification, and belonging. As Kathleen LeBesco argues, 'the spatial politics of fat bodies lay bare the environments that are not built to accommodate them, reinscribing the body as both a boundary and a battleground,'[8] discussing how placemaking is never universal but a process charged with questions of access, exclusion, and identity.

Spatiality and the cinematic fatqueer identity

Contemporary fat cinema, exemplified by Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale*, reveals how spatial dynamics shape fatqueer identity in ways that reflect and reinforce cultural anxieties about bodies, gender, and belonging. This section argues that examining the spatial negotiation of fatqueer bodies on screen, particularly in *The Whale*, illuminates not only the embodiment of marginalisation but also the potential for transformative resistance. This potential is also highlighted by Barbara Plots in *Fat on Film: Gender, Race and Body Size in Contemporary Hollywood*, in which she asserts that in the context of cinematic representations:

> Some public, media and academic discourses claim that in contemporary Western society men's physical attractiveness and thereby also their bodies are held to increasingly high standards, with body image playing a central role within normative masculinity.… The distancing from and negation of the physicality of the body leads to a projection of body-hatred, and the more unpleasant aspects of embodiment in general, onto the fat body, but also onto other types of othered bodies, such as female, non-white or queer bodies.[9]

In *The Whale*, Plotz's claim is dramatically visualised: the film's mise-en-scène turns Charlie's apartment into both sanctuary and prison. Narrow doorways, cramped furnishings, and the omnipresent emphasis on Charlie's manoeuvrings draw attention to how fatness is made visible and problematic in everyday space. The audience witnesses Charlie's discomfort as he struggles to fit through thresholds, reclaiming the theoretical projection of body-hatred by making it a lived, cinematic reality. The inclusion of fat bodies within the wider category of 'othered bodies' is further complicated by queerness. Further, as Amy Borden says, 'The destabilisation of the individual to question the singularity of identity is the primary motivation behind queer cinema studies' resurgent valuing of practice over representation.'[10]

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[7] Deborah McPhail and Andrea E. Bombak, 'Fat, queer and sick? A critical analysis of 'lesbian obesity' in public health discourse, *Critical Public Health* 25, no. 5, (2014): 540, https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2014.992391.

[8] Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 28.

[9] Barbara Plots, *Fat on Film: Gender, Race and Body Size in Contemporary Hollywood* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 25, 132, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350119390.

[10] Amy Borden, 'Queer or LGBTQ+: On the question of inclusivity in queer cinema studies', in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender,* ed. Kristin Lene Hole, Dijana Jelaca, E. Ann Kaplan, and Patrice Petro, (Routledge, 2016), 105.

Following Borden, it becomes evident that rather than reducing identity to fixed categories, *The Whale* directs attention to process—the practice of living, inhabiting, and negotiating space as a fatqueer person. For Charlie, queerness and fatness intersect in routines such as writing, eating, and yielding to physical constraint. The film does not simply represent a static identity but foregrounds the dynamic process of embodied living, aligning with Borden's emphasis on practice.

This focus raises a critical question central to cinematic fatqueer inquiry: How does cinema, through spatial design and visual narrative, construct and challenge definitions of fatness and queerness? By adopting a (fat)queer spatiality lens, we can read the film's spaces as more than neutral backdrops—they become tangible participants in the orchestration of inclusion and exclusion. Space is critical in fatqueer lives, shaping how individuals navigate, experience, and resist norms. The question, as posed by Plotz, of 'how fat bodies are oriented within their physical spaces [also determines] … what defines fatness,'[11] is palpable in *The Whale*'s use of set and blocking. Scenes featuring Charlie's attempts to move through or remain in particular rooms become enacted metaphors for societal definitions of acceptability and marginality. The spatial exclusion often faced by queerness is deeply enmeshed in cinematic spatial politics. The spatial exclusion of queerness is played within the spatial politics in which, as Chloe Vitry argues, 'Some bodies are "queer" because they find alignments in "queer spaces", while other bodies are queered by being thrown out of alignment in straight spaces.'[12] As Vitry notes, queer bodies are 'queered' by being misaligned within heteronormative spaces. *The Whale* demonstrates this tension in every interaction: thresholds between rooms mark boundaries between intimacy and estrangement, and every visitor engages with Charlie at these threshold spaces. These moments dramatise how bodies become 'queered' not just by their desires but by their uneasy fit in everyday environments.

In such an environment, the experience of spatial marginalisation is intensified for fatqueer subjects, whose bodies are routinely excluded by spaces designed for normative bodies and behaviours. For Charlie, space is not abstract; it is viscerally tied to his body and its public perception as 'morally incorrect, a sign of disease, loss of control and weakness.'[13] Within the apartment, the camera's attention to how much space Charlie is 'allowed' to occupy makes visible the social policing of the body. These experiences are also echoed and magnified for fat neuroqueer individuals—those navigating both cognitive and physical difference making the act of claiming space, or 'queering' space, not only about survival but about resistance and transformation.

Thus, as marginalised queer identities, fatqueer individuals engage in 'queering' space, which involves challenging and transforming traditional spatial norms. Judith Halberstam uses the term 'queer space' to describe 'the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the

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[11] Lesleigh Owen, 'Living fat in a thin-centric world: Effects of spatial discrimination on fat bodies and selves', *Feminism & Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2012), 297, https://doi.org/10.1177/095935351244536.

[12] Chloe Vitry, 'Queering space and organizing with Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology,' *Gender, Work, & Organization* 28, no. 3 (2020), 938, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12560.

[13] Maria Clara de Moraes Prata Gaspar, Priscila de Morais Sato, and Fernanda Baeza Scagliusi, 'Under the "weight" of norms: Social representations of overweight and obesity among Brazilian, French and Spanish dietitians and laywomen,' *Social Science & Medicine* 298, no. 1 (2022), 116, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114861.

production of queer counterpublics.'[14] *In The Whale*, Charlie's apartment transforms into such a counterpublic area—a place where normative standards are suspended and new forms of belonging become possible, even if always fragile. Sara Ahmed deepens this reading, arguing 'Bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling.'[15] Ahmed challenges the notion of space as merely external or static, proposing instead that bodies and spaces are mutually constitutive. *The Whale* may appear to trap Charlie, but it also allows his body to transform the meaning of 'home.' His physical routines—opening and closing blinds, navigating rooms, constitute both resistance and adaptation. The apartment is not just a container for the fat body; it is an environment in mutual flux with its inhabitant, performing what Ahmed calls the 'co-creation' of body and space. For instance, the repeated insistence on keeping the blinds drawn in Charlie's apartment aligns with Ahmed's notion of the body 'dwelling' not merely in, but through, the negotiation of space. Each attempt to open the room to light becomes fraught—a possible violence as much as liberation. Nick Walker has further shown how this co-creative process extends to neuroqueering:

> With this awakening of new neuroqueer creative capacities comes an increased capacity to participate in the neuroqueering of cultural spaces and cultural practices: the ongoing co-creation of social environments that support the creative participation of neuroqueer bodyminds and encourage further embodied exploration of neuroqueer performance and neuroqueer possibilities. This sort of ongoing interplay between the neuroqueering of individual bodyminds and the neuroqueering of cultural spaces is the key to collective liberation from compulsory normativity.[16]

Here, the focus shifts to the collective neuroqueering of space—through empathy, adaptation, and mutual care. Walker adds, 'neuroqueering of cultural spaces involves reimagining and reshaping environments to be inclusive of neurodivergent and queer identities.'[17] In *The Whale,* this is dramatised as Charlie's home slowly transforms, becoming a provisional haven where diversity is precariously affirmed. Spatiality's communality becomes clear as cinema produces not solitary but collective negotiations of space, where bodily and cognitive differences compel the invention of new norms. The refusal to adapt or accept signals social failure, while acts of accommodation signify hope for more inclusive futures and a process that Walker sees as central to dismantling compulsory gendered and cognitive spatial norms.

Gendered notions of masculinity are also deeply rooted in gay queer spaces. Regarding the relationship between fatness and masculinity, Sander L. Gilman argues, 'It is not merely thinness that is our ideal, however, but also a specific notion of masculinity. Always, there has existed a need to draw the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable fat, and acceptable and unacceptable masculinity.'[18] Thus, body image, masculinity, and the voyeuristic gaze towards fatness, as Gilman discusses, constitute experiences that are not

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[14] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), 6.

[15] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 9, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074.

[16] Nick Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities* (Autonomous Press, 2021), 9.

[17] Walker, *Neuroqueer,* 11

[18] Sander L. Gilman, *Fat Boys: A Slim Book* (University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 10.

static but evolve with cultural, economic, and technological changes. Also, these distinctions differ across cultures or subcultures, thereby creating expectations of fatness and masculinity that differ for fatqueer men. Thus, the representation of fatqueer bodies in cinema and popular culture, Niall Richardson explains, has to be understood in the cultural context that 'although it [fatness] is often veiled in discourses of health and well-being, the real anxiety about fat is related to physical beauty and how fat violates regimes of attractiveness.'[19] However, within these dynamics of bodily beauty in the cultural present, 'fat itself remains bound up with deeply ingrained cultural images of the [fat as] "feminine" that are not exclusively connected to female bodies.'[20] Additionally, the overlap of queerness and fatness adds another layer of complexity to these cultural images, challenging normative frameworks of gender, sexuality, and cinema aesthetics. Fat queer individuals often navigate a dual marginalisation, where their bodies are subjected to intersecting stigmas that reflect broader societal anxieties about nonconformity.

Taken together, these spatial insights suggest that fatqueer characters are not simply placed in rooms, they are positioned in relation to the limits that those rooms place on bodies, desires, and interactions. In *The Whale*, this is not an incidental backdrop but the formal mechanism by which Charlie's difference is rendered cinematic. This layered dynamic necessitates a closer examination of how cultural perceptions of fatness intersect with sexuality and space, requiring a critical methodology that unpacks these complex relationships. While theorists such as Halberstam and Ahmed emphasise spatiality in queer embodiment, *The Whale* dramatises these ideas through visual cues and diegetic details, enacting what Vitry calls 'bodies thrown out of alignment in straight spaces.'[21] Charlie's interactions with other characters are constantly staged around thresholds and barriers each a reminder of the broader spatial logic that marks certain bodies as always, already displaced.

Mapping fatqueer spatial identity in *The Whale*

Fat cinema often grapples with the spatial politics of size, questioning how fat bodies occupy, disrupt, and redefine physical and symbolic spaces. Recent scholarship exploring the intersections of fatness and queerness in film has become a critical tool for interrogating both societal and spatial biases, examining not only who is permitted to occupy space but how those spaces are constructed and perceived through the cinematic lens.[22] This insight forms a foundation for analysing how cinema shapes, and is shaped by, attitudes towards fatqueer identities, sometimes obscuring or erasing aspects of their spatial experiences.

Queer spatiality, understood as both the lived spatial experience of queerness and the queering of spaces via bodily non-normativity, provides an analytical entry point for understanding fatqueer subjectivities as depicted in film. Specifically, it asks: How do norms—visual, social, and architectural—dictate who can occupy which spaces, and in what ways? How does the medium of cinema, through its techniques and narrative choices, reinforce or disrupt these patterns of spatial marginalisation?

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[19] Niall Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (Ashgate, 2010), 6. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315550022.

[20] Christopher E. Forth, 'Nobody Loves a Fat Man: Masculinity and Food in Film Noir,' *Men and Masculinities*, 16, no. 4 (2013), 402. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X13502653.

[21] Vitry, 'Queering,' 938.

[22] May Friedman, Carla Rice, and Jen Rinaldi. *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality, and Social Justice* (Routledge 2020), 12. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429507540.

Recognising that fatness and queerness exist along spectrums—including various physical and cognitive diversities—it is not the aim here to generalise from one story, but rather to use *The Whale* as a case study illustrating cinema's spatialisation of fatqueer life. To address the spatial metaphors of confinement, expansiveness, and disorientation, this analysis examines both narrative and cinematographic strategies. It understands how confinement is visually rendered through tight framing, repeated shots of Charlie's small apartment, and frequent use of doorways and thresholds that restrict both his movement and our view. The camera often lingers in close-up or medium shots, emphasising the limits of his mobility and how his body seems both oversized for and trapped within these interiors. Expansiveness is paradoxically evoked through the focus on Charlie's physical presence: low-angle shots and wider frames at key moments emphasise not only the magnitude of his body, but also its undeniable claim on the visual field—even as the narrative and other characters mostly wish to render him invisible. Disorientation is activated by Aronofsky's use of subjective camera positions: moments of blurred or shaky focus and sound distortion align us with Charlie's own physical and emotional instability, forcing the audience to inhabit, however briefly, his embodied dislocation.

The film's camera positions the spectator in a complex relation to Charlie's fatness: at times, it is sympathetic, lingering on mundane domestic rituals that humanise him; at others, it becomes voyeuristic or clinical, using long takes and still frames to foreground Charlie's body as spectacle or pathology. This oscillation invites ongoing negotiation: Are we to empathise with Charlie's suffering, or judge his perceived failures? By aligning us so closely with Charlie's point of view in some scenes, yet gazing upon him in others as an object, the film implicates the viewer in the spatial exclusion it portrays, provoking discomfort and self-reflection. In exploring these spatial dynamics, the paper identifies three of Charlie's coping mechanisms—withdrawal, invisibility, and disembodiment—not only as narrative motifs but as visual strategies. Withdrawal is reflected in the dim lighting, closed curtains, and repeated scenes of retreat. Invisibility appears in the evasion of mirrors and avoidance of public spaces, emphasised by the camera's reluctance to show Charlie in full. Disembodiment surfaces in sequences of abstraction, where the focus slips from body to voice, gesture, or memory.

The Whale: Fat voyeurism or (dis)embodied visual disruption?

The Whale, directed by the American filmmaker and director Darren Aronofsky, is based on Samuel D. Hunter's 2014 play of the same name. It is about the last five days in Charlie's life, leading to his tragic death. However, the film raises critical questions regarding the visibility and invisibility of fatness and queerness, framing Charlie's body as both a site of immense suffering and as a testament to the intersections of marginalisation, both spatial and emotional. Through its intimate portrayal of Charlie's relationships and struggle with space and human belonging after the death of his partner, Alan, the narrative provokes discourse on the stigmatisation of fatqueer bodies who exist outside societal beauty norms. While the actor Brendan Fraser's performance as Charlie has been lauded for its emotional depth, the film has also faced criticism for its framing of fatness through a lens of tragedy and fat voyeurism, reinforcing certain stereotypes.[23]

[23] Michael Schulman, 'About Brendan Fraser's Fat Suit in "*The Whale*",' *New Yorker*, 7 December 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/notes-on-hollywood/the-whale-and-the-fat-suit-brendan-fraser-darren-aronofsky.

The Whale visually stages fatness as both spectacle and site of intersectional marginalisation, wavering between a voyeuristic gaze and moments of embodied disruption. Through Charlie's spatial struggles, the film dramatises the intersections of fatness, queerness, and religious shame, but its visual strategies oscillate between empathy and exploitation. From its outset, *The Whale* constructs Charlie's apartment not just as a backdrop, but as an extension of his marginalised embodiment. The camera lingers on his physical struggles—negotiating confined passageways, retrieving objects with assistive tools, and relying on purpose-built 'fat-guy' furniture. As Kathleen LeBesco argues, 'the spatial politics of fat bodies lay bare the environments that are not built to accommodate them, reinscribing the body as both a boundary and a battleground.'[24] These cinematic choices are not neutral: tight framings and prolonged shots risk turning Charlie's corporeality into fat spectacle, inviting what can be called 'fat voyeurism'—a dynamic that both exposes and objectifies. This is especially apparent in scenes where the camera emphasises Charlie's size relative to domestic objects or frames him from behind as he moves with visible effort, foregrounding his body as a site of struggle and deviation from the norm.

Figure 1. Charlie teaches his online class while keeping his webcam off, reflecting his struggle in the digital space. Source: Aronofsky, *The Whale*, 00:04:11.

The movie opens and a series of images tell us about the character of Charlie. His physical condition is immediately apparent, with his struggle to move within his apartment as a reflection of his spatial identity. His body becomes a boundary marked by his lack of interaction with the world beyond his small apartment. In the opening scene, he is taking up more than half the space on a sofa and delivering an online English class to a group of students. Figure 1 captures a pivotal aspect of Charlie's existence as an online instructor, where his deliberate choice to keep his camera off reflects his digital spatial identity. The blacked-out video feed labelled 'Instructor' contrasts starkly with the visible faces of his students, symbolising Charlie's self-imposed invisibility in the digital space. This absence is not merely a technical decision but a deeply emotional and psychological one, rooted in his fear of judgment and societal stigma surrounding his fat body identity. As LeBesco's work on fat

[24] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?* 58.

embodiment and spatiality suggests that 'visibility can be both a site of risk and of political possibility'.[25] Here, Charlie's self-imposed invisibility is an act of protective withdrawal but also a symptom of internalised stigma. The digital classroom, far from neutral, becomes another site where fatness and queerness are policed, not only by others' judgment as evident in the students' laughter and ridicule, but by Charlie's anticipation of that social gaze.

As we critically situate this act into a fatqueer spatial experience, Charlie's decision to remain unseen underscores his absence from both physical and virtual spaces. The digital classroom, which could serve as a neutral or even liberating space, becomes another site of exclusion for him. By turning off his camera, he shields himself from the gaze of his students, avoiding the potential scrutiny and biases that he faces daily. This act of self-erasure can also be understood as highlighting how societal norms dictate who is allowed to occupy space, whether physical or digital, and how they are perceived within it.

This is amplified in the climactic moment (Figure 2) when Charlie finally turns on his camera: what could be transgressive visibility instead becomes a moment of ridicule and alienation as students laugh or record him, reinforcing the very fatphobia and spatial policing he fears. The subsequent destruction of his laptop is both a moment of defiance and of futility—a 'queer art of failure,'[26] in which the refusal or collapse of participation in normative space offers a kind of resistance but also registers deep loss and exhaustion.

Figure 2. Charlie turns on his webcam to confront, but also to deny the digital space in *The Whale.* Source. Aronofsky, *The Whale*, 1:41:41.

The reactions of the students to Charlie's disclosure in the digital space, though subtle in a digital space, carry significant weight for Charlie's spatial experience. In this moment, the virtual classroom becomes a space of vulnerability and exposure for him. The laughter and recording suggest a lack of sensitivity and respect, turning what should be a neutral or

[25] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?* 103.

[26] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 11. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394358

supportive environment into one of judgment, potential ridicule, and dismissive of his spatial presence.

After taking the class, Charlie goes straight into watching gay porn, vigorous masturbation (he nearly has a heart attack as he climaxes), and binge eating. The scene is illustrative of his coping mechanism for spatial discrimination, aligning most closely with 'disembodiment', which refers to the separation of one's physical presence from their identity or experience, often as a way to escape the discomfort or judgment tied to their body.

In addition, when Thomas, a religious missionary (who later turns out to be on the run from the church and his family), enters the door, we are made aware of the religious and societal gaze that makes Charlie internalise feelings of shame, guilt and unworthiness, not only for his body but also for his sexuality. Rather than a prolonged plot summary, Thomas's entrance serves as a key analytic hinge. Thomas, imbued with missionary zeal and shame, finds Charlie not just masturbating to gay porn but embodied as fat, queer, and visibly different. The camera's (and Thomas') gaze is saturated with a mix of awe, disgust, and the compulsion to redeem. This encounter is less about narrative happenstance and more about the punitive intersection of religious and societal discourses about fatphobia, homophobia, and the fantasy of bodily correction. Here, Halberstam's assertion that 'queer failure can signify both withdrawal from and resistance to normativity'[27] is illuminating. Charlie's refusal to apologise for his desires or body, even as he is scrutinised and pathologised by Thomas, enacts a kind of queer noncompliance. This shows that the failure to conform is not simply tragic but can be an act, albeit fraught and painful, of self-assertion against the violence of redemptive paradigms.

Figure 3. Charlie's spatial reality–reaching for the light with a hooked stick. Source: Aronofsky, *The Whale*, 00:16:31.

Throughout, the film dwells on scenes of spatial restriction as we see Charlie manoeuvring with a grabber tool (Figure 3), squeezing through corridors, and being engulfed by a bed and chair. The scene points towards LeBesco's idea that environments 'fail' fat bodies, exposing both structural inaccessibility and the limits of so-called accommodation. The camera's insistence on these moments hovers between documenting struggle and indulging

[27] Halberstam, *The Queer*, 17.

fat voyeurism: are we seeing the world from Charlie's perspective, or are we being invited, as audience, to gape?

Figure 4. Charlie is standing on a bariatric walker in a narrow hallway to pick up a key with an extended reach stick. Source. Aronofsky, *The Whale*, 00:35:01.

Charlie's spatial inaccessibility is further demonstrated in his lack of ability to do simple activities such as taking his phone from beneath the sofa, moving to the washroom without a walking frame, bathing without holding a hanger, picking a key from the floor, and even standing up from the sofa. He has a long rod with a hook at the end to turn off the lights in his bedroom (Figure 3) and a grabber tool that allows him to extend his reach and grasp objects without bending down (Figure 4). The use of assistive devices such as rod, grabber, special chair, registers both a creative adaptation and a form of reified segregation. These objects, while necessary, are reminders that normative space is only ever conditionally and incompletely opened to bodies like Charlie's. The fat activist perspectives of Charlotte Cooper suggest that such representations, when devoid of collective resistance or affirmation, risk reinforcing a 'melancholic rather than liberatory framing of fatness'.[28] In *The Whale*, accommodations never become affirmation; rather, they are reminders of isolation.

The confined layout of the space of his apartment is also visible in Figure 4, where Charlie is trying to pick up the key to his boyfriend's room. It offers a deeply affecting portrayal of spatial restriction and embodied struggle, focusing on Charlie as he navigates a narrow hallway using a walker. The corridor is barely wide enough for Charlie and his walker. His body nearly touches both walls, suggesting a claustrophobic spatial experience and an ever-present friction between the person and the built environment.

Towards the end, we see a deep contrast between Charlie's past bodily appearance when he was a good swimmer (though there are no such scenes) and his body at present. This contrast is evident in his feet (Figure 5), as he disappears into the white light, symbolising the departure of his soul from his body. The film's denouement scene (Figure 6), in which Charlie stands for his daughter Ellie and moves into the white light, demands deeper interrogation. On one hand, standing upright, even briefly, is framed as a moment of immense bodily achievement and emotional connection. On the other hand, the act is swiftly suffused in

[28] Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Hammeron Press, 2016), 13.

melodrama and transcendence: Charlie ascends as a visual metaphor of release. The white light trope, common in queer and fat cinematic deaths, often signals 'peace' or 'transcendence,' but also participates in a weary tradition where marginalised bodies are only freed through obliteration. As Halberstam notes regarding queer death in media, 'narratives often allow queer or non-normative subjects peace only in death, not in life.'[29] For fat activist scholars, such as Cooper and Lauren Berlant, this resolve inscribes fatness as tragedy rather than possibility. The metaphor flattens the complexities of Charlie's life, evacuating moments of communal or sexual transformation in favour of individual release.

Figure 5. Juxtaposed in stark contrast, Charlie's feet symbolise the physical toll of struggles with his body and identity. Source. Aronofsky, *The Whale*, 01:51:10

The swollen feet are a visceral representation of his physical decline and the toll of his emotional eating; a coping mechanism born out of grief for Alan. However, his refusal to conform to pressures to lose weight is also significant; it challenges the pervasive narrative that fatness must be 'fixed' to achieve redemption or acceptance, rather than fixing the underlying causes that can be emotional. Instead, Charlie's fatness is an integral part of his identity and his story, shaped by his love for Alan and the trauma of losing him, but it also overpowers all the other aspects of his life and relations. In the movie, Charlie only stands once in a pivotal scene (Figure 6) where he tries to connect with Ellie. Spatially, the act of standing up and moving toward his daughter right before his death can be understood as Charlie's final move to reconnect and seek redemption, despite the limitations imposed by his body and society.

The recurring theme of spatial failure, Charlie's inability to reclaim spaces (both literal, like Alan's locked room, and figurative, like family intimacy), invites a productive reading via Halberstam's 'queer art of failure.' Charlie's withdrawal is not simply defeat but a quiet renunciation of normative demands: he seeks neither transcendence of fatness nor apology for queerness, but he also remains isolated, never finding alternative forms of belonging.

[29] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), 121.

Figure 6. Charlie stands not for himself but for Ellie, before transcending beyond the confines of body and space. Source. Aronofsky, *The Whale*, 01:52:11.

This is where Berlant and Cooper's fat activist critique becomes essential. *The Whale* offers little in terms of fat affirmation or queer collectivity—the narrative remains saturated in shame, individual coping, and isolation, rarely opening space for what Cooper calls 'fat pride or fat solidarity.'[30] The film's narrow focus on Charlie's pain and eventual disappearance risks what Berlant has called the 'cruel optimism of redemptive suffering,'[31] where the promise of transformation is tied to the erasure of fat, queer life rather than its flourishing.

The Whale disrupts and reiterates cultural tropes of fatness and queerness: sometimes inviting empathy, sometimes indulging voyeurism, ultimately tethered to a framework of melancholia and transcendence that leaves little room for the radical possibilities of fatqueer place-making or collective resilience. Engaging with fat studies and queer theory and resisting the reduction of Charlie's life to either spectacle or mere suffering, remains vital for pushing both cinema and critique toward more inclusive, disruptive narratives.

Charlie's spatial withdrawal, (un)familiarity, and (dis)orientation

In *The Whale*, Charlie's spatial withdrawal is not only psychological but viscerally rendered through the film's persistent focus on the limits of his movement within the apartment. The camera often frames him from behind as he navigates the cramped space, emphasising both his physical effort and the constant negotiation with furniture, doorways, and narrow hallways. His apartment becomes an extension of his isolation: a site where 'the work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar, such that it is still possible for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn.'[32] This is clearly illustrated in scenes where everyday tasks like fetching objects and moving from the couch to the bathroom are shown to require disproportionate labour,

[30] Cooper, *Fat Activism*, 27.

[31] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 12, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394716.

[32] Ahmed, *Queer*, 7–8.

foregrounding the tension between his bodily needs and the affordances (or denials) of the space.

Ahmed's notion that 'the familiar is an effect of inhabitance'[33] manifests in the film as Charlie seeks out objects within reach: food deliveries left at the threshold, his laptop on the table, or medication stowed nearby. While Charlie displays a routine familiarity with his space, the apartment itself remains resistant. For instance, the recurring motif of Charlie reaching for something just out of grasp, such as when he drops a key or struggles to answer the door, visually embodies Ahmed's idea that 'even when things are within reach, we still have to reach for those things for them to be reached.'[34] The choreography of these small but laborious movements renders the familiar both precarious and alienating, foregrounding a sense of spatial (un)familiarity.

Spatial unfamiliarity is further amplified by Charlie's attempts to minimise his presence during interactions, notably with his daughter Ellie and caretaker Liz. Even seated, Charlie's body is presented in partial frames that are cut off, obscured, or fragmented, mirroring his internalised desire to blend in to avoid scrutiny. His shrinking posture, avoidance of eye contact, and frequent retreat into shadow or the farthest corners of his apartment make him nearly invisible within his own home. The staging of these scenes materialises the process of self-effacement that Ahmed describes, as Charlie's body is continually edited out of the social and cinematic space, amplifying 'how spaces "impress" upon bodies'[35] and dictate the terms of familiarity and belonging.

Charlie's disorientation emerges most clearly in moments of emotional distress or loss. When confronted with memories of his deceased partner or with harsh judgments from Ellie, the film uses blurred focus, muffled sound, or spinning camera to express his psychological and spatial dislocation. Ahmed's assertion that bodies 'become orientated by how they take up time and space'[36] is visually enacted as the camera sways or lingers on Charlie's laboured breathing, signalling his struggle to reorient physically and emotionally within the apartment. These filmic choices not only underscore the alienation that fatqueer individuals may feel from their bodies but also tie Charlie's spatial (dis)orientation directly to the intersecting traumas of grief, stigma, and marginalisation.

Conclusion: Fat 'place-making' in cinema and beyond

Fatqueer place-making, which is the creation and negotiation of spatial belonging for those whose bodies and sexualities are marginalised, is both evoked and constrained in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale*. The film centres on Charlie's spatial embodiment, portraying his everyday negotiations with and within the home, and thus gestures toward what it might mean for a fatqueer person to stake a claim in space that is often unwelcoming. Yet, even as the camera's intense gaze foregrounds Charlie's body, the narrative struggles to fully realise the promise of fatqueer place-making. Instead, it repeatedly renders Charlie's queer desire and sexuality invisible, focusing on his fatness as spectacle and vulnerability rather than his potential for intimacy, pleasure, or community within queer spaces.

Despite the film's intimate, at times invasive, cinematography that frequently positions the audience in close proximity to Charlie's corporeality, *The Whale* ultimately reinforces

[33] Ahmed, *Queer*, 7.

[34] Ahmed, *Queer*, 2.

[35] Ahmed, *Queer*, 12.

[36] Ahmed, *Queer*, 8.

rather than disrupts the marginalisation of fat queer bodies. The overwhelming focus remains on Charlie's physical challenges and emotional pain. While these are important, the narrative sidesteps opportunities to animate queer dimensions of his being. The absence of queer relationships or a supportive queer community on screen renders Charlie's sexual and emotional life as an absence, a void that further enacts his spatial and social exclusion. The presence of supporting characters (Liz, Mary, Ellie, Thomas) offers little in the way of genuine connection or chosen family. Each of them, by failing to see or support the fullness of Charlie's fatqueer identity, illustrates the broader societal failure to extend belonging and recognition to those who defy normative sexual and spatial embodiment.

A further missed opportunity lies in the film's closure, which resolves Charlie's story not through the transformative power of queer kinship, but via a symbolic transcendence that risks reproducing familiar tropes of fatness, suffering, and redemption. By prioritising Charlie's physical journey over his sexual or relational one, the film tacitly confines fatqueer place-making to mere survival, preventing Charlie from flourishing sexually and spatially. Imagining an alternative wherein his world is animated by queer affirmation and new relational bonds would have challenged the dominant narrative and foregrounded the role of queer community in what Halberstam calls 'place-making practices.'[37] Such a vision underscores the resilience and creativity of queer spatiality: the ongoing work of constructing affirming spaces that negotiate both the visible and invisible burdens of fatness and queerness.

In sum, *The Whale* exposes the spatial vulnerabilities and exclusions fat queer individuals face yet it falters in envisioning their possibilities for place-making, intimacy, and solidarity. This conclusion calls for a more expansive and more daring fatqueer cinematic representation—one that not only portrays marginalisation but also gestures toward transformation, community, and the complex realities of intersectional embodiment. By foregrounding fatqueer place-making as both an analytic and creative praxis, future films and scholarship can move beyond mere visibility and toward genuine belonging, offering stories that reflect the depth, diversity, and resilience of fatqueer lives. This critical reassessment of *The Whale* underscores the urgent need for intersectional narratives in cinema, ones that make visible and viable the complex, embodied, and lived experiences of fatqueer place-making, and in doing so, broaden both our cinematic worlds and our social imaginations.

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