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Toward a Responsible Artistic Agency: Mindful Representation of Fat Communities in Popular Media

Running Head: Toward a Responsible Artistic Agency

Abstract:

When fat people are depicted in popular media, we often take their behavior to be representative of all fat people. How one fat person acts becomes representative of a broader pattern of behavior that all fat people are presumed to share, shaping the way we understand fatness. This way of generalizing presents fatness as a singular experience, reducing fat people to a monolithic narrative that often reinforces anti-fat bias.

How do we avoid this reduction? How can we responsibly depict fat characters without perpetuating negative stereotypes about real fat people? Using the case of "Fat Thor" from *Avengers: Endgame,* I propose the beginnings of an account of responsible artistic agency which can be used to improve the ways that marginalized communities are depicted in art, with a particular focus on fat communities. Central to this account are two features: inclusion of and deference to members of the communities depicted from a variety of backgrounds throughout the production process, and mindfulness of the preexisting narrative web built around the communities depicted. I will use this discussion to highlight the need for a drastic shift in how we consider marginalized populations in art— in reimagining both who tells their stories, and what stories are told on their behalf.

Toward a Responsible Artistic Agency: Mindful Representation of Marginalized Communities in Popular Media

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When people are depicted in popular media, we often take their behavior to be representative of all relevantly similar people. Narrative artworks are often meant to represent the experiences and lives of *an individual,* sometimes based on true stories and other times works of fantasy, but they aren't (or, at minimum, are not always) meant to represent all people in that group. However, viewers engaging with those narratives often read them as representations of all members of their respective communities. For example, we may take a depiction of a character with depression (like Toby in *This Is Us*) to be telling us something about *what it is like* to experience that mental illness. Or, we may change the way we think about public school teachers after seeing the educators in *Abbott Elementary* struggle to support their students in an underfunded school district.

Sometimes, the lessons we take from characters help us: they can shed light on an issue or experience of which we were not previously aware, help us feel empathy for others, or provide rich and meaningful opportunities for imaginative engagement with a work of art. But other times, our tendency to generalize about communities of people based on the portrayal of one individual member can be harmful insofar as that portrayal potentially dehumanizes the members of that community.

Take, for instance, Kate Pearson from *This Is Us*. Kate (portrayed by Christine Michelle Metz) offers us important glimpses into the life of a fat woman navigating dating, families, and parenting in the US. Through the course of the show, we come to root for Kate's marriage to Toby, knowing how long she struggled to find love as a fat woman with past experience in an abusive relationship. We are moved to be distraught as their work lives put a strain on their love, and to feel a renewed sense of hope as Kate finds confidence in herself and her musical talents. In many ways, seeing Kate's life unfold helps us better understand the realities of dating (or struggling to) while fat, teaching the audience something about this kind of lived experience. But at the same time, the narrative constructed for Kate reinforces tired, harmful stereotypes about fat women—for instance, that they will always be at war with their own bodies and on a quest to lose weight, or that they are "out of control" so long as they are still fat.

This example illuminates a serious worry: oftentimes, narrative works about an individual person can reinforce existing stereotypes, biases, and oppressive attitudes. This is particularly worrisome when considering representations of marginalized communities, given the ways that narratives about those communities may replicate systems of oppression and oppressive attitudes that we should aim to dismantle. In this paper I focus on one such case, examining narrative depictions of fat people. Oftentimes these works about individual fat characters are understood as communicating something about fat people more generally. Their voices are reduced to, or

absorbed into, the collective "fat experience" (even if there is no such singular experience).[1] The themes we see onscreen exist within a broader narrative web, one which influences how we think about those themes in real life.

This is not exclusive to fat or other marginalized communities. This same kind of reduction of and generalization about individual characters can happen with individuals from nearly any group. However, given that representations of members of marginalized communities often reify existing oppression, we have special—or perhaps amplified—reason to be concerned about this more narrow subset of representations (and the generalizations that arise as a result of these narratives). One of the ways that marginalization is reinforced is through narrowing the available representations of marginalized groups, limiting how we are able to see those groups as a result. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, highlights this worry regarding representations of Black women. As Collins explains, "Black women encounter controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, the mule and the whore, that encourage others to reject us as fully human people" (Collins 1993, 34). Marginalized communities are already offered a narrow set of available narratives, so when new works of art are introduced which reiterate these same tired stereotypes, this reinforces an established understanding of what members of the group are like (which is often seen as uniform and interchangeable).

Seeing the same narrow set of stories told about fatness, then, influences how we think about fatness more generally. If most works share the same limited narratives, or a narrative is regularly repeated, it shapes our understanding of the group about whom a narrative is told. Regarding fatness, we often encounter stories about fat people struggling with their weight or intentionally seeking weight loss. We see fatness represented as a negative way of embodiment, one to be avoided by any means necessary. If we only (or even predominantly) see fat people who hate their fatness, or are fat because they have lost control, then those attitudes can become part of the collective narrative surrounding fat people.

This way of generalizing based on recurring narrative themes reduces fatness into a singular experience, one that many have critiqued is born out of an imagined thin idea of what it means to live while fat. As Aubrey Gordon argues, "over the last thirty years, the majority of fat representation has pushed just a few reductive narratives" which "subtly assert that thin people know as much as (or more than) fat people do about what it's like to be fat, that fat bodies are only temporary, and that fat people who stay fat are simply shirking their responsibility to create a body that would earn them respect" (2020, 128-30). Most works that depict fatness do so from the standpoint of thin creators, and historically representations of fatness have ignored the in-group understandings of and relationship with fatness that fat people actually hold. This reduces fat people to a caricature of themselves, ignoring their complexities and experiences in ways that reinforce harmful mindsets about fatness.

How do we avoid this reduction? How can we responsibly depict fat characters without further perpetuating negative stereotypes and harms done to real fat people? I will propose the

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[1] Paul Taylor motivates a comparable worry regarding representations of Black people, which he argues often deny the complexities and pluralities of existing as a Black person. This renders the variable lived experiences of individuals in that community invisible (Taylor 2016, 63).

beginnings of an account of responsible artistic agency, focusing on aesthetic concerns and agency in popular television and film.[2] Although my account of responsible artistic agency is more broadly applicable, in this paper I focus on cases involving depictions of fat people to help explore the demands of responsible artistic agency on creators. Using the cases of "Fat Thor" from *Avengers: Endgame* and the film *American Pie Presents: Girls' Rules,* I will motivate an account of responsible artistic agency which can be used to improve the ways in which vulnerable and marginalized communities are depicted in art. Through focusing on these cases, I hope to illustrate the thought process required for a framework of responsible artistic agency.

Central to this account are two features: inclusion of and deference to members of the communities depicted (in this case, fat people) throughout the production process, and mindfulness of the preexisting narrative web built around the communities depicted (in this case, anti-fat narratives which harm a variety of fat communities). These features help us navigate and reflect on three different levels at which responsible artistic agency can be engaged: in a work's narrative, the process of creating a work, and the process of sharing/promoting a work. By examining each of these opportunities for engagement, I will highlight the need for a drastic shift in how we consider marginalized populations in art— in reimagining both who tells their stories, and what stories are told on their behalf.

Alongside discussion of the general depiction of fatness, in this paper I will also examine the use of fat suits as it plays an important role in how (and by whom) fat people are represented. Especially considering contemporary conversations about the importance of actors from marginalized communities being cast in roles depicting members of those same communities, we must critically reflect on the ways that utilizing fat suits can perpetuate harm and remove opportunities for fat people in portraying themselves (and people like them) onscreen. Through focusing on this case, I hope to illustrate the thought process required for a framework of responsible artistic agency.

Although there is an ongoing debate as to whether and how artwork itself is subject to ethical criticism, my project is interested more narrowly in examining the actions of the artist, which I take to be morally evaluable (much like any other action would be). Regardless of whether an artwork's moral deficits contribute (positively or negatively) to its aesthetic and

[2] I use this focus because these types of art are the ones with which many of us most regularly engage. There are important issues in representation of fatness in other mediums of art. Stefanie Snider, for example, explores depictions of fat people in contemporary self-portraits, arguing that a "politics of ugliness" should be used to help disrupt dominant cultural norms of beauty (2018). While these types of analysis are important, I am particularly interested in the art that many people in the U.S. engage with on a more frequent basis, as I suspect it has a greater (or at least more regular) impact on our perspectives of others. There may also be other reasons to be critical of and focus on popular art, beyond frequency of engagement. For example, audiences may be primed to view the work with a less critical lens when (often passively) consuming it from the comfort of their own home, as opposed to in a high art setting like a museum where they may be more readily engaged in a critical and careful manner with an artwork. Given production companies' desires to maximize profit and distribute new content (often for streaming services) at a quicker pace than with many other art forms, creators may also be pressured to create works that are less nuanced and more readily accepted by a general audience. These pressures may result in artists relying on tired and often harmful narratives, ones which reinforce or strengthen existing stereotypes and systems of oppression in art. All of these factors help amplify the need to examine popular art and to focus carefully on the harms it may cause. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for emphasizing these considerations.)

artistic merits, the artist is still held to moral standards as a moral agent.[3] Artists can, and should, be concerned with the ethical implications of (and messages within) their work, especially insofar as their work may contribute to or amplify ongoing bias and oppression. As Paul Taylor argues, following a rich history of Black aesthetics and Black scholarship, we cannot separate the aesthetic (or, more narrowly for purposes of this paper, the artistic) and the political (2020, xi).[4] Given the ways in which artistic production can be informed by the political, and by our lives, identities, and experiences outside of an art work, I take it to be imperative that we critically reflect on this process of production. The primary aim of my project is not to settle whether (un)ethical dimensions of a work detract from its artistic merit, but instead to open a conversation with those artists who are already inclined, or can be persuaded, to take greater care in considering the impact of their artwork on people in the "real world". Because these artists (and those who reflect on their art) are engaging with, producing, writing about, and learning from artworks as real, embodied people with deeply complex identities and experiences, it is my hope that this framework of responsible artistic agency can help us develop more humanizing, and less harmful, art moving forward.

I. Motivating the Need for Responsible Artistic Agency

Although there are countless depictions of fat people in popular media, my discussion centers on a contemporary and wildly popular movie, *Avengers: Endgame,* which used a fat suit to represent fat people on screen. This case was riddled with both success and failure, as the creators of *Avengers: Endgame* had arguably good motivations for the character they created, but ultimately they failed to utilize fat suits in ways that reaffirmed, supported, or even accurately and responsibly depicted fat people. In the following section (Section II) I walk through the case of "Fat Thor", exploring its successes and failures. I provide a sample of factors artists should consider in order to move towards responsible artistic agency when depicting fat people on screen. Before exploring this case, however, it is important to motivate the need for responsible artistic agency and to situate this idea alongside the recent framework of ally aesthetics.

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[3] For the purposes of this project, I remain neutral regarding whether an artwork's moral deficits impact their artistic value. While autonomists generally aim to separate our ethical evaluation of a work from its artistic value, some more moderate autonomists like James Harold allow that we can—and often should—reflect on the morality of artists themselves. Harold argues that we should care about the moral impacts that artwork may have on us, but that our moral evaluation of the works themselves should not mirror our ethical evaluation other people (since artworks lack elements of ethical behavior like intention and agency) (2020, 26). While Harold's account focuses moreso on distancing ourselves from or removing our support of immoral artists (2020, 61-64), my goal in this project is to help provide a set of guidelines artists can follow so that this kind of distancing does not become necessary. By taking careful steps to avoid perpetuating biased, harmful narratives about marginalized communities through using a framework of responsible artistic agency, my hope is that artists themselves can *avoid* acts of moral wrongdoing *through the process of creating and distributing* their works.

[4] Even if we *could* fully separate the artistic from the political, this would be insufficient to explain why *artists* are immune from ethical criticism. Although one could plausibly argue that the work an artist produces should be judged solely on their artistic merits rather than assessed according to moral standards, the fact remains that the artist is a person who is subject to moral standards. As such, it is reasonable to think that their actions—in any domain, artistic or otherwise—are and should be ethically evaluable. Thanks to Sherri Irvin for suggesting this point in response to a broader discussion of how art and morality intersect.

Toward a Responsible Artistic Agency

We ought to take care in the stories and images we construct in popular media given their ability to uniquely impact viewers. Following Katariina Kyrölä, I hold that popular media is a medium that deeply influences the way we see ourselves, others, and our relationship to others (2016, 1). Television and film are more easily and readily accessible than many other mediums of art, such as sculpture or performance art, which are often only explored in limited contexts (such as museum visits or one-off events). With the rise of countless streaming services and millions of pieces of new content being published online on a daily basis, it is easy for large groups of people to engage with the same artwork from their homes, from the subway on the way to work, or even during a quick lunch break. Television and film are also often relatively more affordable mediums of art for the general audience to engage with than art that is kept in museums or collected. Thus, television and film help enable a broader audience and more frequent engagement with art by individual members within that audience than many other mediums of art can provide.

Moreover, these works deeply impact viewers and their understanding of the world. As Kyrölä explains, "media images can show us bodies we would never see in everyday life, thus expanding our perception of what is possible, or exclude bodies we see in everyday life, which can shape our evaluations of what kind of bodies are significant, valued or devalued enough to become the stuff of images" (2016, 1). The things we see onscreen, then, carry a significant weight because they challenge and expand how we see (or fail to see) others. Being seen has the power to reaffirm our worth as individuals; when we are made visible to others it suggests that we are *worth* seeing and attending to, and when we are left invisible our dignity is undermined.

Further, the ways we are depicted can result in concrete harms to the communities represented. Depictions of fat people, for example, can harm fat people insofar as they "rely on and reify long-standing beliefs that fat people are isolated, desperate, [and] voracious" (Gordon 2020, 102). Limited and harmful representations of fatness reinforce that fat people are less worthy or valuable than their non-fat counterparts, and that they should accept any treatment because of this presumed inferiority.

Moreover, there is empirical data which suggests that shows with explicitly anti-fat messages may increase similar attitudes and stigma in viewers. In one such study on the weight loss competition show *The Biggest Loser,* researchers found that watching the show "did not improve anti-fat attitudes, but rather, exacerbated them" (Domoff et al. 2012, 996). Crucially, as Domoff et al., report, "after exposure to *The Biggest Loser,* participants reported significantly higher anti-fat attitudes; specifically, they reported greater belief that weight is controllable and greater dislike of obese individuals" (2012, 996). While this study focused on one particular television show, its research supports a concern that certain narratives about fatness in television and film only serve to amplify anti-fat bias and stigma. Reimagining the way we represent fat people through a framework of responsible artistic agency can be a meaningful step towards minimizing the harms that are perpetuated against fat people due to the prevalence of more limited narratives and representations.

I propose a new framework for approaching depictions of marginalized communities in popular media: a framework of responsible artistic agency. The aims of responsible artistic

agency are (1) to address and improve upon the limited and harmful narratives used to depict marginalized communities, and (2) to approach artistic creation in a way that respects and reaffirms the value and dignity of marginalized community members. Responsible artistic agency is importantly distinct from an account of ally aesthetics. Responsible artistic agency entails meeting a bare minimum ethical obligation to others: to avoid perpetuating harms and stigma against them by avoiding deploying harmful narratives and creating art in a way that reinforces existing bias and oppressive attitudes. This establishes what I think is a low level of engagement on the part of the artist—responsible artists will learn about and defer to communities before depicting them or making claims about their lives through artworks. In contrast, aesthetic allyship entails a deeper commitment to collaboration and discussion with marginalized communities than I argue is requisite for responsible artistic agency.

Ally aesthetics, a concept proposed by Jeremy Fried, is an approach to making art wherein the artist is an "ally attempting to create works that advocate on behalf of others" (2019, 448). In ally aesthetics, artists take on a deeper commitment to advocate for and work towards being allies to members of marginalized groups. Successful works of ally aesthetics, on Fried's view, center the needs and voices of members of a "dominated group"; an artist working on a project of aesthetic allyship does not speak over or for members of marginalized groups, does not gaslight them, and refrains from co-opting their goals and projects as a community (2019, 450). Successful works of ally aesthetics instead advocate for and are created with careful consideration of members of marginalized groups.

Fried argues that in order to be successful instances of ally aesthetics, works must be accepted by the relevant communities (2019, 452-53). If artists engaged in projects of ally aesthetics care about responsibility, they "should consult with members of the relevant group during the conceptualization and creation phases of their work" to help increase the likelihood that a work is positively received (Fried 2019, 453). Thus, works of ally aesthetics are likely to require some kind of responsible artistic agency such as what is laid out in this project. However, the idea of responsible artistic agency cannot be reduced or equated to ally aesthetics. Responsible artistic agency, on this account, is a precursor to and foundation for aspiring allyship.

This distinction is important, as many artists do not see themselves as or wish to be allies to the communities they depict. Artists may disagree with the lifestyles and identities of people they depict in art, or may have few thoughts whatsoever about the communities they depict outside of the works they are creating. Further, artists may not feel comfortable claiming allyship for a variety of reasons—because they are just learning about a new identity or community, would rather allow the relevant community the power to deem who is and is not an ally to their group, etc. Artists may also want to depict members of marginalized communities without this becoming the central theme or message of their art. In other words, they may not wish for a work of art to *advocate* for marginalized communities in the ways required for aesthetic allyship. Thus, part of my goal in developing an account of responsible artistic agency is to help provide guidelines for all artists to follow regardless of their commitments to allyship.

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Responsible artistic agency provides an approach through which artists can minimize harm to others, respecting their identities and experiences and creating artworks which do not deepen harms against those communities. This can provide a meaningful set of concrete practices and considerations artists can keep in mind as they create. This is helpful for artists who are not or do not wish to be allies to the communities they represent, and can help guide artists toward aesthetic allyship if they do choose to take on deeper commitments to allyship. Keeping this distinction in mind, we can now examine "Fat Thor" in order to highlight considerations needed to move towards responsible artistic agency.

II. Fatness as Redemption: "Fat Thor" in *Avengers: Endgame*

In the recent film *Avengers: Endgame,* viewers are given glimpses at the varying grieving processes of the superhero group, the Avengers. Following defeat in a battle which resulted in half of the world's population being erased, an event known as "The Snap," the superheroes struggle to reclaim their space in the world and find purpose in the absence of their loved ones. As with most grieving, they have divergent and complex reactions: some find solace in group therapy, some devote their days to protecting those who remain in the universe, and others turn to violence as they seek revenge against the "evil" people who survived The Snap.

One character, a chiseled and idealized god known for his resilience and toned physique, turns to self-medication to cope. As viewers discover, following The Snap Thor blames himself for the heroes' loss and spends his days drinking, eating, and playing video games. What was most shocking about Thor's reveal, however, is that when his friends finally located him he'd transformed from muscular god to a slobby, depressed, alcoholic fat man. In the film, "Thor's entry was made by his belly, low and rounded, naked, before panning up to his familiar face" (Gordon 2019). His body reflected years of damage and coping with his immense grief, and in many theaters was met with choruses of restrained laughs as people tried to reconcile their understandings of the old Thor with the new "Fat Thor".

Actor Chris Hemsworth donned a fat suit for his depiction of "Fat Thor." This depiction has been met with mixed reactions due to his inconsistent treatment in the film. While his body was the punchline throughout the film, with loved ones making jokes about how he had "Cheez Whiz running through his veins" and could use a salad, Hemsworth's fat suit-adorned body was still one of the first depictions of a fat superhero in a major comic film franchise where muscular, thinner, idealized bodies reign supreme (Sims 2019).

The narrative constructed around "Fat Thor" was not the typical one, and the fat suit was not used to depict weight loss as an inevitability or necessity following significant weight gain. Instead, "Thor stays fat. He fights fat. And in the show stopping final battle, he wins fat. There is no work out montage, no on-screen dieting, no disgust expressed on screen…— just a natural metabolization of grief that each of his fellow Avengers are processing differently" (Gordon 2019). This narrative allows space for a complicated story about the evolving relationship between one's emotions and body. As screenwriter Christopher Markus explained, "He's

emotionally resolved. We fix his problem [over the course of the film] and it's not his weight…. [Our] issue that we wanted him to deal with was his emotional state...” (Sharf 2019).

It is important to note that while there was no workout montage for “Fat Thor” in *Avengers: Endgame,* a subsequent film (*Thor: Love and Thunder*) featuring the character did include a workout montage in which Thor lost weight and resumed his previously muscular and toned physique.[5] This complicates the picture of progress painted in previous discussions of “Fat Thor”. The character's weight loss in *Thor: Love and Thunder* reinforces harmful narratives about the presumed inevitability and desirability of pursuing intentional weight loss, and runs the risk of implying that Thor's “real” or “true” self is thin. As such, in terms of responsible artistic agency, the creators of *Thor: Love and Thunder* undo much of the progress that previous creators made to the character within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Because *Thor: Love and Thunder* had a different creative team of directors and writers than did *Avengers: Endgame,* credit is still owed to the artists behind *Avengers: Endgame* for at least attempting to engage in responsible artistic agency (even if, as I will soon unpack, it is a case of mixed success).

Because Thor is a character who has evolved at the hands of many different creators, this case invites interesting questions about the demands of responsible artistic agency when future artists take on the character. What responsibility do future artists have to maintain, amplify, and disrupt narratives previous artists have created using those same characters? Do seeming regressions in ethically responsible representations of characters (as we can arguably see with Thor's weight-loss montage in *Thor: Love and Thunder*) undermine previous successes in responsible artistic agency? How should we balance expectations of artistic freedom and creativity with the demands of responsible artistic agency when serious progress has been made in how a long-standing character is depicted in a franchise like Marvel's? Although it goes beyond the scope of this project to answer these questions, they warrant future discussion and exploration.

Returning our focus more singularly to “Fat Thor” in *Avengers: Endgame,* the film interestingly reaffirms Thor's value despite his being fat and depressed. Thor is known for having a hammer named Mjölnir which can be summoned at will only by those who are “worthy.” Throughout the other *Avengers* films this is a running theme, as other superheroes (who we would ordinarily think of as supremely good in ways that deem them worthy) fail to be able to lift Mjölnir. However, after grieving and undergoing serious emotional growth Thor is once more able to summon his hammer, exclaiming proudly “I'm still worthy!” (Heller 2019).

Regardless of his fat body Thor is still good—he can help save the world, and still has the same value he had prior to gaining weight. “Fat Thor's” story is one of redemption, of overcoming self-doubt and hatred *without losing weight.* This contradicts more typical weight loss narratives used in media, in which one often sees themselves as irredeemable or unlovable until they lose the weight. In a world where fatness is too often seen as a “Before” picture, with

[5] Many thanks to an anonymous referee for recommending discussion of how Thor's image changes in *Thor: Love and Thunder.*

thinness being the ideal "After" or end goal, Thor's staying fat demonstrates that fatness can be morally neutral.

"Fat Thor" presents a complicated case, as the use of a fat suit reinforced uncommon and perhaps refreshing narratives surrounding fatness. Further, the response to Hemsworth's wearing a fat suit was mixed, even among those in fat communities. While many felt hurt or disgusted by the fat jokes that peppered the film and the audience's reactions to the character's newfound fatness, others felt seen as they recognized themselves and their own journey in Thor's process of grieving. Many remarked that the depiction of Thor as worthy despite his weight gain demonstrated that they had value despite their own weight, a narrative which is rarely reinforced in popular media.

The case of "Fat Thor" is riddled with successes and failures which can help inform our decision to use fat suits in a more responsible way in popular media. It is arguably praiseworthy to depict fatness in a genre in which it has historically been excluded, especially when attaching a positive message as *Avengers: Endgame* strives to do. As Anne Eaton has argued, positive representations of fat people are necessary in order to combat a societal distaste for fat bodies which results in fat oppression. Eaton argues that habitually exposing ourselves to positive examples of fat bodies "offers a promising strategy for combatting the perversion of our taste in bodies under fatism" (2016, 53.) To that end, she claims we should "produce and widely promote vivid, imaginatively engaging, and artistically interesting representations that *celebrate* fat bodies and encourage us to see them as likeable and attractive" (Eaton 2016, 53).[6] On this model, "Fat Thor" seems successful insofar as Thor is ultimately able to celebrate and admire his own body. He goes through a complex process of grief and growth throughout the film, which concludes with him recognizing his own worth and value in his newly larger body (and the film invites viewers to do the same).

As Amy Gullage argues, depicting fresher, less harmful narratives about fatness using fat suits could help further the conversation about fatness, dismantling systems of anti-fatness which threaten and harm fat people daily. Gullage explains that "given the ways in which a fat suit can represent the complex intersection of identities, such as identities related to fatness, gender, social class, and heterosexuality, fat prosthetics can and should be used to create interesting and complicated narratives. It is from this place that we might begin to use fat suits in order to change, challenge, and/or destabilize how fatness and bodies are understood and constructed, and create narratives that can be used to question, subvert, and transgress oppressive and limited representations of fatness and enable a means to represent fat bodies as capable of boundless possibilities" (Gullage 2014, 187). The narrative of personal redemption and acceptance used with Thor helps us move towards the kind of positive representation of fatness for which both Eaton and Gullage advocate.

Although this is the primary narrative constructed (setting aside the barrage of fat jokes launched against the hero by his loved ones which detract from this narrative) the film still relies on viewers' presumed anti-fatness for comedic effect. When depicting fat people artists must be

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[6] Emphasis original.

careful about the ways in which they treat fat people (real or as represented with fat suits) within the work itself. To that end, they must think critically about how fat suits and fatness are used in their works. Even with an intent to innocuously depict the worthiness of fat people, *Avengers: Endgame* undermined its own message consistently on a few levels.

First, it is harmful insofar as it reinforces a harmful and cliched narrative of fatness as someone "letting themselves go," becoming slobby, lazy, and unable to control their own body. The film could have depicted a complicated story of grief and self-medication, and even one of weight gain, without resorting to these clichés. Thor could have gained weight while grieving, but still maintained his hygiene, kept in touch with loved ones, and had control over his eating. Further, the film could have continued to depict his emotional struggles with feeling unworthy because of his missteps in battle without some sense of worth (or lack thereof) being derived from his weight.

Second, it is harmful insofar as the show uncritically deploys fat jokes, making Thor's weight gain the subject of humiliation and abuse from his loved ones. Despite acknowledging that the jokes would be found harmful and detestable by some audiences, screenwriter Markus uncritically included them in the film, trading Thor's humanity and worth as a person for the sake of a few cheap laughs. Even with an arguably fresh and important overarching narrative, the writers' choice to include jokes about fatness at Thor's expense demonstrates that not enough work has been done to address and eradicate typical anti-fatness in the work. They could have kept the fat jokes in and immediately had other characters criticize their use, demonstrating that this behavior was unacceptable or detestable. Instead, the fat jokes are used as an opportunity for viewers to laugh, to enjoy the needless criticism of Thor's body without confronting the moral perniciousness of fat jokes and body shaming used in the film.

Third, the film undermines its own message through harmful framing of shots which play on Thor's fatness for jokes. While there is comparatively little overt fatphobia in comparison to past works which used a fat suit, the artists still made the choice to film shots in ways which preyed on the audience's anti-fatness at the expense of the character's dignity and value. As Gordon argues, the disgust is not explicitly expressed on screen, but instead "is largely left to the audience's reaction, and to camera work that knowingly lingers on Thor's rounded belly, pausing for the laughter to subside" (2019).

These three layers of failure reflect the creators' anti-fat bias, which undermines the aims they could have plausibly had to redeem a fat character or do justice to fat people through depicting them with a fat suit. Although many fat viewers found the depiction of Thor to be successful and identified with the character, I argue that artists have an obligation to consistently work to unpack their own anti-fatness. Given that the writers recognized and anticipated that the fat jokes they used were potentially harmful, they are at fault for keeping them in anyway. Their conscious choice to keep potentially harmful jokes and shots in the film reflects a willingness to undermine the humanity and dignity of fat people, and to play off of viewers' anti-fatness when it is convenient to do so. This reflects a lack of integrity, a moral inconsistency in their aims and production.

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The mistake-riddled case of "Fat Thor" teaches us that is not enough to introduce a new narrative about fatness. If an artist simultaneously introduces new narratives while reinforcing old, harmful narratives about fatness, they have failed to take seriously and respectfully the very population they aim to depict. Creators must be cognizant of and actively seek to combat their own anti-fatness in the creation of their work if they are to respectfully and responsibly depict fat people in popular media.

In considering responsible artistic agency, we must also consider whether a particular thin actor is necessary for a character, as opposed to hiring a fat actor. We should be mindful of who we cast to portray fat people, as casting thin actors using fat suits removes opportunities for fat actors. Casting actors from outside of the relevant group to depict members of marginalized communities causes material harms to those communities. As Taylor notes regarding casting white or light-skinned Black people to depict darker skinned Black people, "the film industry capitulates to the problematization of black bodies in its casting decisions... This artificially limits opportunities for black actors in a film industry that…is already less than hospitable to black folks" (Taylor 2016, 68). Our casting decisions have an important impact on marginalized communities, and we can extend Taylor's concerns here to other marginalized groups such as fat communities.

Some fans have sought to justify the use of a fat suit in *Avengers* because Hemsworth was already established in the role, having played the character in several other movies in the franchise. Replacing him with a fat actor for the final film could dramatically alter how the character is played such that creators felt more justified in using a fat suit. If creators wished to keep the same actor in that case, their main choices would be to (1) use a fat suit to depict fatness, (2) change the narrative so weight gain was not a part of the character's story in the movie, or (3) ask Hemsworth to gain weight for the role.

One could plausibly argue that the most responsible choice would be option 2, as fatness was not essential to Thor's narrative or transformation as a character.[7] However, in going with that narrative a fat suit may have been the most responsible choice they could make of the remaining options. Studies show that "fluctuation in body weight was associated with higher mortality and a higher rate of cardiovascular events independent of traditional cardiovascular risk factors," suggesting that having Hemsworth gain significant weight could pose serious risks to his wellbeing (Bangalore et al. 2017). Given these risks, a fat suit is a safer way to depict weight gain in that kind of case. While this does not justify *all* uses of fat suits, it does lend some

[7] Although this may be a plausible option for this one film/instance, artists using this framework of responsible artistic agency should be careful not to exclusively rely on this option, as it runs the risk of erasing any conversation of/reference to fatness whatsoever in ways that could be harmful. However, while the artist is in the process of learning to responsibly depict fatness in their art, choosing *to not represent fatness* may be the most responsible decision they can make (at that point in time). Because responsible artistic agency is an ongoing process and commitment, we can assess how successfully an artist uses this framework over time—with the ultimate goal being that they strive to improve themselves insofar as they depict people more responsibly moving forward. This does not require perfection in any one instance of an artist's work, but rather a commitment to progress. In this kind of framework, we can reasonably imagine an artist choosing to refrain from discussing something like fatness and opting for different narratives until they work to unlearn anti-fat attitudes and learn how to best depict a narrative involving fatness in ways that do not perpetuate harms against fat communities.

legitimacy to using them in cases where a character is already established and must gain weight for the narrative—if the creators have rightly determined that this narrative is essential and does not harm fat people in the ways outlined above.

Finally, artists committed to responsible artistic agency must consider the impact of their works and whether their depictions of fat people using fat suits are accepted by various fat communities. Although not always working from an ally perspective, artists who utilize fat suits need to consider the reception of the work by those in marginalized fat communities in a similar way to what Fried proposes if they hope to act responsibly. Given the routine and historical abuse and misrepresentation of fat people in media, and the ways art reinforces negative stereotypes about fatness, artists who are committed to responsible artistic agency should think critically about how their works may be perceived by those within fat communities. Importantly, creators should think about the ways in which fatness manifests itself differently and imparts different lived experiences based on size, gender, sexuality, race, and other social contexts.

One of the most interesting features about "Fat Thor" is that his representation was received in such polarizing ways, with some feeling well-represented by the character and others feeling harmed. This speaks to the importance of creators consulting a wide variety of fat people—trans and queer fat people, fat people of color, smaller and larger fat people, and so on. While it is impossible to capture *every* fat person's experience in one character, having the character informed by individuals with different experiences can increase the likelihood that the use of a fat suit is responsible and can mitigate anti-fat biases being replicated in the work. Further, having fat people involved in the creation—as actors, writers, producers, etc.—can help ensure that the narratives constructed and presented using the fat suit are informed by actual lived experiences with fatness as opposed to misinformed ideas of thin fantasy regarding what fatness must be like.[8]

III. Reimagining Fat Womanhood and Sexuality: Michelle in *American Pie Presents: Girls' Rules*

Whereas the case of Fat Thor had more mixed success, the 2020 film *American Pie Presents: Girls' Rules* provides a promising starting point for creating works using a framework of responsible artistic agency. This film is the latest in the *American Pie Presents* series, a series

[8] In a conversation about depictions of fatness in film, especially of ones which utilize fat suits, readers may be surprised to see such an exclusive focus on "Fat Thor" without mention of Darren Aronofsky's critically acclaimed 2022 film, *The Whale*. *The Whale* has been met with its fair share of controversy, with some audiences finding Brendan Fraser's performance to be a humanizing glimpse into the life of an infinifat man, and others finding its narratives to be indicative of the very anti-fatness the director purports to have challenged with the project. While I understand that readers may expect me to discuss *The Whale* in this project, my political commitments and identity as a superfat woman make it such that I will not watch the film. Based on credible reports from others in fat communities, there is worry that the film reinforces narratives surrounding fatness that result in real, material harms to me, as someone with similar embodiment to the character in the film, and others in my community. Lindy West offers an incisive critique of the film, arguing that the artist's choices to "confirm [audiences'] biases about what fat people are like (gross, sad) and why fat people are fat (trauma, munchies)… [allowing audiences] to feel benevolent yet superior" (West 2023). West's review offers reasons to worry that *The Whale* may reinforce the very kind of harmful, tired stereotypes surrounding fatness that are of concern in this project, such that investigating this film through a lens of responsible artistic agency would be a fruitful avenue for future discussion in aesthetics.

of raunchy/sex comedies. Typical films in this franchise feature a group of young men going through humiliating and/or immoral and crude antics out of their desperation to have sex. The original films in the franchise often focused exclusively on male pleasure and desire; consent was typically an afterthought (if a consideration whatsoever), and sex was depicted as something to which the protagonists of the film were entitled. However, the most recent installment of the series, *Girls' Rules,* sought to push back against this narrative, giving a refreshing and less morally reprehensible version of a sex comedy. *Girls' Rules* is a useful example of responsible artistic agency in relation to its depictions of women's sexuality, and in relation to fatness more specifically.

Girls' Rules features the first female-fronted cast in the *American Pie* and *American Pie Presents* franchises. In the film, four best friends entering their senior year make a plot to reclaim their sexualities, strengthening their relationships, sex lives, and self-esteem. They aim to have the "perfect" senior year, centering on a plot to have the relationships of their dreams all in time for the school's big dance. As they later discover, they are all pining after the same man and begin competing for his affection. Eventually, three of the women find romantic interests elsewhere, leaving the main protagonist Annie to pursue their former shared love interest. The film ends with the friends recognizing the importance of their strong friendship over more fleeting romantic interests, and they each work to help one another recognize their growth throughout the school year.

Many films which have historically featured this trope of friends going after the same man (particularly teen films with high schoolers as the target audience and as protagonists in the film) end in the women competing and tearing one another apart, destroying their formerly strong friendships for the pursuit of love. While there are a few scenes in which the women in *Girls' Rules* compete against one another and forget about the strength of their friendship, the overall message of the film speaks to the importance of friendship, and to a woman's right to take ownership and control over her own sex life. The writers of the film intentionally aimed to avoid the typical catty woman stereotype found in this kind of film, claiming, "We didn't really want the girls fighting with each other, making like a catty thing. We wanted them more to work together" (Balkovich 2020). Thus, the creators of *Girls' Rules* looked carefully at the existing narrative web of this type of film, striving to avoid the pitfalls and harms typical of the genre. As the authors commented, "we couldn't really make that kind of movie [a raunchy sex comedy riddled with toxic masculinity] anymore. We didn't even want to. We didn't lament it. We were like 'Okay, things are changing for the good, and let's just be part of the good things that are happening right now.' So we switched, and changed [the film] to *Girls' Rules.*'" (Balkovich 2020).

This project further demonstrates a commitment to something like responsible artistic agency through portraying a variety of experiences, rather than reducing portrayals of women's relationships with sex to a singular experience. Within the work itself, *Girls' Rules* makes it clear that there are a variety of different relationships one might have with sex, and varying levels of comfort talking about those relationships. All of the four protagonists grapple with their own sex lives. While some are experienced with sex, others have not had sex or are newly exploring it.

Similarly, they use sex for different purposes: closeness within relationships, to increase self-esteem and self-acceptance, to put or maintain emotional distance between themselves and their partners, etc. The film also alludes to different possibilities beyond what is directly shown as the characters question their own motives and experiences, thus leaving open that the four protagonists' lives do not speak for or represent all possible viewers' experiences. This helps move toward responsible artistic agency insofar as it validates the wide range of lived experiences we may have, all shaped by our resources, identities, history, and more.

Girls' Rules is refreshing insofar as it utilizes the entire cast to bring depth and breadth to characters in ways that amplify their individuality. No work can depict or should be held to the standard of depicting *all* possible experiences and identities—to set the standard for responsible artistic agency here would be to set too high of a bar. But *Girls' Rules* stands as a strong instance of responsible artistic agency because it alludes to alternatives as the work itself rests on the idea that our sexual comfort and experiences are varied and deeply personal. Acknowledging the plurality of experiences people from one group may have helps humanize them, ensuring those groups are made visible in art. This is important, as Taylor argues with specific reference to Black plurality, because denying the complexity of a group ignores "the multiplicity of roles, identities, and categories" that may apply to someone in that group (2016, 63).

Thinking of fatness more specifically, *Girls' Rules* makes similar efforts towards responsible artistic agency through the depiction of fat protagonist Michelle (played by Natasha Behnam). Michelle begins the film in touch with her own sexuality, and openly discusses her sexual experiences with her friends. Presenting a fat person as openly and happily sexual, without being fetishized, is a significant departure from historical narratives surrounding sexuality and fatness. Typically, fat people in this kind of film are cast as humorous but undesirable or non-sexual friends, such as Rebel Wilson's character Fat Amy from *Pitch Perfect.*[9] If fat people are seen as sexual or desirable, it is typically only as a fetish or once they have lost weight and more closely conform to beauty ideals. Michelle, in contrast, is sexual and desired *while being fat,* but not because of or for her weight—she is instead desired as a complete person who happens to be fat. This helps broaden narratives surrounding sexuality and fatness, bringing them closer to reality in which fat people are and can be sexually active and desired, and can and do lead satisfying sex lives.

The character Michelle is further proof of the steps the *Girls' Rules* creators took towards responsible artistic agency insofar as fatness is not the central focus of her identity or experiences in the film. While Michelle is a fat person, this is not a plot point or motivator for her story. Not only does the film refrain from employing tired weight loss narratives, but it allows Michelle's character the space to be fully human and to have the depth and range of her straight-sized counterparts. In other movies and films in which a fat person navigates relationships and life more generally, being fat tends to be a driving force behind every decision they make. For example, Kate of NBC's *This Is Us* fears entering a relationship because she is fat and holds off on her musical career because she worries that people that look like her (i.e. are

[9] See Gordon's discussion of Fat Amy (Gordon 2020, 130).

fat) cannot be celebrities. Even seemingly minor choices, like swimming at night in an empty pool, become a conversation about her fatness and the limitations it brings.

Of course, the reality of navigating the world as a fat person does influence the lives of fat people, and their fatness is inevitably going to be a consideration in various behaviors. For example, while I shouldn't have to, I simply must think about my weight when I pick an airline to travel to an academic conference, as airlines each have different policies regarding "passengers of size". Similarly, when thinking about where to go to eat or which stores to shop at, my weight is a consideration: will there be aisles that I can navigate? Is there accessible and accommodating seating that supports my weight and the distribution of fat on my particular body? So this is not to say that it is wrong for fat people to *ever* consider or be influenced by their fatness—fat people often must and do consider their weight and size when navigating their lives.

But far too often, fat people in media are reduced to merely beings who think about their weight. Fat people can and do make decisions without their fatness being the central consideration, and lead fulfilling lives that go far beyond just their fatness. Yet onscreen, fat people are often depicted as *only* worrying about their fatness; as being obsessed with their size and unable to think of other considerations outside of weight. This runs the risk of reducing fat people to stereotypes and stock figures, which contributes to their invisibility onscreen.[10] Michelle from *Girls' Rules* is refreshing in that her character is allowed to exist as a person—not just as a *fat* person. She is able to pursue relationships, flirt, attend school, go to parties, while being a whole person who is not reduced merely to her fatness. This depth and portrayal of Michelle as a whole person helps avoid turning the character into a prop to share messages about fatness.[11]

All of this is not to say that *American Pie Presents: Girls' Rules* is a perfect example of responsible artistic agency. Far from that, the film importantly fails insofar as the team of writers and directors behind the work is all male, a critique raised by film critic Robert Kojder (2020). In a film that purports to be a feminist reimagining of a historically misogynistic series rife with toxic masculinity, one would hope that women would be involved in the creation of the film (rather than merely portraying characters imagined and written by men, as is the case with *Girls' Rules*). Projects aiming for responsible artistic agency need to include the marginalized communities they depict in the creation process for a variety of reasons: to help maximize the chances that justice is done to the characters depicted, to help minimize unacknowledged or unaddressed bias and harm towards the communities in the work, to help make the work center

[10] This follows Taylor, who argues that depicting Black people as mere stereotypes "defined by single, characteristic traits…rather than by the complex configurations that make for unique personalities" contributes to their being rendered invisible (2016, 52).

[11] It is important to emphasize that Michelle is not the most radical representation of fatness, as she is a smaller fat person who is not visibly disabled, is otherwise conventionally attractive, etc. Although she represents progress within the genre and this film series more narrowly, there is plenty of room to continue expanding and improving representations of fat people within the franchise. Fortunately, if the creators of the film take seriously the project of responsible artistic agency, they will reflect on the limitations of the character as they continually aim to improve representations moving forward.

more realistic depictions that take into account actual lived experiences of the relevant groups, and to financially compensate the people whose stories are being told and used to make a profit.

While the absence of women in the writing and directorial teams of the film is a serious flaw of the film, *Girls' Rules* importantly demonstrates that a work need not be perfect to be taken seriously as a work that aims for responsible artistic agency. *Girls' Rules* makes serious contributions and improvements to the narrative web surrounding sex, sexual agency, and empowerment in this genre of film, and importantly the film makes real improvements on depictions of fat people in comparison to other works in and outside of the genre. The film features an actor who is actually in the relevant marginalized group, Natasha Behnam, and the messages told about relationships (while not exhaustive of the wide range of possibilities) are varied. Thus, while the work is imperfect it provides a fruitful starting point for imagining responsible artistic agency.

IV. Lessons for Responsible Artistic Agency

These works of art help us navigate the difficult issue of artistic responsibility, providing a framework through which we can approach and reflect on artworks to improve our artistic practice moving forward. I have argued that there are several central levels where artists engaged in responsible artistic agency must have care in creating works: on a narrative level, in production of a work, and in the actual art product itself. In what remains I will briefly recapitulate each of these dimensions of responsible artistic agency, highlighting the type of questions artists can ask themselves when working with and depicting marginalized individuals. While the specific considerations and answers to these general questions will vary depending on the relevant marginalized group and medium of art/production process, my goal here is to provide a starting point for using a framework of responsible artistic agency.

Narrative Considerations:

As previously argued, artists who are committed to responsible artistic agency need to consider the implications of the narratives they create and perpetuate both internally and in comparison to other works. Artists using responsible artistic agency should strive to seek out and represent a diverse range of experiences when possible. They also need to take steps to ensure that the work accurately depicts a given community if it purports to do so. Artists must also consider the narrative webs in which their work exists. In considering this, artists can ask themselves what sorts of narratives on similar themes are being told in other works.

- Does the work allow for different experiences to be presented, or does it present the experiences of marginalized individuals as monolithic?[12]

[12] See Taylor's discussion of the importance of plurality for ensuring the visibility of marginalized groups (especially, in Taylor's focus, for Black communities) (2016, 62-63).

- Does the work portray members of marginalized groups in a way that replicates tired and limited stereotypes of their identities? Does this representation speak to or represent the perspectives of the marginalized group it depicts, or is it done merely from an outsider's perception of that group?
- Does the message of the artist's story already exist elsewhere? If so, does this new work amplify inaccuracies, stereotypes, and other harmful narratives that are already prevalent?
- Lastly, does what the artist is saying in their work need to be said? Does the narrative they create contribute to, expand, refresh, or otherwise improve the narrative web that exists on this topic or theme?

Production Considerations

Beyond the narrative created in a work, artists using this framework must be mindful of how that narrative *and* the artwork itself come into existence. This involves carefully attending to production of the work, being mindful of who is involved in its creation and how those people are treated throughout the production process. Below are some questions artists can consider in order to be more mindful of and responsible in production of their works:

- Are the show's messages undermined by how we treat people in the relevant communities? Are they undermined by implicit bias in the work itself (e.g. camera angles)? Do we rely on the audience's bias to successfully make jokes about or otherwise cause harm towards members of this group?
- Are we including people from these communities throughout different stages of production? Are they appropriately compensated for their experience and work? Is the narrative directly informed by their perspectives and experiences, and are they appropriately credited for their intellectual and creative contributions and expertise?
- Can we utilize actors (and other people—photographers, videographers, writers, etc.) from the relevant groups rather than resorting to second-hand accounts from those groups, CGI or animation, and prosthetics?

Final Product/Artwork Considerations

Lastly, artists engaged in responsible artistic agency need to consider the artwork itself as a product that exists in the world. To that end, responsible artistic agency necessitates attending to the impact of the art product. It also involves ensuring that while promoting the work members of marginalized communities have been protected from harm.

- How is this work perceived by the communities it depicts? How can creators use the response to their work (prioritizing feedback from the relevant marginalized communities) to better attend to responsible artistic agency moving forward?

- In what way(s) will this work impact or change our collective understanding of the relevant group's culture, identity, and experiences? Does this work reinforce existing harmful stereotypes about that group?
- How is the work discussed in media? When promoting the work (e.g., giving interviews with media about a movie or show), what steps are taken to ensure that members of marginalized communities are not subject to additional harms as a result of biased attitudes (e.g., from those doing the interview)?

"Media representation of fat characters is tightly tied to a handful of wildly oversimplified stereotypes, perpetuating and magnifying them and flattening us in the process" (Gordon 2020, 134-35). It is by moving towards a framework of responsible artistic agency, wherein these narratives are considered and improved within a narrative web in concert with previous representations, that we will be able to reclaim agency and dignity for fat people. By reworking the images and stories of fat people in art, we can slowly construct a better and more humane future—one in which fat people's stories are told by and for them, ringing true to their actual experiences, needs, and dreams.[13]

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