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***NOBODY LOVES A FAT WOMAN:
Portrayals of Female Obesity in Early American Cinema***

by Joseph Kerr

Introduction:

On Tuesday, August 15, 1911, Thanhouser Studios released a 1,000 foot short titled *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman*. Little is known about this film outside of synopses and reviews, and as far as I can tell, a print no longer exists. The film is fascinating for both its text and context. First of all, it employs a fat female character, who does not get her man, with the assumption being because she is fat. Even more telling is the trade press surrounding this picture, which uses abusive language to describe the character. This film inspired me to research the depiction of and discourses surrounding fat people in early cinema. How does the visibility and invisibility of the fat character shed light on society and culture?

The goal of this paper is to examine not only what survives about this text, but from other silent films from the period of 1905-1920, particularly those from the Thanhouser Studio. How are fat characters used in the narrative and what differences, if any, are there between the representations of female and male fat characters? How were

fat stars from other forms of entertainment depicted in media? Finally, what are the discourses surrounding these texts, characters, and actors in showing society's opinion of fat people? I believe these questions are poignant for today due to the fact that the United States has a growing obesity problem. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 62% of American female adults and 71% of American male adults are obese or overweight. (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12153886) What will be the future representation of fat America?

Methodology:

The goal is to survey American silent films from 1905-1920 (with an emphasis on those from the Thanhouser Studio) and determine which use fat characters and how they are used within the narrative. The dates are somewhat arbitrary but I chose them because both the beginning and ending dates signify films that I believe bear importance to the discussion of obesity in cinema. I want to search for differences between female and male characters as well as differences between the perceptions of female and male actors who are fat. I plan to examine the discourse surrounding fat representation in other forms of entertainment by looking at one of the burlesque and vaudeville stars, Sophie Tucker. Finally, I want to look at trade press articles and how they handle the fat characters in these films.

Background:

Perhaps it is best to begin with a brief historical context of how American society viewed fat people, particularly women, in the decades leading up to the silent films I

want to examine. Joan Jacobs Brumberg in the book, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, traces the history of eating disorders leading to thinness and puts the rise of anorexia nervosa into a context of societal opinions about fat. By the end of the 19th century, thinness in women symbolized moral and spiritual purity as well as denoted class status. Society considered large women unable to control their urges for food and thus sex. The logic was that if women indulged their eating appetites, it was only a matter of time before they also indulged in sexual appetites. Furthermore, thinness could be a way to move beyond the social and class status of one's birth. As Brumberg writes, "Consequently, women with social aspirations adopted the rule of slenderness and its related dicta about parsimonious appetite and delicate food." (182) Diet and a slim body could be the ticket for women to ascend to a higher social class. "By the turn of the twentieth century, elite society already preferred its women thin and frail as a symbol of their social distance from the working classes. (182)

As to be expected, some of these attitudes about female bodies stemmed from male opinions. Interestingly, Lord Byron, the Victorian poet, is a key figure in these attitudes. He believed that fat symbolized "lethargy, dullness, and stupidity." His disciples, or what today we would call fans, took on similar attitudes, and thus a "horror of fat" became popular among the youth of America and Britain. "Byronic youth, in imitation of their idol, disparaged fat of any kind." So they turned to drinking vinegar as a way to shed unwanted pounds. (180)

The connections are clear that by the turn of the 20th century, American attitudes prejudiced fat females. Society linked food with the feminine and girls' identities formed around relationships to food and body image. As Brumberg writes, "Some middle-class

girls, then as now, became preoccupied with expressing an ideal of female perfection and moral superiority through denial of appetite.” (184)

There is an opposing view found in the scholarship that contrary to thinness being the preferred female body type at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, fatness or the more pleasing-sounding word “voluptuousness” was popular. In his biography *Sophie Tucker: First Lady of Show Business*, Armond Fields claims about his subject, “Physically mature for her age, Sophie’s appearance was in keeping with the voluptuous feminine ideal of the day exemplified by such popular stage stars as Lillian Russell, Fay Templeton, Anna Held, and Eva Tanguay.” (Fields, 15) Perhaps Fields is being kind to his subject. Or perhaps something more complicated is at play. We are dealing with two different classes of women. Show business women were not the women of the higher social classes. In fact, Tucker’s family practically disowned her when she left them to pursue a career on the stage. The Jewish community condemned her and saw her as, “a ‘bad woman,’ for having left her husband, child, and parents.” (31) The females Brumberg writes about are middle and upper class women, and if these women were trying to separate themselves from working class women through their thinness, we can assume that some working class women had larger bodies. The problem of anorexia nervosa seems to have affected middle and upper class women. Thinness became popular with the upper class, not with the masses. Nevertheless, one performer who used her body image to achieve success is Sophie Tucker, “the Last of the Red-Hot Mamas.”

(6)

Sophie Tucker

As mentioned above, Sophie Tucker was a large woman, and interestingly this trait led her to perform in blackface. She began performing on stage at age sixteen, around the turn of the 20th century. In *A Bad Woman Feeling Good*, a history of female blues performers, Buzzy Jackson reports about Tucker's crossing racial lines. "As she (Tucker) told it, she was persuaded to perform in blackface by vaudeville managers in New York who apparently felt that, because she was a large woman, the audience would warm to her more easily if she took on the 'Mammy' role so familiar with the minstrelsy tradition." (Jackson, 25) It is interesting that these managers believed audiences would feel more comfortable listening to a fat black female rather than a fat white female. The visibility of a fat black female performer was acceptable, but they were leery about showing a fat white female performer. In fact, Tucker performed in blackface for a number of years at the beginning of her career to disbelieving audiences. "Billed for a time as a 'Refined Coon Shouter,' Tucker enjoyed pulling off a glove at the end of a performance 'to show I was a white girl' to a presumably shocked audience." (25) This attests to Tucker's talent. It is not that her make-up was so convincing as that her vocal performance made her believable as a black artist.

Sophie Tucker added sexuality to her performances as well. As we saw with Brumberg's research, fat women were thought to be overtly sexual. If they could not keep their desire for food at bay, how could they keep their sexual desires repressed? In a particularly telling incident in July 1908, Tucker wore the latest fashion, a sheath skirt, on the streets of Rock Springs Park. "She was arrested for demonstrating to locals how easy the skirt made it to jump off curbs and step over puddles, in doing so not only revealing

her ankles but a portion of her leg as well.” (Fields, 27) Tucker was not afraid to express sensuality or show forbidden body parts. Ironically, her warning was to stick to the script of the show in which she was performing. There is an opposition between what is accepted on the stage and what is accepted on the public street, between what can be visible on stage versus in public. Nevertheless, Tucker is one large female performer who parlayed her talent and personality into a successful career regardless of her body size.

The First Depictions of Fat Female Characters:

As far as I can tell, the first two films to feature fat female character are from American Mutoscope & Biograph. The first is a comedy, *Airy Fairy Lillian Tries on Her New Corsets*, a 57 second short released in November 1905. That same month, the studio also released *The Fat Girl's Love Affair*. The two films were also copywritten on the same day, March 3, 1905, and G.W. Bitzer shot both. (www.afi.com)

These similarities show that there may be other connections between the two films. Perhaps, *The Fat Girl's Love Affair* is also a comedy and maybe even starred the same actress. Whereas, *Airy Fairy* is available on video; the latter, as far as I can tell, is not.

Airy Fairy Lillian Tries on Her New Corsets depicts the story of an overweight wife trying desperately to fasten her corset. She enlists her husband's help, but even together they can't make the article of clothing work. This film, produced by Wallace McCutcheon and Frank Marion, was intended for the peephole mutoscope's viewer, and most consider it one of the “blue movies,” films which due to its “risqué” material.

(www.imdb.com) What becomes interesting to note is what exactly is risqué in the film? Is it the fact that the woman is partially undressed, trying to connect her corset, or is it that she is overweight? Regardless, this is one of the first portrayals of a large female character. Although the joke is that she cannot fasten her corset due to her weight, there is another element at play—the role of the husband.

The film begins with a full shot of a bedroom. Airy Fairy Lillian, wearing a sheer slip and underwear, attempts to put on her corset, an item of clothing, which ironically is supposed to help a woman look slim, but with a body the size of this, a corset is like putting a band-aid on an ax wound. Frustrated, Lillian throws her corset to the ground as her husband enters. He assists her and by his pressing on the sides of the corset, they are able to fasten the device. He then falls to the bed exhausted, but his wife is happy.

Clearly, this film reads as a comedy. One could imagine this might have been a skit on the vaudeville stage, a physical comedy routine for a husband and wife team. As Henry Jenkins reminds us, many vaudeville acts made their way into screen comedies. As he writes in *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, “My central claim will be that anarchistic comedy emerged from the classical Hollywood cinema’s attempt to assimilate the vaudeville aesthetic, an alternative set of social and artistic norms that enjoyed an uneasy relationship with dominant film practice in the 1930’s.” (Jenkins, 24) One of his prime examples of this is the “strange case of the back flipping Senators” from the film *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934). (2) Although thirty years separate this film from *Airy Fairy Lillian*, perhaps in the latter we see an early adoption of a vaudeville aesthetic in cinema. In this case, since perhaps this is based on a skit, the good news is that Lillian gets her

man. She is able to be a wife and we assume, to be loved. He is at least kind, willing to help his wife in the most arduous of tasks.

Unfortunately, we have no information about *The Fat Girl's Love Affair* with which to compare to *Airy Fairy Lillian*. Does the fat girl enjoy love in this film the way that Lillian seems to? Or is she subject to a harsh narrative as we will see as we begin examining the representation of fat in the films like *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman*? *Airy Fairy Lillian*, though playing the joke for laughs, isn't judged for being fat so much as it is part of her physical shtick, not unlike the way Sophie Tucker uses her body as a means to success not failure. Because this is a comedy and possibly based on a vaudeville routine, perhaps that gives a clue to the differences in representation. On the vaudeville stage maybe it was easier to show fat women, but once cinema develops, perhaps the recorded image of the fat body becomes a bigger issue for film studios than it had been for vaudeville and the theatrical stage. Visibility is permitted on stage, but a permanent visibility on celluloid is more problematic. Let us now examine one studio's films to see how they represent the fat body on screen.

Thanhouser Studios:

Of the Thanhouser films for which information exists, eight deal with fat characters. Of these, five employ a fat character in a lead role and the remaining three have a fat supporting character. The lead role films include *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman* (August 1911), *Why Babe Left Home* (May 1913), *A Massive Movie Mermaid* (August 1915), *Foolish Fat Flora* (December 1915), and *Paul's Political Pull* (May 1916). The three films which use a fat character in a supporting role are *Leon of the Table D'Hote*

(October 1910), *The Star of the Side Show* (April 1912), and *Hatful of Trouble* (December 1914). (Thanhouser CD-ROM)

We first should note that the depictions of fat characters in the film from this studio range from 1910-1916. The studio itself produced films from 1908-1918, so it seems reasonable to assume that the practice of using fat characters is not limited to a certain historical point in time. These films use both female and male fat characters. The breakdown is as follows: *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman*, *A Massive Movie Mermaid*, *Foolish Fat Flora*, *Leon of the Table D'Hote*, and *The Star of the Side Show* all use female characters, whereas *Why Babe Left Home*, *Paul's Political Pull*, and *A Hatful of Trouble* use fat male characters—again, not the most astonishing historical fact.

(Thanhouser CD)

However, what does become interesting is that the films from 1910-1912 employ female actresses in the female character roles, whereas the films from 1913 on use male actors in the female roles. Let us explore the three Thanhouser films which use a fat female character in a lead role.

Both *A Massive Movie Mermaid* and *Foolish Fat Flora* employ actor Arthur Cunningham in the role of the fat female. In *Mermaid*, a film director is stymied when his leading lady walks out. He looks for a replacement and finds Pansy, an actress who had once been thin, but who now, “compares favorably in size to the European war debt.” Although the information is not entirely clear, the assumption is that Cunningham plays the role of Pansy and soon, the director's film turns from a drama to a comedy. However, all is not lost when the studio manager watches the film and insists the director shoot all of their future comedies. (Thanhouser CD-ROM)

How is fat represented in this film? Like *Airy Fairy Lillian*, the film uses fat for laughs. Within the film within a film, fat transforms the drama to a comedy. Fat is not represented in a serious manner. Perhaps this is why a male actor plays the part. It might have been easier to make a fat man the joke rather than a fat woman. Like the use of black face with Sophie Tucker, maybe it is easier or even preferable to make a fat white male visible rather than a fat white female.

Similarly in *Foolish Fat Flora*, another comedic short, Cunningham plays Flora, whose desire to lose weight lies at the center of the story. She tries every crazy diet she finds including one in which she gets rid of all her furniture, thus landing her in jail when the neighbors call the cops. Flora is only too happy to go to jail. As the synopsis from *Reel Life* attests, "Prison fare, she had heard, is very bad, and she is happy in the belief that life behind the bars will train her down." (Thanouser CD-ROM)

Both of these Thanouser films, *Mermaid* and *Flora*, were released in 1915. *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman*, the only Thanouser film to feature a fat female in a leading role played by a female actress, was released four years earlier. Although, it too is a comedy, the use of the fat character is different. In *Mermaid*, *Flora*, and even *Airy Fairy*, the jokes stem from the physicality of fatness. There is something different happening in *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman*.

First of all, Blossum, the lead character is not identified by the actress' name anywhere in the historical documents. This could be due to the fact that some earlier films did not have cast lists, but perhaps it is also due to the fact that there is a prejudice, which exists about fat female actors that does not exist or at least not in the same way, as fat male actors. Here, the actress' name remains invisible.

The plot of this film is simple. Jack Darcy will receive a \$50,000 inheritance from his great uncle on one condition: he must marry Blossum, the daughter of his uncle's friend. *The Moving Picture World* of August 12, 1911, describes the situation as follows: "The condition does not seem so terrible until Jack has met the lady fair. She has a kind face; but she looks like twins." (Thanouser CD-ROM) Rather than physical humor, this narrative uses fat as a plot device. Jack must marry her to get the money; he doesn't want to marry her because she is fat.

Jack has a year to make a decision, so he hopes the woman will slim down, and Blossum tries diets to no avail. In the meantime, Jack meets a graceful, young swimmer and decides to forfeit the \$50,000 in favor of the smaller woman. From *The Motion Picture World*, "And this belief is intensified when he see the fat girl in a bathing suit, nearly dies of exhaustion trying to rescue her in the water." (Thanouser CD-ROM) Here, we see fat used for physical humor as Jack must save Blossum, not unlike the way the husband helps Lillian in *Airy Fairy Lillian*. The difference is that in the three other films discussed, there is no competition for the fat female. Here, Blossum loses Jack to a slimmer woman. The icing on the cake is the uncle's celebration of Jack for standing up for the woman he loves, and he gives Jack the \$50,000. Not only does nobody love Blossum, but she is also no longer worth a sizable dowry.

Even more alarming than the plot of this film and its synopsis in its portrayal of fat, are some of the reviews surrounding *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman*. The review in *The Morning Telegraph*, August 20, 1911 reads, "Hilarious is the sort of comedy offered in this photoplay, which relates of the almost-marriage of a handsome man to a grossly fat woman... Thus does the film end joyously for all save poor big 'Blossom,' and thus it is

proven that ‘nobody loves a fat woman.’” (Thanhouser CD-ROM) The message is clear: fat is not beautiful and will never find love. Particularly poignant is the overemphasis of “grossly fat” and “poor big ‘Blossum.’” Are these added modifiers “grossly” and “big” needed in the sentences? It seems the reviewer adds them for emphasis.

Perhaps this is a sign of the historical moment, that writers overemphasized fat modifiers. However, when looking at more current scholarship, we find the same emphasis. In an example published in 1991, the book *Silent Films 1877-1996: A Critical Guide to 646 Movies*, Robert Keppler describes Airy Fairy Lillian as “a very fat, rotund woman.” (Keppler, 28) Again, why does he need both “very fat” and “rotund” to describe this character? In the same book, Keppler details a plethora of films starring Fatty Arbuckle and John Bunny, both overweight actors, but he never uses the word fat nor refers to their being overweight, and he does not emphasize this fatness with extra modifiers. Thus, the discourses around fat male and fat female actors are strikingly different.

Clearly, the representations and discourses surrounding fat actresses and actors is very different, both in the writings of the times surrounding these early films as well as more current scholarship. Neda Ulaby describes Arbuckle’s image in relation to his fatness, “Arbuckle’s fat was so deeply entrenched in his persona that it erupted into his proper name. Yet it was by being fixed to and named through his role as fat that Arbuckle was able to consistently subvert audience expectations.” (Ulaby, 154) I would argue that this is only because he was a male performer. Female film actresses did not share the same ability to translate a fat body image into success. Sophie Tucker was able

to do it on stage, but not on screen. Again, what is the difference between the media that allows a large woman to succeed in one arena and not the other?

Other Film Studios:

Of the other studios, I have found at least 27 films from the years 1905-1920, which include fat characters, males and females, again some leading and some supporting roles. (Keppler; AFI Catalog) Of these, two shed light on the current arguments. *The Slim Princess* and its remake were released in 1915 and 1920 respectively. Both films take place in Morovenia, Turkey where “fat is considered beautiful.” (AFI Catalog, 851) The joke becomes that the thin Turkish princess cannot find love because she is not fat, a complete reversal from *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman* a decade earlier. However, it is not a complete reversal because ideologically it is okay to be fat *as long as* it is in another country. The Turkish may hold fat in high esteem, but not Americans. In fact, what saves the princess is an American who favors thinness, thus falling in love with the princess and allowing everyone to live happily ever after. This also reifies the idea that thinness is attractive and popular in America; the overweight are welcome to stay in foreign countries.

Conclusion:

A recent *Time Magazine* article reports on the current status of fat in America:

“These are fat times in politics. Literally. Nearly 400 obesity-related bills were introduced in state legislatures across the country—more than double the number in 2003...In Washington, the word obesity appears in 56 bills introduced during the current Congress... Some public-health advocates have begun urging the government to put

a warning label on soft drinks; others are calling for a ‘fat tax’ on fast food.” (Tumulty 41)

Although certainly the discourses about fat Americans are not as harsh as some of those used in early reviews of fat representation in cinema, as American continue to expand, will the rhetoric change? In 2003 Americans spent \$75 billion on costs related to obesity with half of that money coming from tax-sponsored Medicare and Medicaid programs.

(41) As these costs continue to rise, how will the representation of fat people change?

Le’ a Kent writes about fat representation, “When *FaT GiRL* surveyed members of its editorial collective about fat representation, the consensus was that fat women are invisible to mainstream media.” (Kent, 134) The word invisible is key here. In a country in which 60 percent plus of the citizens are overweight or obese, how can their representations remain invisible? Kent provides a fascinating example of this invisibility.

I would add the significant genre of the ‘before’ picture in weight loss advertisements, both print and televised. The before-and-after sequence gets to the heart of mainstream fat representation and the resulting paradoxes and impossibilities of fat identity. Here the fat person, usually a fat woman, is represented not as a person but as something encasing a person, something from which a person must escape, something that a person must cast off. (134)

The representation of fat is something outside the body. Fat is so disgusting that it is no longer tied to the human body.

The issue of fat representation in early cinema raises many questions. Why is it preferable to show fat white males or fat black females instead of fat white females? Why is the fat white female rendered invisible? A few films provide exceptions, but particularly with *Nobody Loves a Fat Woman*, there is a prejudice that exists against fat women, a prejudice that continues to this day. It is important to remember these early

representations and the discourses surrounding them so that the media is aware of these tendencies. There may be more representations of fat people today than a hundred years ago, but that does not mean the representations are any less severe. Perhaps what is needed is a fat cinema in the ways we have queer cinema or African American cinema. As Wendy Shanker writes in *The Fat Girl's Guide to Life*, "'Fat' is the word I use to describe my physical stature. I use it without apology. The more I use it, the more comfortable I feel with it, and the less power it has to hurt me when someone else uses it as an insult." (Shanker, 8) The best way to ensure fair and non-prejudiced fat representation is for obese writers, directors, and producers to bring these stories to the forefront of visibility in American cinema. Only then can we even begin to hope that *somebody*, if not *everybody*, will love a fat woman.

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