

## 23. The Truth Beyond the Whale: Bearing Witness to the Abyss—The Lost, the Obsessed, and the Seekers of Redemption; Jonah's Flight, Ahab's Obsession, and Charlie's Final Journey<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* (2022), an adaptation of Samuel D. Hunter's eponymous play, stands as a profound exploration of psychological and existential anguish, weaving together themes of guilt, redemption, alienation, and the inescapable weight of self-reckoning. Featuring a deeply affecting performance by Brendan Fraser, the film was distinguished with the *Academy Awards for Best Actor* and *Best Makeup & Hairstyling* at the *95th Academy Awards*. At its core, the narrative revolves around Charlie, a man afflicted by morbid obesity, burdened by an overwhelming sense of guilt and estrangement, who seeks reconciliation with both his past and his estranged daughter. Through a highly intertextual framework that incorporates literary, theological, and philosophical allusions, the film scrutinizes modern society's mechanisms of isolation, the politicization of the body, and the alienating effects of digital communication. One of the film's most intricate semantic structures is its deployment of the whale as a complex metaphor, laden with religious, psychological, and existential symbolism. The biblical parallel to the story of Jonah and the great fish reinforces Charlie's entrapment within his own corporeal existence, mirroring Jonah's spiritual imprisonment within the belly of the beast. Yet, Charlie's body is not merely a prison, but a palimpsest of his remorse, trauma, and self-imposed atonement. Concurrently, the *Moby-Dick* intertextuality situates the whale as not merely an elusive force, but as an archetype of obsession, self-destruction, and the inevitability of existential confrontation. Ahab's doomed pursuit of *Moby Dick* finds a striking parallel in Charlie's tormented relationship with his own body—both characters are consumed by a relentless compulsion that dictates the trajectory of their fate. However, the whale metaphor extends beyond its literary genealogy, functioning as a visual, psychological, and corporeal manifestation of Charlie's existential and emotional burden. His corpulent frame is not merely a, psychological condition but an externalized embodiment of his psychic affliction and punitive self-exile. Just as Ahab's fatal obsession with the whale precipitates his tragic demise, Charlie too remains ensnared in a ceaseless

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battle against his own corporeal existence, unable to extricate himself from the gravitational pull of his self-destructive compulsions. Yet, in a stark departure from Ahab's inexorable downfall, Charlie ultimately ceases his struggle against the metaphorical whale, instead surrendering to its presence, thereby signaling an act of final reconciliation with his past and an acceptance of his own flawed humanity. The film's climactic sequence, wherein water and oceanic imagery assume an increasingly dominant role, serves as both a structural homage to Melville's narrative framework and an invocation of Christian iconography, wherein water functions as a potent emblem of purification and spiritual rebirth. Aronofsky's deliberate use of claustrophobic mise-en-scène, intimate cinematographic framing, and layered visual symbolism underscores the themes of modern isolation, the corporeal constraints imposed by societal norms, and the existential yearning for absolution. Through its dense network of intertextual references, philosophical undercurrents, and theological resonance, *The Whale* functions as a meditative cinematic treatise on the inexorable burdens of existence and the profound necessity of redemption, reconciliation, and self-forgiveness. The film, by interweaving the mythic, the literary, and the theological, ultimately transcends the limitations of a singular narrative, positioning itself as an evocative study of human frailty, moral reckoning, and the search for transcendence amidst corporeal entrapment.

**Keywords:** Psychological drama, Religious symbolism, Body politics, Whale and oceanic metaphor, Moby-Dick

### **Balınanın Ardındaki Hakikat: Engin Suların Şahitliğinde Yolunu Kaybedenler, Saplantıya Tutulanlar ve Kefaret Arayışı, Yunus'un Kaçışı, Ahab'ın Öfkesi ve Charlie'nin Son Yolculuğu<sup>3</sup>**

#### **Öz**

Darren Aronofsky'nin *Balina* (*The Whale*, 2022) filmi, Samuel D. Hunter'ın aynı adlı tiyatro oyunundan uyarlanan, psikolojik ve varoluşsal katmanları derinlikli bir biçimde işleyen bir dramdır. Başrolde Brendan Fraser'ın etkileyici performansı ile öne çıkan yapı, 95. Akademi Ödülleri'nde "En İyi Erkek Oyuncu" ve "En İyi Makyaj & Saç Tasarımı" ödülleriyle onurlandırılmıştır. Film, geçmişte ailesini terk eden ve derin bir suçluluk duygusuyla yaşayan morbid obeziteye sahip Charlie karakteri aracılığıyla günah, kefare, yabancılaşma ve bireyin varoluşsal hesaplaşması gibi evrensel temaları ele alır. Yapıt, modern toplumun bireyi yalnızlaştırmasını, bedenin politik bir nesne hâline gelişini ve teknolojinin yabancılaştırıcı etkisini dini ve edebi referanslarla derinleştirerek sunar. Filmdeki balina metaforu, çok katmanlı bir semantik yapı kurarak hem inanç temelli hem de psikolojik göndermelerle zenginleştirilmiştir. İncil'deki Yunus peygamber anlatısıyla kurulan paralellik, Charlie'nin kendi bedeni içinde sıkışmış bir figür olarak resmedilmesini pekiştirmektedir. Yunus gibi Charlie de kendisiyle hesaplaşma sürecindedir; ancak onun bedeni yalnızca bir mahkûmiyet alanı değil, aynı

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zamanda geçmişin ve pişmanlıklarının cisimleşmiş hâlidir. Öte yandan, *Moby-Dick* göndermeleri balınayı yalnızca ulaşılmaz bir güç olarak değil, aynı zamanda saplantının, yıkımın ve nihai yüzleşmenin kaçınılmaz bir sembolü olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Ahab'ın *Moby Dick* karşısındaki trajik mücadelesi, Charlie'nin kendi varlığına karşı geliştirdiği yıkıcı saplantı ile örtüşmektedir. Balina metaforu yalnızca edebi referanslarla sınırlı kalmayıp, aynı zamanda Charlie'nin psikolojik ve fiziksel varlığına dair daha derin bir bağlam sunmaktadır. Charlie'nin obezitesi, geçmiş travmalarının ve suçluluk duygusunun dışavurumu olarak şekillenirken, bedeninin devasa varlığı, onun içsel yükünü ve kendini cezalandırma eğilimini görselleştirmektedir. Tıpkı Ahab'ın balınaya duyduğu saplantının onu kaçınılmaz bir sona sürüklemesi gibi, Charlie de kendi fiziksel varlığıyla olan mücadelesinde bir çıkmaza hapsolmuştur. Ancak film, Charlie'nin sonunda balınayla savaşmayı bırakıp onunla bütünleştiğini, yani kendi geçmişiyle yüzleşerek bir nevi kurtuluşa ulaştığını ima etmektedir. Filmin final sahnesinde su ve deniz metaforlarının belirginleşmesi hem Melville'in anlatısına hem de Hristiyan ikonografisinde suyun arınma ve yeniden doğuşu temsil etmesine güçlü bir atıfta bulunmaktadır. Aronofsky'nin karakter odaklı anlatısı, dar mekânsal kompozisyonları ve görsel anlatım teknikleriyle modern bireyin yalnızlığını, bedenin toplumsal normlarla sınırlandırılmasını ve geçmişle hesaplaşma arayışını çok boyutlu bir sinematografik dil ile aktararak izleyiciyi derin bir varoluşsal yüzleşmeye davet etmektedir. Böylece, Balina filmi, insanın kendi varlığıyla hesaplaşmasını, affetmenin ve kabul edişin ağırlığını, edebi ve dini referanslarla örülmüş güçlü bir anlatı ile sunarak izleyiciyi içsel bir yolculuğa çıkaran derinlikli bir yapıt olarak öne çıkmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Psikolojik drama, Dini semboller, Beden politikaları, Balina ve deniz metaforu, Moby-Dick

## Introduction

Throughout the history of art, literature, and cinema, the whale metaphor has emerged as a powerful narrative device that symbolizes human existential inquiries, helplessness in the face of destiny, and the transformative processes of the inner self. In Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Captain Ahab's obsession with the white whale represents humanity's compulsive pursuit of the unknowable and a defiant confrontation with nature. Similarly, in the Bible, the story of the prophet Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale is interpreted as an allegory of sin, atonement, spiritual awakening, and rebirth (King James Bible, 1611). Darren Aronofsky's film *The Whale* revisits this rich metaphorical tradition within a cinematic framework, portraying the individual's inner conflicts, the imposition of bodily norms by modern society, and the dramatic tension between guilt and redemption (Aronofsky, 2022). The whale, far beyond its presence in Western literature, is a significant symbol in the mythologies and religious narratives of various cultures, often associated with wisdom, destruction, protection, and spiritual transformation. In the Torah and the Bible, the whale is portrayed as an instrument of divine will, a space of trial, and a medium for transformation. Jonah's swallowing by the whale and his release after three days mirrors the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day following his crucifixion (Matthew 12:40). Hence, the whale simultaneously embodies punishment and salvation (Crossan, 1999). In Islamic tradition, the story of Prophet Yunus being swallowed by the whale serves as a metaphor for patience, surrender, and return to divine grace. In the Qur'an, Yunus's repentance and prayer within the whale are emblematic of spiritual purification and submission to divine will (Tabari, 1997).

In Hindu mythology, whales and giant aquatic beings represent cosmic protection. Vishnu's Matsya avatar, which takes the form of a great fish, appears in flood narratives as a divine savior of humanity (Doniger, 1981). These narratives emphasize the whale's dual symbolism as both a destructive and protective entity. In Polynesian mythology, whales are considered sacred spirits and ancestral guides. In Maori tradition, the whale is venerated as a divine being who protects and guides seafarers (Orbell, 1995). Here, the whale stands as a symbol of wisdom and a conduit between the divine and the human world. In Norse mythology, whales are often associated with monstrous sea creatures, representing chaos and the uncontrollable forces of nature. Beings such as Jörmungandr embody cataclysm and cosmic peril (Lindow, 2001). In Japanese mythology, whales known as Kujira are believed to be sacred beings dwelling in oceanic depths, with the ability to foresee disaster and connect the world of spirits with that of the living (Kojiki, 712).

Sin, Atonement, and Redemption in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* is infused with Christian theological references, particularly centered on the concepts of sin, repentance, and spiritual redemption. The protagonist, Charlie, burdened with guilt for abandoning his family, seeks forgiveness in the final days of his life. The religious elements in the film not only illuminate character motivations but also invite the audience to contemplate deeper theological themes. Charlie's physical deterioration symbolizes both internal and external collapse, conflicting with the Christian notion that the body is a temple (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). In Christian theology, sin is seen as separation from God, and atonement as the means of reconciliation (Tillich, 1957). Charlie's overwhelming guilt over abandoning his daughter manifests in compulsive eating habits that metaphorically represent the destructive consequences of sin on both body and soul. In medieval Christian art, sinners are often portrayed as physically deformed or diseased, suggesting a correlation between physical and spiritual corruption (Bynum, 1995). In this context, Charlie's physical decline directly reflects his spiritual state. Charlie's yearning for salvation resonates with the Christian principle of divine mercy. His desire to reconcile with his daughter mirrors

the sacrament of confession and penance in Catholic theology, where acceptance of guilt leads to inner transformation and divine forgiveness (Augustine, 426; Rahner, 1978). His final surrender in the film is symbolic of spiritual purification and redemption, akin to Christ's plea on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The whale in sacred texts symbolizes both punishment and deliverance. Jonah's emergence from the whale after three days parallels Christ's resurrection (Matthew 12:40). In the film, Charlie's enormous body represents both the weight of sin and the potential for salvation. Bread, a Christian symbol of spiritual nourishment—linked to Jesus's declaration, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35)—contrasts with Charlie's compulsive eating, which reflects his attempt to fill a spiritual void with physical sustenance. Water, often associated with baptism and cleansing in Christian iconography, appears in the film as a motif of purification and rebirth, particularly in the final scene, signifying Charlie's spiritual transformation.

Beyond its religious dimensions, the film also addresses the alienation experienced by the individual in contemporary society. Charlie's physical condition has rendered him isolated from the outside world, with digital communication becoming his sole means of interaction. In today's digitized age, the transformative impact of technology on interpersonal relationships and its contribution to social alienation are widely debated (Turkle, 2011). Charlie's reliance on remote teaching to survive reflects the modern individual's increasing solitude and the erosion of social bonds. This phenomenon can be associated with Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, where digital interactions replace physical presence (Baudrillard, 1994). The Whale emerges as a multi-layered narrative that explores theological themes of sin, atonement, and forgiveness while simultaneously interrogating the loneliness and alienation imposed by modernity. Charlie's entrapment within both a theological and technological framework reflects the existential crises of the contemporary individual. By weaving religious symbolism with the psychological and social realities of modern life, the film compels its audience to engage in profound introspection and empathetic contemplation.

### **Religious, Philosophical, Psychological, and Sociological Themes: *The Whale* and the Multi-Layered Meanings of the Whale Metaphor**

In Christian theology, sin is considered a disruptive force in the relationship between humans and God. The doctrine of original sin, which asserts that sin is innate from birth, constitutes one of the most significant barriers to attaining divine forgiveness (Augustine, 397, p. 54). In *The Whale*, Charlie carries the burden of his past transgressions and embodies this sin through his physical condition. Especially in the film's opening scenes, Charlie's compulsive eating rituals can be interpreted as a manifestation of guilt and self-punishment. These moments align with Christian teachings that view the body as inherently sinful. In medieval scholastic thought, the body was often depicted as a shackle hindering the soul's journey to perfection (Aquinas, 1265, p. 190). Charlie's physical deterioration offers a vivid cinematic representation of this theological perception. In particular, the scene where he reads the essay written for Ellie stands as a poignant instance of his search for atonement. This can be understood as a symbolic equivalent of confession and penitence within Christian theology.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, humans are "thrown into the world" and must create meaning through their actions (Sartre, 1943, p. 212). Charlie's life closely mirrors Sartre's conception of existential crisis. Haunted by past mistakes, he remains trapped in a self-destructive existence. However, by the film's conclusion, Charlie acts out of free will and attempts to create meaning, particularly in the scene where

he decides to be truthful with his daughter. Sartre emphasizes that individuals should not be imprisoned by their past while shaping their existence (Sartre, 1943, p. 217). Unlike Captain Ahab, Charlie rejects being condemned by his past and seeks to construct new meaning. Martin Heidegger's concept of "thrownness" also becomes relevant, suggesting that individuals are cast into a world beyond their control and are compelled to find their place within it (Heidegger, 1927, p. 182). Charlie's confinement within his obese body and his restricted living space vividly symbolizes this struggle. The use of narrow, claustrophobic settings throughout the film visually reflects Charlie's inner entrapment and his striving for Heideggerian authenticity.

With the advancement of technology, individuals in modern society have become increasingly isolated (Bauman, 2000, p. 97). Charlie's exclusive interaction with his students via Zoom and his avoidance of physical contact illustrate the alienating effects of the digital age. As Sherry Turkle (2011, p. 134) notes, the decline of face-to-face communication deepens feelings of loneliness. Charlie's existence behind a screen, disconnected from physical reality, critiques the estranged relationship modern individuals have with digital life. Charlie experiences overwhelming guilt for past wrongdoings and gradually destroys himself through compulsive overeating. According to Freud's concept of the death drive, individuals may develop unconscious inclinations toward self-annihilation (Freud, 1920, p. 85). Charlie's excessive eating is not merely a physical compulsion but can be interpreted as a ritualistic act of self-destruction. Freud argues that repressed traumas often find expression through self-harming behavior (Freud, 1920, p. 89), and Charlie's actions serve as a cinematic embodiment of this theory.

Obese individuals are frequently marginalized and stigmatized in contemporary society (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012, p. 576). Charlie's long-term disconnection from the outside world and reliance on Liz for his basic needs can be seen as outcomes of social stigmatization. In one scene, a student criticizes Charlie for attending class without turning on his camera, revealing how individuals who deviate from physical norms are rendered invisible. Even in the virtual realm, Charlie's existence is denied due to societal expectations. In capitalist systems, the body is also commodified (Harvey, 1989, p. 212). Charlie's continual eating becomes a metaphor for the pressure exerted by capitalist ideology on bodily consumption. Industries such as fast food and dieting shape how individuals relate to their bodies (Elias, 1994, p. 76). Charlie's dependency on food underscores how capitalist systems govern bodily behavior and offer no viable alternatives for authentic existence.

### **The Story of Prophet Jonah: A Theological and Literary Analysis**

The story of the Prophet Jonah appears in both Jewish and Christian sacred texts and offers a rich narrative with profound theological and literary dimensions. In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Jonah (*Sefer Yonah*) is classified among the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament (Alter, 2018). In Christianity, Jonah gains particular significance due to Jesus' references to him in the New Testament (Matthew 12:40; Luke 11:29–32). God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and call its people to repentance (Jonah 1:1–2). However, Jonah attempts to escape God's directive by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish from the port of Joppa (Sasson, 1990). This act of defiance is interpreted by many Jewish and Christian commentators as a demonstration that one cannot escape divine will (von Rad, 1962). A violent storm arises after Jonah boards the ship. The crew draws lots to determine the cause of the storm, and Jonah is identified as the culprit (Jonah 1:7–12). This segment of the story is frequently viewed as an example of divine intervention through natural events (Baldwin, 1978). Jonah tells the crew to throw him into the sea to calm the storm, and once cast overboard, he is swallowed by a great fish (Jonah 1:15–17). His three-day entrapment within the fish is interpreted in the New Testament as a prefiguration of Jesus'

death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). N.T. Wright (1996) describes this narrative as a symbolic precursor of the Messiah's resurrection.

After being vomited out by the fish, Jonah fulfills God's command and goes to Nineveh to proclaim that the city will be destroyed within forty days (Jonah 3:4). Unexpectedly, the people of Nineveh, including their king, repent, fast, and renounce their sins (Jonah 3:5–10). God accepts their repentance and spares the city, emphasizing His merciful nature (Buber, 1949). Jonah, however, becomes angry at God's forgiveness and wishes to die. God responds with a didactic parable involving a ricinus plant that withers after providing shade to Jonah (Jonah 4:5–8). God reproaches Jonah for mourning the plant while begrudging His compassion for thousands in Nineveh (Jonah 4:9–11), thereby illustrating divine justice and universal mercy (Heschel, 1962). Unlike other prophetic books, Jonah's narrative is uniquely structured. His direct defiance of God and subsequent spiritual education underscore its didactic function (Trible, 1994). The irony is particularly evident in the unexpected repentance of the Ninevites and Jonah's reluctance to accept divine mercy (Freedman, 1992).

Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* makes extensive allusions to the Book of Jonah. The opening line, "Call me Ishmael," evokes the maritime journey of Jonah (Parker, 2002). Captain Ahab, like Jonah, is portrayed as a figure resisting divine will. Jonah's experience of being swallowed by a great fish parallels Ahab's destructive encounter with the white whale, forging strong metaphorical ties between the two narratives (Wright, 1949). Modern Jewish and Christian theologians interpret Jonah's story as a representation of universal moral principles. Amy-Jill Levine (2017) notes that the narrative illustrates divine compassion toward humanity, particularly relevant to Jews in diaspora. N.T. Wright (1996) contends that within the New Testament, Jonah serves as a symbol for Christ's death and resurrection. Thus, Jonah's story resonates with both theological and literary significance. As part of the prophetic tradition, it explores themes of human fallibility, divine mercy, and the path to redemption.

Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) is not merely a maritime adventure but a philosophical and theological meditation on humanity's struggle with nature, the self, and the divine. Similarly, Darren Aronofsky's film *The Whale* engages in profound introspection and draws extensively on the story of Jonah. In both the Torah and the Bible, Jonah's tale recounts a prophet who tries to flee from God's command, only to be swallowed by a great fish and released three days later after repentance (Alter, 2018; Trible, 1994). This article seeks to examine how the Jonah narrative is reimagined in *Moby-Dick* and *The Whale* through both literary and cinematic lenses.

In *Moby-Dick*, the white whale is more than a creature of nature; it symbolizes divine justice and humanity's helplessness in the face of fate. Ahab's obsessive battle with the whale mirrors Jonah's initial resistance to God's command. However, unlike Jonah, Ahab defies the divine message and seeks to destroy it (Parker, 2002). Ishmael, the lone survivor of the Pequod, serves as a Jonah-like figure—one who lives to tell the tale. His salvation echoes Jonah's deliverance from the belly of the fish, reinforcing Melville's exploration of divine authority and human obedience (Melville, 1851).

*The Whale* uses the Jonah story as a direct metaphor. Like Jonah, Charlie is in exile due to his past sins. Whereas Jonah is punished for fleeing from Nineveh, Charlie is trapped in his own body by guilt over abandoning his daughter (Hunter, 2012). His binge eating disorder serves as a metaphorical parallel to Jonah being swallowed by the fish (Trible, 1994). Charlie's physical confinement in his home parallels Jonah's entrapment within the belly of the whale. Just as Jonah spends three days in isolation contemplating his actions, Charlie confronts his past in the final days of his life. His refusal to leave the

house becomes a physical manifestation of spiritual and emotional collapse (Alter, 2018; Parker, 2002). Though *Moby-Dick* and *The Whale* highlight different aspects of Jonah's story, they share core narrative parallels. In *Moby-Dick*, the white whale represents divine retribution and human arrogance, while in *The Whale*, the metaphor of the whale illustrates Charlie's process of self-destruction and moral reckoning. Ahab is consumed by his obsession to destroy the whale, whereas Charlie surrenders to his inner despair. Both characters face their past and descend into tragedy. However, while *Moby-Dick* concludes with Ishmael's survival—symbolizing Jonah's redemption—*The Whale* ends with Charlie's death, suggesting a final act of spiritual transformation. In both works, the story of Jonah functions as a powerful symbol for inner conflict, the desire for forgiveness, and the possibility of redemption.

### Body Politics and Social Norms in the Context of The Whale

Body politics is a concept that examines the mechanisms of social, cultural, and political control over the individual's body. The body is not only a biological entity but also a site inscribed with ideological, cultural, and societal meanings. In modern societies, the body is regulated, disciplined, and normalized through its associations with gender, race, class, health, beauty, and labor. This concept has been extensively analyzed in feminist theory, postmodernism, biopolitics, and queer theory. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Susan Bordo have examined how bodies are shaped and governed within relations of power. Michel Foucault is one of the most influential theorists in the field of body politics. In works such as *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1976), Foucault elaborates how modern power disciplines individuals and exerts control over bodies. According to Foucault, modern power operates not only through legal sanctions but also through internalized norms, implementing a form of biopolitics that controls individuals by regulating their bodies. Institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and factories serve as disciplinary apparatuses, training bodies to conform and become productive. The normative power of society coerces individuals into conforming to specific standards of beauty, health, and behavior, turning the body into a subject of regulation. Medicine and health discourses classify bodies as either "healthy" or "unhealthy," thereby determining how bodies should ideally be. Likewise, diet culture and the fitness industry pressure individuals to conform to an "ideal body."

Feminist theorists have significantly contributed to analyses of body politics, particularly in relation to the female body. Media, fashion, and cultural ideals impose rigid aesthetic standards on women's bodies. Susan Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), emphasizes the perpetual disciplining of the female body through diet, exercise, and cosmetic industries. In modern society, obesity has become a critical issue in body politics. As portrayed in Samuel D. Hunter's *The Whale*, individuals with obesity often face social exclusion and stigma. Diet culture and ideals of the perfect body associate obesity with laziness, lack of discipline, and moral failure, contradicting capitalist ideals of the productive individual. Medical discourse also reinforces these social pressures by defining health within narrow weight ranges. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth* (1990), argues that beauty standards are used as tools to oppress women. Similarly, anti-obesity campaigns and the diet industry pressure individuals to conform to specific bodily norms. However, the body is not only a site of regulation but also a potential space of resistance.

*The Whale* provides a powerful narrative exploring how societal norms and body politics function in modern life. Through the character Charlie and his morbid obesity, the film examines how the body becomes politicized and how society exerts control through aesthetic expectations. In many societies, obesity is not simply treated as a medical condition but as a moral failing (Campos, 2004). Charlie's social isolation and the harsh criticism he receives for his appearance expose the biases and exclusions



faced by obese individuals in modern society. Foucault's concept of biopolitics offers a valuable framework for understanding Charlie's situation. According to Foucault (1975), modern forms of power discipline individuals through their bodies, coercing them into specific norms. Charlie's body becomes both physically and symbolically politicized. His obesity marginalizes him, yet also becomes a form of resistance against dominant norms (Bordo, 1993).

Media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of the body. Studies show that media often idealizes thinness while rendering obese bodies invisible or subjecting them to negative stereotypes (LeBesco, 2004). Charlie's story counters typical media representations by emphasizing his emotional depth and humanity. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) notes that aesthetic norms are tied to class and cultural capital, stigmatizing those who deviate from them. Charlie is psychologically and socially marginalized for failing to meet these aesthetic expectations. This process aligns with Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, in which individuals are excluded when they do not conform to social norms. Fatphobia refers to the discrimination, shaming, and exclusion of individuals based on their weight (Rothblum, 2012). Charlie's physical and emotional isolation throughout the film reflects this phenomenon. His family's and society's negative attitudes highlight the systemic social exclusion faced by obese individuals. Physical appearance plays a key role in social acceptance (Shilling, 1993). Because Charlie does not conform to societal standards, he becomes isolated in both his professional and personal life. The film interrogates how physical appearance influences social status and inclusion.

Capitalist society reinforces bodily norms through the beauty and health industries. Charlie's body, rejected by the consumerist and health-centered ideal, illustrates how capitalism shapes and excludes certain bodies. Obesity is often framed as an issue of personal responsibility, thereby ignoring structural factors (Guthman, 2011). Modern media cultivates obsession with body control and aesthetic regulation (Orbach, 1978). Charlie's compulsive eating may be read not only as a coping mechanism for emotional trauma but also as a consequence of societal pressure. *The Whale* presents a nuanced narrative of how individuals are judged and excluded based on body norms. Charlie's trauma reveals how society confines individuals to normative molds. The film critiques social regulation of the body, the influence of consumer culture, and how bodies are politicized. In doing so, it reflects Michel Foucault's biopolitics and body politics, showing how power disciplines and normalizes bodies in modern society. Charlie's body, shaped by social norms and power relations, becomes both a site of marginalization and resistance. According to Foucault, modern power disciplines and normalizes bodies through institutions and norms. These mechanisms seek to mold individuals' bodies into conforming entities, thereby rendering the body a site of power (Foucault, 1975). Charlie's body, seen as deviant, reveals the processes of normalization and discipline at work. Medical professionals' interventions exemplify society's efforts to regulate his body.

Foucault's concept of biopolitics explains how power manages and controls human life. Through the regulation of health, hygiene, and living conditions, biopolitics targets bodies like Charlie's for correction. Social judgments and health pressures on Charlie illustrate biopolitical control in action (Foucault, 2000). The body is objectified by power but also becomes a site for subject formation. Charlie's relationship with his body, despite societal rejection, demonstrates his struggle for selfhood. His efforts to accept his body represent resistance and subjectivity. Charlie's relationship with his daughter further reveals the societal judgment on his body and internal conflicts. Her criticism, echoing society's gaze, manifests Foucault's theories on disciplinary power. However, Charlie's journey toward bodily acceptance exemplifies individual agency in the face of biopolitical control. Ultimately, *The Whale* offers a compelling analysis of power, body, and identity. Through Charlie's narrative, the film portrays

how biopolitical mechanisms operate, how bodies are disciplined, and how individuals resist these forces. Charlie becomes both object and agent—a body shaped by society and a self-seeking reconciliation.

### Cinematic Elements and Narrative Depth in *The Whale*

*The Whale* captivates not only through its narrative but also through its cinematographic choices that enhance its psychological depth. Adapted from Samuel D. Hunter's stage play, the film transcends its theatrical roots to present a compelling example of how contemporary cinema utilizes audiovisual techniques to enrich character study. The cinematographic techniques employed in the film construct a visceral atmosphere that immerses the viewer in Charlie's inner world and his physical and metaphorical imprisonment (Bordwell & Thompson, 2017). This section analyzes the film's use of camera movement, framing, set design, color palette, lighting, and sound to explore how these elements contribute to its narrative depth. Departing from standard widescreen formats, *The Whale* is filmed in a 4:3 aspect ratio. This narrow frame plays a vital visual role by emphasizing Charlie's constrained physical mobility. His entrapment is rendered not only thematically but also visually (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2015). The restricted frame underlines the character's alienation, psychological suffocation, and bodily confinement. Darren Aronofsky's previous films—*Requiem for a Dream* (2000) and *Black Swan* (2010)—similarly explore character psychology through framing. However, in *The Whale*, the technique takes on new resonance due to its direct relation to Charlie's physical state (Mulvey, 1975). The camera remains predominantly static throughout the film. Unlike traditional dynamic camera movements used to depict psychological change, Aronofsky employs a fixed camera to emphasize Charlie's stasis and imprisonment. This technique aligns with the play's theatrical origins and centers the viewer's attention on the character's internal conflict. Furthermore, the camera is often positioned at Charlie's eye level, fostering a sense of empathy. High or low-angle shots are rarely used, thus enabling the viewer to perceive Charlie on equal footing, intensifying the emotional connection (Bordwell, 2008).

**The Apartment as a Prison** Charlie's apartment reflects both his physical and emotional confinement. While single-location narratives are common in stage adaptations, *The Whale* utilizes the set as a powerful metaphor. The small, dimly lit, and cluttered apartment underscores Charlie's despair and sense of entrapment. Windows remain closed; doors to the outside are seldom used. The space thus becomes a visual manifestation of Charlie's internal stagnation and psychological distress (Chion, 1994). The film adopts a muted palette dominated by browns and grays, chosen to reflect Charlie's depression and emotional decay. The absence of bright or saturated colors emphasizes the dwindling hope in his life (Bordwell & Thompson, 2017). In contrast, scenes featuring Ellie (Sadie Sink) employ stronger contrasts and altered lighting schemes to underscore her disruptive energy and the emotional volatility she introduces. Dim, shadowy visuals mirror Charlie's psyche, while the climax features increasing brightness as Charlie moves toward a source of light—interpretable as both physical release and spiritual transcendence (Tillich, 1957).

**A Sonic Echo of Internal Struggles** The film's sound design is minimalist. Unlike Aronofsky's earlier works that utilize intense scores, *The Whale* foregrounds silence, breathing, chewing, creaking, and ambient noises to underscore isolation. The absence of music directs attention to Charlie's corporeality—his labored breathing and bodily sounds reflect his anguish. This subtle auditory approach invites the viewer to experience Charlie's psychological and physical reality with heightened intimacy (Chion, 1994). Through its cinematographic choices, *The Whale* offers a deeply affecting character portrait. Techniques such as the 4:3 aspect ratio, static camera, subdued color palette, and restrained sound

design converge to construct a cinematic environment that embodies Charlie's inner world. These elements collectively transform the film into an immersive psychological experience that transcends its narrative, leaving a profound emotional impact on the audience.

## Conclusion

Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* stands as a cinematic meditation on the corporeal, existential, and psychological dimensions of human suffering, engaging with universal themes such as identity, sin, redemption, and self-reconciliation. The film's whale metaphor transcends its literary origins, interweaving religious, mythological, psychological, and sociological dimensions to construct a multifaceted symbolic framework. Through Charlie's tragic journey, the film examines societal alienation, existential reckoning, and the quest for forgiveness, while simultaneously drawing intertextual parallels with *Moby-Dick* and the biblical narrative of Jonah. The whale operates as a prison, a trial, and a potential instrument of liberation in relation to Charlie's corporeal form, societal judgments, and internal conflict. In *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab's monomaniacal odyssey signifies humanity's insatiable drive to grasp an elusive truth and confront the mysteries of existence, whereas in the biblical tale of Jonah, the whale's belly symbolizes spiritual transformation and purification. Charlie embodies both of these narratives—he is simultaneously burdened by Ahab's obsessive struggle and Jonah's reluctant surrender to fate.

The film's engagement with body politics critically examines how physicality is shaped by sociocultural and psychological forces. Charlie's morbid obesity is not merely a physiological condition, but rather a somatic manifestation of his unresolved guilt and emotional trauma. Through the lens of Michel Foucault's theories on the body, Charlie's physical form may be interpreted as a stigmatized and marginalized entity, subjected to the disciplinary mechanisms of social norms. The film interrogates dominant aesthetic standards, societal fixation on body image, and capitalist structures that commodify physical appearance, exposing the tensions between individual autonomy and external expectations.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Charlie's compulsive eating and self-destructive tendencies align with Sigmund Freud's concept of the death drive (Thanatos), which suggests that individuals may unconsciously engage in behaviors leading to self-annihilation. Charlie's excessive consumption can thus be interpreted as a form of penance for his past mistakes, reinforcing Freud's theory that human beings often reenact trauma as a means of processing guilt. From an existentialist standpoint, *The Whale* resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, which asserts that individuals are condemned to create their own meaning in an indifferent universe. Charlie, through his confrontation with the past and his final attempt to reconnect with his daughter, engages in an act of self-definition, constructing his identity through his final choices.

The film's religious undertones further amplify its thematic depth. Christian iconography frequently associates water with purification and spiritual rebirth, a motif that becomes increasingly pronounced in the film's climactic sequences. Charlie's final moments, wherein his desperate attempt to reach his daughter coincides with water imagery, evoke both the cleansing ritual of baptism and *Moby-Dick's* portrayal of the ocean as a liminal space between life and oblivion. Theological concepts such as Catholic atonement, Protestant individualism, and the Christian doctrine of divine grace permeate the film, embedding Charlie's narrative within a broader spiritual discourse. His final act of acceptance symbolizes an existential resolution, wherein he comes to terms with his own imperfections and finds solace in the acknowledgment of his humanity.

From a cinematic perspective, Aronofsky's stylistic choices contribute to the film's psychological and emotional intensity. The use of claustrophobic interiors, tight framing, and minimalistic mise-en-scène accentuates Charlie's isolation and physical entrapment. The muted color palette reinforces his emotional desolation, while strategic manipulation of light and shadow mirrors his fluctuating psychological states. The film's aesthetic language thus serves as a visual articulation of Charlie's existential suffering. *The Whale* transcends individual tragedy, emerging as a profound critique of modern alienation, the politicization of the body, and the human confrontation with existential despair. By intertwining literary, theological, and philosophical elements, the film facilitates a multidimensional exploration of selfhood, guilt, and redemption.

Ultimately, *The Whale* stands as a testament to the profound weight of human frailty, crafting a poignant meditation on reconciliation, forgiveness, and the existential burden of being. Charlie's odyssey, akin to Ahab's doomed pursuit, Jonah's reluctant journey, and the timeless struggles of human existence, elevates the film beyond the confines of personal drama, situating it within the broader philosophical discourse on the human condition. Aronofsky's character-driven narrative invites audiences to confront profound ethical and existential dilemmas, ensuring that the film will endure as a subject of academic and artistic discourse for years to come. Charlie's story is not merely a chronicle of suffering but a modern tragedy that encapsulates the universal struggle of self-reckoning, illustrating the inexorable need for redemption and the transformative power of self-acceptance.

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