

The Whale: The new film by Darren Aronofsky

David Walsh
12 March 2023

The Whale is a film directed by Darren Aronofsky, based on a 2012 play of the same title by Samuel D. Hunter.

It features Brendan Fraser as Charlie, a hugely obese man. He is an English professor in Idaho who teaches online courses and essentially hides out in his apartment. He has a few dealings with other human beings as possible. A nurse, Liz (Hong Chau), visits him and tries to keep him alive. A delivery man regularly drops off food on the porch, with Charlie leaving payment in the mailbox.

Years earlier, Charlie left his wife and daughter (with whom he has had little or no contact) for a man, Alan, who subsequently killed himself. That tragic event prompted Charlie's massive weight gain. Alan was the son of the head pastor of the New Life Church, and guilt over his homosexuality eventually helped drive him to his death.

Now virtually unable to move because of his enormous size, Charlie obstinately refuses to go to a hospital or receive any serious psychological or medical treatment. Claiming to have no money for health insurance, he has, in fact, a sizable sum in the bank, which he has supposedly been saving to give to his estranged daughter Ellie.

A young, door-to-door proselytizer, Thomas (Ty Simpkins), purporting to be a member of the same New Life Church, begins to come around Charlie's house, seeking to save his soul.

Charlie makes contact with Ellie (Sadie Sink), who is consumed with anger over his earlier abandonment. ("You can't throw me away like a piece of garbage, and then suddenly just want to be my dad eight years later. You left me for your boyfriend.") Charlie offers her the \$120,000 in his bank account if she will spend time with him, offering to help rewrite a high school essay on which she received a failing grade. Eventually, Mary (Samantha Morton), Charlie's former wife, also finds her way to his place.

The "whale" in the title may refer to the giant-sized character, but also to *Moby Dick*, the Melville novel, which looms large in Charlie's thinking.

Fraser won an Academy Award Sunday night as best actor and Chau was nominated in the best supporting actress

category.

Presumably, Aronofsky wants to encourage tolerance and empathy toward people often considered "monstrous" in one way or another. Moreover, he opposes the anti-gay fanaticism of religious zealots and is disturbed by its consequences.

This is something—but not very much. Is it really demonstrating great audacity in our day and age, for example, to suggest that an obese man deserves to be treated like other people?

We live at a time of immense official political and social conformism, where every leading institution attempts to create the illusion that its daily lying about earth-shaking events is believed and accepted by "everyone." "The COVID pandemic was impossible to predict or prevent." "Russia launched an unprovoked war on Ukraine." "American democracy is resilient and strong." Someone desiring to swim against the stream in a significant manner would find no shortage of opportunities.

The director has explained that he chooses characters "whose stories generally either start or end up in very extreme places." He rather proudly points to the fact that Brendan Fraser ended up facing "five hours in a makeup chair every day" (adding and taking off hundreds of pounds of prosthetics). The *Hollywood Reporter* notes that as far as "physical transformations go, Brendan Fraser's in *The Whale* is by far the most drastic this year in film." A "full-body artificial skin suit was created using 3D printing and filled with sacks of 'gelatinous water beads' to get the movement of Fraser's limbs right."

The American film industry in particular specializes at present in the technical-organizational tour de force, frequently intended, consciously or not, to divert attention from the emptiness of the work in question.

As we have asked before in regard to Aronofsky's murky, strained efforts (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Wrestler*, *Black Swan*, *Mother!*), all of this to what end? If the filmmaker's immediate "extremism" is peeled away, what is left?

Explaining what impelled him to create his most recent film, Aronofsky indicated he was concerned with the “lessons” of the pandemic “that pulled us all apart” and “also all the political stuff that was ripping us all apart.” The answer to that, he suggested, was “human connection ... We’re all the same species. We are connected, but the fact that we’re so disconnected in so many different ways ... just trying to remind each other that with all of those gulfs, there is a way back.” Speaking of Ellie, Charlie’s daughter, Aronofsky suggested that with all of her “pain and distrust and sadness and anger, that she can find love” and that this “inspired” him. One of the film’s last lines is, “People are amazing.”

This is rather banal, and misleading.

Charlie’s insights into literature and his students’ efforts are also thin, clichéd. He advises his daughter at one point, “Just think about the poem for a while, and write something. Be honest. Tell me what you really think.” Comments of this sort are supposed to set him apart as a teacher and a human being.

One of the most deplorable elements of *The Whale* is its near celebration of defeat and resignation. The decision by Charlie to eat himself to death is treated as a meaningful act of self-sacrifice. Why would this possibly be so? His ultimate fate has nothing whatsoever inevitable about it.

Fortunately, hardly anyone is likely to bother working through the film’s objectionable social logic, but it’s there. After all, Charlie’s defense of his refusal to spend his savings on his own health is that the “money is for Ellie. It’s always been for Ellie.” His martyrdom has to occur because “I need to know that she’s gonna have a decent life.” This is both reactionary—the older generation should remove itself off apparently for the sake of the younger one—and false—losing one of the few people who cares about her is hardly going to help guarantee that Ellie has “a decent life”! Indeed, what is one to make of a “compassionate,” “humanist” film that seriously argues that \$120,000 is worth more than a man’s life?

Things are not improved by the fact that Charlie, as he perishes, appears to float upward bathed in bright, as though he were genuinely going “to a better place.” There is also the small fact that, at the end, Thomas the missionary, who has proved to be a “fallen” creature, is returning to the bosom of his cult-like, godawful “Christian” family? Why is that a good thing? In general, what in the world (and how much) is Aronofsky thinking?

The director evidently recognizes there is a great deal of suffering and torment in the world, some of it self-inflicted, but he has never offered any insight into its more generalized sources. He seems largely impotent and paralyzed in the face of it. Aronofsky belongs to a

generation of directors who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, when the “end of history” was announced and the status quo was proclaimed to be, if not the best of all possible worlds, at least the only one we were likely to experience.

The artists were officially blocked from examining the existing state of things to see how it might be altered. This did not prevent them, of course, from developing and reflecting anxiety and discontent, but these sentiments take on a largely unproductive, festering character, devoted at best to the small change of psychological life.

Many of the filmmakers reflect the violence and disturbances of the times, without drawing any important conclusions: Robert Rodriguez, Guy Ritchie, James Gray, Lynne Ramsay, Christopher Nolan, Martin McDonagh and the Russo brothers. Extremism in behavior and artistic form, combined with a non-committal or hostile attitude toward the prospect of changing the world.

More than two decades ago, we commented unfavorably on Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream*, about drug addicts in Brooklyn, based on a novel by Hubert Selby Jr. We noted the unfortunate affinity that Aronofsky obviously felt for Selby. The latter, we argued, “writes in an overheated prose about people who are fairly well destroyed by the time we meet them. His specialty is lovingly detailing the disasters they undergo. He is not a charlatan or a poseur, but an inadequate writer and artist and thinker. The destinies of his wretched characters are so obviously preordained that any real drama or spontaneity is largely drained away. We’re watching cattle being slaughtered.”

It is never entirely clear, we added, “whether the author is protesting against the terrible things that are done to people or registering his disgust with the mutilated, self-deluded population itself. At all points, he fails to bring out the mainspring, the secret of their behavior. Aronofsky’s film manifests a similar ambiguity. ... The film’s essential hysteria and sensationalism reach extraordinary heights. ... If Aronofsky is genuinely distressed by the misery in the world, and not simply attempting to construct a career out of it, he needs to take another tack.” There is not much more to be added.



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