



[Gordos](#) viewed at [Cornerhouse, Manchester](#)

Dir Daniel Sanchez Arevalo, ES 2009, 120 mins

Reviewed by [John Hutchinson](#) April 2011

Undoubtedly, the most interesting of the sophisticated films and perhaps the “winner” overall of this year's Spanish and Latin American Film Festival at the Cornerhouse, is Gordos (Fat People). This has won many accolades, including the best supporting actor at the Goya awards in 2009, and has been a huge box office success in Spain.

The film takes as its central premise the subtitle “todos llevamos uno dentro” - loosely translated as “there is a fat person waiting to get out in all of us”, and is sophisticated as it explores this concept in often hilarious and satirical detail. I use the term concept rather than narrative here for although there is a bewildering interweaving of the dramas and crises of many lives, all united under the bursting umbrella of obesity, one way of responding to the film is at a conceptual level rather than to an individual story line.

The actors, those who weren't originally sufficiently horizontally challenged, at least, had to physically gain weight for the roles to experience what it was like to be fat with its inconveniences and limitations. They speak in interviews about the film of filling the “vacíos” or voids of daily life and there is the fast food consumption of images and relationships and sexual liaisons. It is both grotesque and side splittingly funny at the same time.

And the characters are appropriately larger than life. The film opens with a slick salesman peddling the quick fix of “Kiloaway”, a diet control programme to a television room full of “gordos”, hooked on every syllable he utters. “Kiloaway” pronounced in the mouths of Spanish speakers sounds like a parody of some breakfast cereal brand and manages to lose the first “a”, so it runs together as one word: the only form of slimming that is successful in the movie.

It's all phoney. We next see the same salesman, not the thin, super-successful and super-self-confident version with a captive marketing audience but his real, fat, de-motivated alter-ego in serious difficulties because he has lost his job and broken the working contract with a permanent penalty clause which claws back his remuneration if he becomes fat. It also later emerges he is gay.

The real theme then opens up as the same character is attending a therapy session for the obese and it is this bizarre and anxiety ridden group whose ups and downs we follow throughout the film. The therapist is a paradigm of monogamous virtue and ideal body weight and mass, so it seems. Yet he is undone by the pregnancy of his beautiful wife when his genuine love turns to repulsion as her belly and figure bulge. His wife turns the mirror of disgust on herself, causing a serious rift in the otherwise perfect relationship, leading to a tortured separation just as their child is born.

Wherever one looks, there are the same juxtapositions of fat and thin and defining obsession or characteristic and its opposite in this graphic human laboratory of anxiety. The examples of dissatisfaction accumulate like layers of cellulite.



An attractive, svelte and intelligent young woman loses control of her weight when her long term boyfriend finds work on the other side of the Atlantic and it is not the separation but her ballooning figure which destroys their intimacy. A young, devoutly Catholic couple, another instance of little and large, (and “novios”, formal boyfriend and girlfriend, in the very old fashioned Spanish sense of many years of engagement and minimum physical contact) have their rigid moral code undermined by the overweight woman’s attempts to diet. It has the effect

of waking her libido and consummating their relationship before marriage to such an excessive extent that the boyfriend declares that they have become sex addicts.

Another member of the therapy group, a large man, American in the scale of his obesity and lack of refinement, with an almost equally corpulent wife is the father of teenage twins, the boy thin and the girl fat. They bicker and quarrel like Tweedledum and Tweedledee and as an act of retaliation on their parents noisy humping in the bedroom secretly film their lovemaking and distribute it on the Internet to the horror and anger of their parents. Their anger is assuaged, however, by the fact that they become porn stars of the web with millions of hits.

The most striking journey from one state to its polar opposite is that of the gay salesman who not only manages to murder his business partner in a fit of rage in a chance encounter in a park and successfully cover it up but eventually embarks on an affair with the widow, thus apparently becoming straight as a result of obesity therapy. It doesn't last, as no transformation which denies the comfortable and natural state of an individual does. Sexual repression, strongly linked to the physicality of fat bodies, bursts out into sexual indulgence in hilarious and unexpected ways.

What then is the cinema goer to make of this film? On one level it is side splitting entertainment. As a form of satire, it is obviously very three dimensional in its physical subject matter yet very two dimensional in its treatment of obesity. Satire does reduce reality to abstractions and that is why this review has not used names, just tried to convey the pattern of action. The film also skates nimbly over a whole series of improbabilities without totally straining our credulity.

To answer the question, we must return to the twins. There is a hidden theme here which many may miss. For his birthday, the boy is given a DNA kit. He is slim and stupid: his twin sister is fat and clever, always outperforming him at school. Unlike the English language, Spanish can use words rather than phrases to explain the difference. “Gemelos” (also meaning cuff-links) are identical twins (the splitting of the same egg), “mellizos” are fraternal twins (the fertilisation of two separate eggs by two sperm).

Even the linguistic advantage of Spanish is insufficient, however, for this situation. These are actually, for want of a better term, half-twins. Of course, identical twins have an identical DNA and fraternal twins can be as different in their DNA make-up as any normal siblings. When the sister uses her brother’s DNA kit, she makes a startling discovery - her brother and herself have different fathers! This does happen in the real world but is very rare. There are a few cases, for example, recorded of mixed race twins when both parents are white or black and yet the only explanation of one black and one white twin is that conception occurred with two fathers sufficiently close in time to enable both foetuses to survive.

This bizarre twist is another challenge to obesity therapy in that it throws open the whole nature versus nurture debate and asks to what extent is being fat a genetic predisposition and to what extent the bad habits or otherwise of a lifetime.

Whatever your take on this issue, “Gordos” will force you to re-examine your prejudices but not necessarily to change them. Unlike “[Octubre](#)” where, despite the lack of resources, personal growth is possible, the mirror is reflected back on the viewer to find his or her true nature. Most people cannot tolerate the view.

Editor's comment: Terrific review that confirms the need to discuss the ubiquitous role that talking therapies plays in contemporary society as a way of making connections between people - the Salon's discussion entitled [Talking therapies: good for people and politics?](#) is on Monday 16 May.