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PUNCHING UP THE STORY: Disability and Film

In many contemporary films, disability may be represented as a moral metaphor ([The Straight Story [France/UK/USA, 1999, David Lynch]], as extraordinarily heroic (A Beautiful Mind [USA, 2001, Ron Howard]), or as the punch line of a gag (There's Something About Mary [USA, 1998, Bobby and Peter Ferrell]). For audiences, such portrayals translate as permission—even encouragement—to feel apprehension, admiration, hilarity at the appearance of “problem bodies” on screen. Much has been written about disability on screen as narrative metaphor, but little about disability as sight-gag in contemporary films. Consider, then, Lars and the Real Girl (USA, 2007, Craig Gillespie), a kooky story about an extremely shy and withdrawn young man and his anatomically-correct sex-doll “Bianca.” The film has much to criticize. It perpetuates, for example, a characteristically American nostalgia for small-town U.S.A., imagined to be an old-fashioned and tightly knit community: homogenous, cohesive, mono-religious, mono-lingual. Nearly everyone in Lars and the Real Girl is white, able-bodied, and some generalized version of non-denominational Christian. As a rare representative of “diversity” in the town, Bianca is not only confined to a wheelchair, but, Lars says, she is from Brazil and “doesn’t speak much English.” Yet the film is also a touching portrayal of mental and physical disability. There is something unique and life-affirming about the way people in the town—though shocked at first—rally around Lars and his new girlfriend. Although a plastic doll, Bianca is also a filmic representation of a grown woman in a wheelchair, and once people in the town become used to the idea of Lars “dating” Bianca, they quite cheerfully offer her jobs, invite her to sit with sick children, groom her, and even elect her to the school board. Ostensibly, they are including Bianca in town activities because of Lars, but individual members of the town express fondness and concern for Bianca and grieve when she “dies.” Bianca the sight-gag becomes Bianca the sympathetic, doomed-to-die-young heroine. Early on, the local doctor—a wise and compassionate woman—insists that Lars bring Bianca to her office regularly to have her “low blood pressure” checked. The weekly visits allow her to help Lars work through the fear of close human contact that has led him to substitute a sex-doll (with whom he apparently does not have sex) for a relationship with a real, live woman. Eventually, and somewhat predictably, Lars becomes more self-confident, conquers his delusion by allowing Bianca to “die,” and sets off on the road to love and happiness.

What I find most interesting about the film is that, to borrow terminology from David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (see endnote 2), Bianca serves as a narrative prosthetic device: she furthers the narrative without disrupting the normative boy-girl romantic ideal. But interestingly, Bianca does not provide a “solution” to Lars’s mental “problem” so much as she offers the town members a means to re-evaluate their relationship to Lars. As a disabled “person,” Bianca serves as a prosthetic for the town, an enabling device for the community to recognize that Lars is not lonely or emotionally needy, nor does he require the town’s help to be romantically “fixed-up.” By introducing Bianca into his community, Lars escapes the need to avoid community contact and is able to present himself as “dating.” It is almost as if he is taking care of them by getting this mail-order doll and treating it as his girlfriend. So, although presenting a protagonist with a “problem” he needs to overcome, the film also presents a town in need of overcoming its reactions to mental disability. Lars’s problem is his disability, his disability is his personality, and his personality is the art of the film. Personality through art; personality through bodily “problem”; corporeal problem represented as the soul of the individual. In his introduction to the philosophy anthology The Body, Donn Welton writes, “With the rise of Modern philosophy in the seventeenth century, there came into being the question of how one can develop a rigorous theory of the nature of persons or, to put it more accurately, of what could be admitted into such a theory if one employed a philosophical method incorporating the precision found in the newly emerging mathematical and natural sciences.” Similarly, the authors in this collection offer theories of disabled bodies, critique inherited (and limiting) representations of disability, and raise questions about what still needs to be advanced within such theories. Central to their collective discussion is the question, what does it mean to display characters with physical and mental disabilities as protagonists in films where they don’t necessarily “recover,” where, in fact, “recovery” is beside the point?

That I view Lars and the Real Girl through a disability lens is due, in part, to the critical insights and theoretical readings that disability scholars bring to film studies, including the contributions to this special issue of CJFS/RCEC. Their authors offer strong, unique, and engaging disability readings of a broad range of films. They address disability within a range of theoretical frameworks including postcolonialism and disability, age and disability, disability within the context of historicized medicine, and disability within the viewing experience of a specialized film festival. Each relies on film and disability discourse that acknowledges and challenges expected audience reactions to the viewed disabled body; each writes towards a new and unexpected terrain of disability as a trope of modernity, as social collectivity, or as a postcolonial salvation project.
Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell examine paths of inclusiveness, using the London 2004 Disability Film Festival as a central reference point. They discuss the nature of various accessible and inaccessible spaces, as well as the interactions and communities that develop through, and grow out of, shared theoretical and artistic interests. What happens, the authors ask, when heterogeneous racial, social, class, and disability interests become factored into self-defining disability communities? What politics and aesthetics shift when disabled people become the target audience for film rather than its objects? Snyder and Mitchell draw a parallel between the question of getting "all these disabilities" into a public space and getting them more directly into films. While focused film festivals gain wider audiences, disability film festivals remain largely aimed at specific groups. Such festivals, they argue, promote films that tend to valorize oppositional identities. Indeed, cultivating a content-specific audience, in their view, "situates the activist context itself as influenced by disability experience while also using the film to encourage solidarity on behalf of bodily limitations." Their essay offers insightful examinations of the "problem and promise" that shared socializing space can provide. The authors introduce the term "the politics of atypicality" to describe disabled people and characters in films who refuse to remain within strict boundaries of "medically and socially prescribed categories of sameness." That "categories" always emerge and dominate discussions surrounding disability is inevitable, but Snyder and Mitchell remind viewers (and readers) that the category of "the same" denies the multiple ways of viewing disability. Discussing a wide variety of award-winning cinematic narratives, Snyder and Mitchell outline what they call "resistance-based activities of culture-making," analyzing portrayals of community celebration that often develop from what begins as segregation. As they point out, "Film itself, within this scenario, becomes an alternative form of political participation."

Making a distinction between the conflation of disability categories that often results in segregation and ultimate incarceration, Sally Chivers challenges filmic representations of old age and disability. She argues that the distinction in recent films between the "new normal" (aging) and "new abnormal" (aging with disabilities) assumes that aging without disabilities is natural and preferable and excludes disabled characters who age at all. Through the example of older people sitting in the section of a bus reserved for disabled passengers, Chivers analyzes the ways in which old people are considered "burdensome and in the way of the efficiency of contemporary capitalist society." Her example crystallizes the competing interests involved in deciding who deserves the reserved space more: "the older bus-riders or the rider in the wheelchair? Who is more in the way? Who should get out of the way? And, how does 'being in the way' set one group against another?" To extend her discussion, Chivers turns to the British film, Iris (2001, Richard Eyre) and the Dutch film, Pauline and Paulette (2001, Lieven Debrauwer). In both films, aging characters with dementia become dependent on other (also aging) characters, whose representative impact thus becomes more and more that of "normal" aging. Although old age is usually portrayed as "natural" and disability as "unnatural" and entirely undesirable, Chivers examines the myriad ways that "in public imagination, disability exists quite separately from old age, but old age does not ever escape the stigma and restraints imposed upon disability."

Through the lens of postcolonial theory, Robert Budde examines codes of identity and the material inscription of the disabled body in Deepa Mehta's Earth (Canada/India, 1998). He argues that the ideologically marked body (of the girl Lenny) becomes representative of both disability and national identity: "Lenny's caliper legs are rather crude symbols for the dependent and disadvantaged position of Pakistan in relation to colonial power." As "emblem" of a "broken" country, Lenny projects not only a disabled body, but also a not-yet-adult feminized version of nationality. Mehta's film does not offer a protagonist who must re-situate national identity as masculine-based, nor must she merely depict her "broken country" as still a child to parental colonial power. Rather, Budde points out that the "narrative management" of the film inscribes Lenny's disabled body as postcolonial metaphor, but also as "representational surface," a signifying palimpsest, a narrative map that leads to "a rift" between "theoretical study" and "identity struggles." In Budde's view, the film portrays Lenny as a character who values and holds precious her disability. Her identity of self is as corporeal disabled character, while the film prompts us to read her body as political inscription.

Eunjung Kim and Michelle Jarman also investigate the formation of national identity and the negotiation of international exchange. They argue that "modernization projects" tend to be presented as charity or as a "rescue" of disabled bodies viewed simply as social or medical conditions strategically positioned as "pre-modern." Indeed, the authors point out that, given the modernist obsession with progress, disabled characters in film have become the symbolic focus of modernization projects, enabling oppressive models of rehabilitation to define the "normal." Kim and Jarman expand their purview to the global film industry, focusing on the Japanese animated film Mononoke-hime (Princess Mononoke [1997, Hayao Miyazaki]) and the Australian documentary The Good Woman of Bangkok (1991, Dennis O'Rourke), a controversial film "documenting" the filmmaker's nine-month involvement with a Thai prostitute, Aoi. They examine the cross-cultural framings that each film posits. "What value is exchanged," ask Kim and Jarman of both films, "in the relocation of disabled people and prostitutes—a process seemingly imperative to new social economic formulations?" They question the positioning of the male gaze, especially, as in The Good Woman, where it is presented as a male, Western, "invasive gaze." They ask in what ways disability as "social stigma" becomes the implied impetus for Aoi's
status as prostitute, suggesting that *The Good Woman* purposefully dramatizes the victimization of its disabled protagonist to blur the exploitation enacted in the process of making the film. The director’s transition from third-person filmmaker to first-person narrator betrays his salvation/exploitation role as “a new form of imperialism.” Both films intersect along the edges of disability, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural identity, always returning to the “discriminatory gaze” that the films’ characters encounter. Just as the characters’ cultures are less able, visibility and invisibility, all on the outside, the stuff of myth (gesticulating man-animal monsters, “in actu”), the doctor’s focus is on training his hearing socially as well as physically.

Usually, in movies made for mass distribution, the goal is for an actor to portray a disability “realistically.” In *Bright Victory* (USA, 1951, Mark Robson), “Kennedy,” Norden remarks, “added a considerable degree of authenticity to his performance by wearing the lenses.” But I question such “method acting” approaches to portraying a disability, especially blindness. An actor not using his sight to make his way through a film does not replicate the experience of a person who has been blind for months, if not years. Such portrayals perpetuate the notion that blind people are hesitant and unsure in their surroundings, when the opposite is usually true. Indeed, representing the experience of “loss” rarely represents the experience of disability. Films that focus on the absence of an ability almost always manage to convey the opposite experience to that of disabled people. In *Voices* (USA, 1979, Robert Markowitz) a deaf woman is portrayed as existing in a silent and impenetrable world, when in fact sound has little relevance in the daily life of deaf people. Similarly, in *The Men* (USA, 1950, Fred Zinnemann) all the main characters are paraplegic veterans who, in Zinnemann’s treatment, can only think of themselves as irredeemably “crippled.”

Traditionally, literary and filmic representations of mentally and physically disabled people assume a normalcy that reinforces itself through medical and psychological regimes and, in some cases, incarceration and isolation. These regimes constitute what disability activists call an “ableist” ideology, one that differentiates bodies by categories of able and less able, visibility and invisibility, “handicapped” and “normal.” The disabled character thus represents a history of social, economic, and cultural assumptions. By recognizing and challenging such assumptions, disability critics identify the ways in which “the body” has been marked and catalogued as disabled. Historically, depictions of the disabled body paradoxically erase the actual physical body from representational visibility. In *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder argue that disabled characters function, throughout history, as a “crutch on which literary narratives lean for their representational power.” They point out that, since antiquity, texts have frequently relied on the disabled secondary character to metaphorically represent a moral flaw or shortcoming of the primary character, thus perpetuating images of disability as fitting examples for moral correction. In film, disability has been disproportionately underrepresented at the same time as it has been excessively displayed. Frequently, disabled characters are minor figures whose less-than-perfect bodies serve as a foil for the protagonist, whose physical desirability is highlighted by comparison with the “undesirable” physical characteristics of the disabled character. In this way, characters portrayed as disabled perform the dual purpose of signifying a “lack” or character flaw to which more primary characters (and presumed-to-be able-bodied audience members) might succumb, while at the same time re-establishing, by contrast, the presumed wholesomeness and integrity of the primary characters (and presumed audience members as well).

In an episode of *Setinfeld*, George Costanza, upon realizing that someone has been shining a laser-pointer at his face, cries out in trepidation, “I can’t be blind, Jerry, the blind are courageous!” The punch line sums up one of the
many stock reactions to disability: that disabled people must be noble or especially spirited in order to cope with what "normal" people would find too difficult or overwhelming to handle. The scene succinctly evokes how people with disabilities are likely to be viewed on screen: not just as disabled people, but also as stereotypes. As Martin Norden has shown, disabled characters on film seemingly must reveal a "spiritual" attribute that makes their disability tragic because of their "suffering" (e.g. the "Tragic Victim" or the "Saintly Sage"), or somehow heightens their dignity and goodness (e.g., the "Sweet Innocent" or the "Noble Warrior"). In discussing how one defines who is—or is not—disabled, Mary Johnson writes, "The real clue as to whether someone is truly disabled is if we feel sorry for them being that way; if we secretly are horrified at the prospect of being like that ourselves." So, according to the ableist prejudice Johnson outlines in her book, disability is measured by how much an able-bodied viewer pities or admires characters for "enduring" their disabilities. George's panic—not only at the possibility of losing his sight but also at the possibility of expectations for him to start acting as a brave soul—reinforces normative assumptions about the frightening demands the disability places on a blind person's actions and attitudes.

What, then, to make of the parody of elderly characters who constantly visit the bathroom (virtually every Golden Girls episode assigns this joke to the Estelle Getty character, perhaps to distance the other three aging bodies from a "truly" old character), or blind characters who wear mismatched shirts and ties (a frequent joke in Becker), or the unfortunate rival lover in a wheelchair whom the misinformed hero pushes down stairs to prove that the wheelchair user is "faking" a disability (as in the recent Hollywood film Fast Track [USA, 2006, Jesse Peretz])? Such visual jokes rely on taking audience identification away from the character depicted, so that audiences can "have a laugh" at characters portrayed as Other. The audience identification process has been much discussed in film theory. However, few critics talk about how belittling or demeaning the Other through such bodily markers as race, gender, or even sexuality have been either abandoned by filmmakers or relegated to characters depicted as unsavory. In other words, the body that represents the Other remains sacrosanct insofar as running is a powerful image of strength or speed or beauty or terror; the body image that most filmmakers and audiences have yet to absorb and understand as anything other than ridiculous: where is that character going? why is she moving at all? if s/he's wheelchair "bound" why not simply sit still? S/he's certainly humorous, must be humorous, because where else but within the absurd can an unschooled audience comprehend the disabled protagonist? The flip side of the question is: what to do with films that unapologetically present disabled characters as both serious and absurd, unflappable and comic, and central to the action of the film?

Bianca—an animate object in a wheelchair—participates in virtually every level of town life in Lars and the Real Girl. She does not, in fact, always sit still, she's physically manipulated (lifted, dressed, washed), and she becomes the girlfriend the town supports: for Lars's sake. And upon achieving that status—true prosthetic that she is—she dies. Funny ha-ha, or funny strange? Comic or tragic? Such has been the binary choice within most disability films. Yet, as new films emerge, studies like the ones collected here not only introduce interesting and under-analyzed films, but broaden and deepen the theoretical and critical discourse surrounding filmic representation of the "problem body."

NOTES
1. I use the term the "problem body" to address variable determining factors defining the problematic relationship between "normal" and "abnormal" bodies, suggesting that the disabled body is not merely added as the next overlooked critical frame to the burgeoning critical writing on the body, but that the "problem body" denotes a complicated approach to bodies deemed physically problematic due to multiple forms of difference, including racialization, gender, age, queerness, and disability. See my introduction, "Coincidence of the Page," to a special issue of Tessera 27 (Winter 1999): 6-15.
5. The notion that blind people are trapped in a "sightless" world is a popular fear among the sighted. In 2002, a restaurant opened in Berlin, the Unsicht-Bar, that serves customers in total darkness. According to the restaurant's website, diners are accompanied to their tables by blind or visually impaired waiter-guides: "You will learn quickly that it is not as complicated to accommodate to the dark as you might think!" Although the restaurant is careful to explain the set-up as a unique experience mitigated by assistants comfortable without sight, most reviewers focus on how exciting it is to experience a meal "just like a blind person," transposing their two-hour stint of novelty darkness into the permanent experience of a blind person. Unsicht-Bar Restaurant promo website, http://www.unsicht-bar.com/unsicht-bar-berlin-v2/en/html/home,1 идеа.html (last accessed: June 19, 2007).
8. Norden, 26, 121, 131, 221.
10. See, as the pivotal example, Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen, 16.3 (1975): 6-18, in which she discusses how the signifying body on screen puts the spectator, regardless of gender, into a masculine subject position.
When Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (USA, 1932), which featured actors who had worked in sideshows, was first released, many movie houses quickly stopped showing it or refused to show it at all. The main characters—all disabled actors—were not absurd, but sympathetic; not adorable, but often powerful. The film depicts evil “normal”-bodied characters and victimized “freaks” (with a horror-revenge ending), leaving little room for audience members to identify with (and thus situate their own bodies within) one moral extreme or the other.

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"HOW DO WE GET ALL THESE DISABILITIES IN HERE?": Disability Film Festivals and the Politics of Atypicality

Résumé: Qu’est-ce qui change quand les personnes handicapées deviennent le public cible du cinéma plutôt que son objet, et que l’espace des festivals du film sur l’inégalité devient un lieu d’interaction? Le cinéma sur l’inégalité a produit une énorme quantité d’œuvres et le champ significatif qu’il constitue est de plus en plus divers. Simultanément, le film sur l’inégalité a cultivé chez le spectateur une reconnaissance de l’exclusion que partagent les personnes handicapées à travers les cultures, tout en fournissant des perspectives favorables à l’observation de différences géographiques, sociales, médicales, empiriques et disciplinaires. La virtualité du cinéma crée un espace alternatif qui sert de lieu de discussion pour les personnes handicapées qui peuvent y exprimer leurs préoccupations. La théorie de David Harvey sur « simultanéité » post-moderne offre une base solide pour analyser l’espace agonistique des festivals du film sur l’inégalité et leur public qui regarde autant qu’il commente.

Three days into the 2004 London Disability Film Festival a small, international arts community came together. The festival gave disabled artists, filmmakers, and activists an opportunity to screen independent films and discuss the pragmatics, aesthetics, and politics of representing disabled people in digital media. In the tradition of disability outings for those who spend a majority of their time behind institutional walls (see *The Men* [USA, 1950, Fred Zinnemann] or *Waterdance* [USA, 1992, Eric Jimenez and Michael Steinberg]), a dinner for festival participants was organized. Twenty-two in all, the group included five wheelchair users, three deaf persons, two with visual impairments, an individual with a brain injury, three with communication-based and/or learning disabilities. Together the collective navigated cobblestones to a nearby pizza place. At the accessible entrance an employee greeted us by calling out for instruction: “How do we get all these disabilities in heret?”

While this resonated with the group of dinner-goers and had immediate consequences for sustenance and social networking, the comment branched off into a series of philosophical questions over the course of the festival. These included: Can a disability film festival avoid encountering the implications of a modern day freak show? Can universal access be achieved in an adapted finest?