

## Reading Disability in Literature and in Film:

A Review of

Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić (Editors and Introduction). *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 2010, 239 pages, ISBN: 978-0-8142-5231-4  
and

Ato Quayson. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007, 246 pages, ISBN: 978-0-231-13903-8

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### Abstract

This is a review-article of two major studies in disability studies, one edited collection, *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, edited by Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić and one authored volume, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* by Ato Quayson.

**Keywords:** *disability, film, literature, Sally Chivers, Nicole Markotić, Ato Quayson*

In their book *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder describe an encounter with a Japanese literature scholar who was interested in representations of disability in American literature. Mitchell and Snyder asked him about representations in Japanese literature and, they write, ‘he honestly replied that he had never encountered any.’<sup>1</sup> It was only after reflecting on the matter that he remembered the work of Kenzaburo Oë. Mitchell and Snyder add that ‘[t]his “surprise” about the pervasive nature of disabled images in national literatures catches even the most knowledgeable scholars unaware’.<sup>2</sup> A similar story is recounted by Ato Quayson in *Aesthetic Nervousness*,<sup>3</sup> one of the two books being reviewed here. His father’s limp and his grandfather’s blindness and post-traumatic stress disorder led him to having an interest in disability. However, he states that he started researching representations of disability when he was teaching at the University of Cambridge in the 1990s, after one of his students asked him why almost all the texts he had assigned the class had disabled characters in them. ‘Her question came as a complete surprise to me, for the simple reason that I had not noticed the disabled characters myself’, he writes (*AN*, xii). Surprise was a response that I myself experienced in 2014 when I was preparing lectures for a course on ‘Disability and Culture’ which I teach at the University of Malta. I naively thought that I could draw up two lists, one of

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<sup>1</sup> David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, 51.

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter cited as *AN*, with page numbers in the text.

novels and one of films that featured disabled characters. It did not take me long to realize there were simply too many of them to come up with exhaustive lists, and so I settled for indicative ones instead, and ones which, however much I continue to add to, will always remain indicative.

What is it that renders disabled characters ever-present and yet almost-invisible in narratives? *Aesthetic Nervousness* and *The Problem Body*<sup>4</sup> are among the books that help us arrive at some answers to this question, through the concepts that they present and develop, and through the analysis of specific novels, plays, and films. In this review, I mostly discuss the former – the concepts – and present a summary of the chapters in the two books that focus on specific authors (in *Aesthetic Nervousness*) and films (in *The Problem Body*). First though, it is important to consider what each volume means by the term ‘disability’.

While Chivers and Markotić’s *The Problem Body* focuses, as the title suggests, on projections of the disabled body, the films considered by the various authors who have contributed to this edited collection present a wide variety of impairments and medical conditions, especially prosthetic limbs, phantom limbs, blindness, developmental disability, terminal illness and mobility impairments. Quayson’s range is even wider as it takes in different types of physical impairments and ailments, incurable diseases and chronic conditions, disfigurement, cognitive impairment and autism. The approach used by many authors, including those of the two books being reviewed, is to analyse a select number of narratives – literary texts – and the connection between disability and Robben Island in the case of Quayson’s book, and films in the case of Chivers and Markotić’s edited collection.

Trauma is also referred to by Quayson and by several of the authors in *the Problem Body*. In a chapter on trauma art in *Disability Aesthetics*, Tobin Siebers calls for the inclusion of trauma as a subject for consideration in disability studies, and vice versa. This step, he argues, enables a study of physical and psychological traumas from a disability studies perspective, and for trauma studies to consider how disability can be conceptualized. More importantly, he says, considering trauma and disability together helps us recognise ‘the fragility as well as the violence of human existence.’<sup>5</sup> As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, the need to consider trauma in disability studies is also discussed by Alison Kafer,<sup>6</sup> and is also the position taken by Daniel Morrison and Monica Caspar in their call for disability studies not to ignore the wounds, pain and trauma that are important aspects of the lives of many disabled people.<sup>7</sup> Within this context, and in line with the social relational model, disability is here being taken to refer to the interaction between the person who has an impairment (including physical or mental illness) and the material and attitudinal barriers that they encounter in society.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter cited as *PB*, with page numbers in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 103.

<sup>6</sup> Alison Kafer, ‘Un/Safe Disclosures: Scenes of Disability and Trauma’, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 10.1 (2016):1-20.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel R. Morrison and Monica J. Casper, ‘Intersections of Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies: A Provocation’, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32.2 (2012): no pagination; available at <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3189/3073> [accessed 28 October 2018].

<sup>8</sup> This understanding of disability is in line with the description of disability found in the Preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2006); available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/preamble.html> [accessed 28 October 2018].

Trauma has a dual meaning in the way Siebers uses it in relation to visual art. He refers to art that depicts and represents trauma, as well as the potentially traumatizing effect that these depictions can arouse in the viewer. Kafer also discusses this latter meaning. Likewise, in their contribution to *The Problem Body*, Snyder and Mitchell refer to trauma for the film viewer at the sight of the disabled body, either because of the way it looks or because it is perceived as a 'threat toward the integrity of the able body' (Snyder and Mitchell in *PB*, 181). The potentially traumatic effects of representations of disability are contiguous with the negative associations of disability and the assumptions that are generally made that life with a disability is necessarily a life of suffering and one not worth living.<sup>9</sup> The authors of the two books being reviewed address these assumptions and associations in their discussions of the selected texts and films, in the conceptual frameworks within which they operate and in the title of the books themselves.

*Aesthetic Nervousness* and *Problem Body* present different yet related conceptual frameworks within which to study the representation of disability in literature and in film. Quayson bases his concept of aesthetic nervousness on the tensions that he identifies at three levels: between disabled and non-disabled characters in literary texts; between plots, motifs, perspectives and the representation of disability; and between the reader and the text. The nervousness, Quayson argues, arises because disabled characters and the representation of disability are located in 'a universe of apparent normativity both within the literary text and outside it' (*AE*, 20). How perceptions regarding normativity affect disabled people has been extensively explored in disability studies, most notably by Rosemary Garland-Thomson and Lennard Davis whose work about the normate and normalcy respectively Quayson refers to.<sup>10</sup> What emerges from these various discussions is the point that having an impaired mind or body is not considered to fall within the normal range of human experiences but is deemed to be abnormal and therefore the binary opposite of normal. But this binary is not as simple as it may at first appear. According to the United Nations, 10% of the global population have a disability, making it the world's largest minority.<sup>11</sup> More to the point, it is a minority which those of us who do not have a disability can easily become a part of as a result of injury or ill-health. Manifestations of disability in literature thus bring to the fore what Quayson calls 'dialectical interplay' (*AE*, 21), which arises from the encounter between the preconceptions about disability that the reader brings with them to the text and the reminder presented by disabled characters that disability is after all an integral part of the human condition. As Davis, Mitchell and Snyder and also Quayson argue, disability in literature is very often used as a symbol, as a stand-in for social or narratological disruption. However, its symbolic nature cannot be divorced from the reality of living with disability. It is from this dual role of disability that tension, and nervousness, arise.

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<sup>9</sup> One forceful rebuttal of this idea comes from Ben Mattlin, who has spinal muscular atrophy, a degenerative disease, in 'A Disabled Life is a Life Worth Living', *New York Times* 5 October 2016; available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/05/opinion/a-disabled-life-is-a-life-worth-living.html> [accessed 28 October 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Enable, Fact Sheet on Persons with Disabilities. (undated); available at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/toolaction/pwdfs.pdf> [accessed 20 October 2018]. It should be pointed out that, although women are not in a minority in terms of numbers, they are very much in a minority in terms of social equality.

It is significant that Quayson chooses to discuss the interaction between the representation of disability in literary texts and the readers of those texts in terms of ‘tension’ and ‘nervousness’. Both terms connote negativity, which is of course reflective of the misconceptions about disability discussed above. Likewise, Chivers and Markotić use a negative term for the title of their book. In order to explain their use of the term ‘problem body’, Chivers and Markotić turn to Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault<sup>12</sup> who emphasized the importance of taking context into account when analyzing a concept or phenomenon, with Althusser taking a Marxist approach to studying production relationships, and Foucault analyzing power structures. Problematizing disability therefore involves considering the ideological structures within which it has evolved as a concept, and how this evolution has been determined by power relations, especially between those who have a disability and those who do not, with the latter mostly determining the meanings that disability ought to be given.

Furthermore, Chivers and Markotić remark that, with the term ‘problem body’, they ‘evoke a status that is both discursive and material’ (*PB*, 9). Disability is at once a lived reality for those living with impairments or ill health, and a social construct. The editors state that the discursive and the material, the social construction and the lived reality of disability are binary opposites, but are presented in their volume as complementary to each other, ‘so that disability can be understood as *both physical and social*’ (*PB*, 11). These points bring us back to Quayson’s aesthetic nervousness, for it is also with reference to the tension between these two aspects of disability that the films included in Chivers and Markotić’s collection are discussed. Since it is film that the various contributors to their book focus on, the discussion is on the *projection* of disability. Chivers and Markotić point out the different connotations of this term – theirs is a *project* to examine the ways disability is projected in film, a medium that *physically projects* images onto a screen and also relays *figurative projections*, in this case of the disabled body. Analyses, such as the ones offered by Quayson and by Chivers and Markotić and their contributors, thus serve to disrupt assumptions about disability that often go unquestioned and to consider the role of disabled characters in ways other than ones that simply conform to preconceived notions of disability. They address ‘the moral panic that has historically obtained in social encounters between disabled and nondisabled people and that often gets refracted within literary discourse to become normalized and unquestioned’ (*AN*, 33-4).

In both books, we also encounter a framework within which analyses of the representation of disability in literature and in film can be undertaken. Quayson provides a typology of this representation, which he divides into nine categories, and which he then uses in the subsequent chapters about the works of Samuel Beckett, Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, J.M. Coetzee and about the history of Robben Island. These nine types can be considered within the tensions that he identifies which work at three levels, as seen earlier. Thus, the first two types relate to the relationship between disabled and non-disabled characters in literary texts.<sup>13</sup> The first is ‘disability as null set and/or moral test’, where disabled characters do not have an existence in their own right but serve as a means for other characters to prove themselves. The second is ‘disability as the interface with

<sup>12</sup> They refer to Louis Althusser’s *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1969) and Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> The typology is presented in Chapter Two and the nine identified categories are also listed at the end, on page 52.

otherness (race, class, and social identity)', where disabled characters also belong to other social minorities.<sup>14</sup> The third type can be considered as operating at the second level identified by Quayson, that is the tension between plots, motifs, perspectives and the representation of disability. This is 'disability as articulation of disjuncture between thematic and narrative vectors', with disability serving as an analogy of social or narratological disruption. Such an analogy is similar to the concept of 'narrative prosthesis' developed by Mitchell and Snyder with reference to narratives and to the concept of 'disability aesthetics' developed by Siebers in relation to visual art.<sup>15</sup> The next five types operate at the third level, between the reader and the text, since they refer to the different possible interpretations that readers can project onto the role of the disabled characters in the text. They are: 'disability as bearer of moral deficit/evil'; 'disability as epiphany', that is when the disability of a character is only revealed at a key moment in the plot to highlight the significance of that moment; 'disability as signifier of ritual insight', that is the use of disabled characters who have superior insights, especially in folklore and myth; 'disability as inarticulable or enigmatic tragic insight' which, in contrast to the previous type, refers to the use of disabled characters to convey insights that are not clearly articulated; and 'disability as hermeneutical impasse', where disability signifies the failure of the narrative to reach a resolution or closure. To these eight categories, Quayson adds 'disability as normality'. Very significantly, he does not include fictional texts in this category, but rather life writing by disabled people themselves or their close family members. These are the texts based on the lived experience and the materiality of disability as well as on its social construction, texts that provide the perspectives of those who have the experience of living with a disability on a day-to-day basis, perspectives that are woefully lacking in most literary and filmic narratives that include characters with disability. There are however also works of fiction that could be added to this category, many of which have been written by disabled people themselves.<sup>16</sup>

In presenting this typology, Quayson is at pains to point out that it is intended as a heuristic device and 'as a provisional mapping of the field only' (AN, 52). Additionally, he points out that the types can be used in combination with each other. Similarly, the disability representations that are typical in film discussed in Chivers and Markotić's book are not meant to be exhaustive. These types are presented in the final chapter of the book, 'Body Genres: An Anatomy of Disability in Film', and have been drawn up by Snyder and Mitchell (PB, 179-204). What these authors present is an 'anatomy' of 'body genres' which they created by adapting Linda Williams' categorization of films from a feminist perspective.<sup>17</sup> Snyder and Mitchell's anatomy is split into nine genres of disability representation, each of which is then related to three film genres: comedy, horror and melodrama. They choose these as 'the three foundational genres of film narrative' (PB, 188). The anatomy is presented in a table and is not explained in as much details as Quayson explains his typology. It is, nonetheless, a useful schema. The first genre identified by Snyder and Mitchell is Bodily Display, which refers to where the

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Chivers and Markotić also refer to the importance of considering disability within the context of intersections with other social groupings.

<sup>15</sup> See Mitchell and Snyder, a book that is referred to by most of the contributors to PB, and Siebers.

<sup>16</sup> Examples include Anne Finger's anthology of short stories *Call Me Ahab* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) and Susan Nussbaum's novel *Good Kings, Bad Kings* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2013). PB ends with a short story by Anne Finger, 'Blinded by the Light, OR: Where's the Rest of Me?', which critiques the portrayal of disability in film (207-16).

<sup>17</sup> Snyder and Mitchell refer to Linda Williams's 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 701-15.

impairment originates from – whether it is a faked impairment in comedy, an innate monstrosity in horror, or an impaired ability in melodrama. Like Quayson, Snyder and Mitchell consider the interaction between the viewer and the disabled character. For the second genre, Emotional Appeal, they identify the feelings aroused in the viewer: a feeling of superiority in comedy, disgust in horror and pity in melodrama. The authors next focus on the Presumed Audience of these films towards whom the representations of disability are mainly addressed: men for comedy, adolescent boys for horror, and girls and women for melodrama. The fourth genre, Disability Source, refers to how the disability is made visible to the viewer. Thus, in the case of comedy, it is performed (rising as it does from faked impairment), in the case of horror it is external, and in melodrama it is internal. The fifth genre, Originary Fantasy, refers to affect aroused in the viewer in terms of sadism (comedy), sadomasochism (horror) and masochism (melodrama). Next is Resolution, that is how the predicament of disability is resolved. Snyder and Mitchell identify humiliation for the disabled character in comedy, obliteration in horror, and compensation in melodrama. The seventh genre is Motivation, that is the force that motivates the disabled character to act as they do: in comedy it is duplicity, in horror it is revenge, and in melodrama it is restoration. The penultimate genres, Body Distortion, deals with how the disabled body is presented: as malleable in comedy, as excessive in horror, and as inferior in melodrama. The ninth and final category is Genre Cycles/‘Classic’ and focuses on the character types associated with each type of plot: the character of the con artist/bumbling ‘success’ in comedy, that of the monster in horror, and the long-suffering character in melodrama.

Snyder and Mitchell present their schema as a tool to understand the formulae generally used by film-makers in the use of disabled characters and the ways that the disabled body is used as short-hand that ‘prompts a finite set of interpretative possibilities’ (PB, 189). They then consider some examples of films that fall under the different categories they identify, in the same way that Quayson discusses his types in relation to various narratives, including Greek mythology, Shakespeare, Indian and South American literature, as well as the authors whose work he analyses in the next chapters. Together, Quayson’s typology and Snyder and Mitchell’s genres offer a comprehensive overview of how disability and disabled people are represented in textual and filmic narratives, including the ones analyzed in *Aesthetic Nervousness* and *The Problem Body*. Significantly, like Quayson, it is to narratives told from disabled people’s perspectives that Snyder and Mitchell turn as a way of challenging these formulaic and stultifying genres that only serve to reinforce stereotypes. In the same way that Quayson identifies lifewriting in this regard, Snyder and Mitchell pinpoint documentary as a genre that can foreground disabled people’s perspectives.<sup>18</sup> Considering representations of disability from the perspective of disabled people emerges as an important approach for the analysis of these representations. It is by bringing in these perspectives that the disjuncture between codified representations based on preconceptions of disability and the lived reality of disability can be resolved.

This approach does not mean that analyses can only be carried out by disabled people but it does mean that they need to be carried out in a manner that is informed by the insights gained through the work carried out by scholars in disability studies. This is in fact the approach taken by Quayson in *Aesthetic Nervousness* and by the contributors

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<sup>18</sup> A recently published edited volume that deals with this genre is Catalin Brylla and Helen Hughes’s edited collection *Documentary and Disability* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

to *The Problem Body*. Given the huge number of films and literary texts that figure disability, as I previously pointed out, it would, of course, be impossible for either book to even attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of filmic and literary portrayals of disability. The texts and films analyzed, and the ones that are referred to more briefly in the analysis, are as important as the ones that do not get a mention. In fact, it would be easy to criticize either book regarding what has been left out or to query the inclusion criteria used. However, such criticism would be unproductive not only because of the wide range of filmic and literary representations to choose from, but also because what is presented opens up the possibility for further analysis, especially when used in conjunction with the conceptual frameworks used in the two books. In this regard, Quayson's choice of authors, including African writers, means that his volume provides a more global perspective than is usually the case, given that most analyses focus on Western-produced books and films. By choosing Nobel prize laureates, Quayson affirms the importance of considering the role of disability in the literary canon.

The following is a very brief summary of each of the remaining chapters in *Aesthetic Nervousness* and *The Problem Body*.

The first author whose work Quayson analyses is the Irish writer Samuel Beckett, with a focus on the novel *Molloy* and the play *Endgame*. Beckett's characters share a remarkable list of ailments and impairments. Quayson reminds us that for Beckett bodily weakness was a reality, due to the different illnesses that he frequently suffered from. In order to explore Beckett's use of disability, Quayson uses the eighth type of disability representation that he identifies in the earlier chapter – disability as hermeneutical impasse. The characters' impairments and pain, Quayson argues, do not seem to have physical consequences. Sometimes the nature of the impairment is doubtful – the eponymous Molloy is not sure whether it is his left or right leg which is stiff and shorter than the other. In his discussion of *Endgame*, Quayson discusses how the bodily discomforts and pain experienced by Hamm and Clov are not necessarily perceived as having an objective reality by the audience. Disability in Beckett, then, is representative of uncertainty and the constant deferral of meaning, and 'a cipher of the condition of frailty' (AN, 82).

Disability in the work of African American novelist Toni Morrison, the subject of Quayson's next chapter, is equally complex, even if in a different manner, including in *Paradise*, *Sula* and *Beloved*, the three novels considered in *Aesthetic Nervousness*. Consolata's blindness in *Paradise* is linked to insight.<sup>19</sup> Eva's self-inflicted impairment in *Sula* is never precisely described. This vagueness, Quayson argues, emphasizes the symbolism of her missing leg and the mythic qualities of Eva as disabled mother and as arbiter of life and death. In *Beloved*, disability directly references the trauma of slavery. Quayson notes that in this novel, the characters' own consciousness and, therefore also their experience of disability, is brought to the fore. Quayson uses three elements from his typology to analyse Morrison's characters – disability as epiphany, as enigmatic tragic insight and as normality – arguing that the three often work at different levels, without being sufficient to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the role of disability in Morrison's work.

Quayson next considers the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, especially the plays *The Strong Breed*, which centres around ritual sacrifice, and *Madmen and Specialists*,

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<sup>19</sup> Attributing superior insight to blind personages is a trope that comes from a very long way, including Tiresias in Greek myth.

which has the Biafran war (during which Soyinka was imprisoned) serving as its backdrop. *The Strong Breed* opens on the night of a festival in which one person is offered as ritual sacrifice to expiate for the wrongdoings of the community. The choice falls on Ifada, a boy who has cognitive impairment, because he is considered to be already contaminated. He runs away and Eman – who occupies an equally liminal position in the community – offers himself for sacrifice. In *Madmen and Specialists*, disability becomes symbolic of the chaos of war as the protagonist, Dr Bero, holds his father captive and tortures him. These narratives tap into the disability as moral deficit/evil category but, Quayson argues, they are also more complex than that. Ifada and Eman's action subvert the power of the community over them – the one chosen for sacrifice is supposed to meet his fate with docile passivity. In *Madmen and Specialists*, a group of disabled beggars serve as a Greek-like chorus that invites reflection on the tragedy of war and the actions of those caught up in it.

The last writer whose work is analysed in *Aesthetic Nervousness* is the South African-born J.M. Coetzee, especially the novel *The Life and Times of Michael K*. The novel is set in apartheid South Africa and even if Michael's ethnicity is not specified, it is implied that he is not white. Michael was born with a cleft lip, is a slow learner, was institutionalized at a young age and has elective mutism. Quayson reads Michael's conditions in terms of autism. I find this conclusion debatable, since Michael's withdrawal can also be the result of traumatic experiences in his early childhood.<sup>20</sup> Whatever the diagnosis, what is of interest is Quayson's discussion of Michael's silence within the context of Coetzee's use of internal dialogues that his characters engage in. This dialogue takes on an added significance for Michael, since he does not speak to others. The interlocutor in Michael's internal dialogues, Quayson argues, emerges from the rules of behaviour that he has imbibed from the institution he was in, and those pertaining to masculinity. These dialogues enable the reader to appreciate how Michael experiences his liminal social status. However, as Quayson argues, the character's ethnicity and social class are never mentioned. Michael's experiences therefore remain allegorical and his character symbolic of the ills of South African society at the time, and cannot be said to represent the lived experience of being a disabled person and an outcast.

It is in South Africa that Quayson remains for the last 'text' that he analyses. That 'text', Robben Island, may at first glance seem like an odd choice. The reason for that choice is that, long before it became a prison – and famously Nelson Mandela's prison – it served as an asylum for the sick poor, people with leprosy (nowadays called Hansen's disease), and those with mental illness. Robben Island's history is therefore intimately connected with bodily difference. Quayson discusses this history with regards to Athol Fugard's play *The Island*, which does not reference disability, but is based on the story of two convicts who actually served time in the apartheid-era island-prison. Quayson's argument for including this analysis in his book is that it shows how interconnected questions of justice are for people who live on the edges of their own societies and also how literary and historic texts can both shed light on the reality of such persons as well as informing each other.

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<sup>20</sup> There are instances where characters have diagnosed with autism (or other conditions) by readers/viewers, without their being explicitly presented as having a particular impairment. One of the most notable characters is Sheldon, in the television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. See for example "The Problem with Sheldon Cooper and the "Cute Autism"" by Lydia Netzer (2016), available at <http://www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/problem-sheldon-cooper-and-cute-autism-387783> [accessed 20 October 2018].



War and social conflict feature heavily in the texts discussed by Quayson in *Aesthetic Nervousness*. War is also referenced in the first film analysed in *The Problem Body*. War has a curious relationship with disability. Soldiers must be physically and mentally fit, and thus free from any impairments or medical conditions, before being allowed to go to the front, and yet going to the front highly increases their likelihood of returning home as disabled persons, whether it is through physical injury or post-traumatic stress disorder. Timothy Barnard's chapter "'The Whole Art of a Wooden Leg": King Vidor's Picturization of Laurence Stallings's "Great Story"' deals with King Vidor's 1925 film *The Big Parade*, which is based on Laurence Stallings' autobiographical novel *Plume* and features Jim Apperson, a World War I soldier who returns home with an amputated leg. Barnard discusses how the film was made, including how the non-disabled actor who plays Jim (John Gilbert) was shown as having a below-the-knee amputation, long before the advent of computer-generated images. The realistic depiction of an amputation is related to the realism of the film more generally, especially with its attempt to debunk romanticizing myths about war. This attempt, Barnard argues, is only partly successful since the film does not escape melodrama and is a less bitter account of the ravages of war than the original novel it is based on. As with many of the works analyzed in the two books being reviewed, the focus is on how disability is used as a metaphor.

In the next chapter, 'Phantom Limbs: Film Noir and the Disabled Body', Michael Davidson looks at how this film genre uses disability. Davidson argues that, in film noir, disability is often linked to sexuality. In these films, Davidson argues, the disability of certain characters is linked with their sexuality or that of others. The crippled man whose wife takes a lover, for instance in *Double Indemnity*, *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Walk on the Wild Side*, serves to highlight the other man's superior sexuality. The link with sexuality goes further, according to Davidson. The love triangle between crippled man, unfaithful wife and virile lover steals the limelight, thus allowing the director to introduce same-sex attractions into the plot, at a time when such filmic representations were heavily censored.

The third chapter in *The Problem Body*, 'Seeing Blindness On-Screen: The Blind, Female Gaze' by Johnson Cheu, explores how depictions of blindness on screen tend to be based on and also reinforce stereotypes and assumptions about blindness held by those who can see. Cheu chooses Terence Young's 1967 *Wait Until Dark* for a more in-depth analysis. The character of Susy Hendrix, the blind female protagonist, feeds into two stereotypes: determined overcomer and helpless victim. These stereotypes may appear contradictory but both feature commonly in general assumptions about disabled people. Ultimately, it is the second stereotype that emerges more strongly. Susy's agency in getting the better of those who drag her unwittingly into the selling of illegal drugs is undermined by the depiction of her as dependent on sighted persons for salvation.

Dawne McCance's chapter 'The Wild Child' is about François Truffaut's 1969 *L'Enfant Sauvage* is based on the true story of Itard's work in early nineteenth century France with Victor, the 'wild boy of Aveyron', a feral child whom he took under his care. It is almost impossible to ascertain whether Victor's developmental disabilities occurred before or after he was left to fend on his own in the wild. What is certain is that he was seen as not fully human by many of those who observed him, a stance which, as McCance notes, unfortunately applies for the way some disabled people are looked at even today.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Among the main proponents of seeing certain disabled people (especially those with profound and multiple physical and cognitive impairments) as not qualifying for human rights are Peter Singer and Jeff

Much like Coetzee's Michael K., Victor can hear but does not speak. McCance argues that in Truffaut's film, this inability to speak is what prevents the boy from attaining full human status because 'he is incapable, in Jacques Lacan's terms, of crossing the threshold into speech and autonomous subjectivity' (PB, 93).

One of the issues that Quayson, as well as the contributors to *The Problem Body*, pinpoint is the lack of verisimilitude of the depiction of disabled people's lives in narratives. Very often, they argue, this lack sustains the use of disability as a metaphor, trope, allegory or symbol – in short anything but the portrayal of the lived experience of disability. This issue very much features in Paul Darke's chapter 'No Life Anyway: Pathologizing Disability on Film'. Darke's scrutiny is on John Badham's 1981 *Whose Life Is It Anyway*, which tells the story of Ken, who becomes quadriplegic following a car accident. The film, Darke argues, requires Ken to be in a far more pitiable state than someone in his situation could have been. His need for long-term hospitalization, his remaining mostly in bed and his constantly wearing hospital clothes are among the techniques used to highlight the hopelessness of his situation, even if in reality a quadriplegic can live at home (albeit with intensive support), use a wheelchair and wear ordinary clothes. But Ken's final choice to die, rather than living in his present state, would be undermined by a more realistic depiction of life with quadriplegia.

Death plays a more central role in the next chapter, "And Death – capital D – shall be no more – semicolon!": Explicating the Terminally Ill Body in Margaret Edson's *W;t* by Heath Diehl. *W;t* is both a play and a film, and tells the story of Dr Vivian Bearing, a John Donne scholar, who is diagnosed with cancer, receives treatment for it and eventually dies. Diehl argues that this film works more as analogy than allegory, with scenes of Bearing's doctor diagnosing and treating her illness being interspersed with her analyses of Donne's metaphysical poetry. Ultimately, however, the analogy fails because the latter cannot substitute the experience of being treated for and dying with cancer, an experience that is dominated by pain and physical suffering not only from the disease but from the treatment for it as well. Unlike in the other narratives discussed in this review, the lived experience of bodily weakness is foregrounded, rather than being used as a vehicle for another theme.

The link between disability and sexuality, mentioned earlier, is returned to in the next chapter, Eunjung Kim's "A Man with the Same Feelings": Disability, Humanity, and Heterosexual Apparatus in *Breaking the Waves*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Breathing Lessons*, and *Oasis*. *Breathing Lessons* is different from most of the other films discussed in this book, since it is a South Korean documentary film, the only one of the four films in which the disabled character is a woman. In the first three films, the disabled men seek to recover their sexuality through buying the service of prostitutes or, in the case of Jan in *Breaking the Waves*, prostituting his wife. *Oasis* highlights the very different way that disabled women's sexuality is presented. As Kim says, its existence is hidden. In the film, Gongju, who has cerebral palsy, is raped by Jongdu, the man who had killed her father in a hit-and-run accident. Jongdu immediately regrets his action and the two develop a relationship. When later on in the film the two have consensual sex, Gongju's family assume that she is being raped. In different ways, these films reinforce the perception that disabled people cannot find sexual fulfillment in the ways available for non-disabled people.

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MacMahon. For a debate between them and those who oppose their views see *Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, eds Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

Sexuality also features in Chapter 8 of *The Problem Body*, the last one to focus on specific films, Robert McRuer's 'Neoliberal Risks: *Million Dollar Baby*, *Murderball* and Anti-National Sexual Positions'. Like Kim, McRuer analyses both a film and a documentary. In *Million Dollar Baby*, Maggie, a boxer, becomes quadriplegic and enlists the help of her former trainer to die.<sup>22</sup> McRuer sees Maggie's story as linked to neoliberalism, among other reasons because she took a risk, which could have paid off but did not, in a deregulated environment, and took personal responsibility for it, thus avoiding becoming a burden on the state. The quadriplegic rugby players who take part in the documentary *Murderball*<sup>23</sup> portray a very different picture. They are active and trade on their masculinity. The narrative threading through the documentary is the sporting rivalry between the United States and Canada, but there is also a glimpse into the private lives of the US team, including their sexuality. The discussion on how a severely disabled man can have sex, McRuer argues, undermines the nationalistic streak of the documentary since it presents a different angle to life with a disability than the one that is generally sanctioned.

As mentioned earlier, these two books inevitably omit more representations of disability than they could ever hope to include. There may also be moments where one is not necessarily in agreement with the interpretations presented. Perhaps the most important message to take away from the analyses is that representations of disability are rarely what they seem to be at first glance and the reader/viewer does well to seek out the polyvalent nature of these representations not only to understand better the text at hand and to consider the dimension of disability in different narratives that is so often neglected by reviewers and critics, but also to appreciate more closely the reality of living with a disability.

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<sup>22</sup> The plot is rather predictable and follows the same pattern as *Whose Life is It Anyway?* discussed above, as well as Alejandro Amenábar's 2004 *Mar Adentro* and Thea Sharrock's 2016 *Me Before You*, among other films.

<sup>23</sup> The title of the documentary is the former name given to quad or wheelchair rugby and evokes the dangerous and violent nature of the sport.

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## **Interpretarea dizabilității în literatură și în film. Recenzie**

### **Rezumat**

Acest articol recenzează două studii majore din domeniul studiilor dizabilității, un volum editat de Sally Chivers și Nicole Markotić, intitulat *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, și un volum intitulat *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* al cărui autor este Ato Quayson.