

The Disability Paradox: Ghettoisation of the Visual by Lennard J. Davis

If disability art is ghettoised, it is ghettoised in a very particular way. Very few people are aware of disability as a topic of art, and even fewer are aware of specific artists as being disabled. Someone like Chuck Close is, for example, known both as an artist and a person with disabilities, but no one thinks of his art as 'disabled art'. In the USA, within disability circles, Riva Lehrer's or Sunny Taylor's works are well known; beyond the compass of disability circles, however, their work has not yet garnered a national or international audience.

Disabled artists are caught in a paradox. It might be well and good that disabled artists should create art – after all, is there any group that shouldn't create art? – but if they create art that is narrowly about disability, they will not appeal to the vast majority of 'normal' people. Their art will, because of its specificity, be seen as lacking universality. Yet if their art does not deal obviously with disability, then their disability status will seem irrelevant. For example, Beethoven's opus isn't seen as 'deaf music', although Beethoven is famously known to have become deaf. No one analyses his later music in terms of what it has to say about his deafened status. Likewise, Close's work, regarded as universal, isn't analysed for having been made by a paraplegic. It seems that the better known (hence more universal) the work of disabled artists becomes, the less disability will factor into the recognition value of the work.

The situation is somewhat parallel to that of artists of colour or of particular nationalities or ethnicities. An artist who is deemed to have a recognisable 'identity' is expected to paint from the experience of his or her group. Of course, unlike having the identity of being disabled, members of many of these mainstream minoritarian identities are now prized by the cultural world at large. Thus, aboriginal artists are supposed to paint aboriginal subject matter in an aboriginal style – and if they don't, how saleable is their art? An African-American artist who does not paint in group themes, or does not use an expected palette of colours, probably has little chance of making it in the art world. If Close were an aboriginal artist, would his work have been so collectible and sold so well? We don't say of a Close painting that it is an Anglo-Saxon work of art. We don't think of Camille Pissarro as a Jewish artist. If you are an artist and your work becomes universally acknowledged, then your particular identity becomes less important.

And while we all recognise the monumental statue *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005) as a major work of disability art, we may forget that the artist who made it, Marc Quinn, is not himself a disabled person. We are also told to think of Lapper, according to Quinn's website, as 'a woman who was born

without arms', while Lapper's website describes her as a 'British artist'. The erasure of the disabled artist to be replaced by the disabled object is a telling elision. The art world is fascinated by disability, often thought of as deformity or the grotesque, but only as subject matter and usually as seen from the outside in. The lived experience of a disabled subject rendered into art is relegated in the popular mind to issues around rehabilitation and coping, not as a subject worthy of high art. (Think how much more scandalous would have been Édouard Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1862-63, with blind men and a naked, pregnant, disabled woman – it's hard to imagine it would have outgrown its initial notoriety to become high art.)

The heroic proportions of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* can well be seen as a timely statement about moving disability from the abject to the ideal, but the work also puts into relief the strong cultural contrast between the idealized monumental figure and the abnormal female body – naked, pregnant and disabled. In other words, one could ask whether the heroic format of the monumental marble is made to idealise disability or rather to throw into contrast the non-standard proportions and qualities of the object considered? An argument can be made for both interpretations – making disability heroic or problematising the making of disability heroic – but what remains is that the statue only makes sense in a world in which disability is on the margins. Otherwise, the statue would be considered in the same way that the statue of Admiral Nelson in Trafalgar Square is normally considered. No one stops to say of Nelson's statue: 'Oh look, a one-armed, one-eyed, chronically ill white man!' This despite the fact that the heroic statue actually shows Nelson missing an arm (although this feature is not easily perceptible to a viewer on the ground).

I'd like to shift my discussion from three-dimensional and graphic art to film and television. There are regularly recurring representations of disabled people in cinematic media, and yet they are almost always marked as different. Their difference, in the logic of filmic narrative, is rarely explored in its lived complexity, but more often than not is framed as a metaphor for a challenge that needs to be overcome. In this sense, disability becomes heroic in film much as it does in the Lapper sculpture. The idea of disability as a challenge then universalises and displaces the more mundane lived experience of a person with a disability. As part of that displacement, the filmic character with a disability now becomes a stand in for anyone and how he or she might deal with the exigency of the human condition. So, much as Lapper becomes a nodal point for issues around who can or should be cast into heroic form, disabled characters in films raise questions for ordinary audiences about what it means to be human rather than what it is like to be disabled.

Paradoxically, therefore, the filmic attempt to close down the ghetto where disabled images live, by bringing these images front and centre on screen, ends up re-creating the ghetto in another form. What then is now being quarantined in the ghetto is not the objective fact of impairment but rather the lived experience of being impaired in a disabling culture. Thus the disabled person as subjectively living his or her life is relegated to the closed area of the remodelled ghetto, while the objective part of disability – the part that translates into the universal challenge – emerges from the confines of the ghetto's walls. Filmgoers don't get the subjective experience of disability: what they get is a template onto which they can map their own non-disabled beliefs.

This ghettoisation in filmic terms is particularly notable in the convention of having non-disabled actors play disabled characters.⁽¹⁾ While it is true that there are some disabled actors of note, like Mat Fraser and Peter Dinklage, non-disabled actors have historically been cast to play most of the major disabled roles. To its credit, the BBC has been at the forefront in using disabled actors and has compiled a directory of disabled actors. Yet, a quick look through their slim résumés says it all. The only notable exceptions are people of small stature who seem to have a buyer's market for those staples of fantasy and adventure films: elves, dwarves and the like. In fact, when I queried Fraser on this subject, he verified the paucity of acting jobs, declaring: 'I am just now on a big Irish soap [opera] for six weeks, being disabled of course, but also having a love affair and being a main character. Another TV disability first. But yes, you're right: apart from *Cast Offs* there is almost nothing ever for and with main roles for crips.'

The fact remains that for protagonists in films about disability, non-disabled stars rule. Indeed, if you are a big star and want to try for an Academy Award, you would do well to portray a person with a disability. Notable movies of this kind have filled the silver screen: from Patty Duke's Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker* (1962) to Dustin Hoffman's Raymond Babbit in *Rain Man* (1988); from Daniel Day Lewis's portrayal of Christy Brown in *My Left Foot* (1989) to Tom Cruise as Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). The take-home message here is that films that focus on disability in a central way continue to be made and remain star-vehicles for high profile non-disabled actors.

In the USA, disabled characters in film and television are hard to find. According to an article in *The Hollywood Reporter*, out of a total of 600 characters on American television shows in a given season, only 12 will have a disability. And of those 12 roles, non-disabled actors will play the majority. So, the end result is that out of 600 regularly recurring characters on television in the US, two will be played by disabled actors. Most of the supporting roles in movies will be played by non-disabled people. The best

friend of the main character, the mother, father, siblings and so on will always be conceived of as being neutral: that is to say normal and not disabled.

Why that is has something to do with the logic of visual storytelling and something to do with the legacy of eugenics and the current hegemony of ableism. If you want to make a film that is about disability, then every part of the story has to do with that disability. The film has to be, in some sense, obsessed with disability. But if the roving eye of the camera takes its focus off disability, then disability has to disappear or it will create interference in the storytelling. Think of something like pregnancy. It is quite normal to see a pregnant woman on the street, but if you make one of the characters in a television show pregnant, then you have to provide a whole rationale and back-story for the pregnancy. That's why generic mothers in a narrative about children are never pregnant, unless the pregnancy figures into the plot, whereas in real life mothers might be pregnant or not depending on a host of random factors. Likewise with disability: if the mother of a child in a movie has a disability, and the film isn't about the disability, then the audience will be distracted by the disability. They will wonder why the 'normalcy' of the film is being tampered with. This is because disability is inevitably part of a signifying system. Disability can't just *be*; it has to *mean* something. It has to signify.

In this sense, disability is allegorical. It can't be about itself; it has to tell a story about something else and contain a moral truth. To paraphrase an apocryphal quote of Sigmund Freud's, sometimes an amputated leg is just an amputated leg. (2) But in the world of media narrative, an amputated leg is never just that. It must be a character trait, a metaphor, and fit into a plot point, or be a 'reveal' to some other character who hasn't seen it, or to the main character who discovers new things about himself or herself in the process of triumphing over the disability. Of course, possessing a functional leg is never allegorical, needs no interpretation, and is basically a degree-zero signifier without a referent.

So, when an actor takes on a role as a person with a disability, he or she is automatically entering a world of signs and meanings that encompasses the larger society's attitude toward disability. This system of signs and meanings is largely a projection of the non-disabled person's fantasy about disability. Edward Said has illustrated this point in his book *Orientalism* (1978), in which he points out that the 'fact' of the Other is actually the fantasy of the person who regards the Other. Said's point was that the East was made into the projected fantasy of the West. So, you learn more about the West by studying orientalist works than you do about the Middle East. Given this ideological stance, it well might be that only a non-disabled actor could in fact portray that distorted and biased vision of disability that lives

and breathes in the standard Hollywood film, just as only someone like Rudolph Valentino could portray a sheik in a silent movie: he was that perfect embodiment of the West's mytheme of the sexuality of the orient. In that sense, only Hoffman could embody the ideology of the autistic person that proliferated in the era *Rain Man* was made. An autistic actor probably could not.

Of course, a non-disabled actor has to transform himself or herself both mentally and physically in order to portray a disabled person. Audiences are trained to like that transformative ability, and such transformations are surely deeply embedded in our ideas of theatricality. We are used to the idea that actors transform themselves in a protean fashion by means of make up, mental preparation and, nowadays, with the aid of computer graphics as well. We admire the hours of cosmetic and prosthetic work that goes into transforming people like Brad Pitt into characters such as the aged protagonist in the film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008).

But we are less willing to approve – and this is where the complexity comes in – when actors transform themselves from one identity group to another. This becomes particularly egregious when the actor is a member of a dominant group and is portraying a member of an oppressed group. So, for example, the practice of using blackface in theatre and film was widely appreciated by dominant white audiences until the issue of racial inequality became much more charged in the 1930s. Despite such famous names as Al Jolson and Judy Garland donning blackface, the practice faded out entirely from dramatic works by the 1950s and '60s. Likewise, while white actors continued to portray Native Americans, Asians, Indians and other ethnic minorities well into the latter half of the twentieth century, it is now unusual. In fact, it is almost universally acknowledged that when it comes to most racial groups, actors from within the tradition of those groups are preferred to actors from outside. Few would contest, for example, that Ben Kingsley did a pretty good job of playing Ghandi in the eponymous film (1982), but while such a practice was tolerated 30 years ago, now it might not be. Alec Guinness's Brahmin Professor Godbole in *A Passage to India* (1984) would no longer be tolerated, yet it is currently acceptable for Morgan Freeman to play Nelson Mandela in Clint Eastwood's *Invictus* (2009), even though South African actors decried the limited roles available to them in the film.

Even when Eastwood made *Million Dollar Baby* in 2004, it was roundly criticised by disability activists for its pessimistic vision of life for a disabled woman. But few criticised Eastwood for not casting a disabled actress in the main role. The reason for that is obvious: the central character, Maggie Fitzgerald, played by Hilary Swank, had to progress from a physically intact athlete to a quadriplegic during the course of the film. The skill of the actor and the director lay in representing a transformation that had no element of

choice in it (except, of course, the choice to end one's life). Frequently, it seems, a central concept in such films is that the disabled person is a person without a choice.

But, although the disabled character is without choice, the audience will always know that the non-disabled actor has many options. In fact, to return to the issue of the transformation of the non-disabled actor into a character with a disability, which is often the subject of film publicity, the salient point for the audience is that the actor isn't disabled; rather, the prestidigitation of CGI, make-up and prosthetics is part of the magic of film. The audience can rest comfortably assured that the central character may appear to be disabled but isn't really a disabled person, and is in fact a non-disabled actor playing the role. This act of viewing is a form of make-believe; when the time comes for Swank to stride across the stage and accept her Oscar she won't be ambulating using a wheel chair controlled by a sip-straw.

The star system makes it hard for disabled actors to fit in. Stars are by definition interchangeable parts in a system of production. Their normality is a sign of their ability to transform. Transformation and choice – two basic tenets of the neo-liberal system that promotes individuality and self-actualization – are deeply part of the mythology of capitalism. The 'normal' actor then embodies this mythology of bodily open-endedness, while the disabled actor is seen as a grim reminder that transformation is not always possible, except in limited ways, and that choice is not operative. A disabled actor, in the system of signs and meanings that make films make sense, signifies the crushing weight of fate and resignation rather than the magic and play involved in transformation.

If disability represents, in the popular imagination, a tragic fate in which choice is removed while at the same time offering a frightening and disfiguring prospect for audiences – who can only too easily imagine themselves transformed into a disabled person by the simple swerve of a car on the highway, a potent disease or a malfunction of the body or the mind – then the role of visual media historically has been to provide comfort to them. The comfort comes from the triumphant scenario in which the main disabled character overcomes the limitations of the impairment to become the leader of, say, the anti-war movement, or a famous blind-deaf writer, or any other accomplished professional. The comfort also comes from seeing that person accepted with all his or her limitations by friends, family, lovers and the general public – which includes the audience who learns to see that person as 'human'. But the greatest comfort comes from knowing that the character is being play-acted by a normal person. The fear of fragmentation and destruction of ego is compensated for by the notion that 'it's only a movie'. The effect of this logic is that disability is not only ghettoised in

content, but it is ghettoised literally as a location that only hires a particular kind of worker.

What might be called 'the disability paradox' – that disability is the theme of the film without there actually being a disabled person in the film – is worked out as well as could be expected in the film *Avatar* (2009). Jake Sully, played by Sam Worthington, a non-disabled actor, is a paraplegic marine who lost the use of his legs in a war. In the film, we see a crucial close-up of his atrophied legs. This scene is in some sense the 'money shot' which verifies to the audience that the character is indeed a paraplegic while of course the actor really is not. But part of the visual *frisson* of seeing those atrophied legs is knowing that this is one among many other special effects that have no bearing on the reality of the actor's actual body. In fact, the film is about nothing if it is not about transformation, since Jake becomes a larger-than-life blue avatar through the miracle of both DNA, biotechnology and, of course, CGI and 3D effect. The realism of the 3D effect guarantees the realism of the live-action part of the film that also 'guarantees' the character's disability. That disability disappears in the movie whenever Jake enters his avatar, and, given the film logic, the unreal world of the avatar eventually becomes more real than the live-action element of the film. In the forests of Pandora, Jake is at one with nature, able to perform acts of physical prowess and use his super-human mobility. So the bargain with the audience – the 'resolution' of the disability paradox – is that viewers get to have a disabled character who remains disabled at the end of the film, even turning down the villain's offer to give him back his legs through expensive medical cures, but that this character can still transform to become non-disabled. And of course, in reality, Worthington had the ability to walk into the Golden Globes awards ceremony on his own two feet. Everyone will be assured that the movie is, after all, only a movie. And disability is, after all, only a trope, a signifying event, an allegorical state of being.

What I've been trying to say is that disability will remain in its own ghetto as long as we are caught in the 'disability paradox'. The paradox in terms of art in general states that an art work can never be great if it is not universal; and any work by or about a disabled artist that focuses on disability will never be universal. If it does become universal, then it will cease to be regarded as disability art and the artist will cease to be seen as disabled. The reverse corollary to this paradox is that, in film, disability is always seen as universal – as a trope about overcoming a challenge – and therefore never can show us the subjective experience of living with a disability (which, if it was shown, would cause the film to fall from the level of the universal to the particularity of rehabilitation, accommodation and coping). The disability paradox in film continues through the issue of casting. The paradox operates on the fact that in order for an audience to really believe in the disability portrayed on screen, the actor can never be disabled. The transformation of the normal

actor into the disabled character is part of the transubstantiation required for disability to appear as filmic and theatrical.

All of these 'rules' govern how the disability paradox functions to ghettoise disability in art and culture. So what do we do about this? The first step is to reveal the paradox as it operates. Perhaps, as in psychoanalysis, the putting into language and consciousness of the defence mechanism will ultimately remove the symptom. As we become aware of the conventions of marginalisation and exclusion, these invisible and intuited 'truths' will, one hopes, fall into the dustbin of past ideologies. As unthinkable now as blackface is, we have to remember when it passed for sheer entertainment – the way that white people in the past loved the transformation of Jolson or Fred Astaire into a black man – while today we are puzzled, if not appalled. Thus, one day, we will come to see our appreciation for Day Lewis's physical contortions and speech deformations in *My Left Foot* or Hoffman's verbal and physical tics in *Rain Man* as remnants of a time in the past when ableism flourished and disability was a disempowered object of cultural and ideological fantasy. In other words, we will see such representations as pastiche and farce rather than the 'real thing' and high drama.

1. I should point out that my discussion is predicated on the fact that I refer to mainstream television programmes and Hollywood films. There is a small but growing body of films made and acted by people with disabilities. These films are increasingly shown in disability film festivals and other venues, and they contradict the trends I am describing in this essay. Currently, however, their general lack of viewership and notability does serve to support my argument.
2. Freud is widely, but incorrectly, assumed to have said in regard to phallic symbols: 'Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.'