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Research Project Overview

Disability and Deviance: Film Genre and the Maintenance of Aabledness as a Critical Framework in Film Studies

This project builds upon recent work in disability and film studies, especially Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic's collection *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, Fiona Kumari Campbell's *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Aabledness*, Martin Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation*, and Tom Gunning's work on film genre. What this project introduces to this rich discussion of disability in film is the idea that film genre affects the ways disability in cinematic worlds are classified and marginalized for the purpose of creating disabled identities by fitting the disabled into a narrative of deviance for surveillance, control, or amelioration. Close attention to the formal elements of cinematic language provide insight into the strategies that "the maintenance of aabledness" in sexed, raced, and modified bodies (in Campbell's words) facilitates the representation of this marginalization. In horror films, for instance, the strategy the film's characters use is what I call "metaphoric disability." By metaphoric disability, I do not mean the ways that a disabled body is represented as a metaphor for emotional or spiritual deficiency, nor do I mean the use of disability related language in a metaphorical way. Instead, a metaphoric disability is a trait, whether physical or psychological, that is treated as a disability to further marginalize one's identity by imposing deviance onto the trait. In horror films, the use of metaphoric disability indicates to characters that they are always already less than the ableist ideal and, thus, always already deviant.

The horror movie offers an especially fruitful opportunity for examining the connection among disability, deviance, and processes of ableism because of the elements of its genre – especially its focus on deviance. Outside of Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's essay on spectatorship and "body genres," the influence of genre on representations of disability remains largely overlooked. While Snyder and Mitchell's emphasis on the ways "disabled bodies have been constructed cinematically and socially to function as delivery vehicles in the transfer of extreme sensation to audiences" provides a useful framework, their analysis focuses on what film critic Tom Gunning calls "narrative-centered genre criticism" (186). Instead, the maintenance of aabledness becomes embedded within the techniques of filmmaking itself and that those techniques are exclusive to particular genres of film—what Gunning calls the techniques of "cine-genres."

For example, in Dario Argento's 1985 film *Phenomena*, the use of metaphoric disability to create an internalization, or self-hatred, as a result of compulsory ableism occurs through the ways in which the teachers and the doctors try to "treat" the main character Jennifer. Throughout Argento's film, those characters attempt to classify Jennifer's disability as deviant in order to control or "fix" her. In one scene, a group of scientists seek to diagnose her "affliction" through the medical model of disability, hooking her up to an electroencephalogram machine, while Jennifer's schoolmistresses interpret Jennifer's behaviour as a disciplinary problem based in environmental factors (they think her dad's celebrity status is the cause of her behaviour at first), and they allow the other students to, as one teacher says, "keep her in line." This represents the structural model of disability. Additionally, each of these approaches become reflected in the shots and framing used to depict Jennifer during particular key points in the

narrative. The objectifying gaze of the medical room medium close shot promotes Jennifer's role as a scientific object to be explored, explained, and fixed. Likewise, a later shot in which the schoolgirls and teachers encircle Jennifer mimics a Panopticon-like feeling in which Jennifer is constantly under surveillance. However, in each instance, the attempt to place Jennifer within a narrative of deviance for surveillance or for making well fails to diagnose or discipline the supposed "deviant, disabled body." Through this failure, the film dramatizes contemporary critiques of traditional models that examine disability. By normalizing Jennifer's ability, then, *Phenomena* offers a framework for examining the process through which elements of "abledness" become normalized, a concept which many theorists now argue should maintain the focus of disability studies.