Olga Tchepikova-Treon "From Deaf to Cult Film: *Deafula*'s Unauthorized Transfer"
Aleksander Sedzielarz, "Visions of Deaf Voices: Wong Kar Wai's Generic Subversions of Deafness as Disability"
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Jarrel De Matas "Resistance, yet Reinforcement, of the Dis-Abled Binary in *Special* and *Jeremy the Dud*"

INTRODUCTION – DISABILITY AND FILM DOSSIER: PERSPECTIVES ON GENRE, MEDIUM, AND MEANING

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In their introduction to *The Problem Body*, Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic' note how "filmic narrative often aligns the bodies it represents with an elusive and ideal norm of the human body."[1] This problem has historically been central to disability studies inquiries into the presence of disability on screen: how does it offer variance of bodymind representation in answer to an illusory but expected norm? How is it used as a prop to support the storylines of nondisabled protagonists? In an overly brief summary, what does disability *do* for film worlds? The articles collected in this dossier take on this question by turning to overtly disability-centric narratives to discuss the implications of having disability as a central consideration in the making of disability cinema. From the ambiguously-received cult classic *Deafula*, through Wong Kar Wai's corpus of films, including Ho Chi Moo and Xiao Chen (mute and deaf-mute protagonists), *The Shape of Water*, and into *Special* and *Jeremy the Dud*, these collected writings demonstrate the possibilities and pitfalls of media where disability is a central consideration.

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[1] Chivers, Sally and Nicole Markotić. *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability in Film.* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010) 1.

This dossier digs into the primacy of disability in order to offer a multiplicity of perspectives on how disability disrupts, reinforces, and otherwise offers something-else to established cinematic practices. Often, disability is read as a signal of excess. Disability theorists like David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, Tobin Siebers, and Ato Quayson[2] note how the disabled body is read by others as carrying social and cultural meaning beyond the flesh and being weighed down by stigma and other markers beyond conventional signification. To that end, this dossier takes up conceptions of affect transmission and theories of the grotesque in order to consider how disability offers transmission of meaning that is simultaneously cognitive and affective. In his text *Film Worlds*, Daniel Yacavone lays out the multiple registers in which film affects audiences:

> local cinematic expression may be seen to comprise three general forms: (1) the sensory-affective , which tends toward the immediate, visceral, and 'natural' (i.e., likely biologically 'hardwired' in contemporary parlance); (2) the emotive-cognitive, or what I will refer to as cognitive-diegetic , working through fictional representation and imaginative participation or identification of some sort; and (3) the formal- artistic , involving responses to features of a film that center on their evincing aesthetic properties of form, design, and artistic intentionality and significance[3]

To briefly summarize, Yacavone argues for three forms of affect: sensory (biological), representational (cognitive diegetic), and constructed (formal-artistic). Meaning and affect are passed through these channels as audiences engage with film, reacting to it as embodied individuals, as bodies identifying at the cognitive level with representations on screen, and as thinking individuals interpreting art as recognizable form. The articles herein discuss how disability activates, in different registers, cognitive/affective experiences that transform audiences' understandings of genre, medium, and meaning.

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[2] In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Quayson offers an incomplete but effective nine-point typology of disability representation in cultural texts.
[3] Yacavone, Daniel. *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*. (Columbia UP: New York. 2014). 170.

In "From Deaf to Cult Film: Deafula's Unauthorized Transfer," Olga Tchepikova-Treon follows the long history of *Deafula* and its unauthorized conversion from 16mm film to VHS and its subsequent cult status. Tchepikova-Treon emphasizes the importance of the film, in that "*Deafula* marks one of the few fully accessible movies for deaf and hard of hearing audiences produced before the emergence of video- and digital filmmaking."[4] Establishing the significance of the film, Tchepikova-Treon follows its history from 1975, the infamous lawsuit regarding its unauthorized transfer to VHS in 2001, to its ambiguous and ongoing existence in cult film communities. This ambiguous positioning is the result of how some in cult film communities "take the film's situation in the deaf world and the signed dialogue as its primary merit, its most prominent special effect, and, in agreement with cult cinema's chase for originality, praise it as something they have never seen before" while others consider its origin and primary formation in the deaf community as "an invitation to mockery."[5] Tchepikova-Treon's piece broadens the possibilities of deaf-community cinema, enriches its history, and offers much-needed perspective on what has often been a filler title in cult film lists. Deafula occupies an ambiguous and fraught position in the history of deaf cinema, where "even among the revered detritus assembled in cult and paracinema canons, Deafula remains an oddity that hearing spectators often despise or admire, but seldom respect."[6]

Generic conventions establish boundaries that often contain representations of disability on the screen as objects of pity, as quick and simple markings of villainy, or as disposable props which support nondisabled characters.[7] The articles in this dossier interrogate the potential for disability cinema to disrupt these boundaries in humorous and grotesque ways. Istvan

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[4] Olga Tchepikova-Treon, "From Deaf to Cult Film: *Deafula*'s Unauthorized Transfer" (*Wide Screen* 9.1 July 2022)
[5] Tchepikova-Treon, "From Deaf to Cult Film"
[6] ibid.
[7] Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse.* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP. 2001).

Csicsery-Ronay argues that the "grotesque… represents the collapse of ontological categories that reason has considered essentially distinct, creating a spectacle of impossible fusions."[8] Centralizing disability offers an opportunity to destabilize how disability is socially constructed and construed. The stories discussed in this dossier point to the collapsing boundaries that separate disability from humanity, disability from sexuality, and disability from engagement in social structure in ways that hint at "unexamined… prejudices and biases" Ato Quayson identifies in his work on aesthetic nervousness.[9] Csicsery-Ronay notes that "the grotesque obstructs the mind from completing its effort of quick understanding, arresting it when it wishes to get on with its routine of knowing, and forces it to learn something it is not sure it wants to know.[10]" The authors here emphasize how the use of the grotesque, rather than a collapse of meaning, forces audiences to more deeply engage with the subject matter, thus demonstrating how disability studies approaches to cinema offer nuanced and rich engagement with the subject matter.

In "Visions of Deaf Voices: Wong Kar Wai's Generic Subversions of Deafness as Disability," Aleksander Sedzielarz discusses how Wong Kar Wai's use of disabled protagonists forces audiences to reconsider their own relationship to generic conventions of gender, disability, and capital. Addressing a plurality of films, Sedzielarz emphasizes how the use of generic instability is consistent across Won Kar Wai's career, "featur[ing] zany parodies of genre and inset narratives that function to produce a genre-within-genre reflexivity that fosters a cinematic self-consciousness."[11] The boundaries of genre that are expected within Hong Kong cinema are defied, ruptured through the presence and practices of Xiao Chen and Ho Chi Moo [disabled

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[8] Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. (Middletown: Wesleyan UP. 2008). 7.
[9] Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. (New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 2007). 15.
[10] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties,* 186
[11] Aleksander Sedzielarz, "Visions of Deaf Voices: Wong Kar Wai's Generic Subversions of Deafness as Disability," (*Wide Screen* 9.1 June 2022)

characters]. Sedzielarz notes that these grotesqueries "proscribe narrative completion or completeness. The doubt these characters introduce opens a critical space for raising complicated questions of the body and labor."[12] In defiance of a simple reading of disabled characters as props or supports for other narratives, these protagonists open up the potential of disability representation for more nuanced engagement and reflection on societal practices and assumptions. Sedzielarz remains with Xiao Chen and Ho Chi Moo as they "voice an autonomy that introduces a self-conscious cinema that is urgently critical of systems—both narrative and economic—that define the human by alienating and exploiting human labor."[13] "Visions of Deaf Voices" is a complex look into the ways in which Wong Kar Wai's representations of deafness and muteness defy stereotype, exemplify awareness of situating language in national identity, yet present as cinema of isolation. This article thinks through the positionality of disability and gender by addressing expectations around the laboring body.

In his work on disability as a form of knowledge and political act, Tobin Siebers argues that disability aesthetics "participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel.[14]" As such, it is arguable that disability cinema in particular offers as much cognitive information as embodied information. In his work, Siebers is using 'body' in the broadest sense, to relate across physical human and nonhuman bodies as well as bodies of art. Acknowledging the relationship across disability and the grotesque, it is fairly easy to incorporate Siebers' use of "complex embodiment" as a way to think across the bodies of characters, bodies of material film (perhaps transferred from 16mm film to VHS and later digitized), and the transmission of information to the bodies of the audience about disability. Siebers describes complex embodiment as raising

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[12] Sedzielarz, "Visions of Deaf Voices"
[13] Sedzielarz, "Visions of Deaf Voices"
[14] Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2010). 20.

"awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body.[15]" This move is done to acknowledge the lived embodied experience of disabled people alongside and simultaneously with social and environmental factors that lead to disability. The attentiveness to people's bodies as well as the networks of social interactions that shape their experiences is central to the final two articles of this dossier. Working within Yacavone's method for engaging film, the discussion of these films communicate affectively, imparting understanding not just to a mind divided from the body, but to the bodymind of audiences in their holistic being. In his theories on embodied knowledge, Shogo Tanaka notes that "embodied knowledge is a type of knowledge where the body knows how to act... There is no need to verbalize or represent in the mind all the procedures required. The knowledge seems to be imprinted in one's body. The knowing-subject here is the body itself, not the mind. Or more precisely, it is the mind-body.[16]" Embodied knowledge marks an understanding that is not located in conscious processing, but in a unified mind-body (or to use disability theory terminology that acknowledges these elements as linked: bodymind[17]). Tanaka emphasizes that "body schema is a self-organizing system that realizes an action without bodily awareness. It converts perceptions of the environment into the appropriate action toward the environment, and facilitates skillfully coping with situations.[18]" The biological reactions that Tanaka refers to, and that Yacavone hails as "sensory-affective" are knowledges that are distributed across the body and which do not require active cognition to process.

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[15] Siebers, Tobin. "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment" *Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard Davis. (4th ed. New York: Routledge. 2013).

[16] Tanaka, Shogo. "The Notion of Embodied Knowledge" *Theoretical Psychology: Global Transformations and Challenges*. (Captus: Concord. 2011). 149.

[17] Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. (Durham: Duke UP. 2018). 4.

[18] Tanaka, "Embodied Knowledge," 156.

In "Who's Afraid of Elisa Esposito: Women, Disability, and Sexuality on the Screen"
Madhubanti De thinks through the ways that *The Shape of Water* fuses fairytale/myth, science
fiction, and horror as ways to interrogate the overlapping body knowledge of Elisa Esposito as
the "monstrous-feminine." Introducing the character of Elisa Esposito, De notes that "Strong
disabled women with agency and an active sexuality are primarily to be found in the horror
genre."[19] The generic location of strong, sexual, disabled women within horror is especially
evocative of the ways societal expectation maps asexuality onto disabled people and passivity
onto women and disabled people. When these expectations are challenged, there is a
short-circuiting of understanding that results in a physical sensation. Matt Cardin gives a broad
overview that the sensation of horror is "centered on a primal gut feeling, often implicit, that
something *should not be*, that something is somehow fundamentally *wrong* about a given person,
creature, act, event, phenomenon, environment, or situation."[20] The implied wrongness of strong,
sexual disabled women becomes a site of new embodied knowled, of the internalized ableism
and sexism inherent in such a reaction. This understanding of embodied knowledge fits into Ato
Quayson's understanding of aesthetic nervousness where "the aesthetic domain itself is
short-circuited upon the encounter with disability… aesthetic nervousness is what ensues and can
be discerned in the suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of the hitherto dominant
protocols of representation that may have governed the text."[21] As a strong, sexual disabled
woman, Elisa Esposito offers redress to the protocols of representing disabled women. In her
article, De unpacks how "race, gender, and disability, are all perceived as closed categories. The
rupture that their intersection creates in the film narrative poses a problem, and it is necessary to

[19] De, Madhubanti. "Who's Afraid of Elisa Esposito?: Women, Disability, and Sexuality on the Screen" (*Wide Screen* 9.1 July 2022)
[20] Cardin, Matt. *Horror Literature Through History Vol I*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2017) xxx. Author's emphasis.
[21] Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, 26.

use this to create a field of inquiry regarding larger questions of representational practices that surround non-normative bodies."[22] This reflective space opens new pathways of embodied knowledge while questioning the status quo for representation of disabled women.

The final article of this dossier opens out from questions of nervousness and the grotesque, leaning into humor and the possibilities of disability cinema created by and featuring disabled actors. In "Resistance, yet Reinforcement, of the Dis-Abled Binary in *Special* and *Jeremy the Dud*" Jarrel De Matas offers a reading of these titles that addresses both their radical possibilities as examples of disability cinema while acknowledging the limiting binary in which they exist. In this article, De Matas hails these productions as ones which "emphasiz[e] the ideological, political, and institutional underpinnings of ableism which enact subtle micro-aggressions as well as overt discriminatory practices that relegate disabled people to inferior, nonhuman positions." This keen attention to discriminatory practices arises from the embodied knowledge of their creators and cast. Paying close attention to *Special*, De Matas address both its attempts at disability activism as well as it reinforcement of hierarchies of disability. Similarly, De Matas reads *Jeremy the Dud* for its direct reversal of disability narratives, in which a non-dsiabled protagonist living in a world of disabled people must navigate not being special. While both projects offer cutting insight into lived disabled experience, they reify the boundary between being disabled and nondisabled.

Taken together, this dossier offers the most up-to-date read of disability cinema. The pieces here offer a variety of ways forward for considering cinema which centralizes disability in its creation and subject matter. The dossier enriches the timelines and history of disability cinema, emphasizing the Deaf community as part of the cult status of films like *Deafula* while also drawing attention to the significance of having rich, realized disabled protagonists, which

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[22] De, Madhubanti. "Who's Afraid of Elisa Esposito?"

forces audiences to reconsider their own relationship to generic conventions of gender, disability, and capital. This is further complicated by readings of gender, disability, and sexuality that are not siloed off into isolated categories, thinking about their confluxes as spaces to inquire about the representational practices that surround people who vary from a limiting and illusory "norm." All of this is woven together and intertwined through a recognition of the affective pathways that are activated by the presence of disabled characters on the screen. Through their utilization of disability as an affective process, these articles demonstrate the potential for disability cinema to offer new pathways of understanding, moving through the visceral into the cognitive and the formal.

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