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Phenomenal Encounters: Film, Disability, and the Ambivalence of Embodiment

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Phenomenal Encounters: Film, Disability, and the Ambivalence of Embodiment

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B.A., Pomona College, 2003

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An abstract of a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Film and Media Studies 2012

Abstract

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By Sara Palmer

This thesis examines representation of disability in film in its relation to the embodied encounter between spectator and screen. While disability is often a marker of social difference, its representation in film can also serve as an exploration of the instable relations between mind and body. This instability is evocative in cinema because it reminds the spectator of their own ambivalence about being embodied. Case study analysis of three films, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and *Avatar*, identifies ways in which a film may take up disability existentially as a means to feel though crises of embodiment or may position disability as something that needs to be transcended so as to resolve ambivalence.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I recognize the man in the elevator and suddenly he stumbles into a depth of field. He is called, he is spotted, and he reflects all this in tightened face and frame. Having met only once before, we have no words to trade but do bounce our eyes about the walls, which are at once too close and far beyond our rigid moment. I cannot tell if it is my expression or the elevator's sequestered time and space that unnerves him while we wait. Nonetheless, here we are.

* * *

It happens all the time. You're on an elevator, a stairwell or even in a café and you see someone who is nearly recognizable. You focus and you stare. In the absence of sufficient time, this ambiguous encounter may prickle with enigma. Something catches you and your attention is pulled in by some detail both definite and indescribable. That moment of recognizing someone on the elevator is quickly surpassed by the dynamism of exchanged glances, which must in turn give way to further communication or retreat. Cinema operates in a similar way. Comprised of a stream of images and sound, films are not static objects for inspection but are vibrant experiences in which the spectator partakes. To watch a film is, in some sense, to become a part of it in much the same way that we share experience with others in everyday life.

In her 1992 book, *The Address of the Eye*, Vivian Sobchack offers an approach to film analysis that considers the interaction between viewer and film as an intersubjective one.

> What we look at projected on the screen…addresses us as the expressed perception of an anonymous, yet present, "other." And, as we watch this expressive projection of an "other's" experience, we, too, express our perceptive experience. Through the address of our own vision, we speak back to the cinematic expression before us, using a visual language that is

> also tactile, that takes hold of and actively grasps the perceptual expression, the seeing, the direct experience of that anonymously present, sensing and sentient "other." (1992, 9)

Through this lens, cinema is the engagement of two bodies, that of the spectator and that of the film. Rather than treating film as an object to which other theories may be applied (such as psychoanalysis), phenomenological analysis seeks a careful account of this sensuous engagement in order to flesh out what is often simply taken for granted. Put another way, it is to privilege the dynamic encounter within the elevator over a preconceived notion of what elevator rides are imagined to be.

The film experience, phenomenology insists, is an embodied one. Film is not passively observed but actively felt and interacted with by its viewers. What happens, then, when a film tells a story concerning disabled embodiment? Does the presence of disabled bodies onscreen present a special case for the embodied act of spectatorship? In addition to disabled characters, one may also consider the way the aesthetics of a film act in a way that could be considered disabled. In contrast to the norms of conventional three-point lighting and continuity editing in which cuts are not meant to draw attention away from the story world on screen, distortions from swiftly changing focus, rapid editing and conspicuous effects of lighting may draw attention to the film as a body on the verge of breakdown.

Tobin Siebers opens his book, *Disability Aesthetics*, with the claim that "[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies" (1). Using the theories of Alexander Baumgarten, Siebers positions the affective encounter between bodies as central to understanding how disability

shapes artistic expression. In relation to film, one may consider how the depiction of disability within a film or the film performing disability impacts the phenomenological encounter between spectator and screen. How does disability function as a visual attraction and by what mechanisms do disabled bodies onscreen produce feeling in the spectator? To what extent does disability function as an uncanny spectacle and how might the spectator's relationship to disability be directed towards Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's conception of "proper looking" as "converting the impulse to stare into attention?" (Garland-Thomson, 22) Such questions are important for two reasons. First, disability is a topic in film studies that has received little scholarly attention and second, the particularities of film style have often been overlooked in media analyses within disability studies scholarship.

Much of the scholarly work on filmic disability has focused on the politics of representation. Martin Norden's *Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability at the Movies* chronicles the use of stereotypes in which disabled characters are reduced to objects of pity or disgust. Indeed, stereotypes can induce a variety of affective impressions on the spectator. The shock value of deformity is frequently deployed in horror, from classic characters such as Erik (Lon Chaney) in *Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian, 1925) to pop cultural phenomena such as Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund) in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984). In melodramas disability is often a wellspring of heartrending tragedy. For example, stories about terminal illness such as the cancer narratives *My* Life (Bruce Joel Rubin) and *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus, 1998) disability is meant to conjure sentimental

explorations of family. In addition to shock and heartbreak, life with a disability is also figured as an inspirational triumph over adversity. One example is *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989), the biopic of Christy Brown (Daniel Day-Lewis), a man with cerebral palsy who learns to paint using his foot. The film centers the physical struggles of Brown as evidence of an irrepressible spirit inducing humility in all other characters. The affective associations of fear, tragedy and inspiration are also prevalent in the more typical use of disabled characters in marginal roles.

In its marginal position within film narratives, disability may function metaphorically for the ills of society and the shortcomings of humanity. As Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić state in the introduction to *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, "In narrative filmic representation disability is both given and taken away, both opportunistic metaphor and phenomenological experience" (11). Indeed, films involving disability are often not about disabled experience. For example, the intellectual disability of Tom Hanks' eponymous character in *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) has much more to do with communicating the naiveties of American discourse than with the complexities of navigating the world with mental impairment.

Yet this opposition between metaphor as exploit and lived experience as authenticity is a bit misleading. For one, the question of what constitutes authenticity in representation is difficult to answer. Calculating the authentic is a difficult balance between communicating the realistic aspects of impairment (i.e. what it is actually like to live with a disability) with the fact that the no two people experience a disability in the same way. A film character can never adequately

present the sum of disabled experience even as distinctions between lived realities and gross stereotype are important to make. Additionally, the opposition relies on a sense that metaphor cheapens experience, shortchanges its essence, and distorts its true meaning. This antagonistic conception of metaphor positions it as a functionary of stereotype and forecloses on its broader potential to explore what is common in human experience.

A frequently cited concept in disability studies scholarship is David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's notion of "narrative prosthesis." Principally concerned with tropes in literature, they write: "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device. We term this perpetual discursive dependency upon disability *narrative prosthesis*" (Mitchell and Snyder, 274). The emphasis on narrative can overshadow the importance of style when it focuses closely on discussions of plot and character. In casual conversation, the narrative fate of disabled characters and their relative importance to plot is often what counts in evaluating whether a film offers a 'good' or 'bad' portrayal of disability. It may well be true that films "rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions," but marginality in narrative does not necessarily mean that disability is as much of an artificial device as the term prosthesis may imply (274).

The idea of prosthesis suggests the presence of something foreign, of an artificial supplement that corrects some mishap in the presumed natural order of being. As a conceptual tool for disability studies, it may too closely inscribe disability within the very terms of marginality against which critiques are levied.

The effort to identify exploitation can obscure the complex ways an aesthetics of disability communicates universal aspects of embodiment. In a broad and compelling claim, disability theorists rightly emphasize the fact that disability is universal to human experience. That impairment is not only natural but is a fundamental aspect of infancy and the outcome of longevity in that even the most fit will become disabled through aging. One might deduce that human frailty is anxiously displaced into the category of 'other' because it is a reminder of aging and in turn death. Though disability can be exploited as a crude symbol for human mortality, there is perhaps something more complex at work. Perhaps an alternative way to consider disability as prosthesis is to look both at how film sometimes leans on it as a something artificial and at other times incorporates it seamlessly into its gait. That is to say, the film may also take up disability as something integral to questions surrounding the meaning of embodiment.

Gary Tarn film's *Black Sun* (2005) presents disability as an occasion to rethink how film aesthetics might communicate the meanings in embodiment. Narrated by Hugh Montalembert, its real life subject, the film deploys a variety of images to accompany Montalembert's story of adjusting to complete blindness resulting from a violent attack. The images vary from blurred views of staring strangers, abstract convergences of colors, surreal fragments of nature and a camera that appears to drift through scenes from Montalembert's memory. As Montalembert accounts for how his blindness has increased his appreciation for the interdependency between people and the intersubjective nature of living, so, too, the images appear to guide the viewer through the fluid nature of perception and

film's capacity to convey a new way to approach relations between memory, sense and consciousness.

Conversely, a common way in which disability is 'leaned on' in films is in its function as a simple abject reversal of the affirming qualities of life celebrated in the narrative of a film. A classic example of this is Clint Eastwood's boxing drama *Million Dollar Baby* (2005) in which fighter Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank) realizes her dream to fight in a title match but in doing so receives a spinal cord injury paralyzing her from the neck down. The film's story of the life-affirming values of athletic competition props itself up on its depiction of her quadriplegia as a state of existence so intolerable and void of meaning as to justify its controversial ending in which her coach (Clint Eastwood) assists in her suicide by lethal injection. Eastwood's narrative of athletic vitality leans on the notion that disability is only a negation of meaningful embodiment.

Whether or not a film elects to explore its complexity, disability itself calls into question the significance of the body as a stable form with reliable capacities of the senses, cognition and mobility. This instability of the body is evocative perhaps because it is a reminder that the relationship one has with their own body is also unstable and, at times, deeply ambivalent. While it is true that we must always have a body, there are always times (in both illness and health) that we wish to escape it. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas theorizes "escape [a]s the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I is oneself."(Levinas, 55) The need to escape embodied life can be as dramatic as

extreme physical pain or as pedestrian as the anxiety brought on by the glance of a stranger.

The importance of disability to cinema as something that is universally evocative runs counter to the social marginality of disability as always and only an 'other.' However, this broad approach cannot account for the particularities individuals experience with specific impairments and the social exclusion they endure. As such, it carries a risk that is an inversion of Mitchell and Snyder's concept of prosthesis. It risks generality in its move towards universalism whereas prosthesis risks redoubling marginality in reclamation of lived realities. This thesis conceptualizes disability broadly—as the presentation of significant impairments of senses, cognition and mobility whether by the characters or the camera—in an effort to think through why disability is fundamental to the existential appeal of cinema.

To consider to how disability may appeal to the existential questions of human experience requires more than measures of stereotype and authenticity. An alternative approach is to analyze it through a phenomenological lens. One may understand the contradictory meanings of disability in film more clearly if one approaches it as something central to film experience even when it is marginal to a film's narrative. That disability is still part of the film's body that is the felt through and not just leaned on. Even further, the filmic body itself has properties analogous to disabled human embodiment.

How might a film be considered a disabled body? One could look to instances in which the film seems to mimic impaired states of human embodiment. Sustained

blurs in focus, jump cuts, the uncanny spectacle of the camera falling down and even quick scenes shown out of temporal sequence can endow the filmic body with the appearance of impairment. Of course, the peculiarity of these devices derives from their deviation from the dominant practices of unobtrusive camera movements and invisible editing exemplified in classical Hollywood cinema. Yet the same could be said of human disablement to the extent that much of the perception of impairment as strange derives from the privileged position of an ideal body in cultural and scientific discourse.

In addition to this mimesis, part of the spectator's attachment to the filmic body may also stem from the fact that like us, the film lives and dies. It comes into the world beholden to its creators in the opening credit sequence and works it way both with and against the conventions of genre, ideology and narration it has inherited from the films that came before it. As its story unfolds and matures, the life of the film accrues meaning within its limited runtime and exposes its strengths and weaknesses of form. Finally, it inevitably slips into the darkness of death and decomposition when the final credits, like dissolving flesh and emerging bones, reveal the complex structures behind its vitality.

To further pursue the question of existence in relation to film form, one may ask if the film itself can be said to possess a certain ambivalence about its own embodiment. On its face, this question may appear absurd. After all, a film certainly does not possess consciousness in the same way that a person does. On the other hand, a film is undoubtedly more than its print and the ephemeral nature of its projection relies on a certain kind of ambivalence, albeit a mechanical one. This

ambivalence is embedded in the very mechanism by which motion in pictures is perceptible to the human eye. Motion pictures rely on the alternation between the black frames created by the projector's shutter and the imaged frames of the film's print. Without the shutter, we could not perceive movement across the images but would only see a strip of photos sliding over the screen. This fundamental property of cinema means that half of every film consists of blackness and that the very life of a film depends of on a continual fluctuation between the absence and presence of the filmic body. Cinema is a body that flickers.

Correspondingly, the film experience appeals to the spectator's own ambivalence about being embodied. This ambivalence, brought on by both crises of the world and of the body, is central to the attraction of cinema. Cinema appeals to both sides of this ambivalence, to both the need to have a body and the desire to escape embodied life. It does so by producing feelings in our bodies while simultaneously making us feel part of a world beyond the reach of our daily existence. One may become completely absorbed in the film's imaginary space and unaware of their body and then suddenly become aware of the physical sensations of sitting in the theater. It is in this sense that to watch a film is to flicker, to have one's own consciousness seem to toggle between corporeal sensation and cerebral projection.

My central objective in the chapters that follow is to explore the meanings disability in its relation to the ambivalent flicker between body and mind as well as between spectator and screen. It is nevertheless crucial to critique instances in which particular disabilities are grossly generalized or overtly exploited in ways

that position the disabled body as a 'problem body.' My purpose here, however, is to consider not only how disability may be figured as a 'problem body' but may also provide a way to think through the universal contradictions in embodiment itself. This thesis approaches disability broadly as impairment in order to think through the bodily ambivalence that is so intrinsic to cinema. The impairment of sense, mobility and cognition invokes our awareness that the relations between mind and body fluctuate, that they are not stable. It is this instability of the body, of the flicker between something taken for granted to something acutely present, by which disability may be related to the filmic encounter.

A film may take up disability existentially as a means to feel though crises of embodiment or may position disability as something that needs to be transcended so as to resolve ambivalence. In my first chapter I examine the role disability plays in communicating the conflict between subjects and the prejudices of the world they inhabit. I argue that in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), the crises of queer subjectivity are expressed through the aesthetic functions of Joe's mental illness and Ratso's physical disabilities. My second chapter examines how the crisis of a sudden onset of severe impairment can impact relations between body and mind. In *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), the film style feels through the particular sensations of its protagonist Jean-Do with a total paralysis that requires him to renegotiate his relationship to his body and his imagination. The final chapter examines the filmic use of disability not as something to feel through but that is narratively leaned on. In *Avatar* (2009) Jake Sully's paraplegia functions as a metaphor for the woes of Western imperialism and is situated as something to be escaped from in order to

access the paradise of Pandora and its tantalizing 3-D cinematography. Though these films vary widely in terms of subject and style, I believe their explorations of disability in relation to social, bodily and economic crises provide new ways to consider the relationship between disability and film.

Chapter Two

Cohere as Queer: Mental and Physical Disability in *Midnight Cowboy*

In May of 1969, one month before a police raid on a gay bar ignited the historic Stonewall riots, New York City saw the initial release of a film placing its gritty, hard-knock materiality in a distinctly queer context. A story of two men grifting and conning to survive life in the Big Apple, *Midnight Cowboy* presented a male friendship that, while never overtly sexual, was nonetheless infused with eroticism and structured as a love story. Lead actor John Voight plays Joe Buck, a tall, self-styled cowboy who leaves his dishwashing job in Texas with the hopes of making solid cash as a gigolo for wealthy women in New York. There he meets up with Rico or "Ratso" Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman), a scrawny native of the Bronx who initially cons him out of twenty dollars but ultimately offers to share the rundown apartment in which he squats.

While struggling to survive poverty and homelessness, the two characters also grapple with impairments of body and mind. Joe is periodically overcome by memories of trauma while Ratso possesses a painful limp and an unshakable cough. In caring for one another, the pair acts with the tenderness of a romantic couple and the film's tactile qualities provide a sense of the physicality of this connection.
The sense of texture and bodily presence situates *Midnight Cowboy* within the eroticism of 1960s cinema and positions the film much closer to a queer romance than a typical buddy film. While buddy films trace the development of a friendship across a series of obstacles, disability is not always a mere twist or turn of narrative.

Aesthetic emphasis on disability can provide a more sensuous engagement between the spectator and the body onscreen, one that allows sublimated longings to speak between the lines and beyond the plot.

Voight's own description of the film as "really a love affair, although it never becomes sexual," speaks to a tension between inner feeling and outward expression and, more broadly, between body and mind (Reed, D27). To this end, the film itself is divided between Joe's mind and Ratso's body. Joe's sporadic flashbacks culminate in a nightmare at the film's midpoint, after which the plot is increasingly structured by Ratso's physical decline. Yet this tension between body and mind is even more fundamental to the story as it speaks precisely to the issue of repressed sexuality. To be sexually repressed, after all, is to possess a mind at odds with what the body desires. As such, the tactility of Joe and Ratso's illnesses serves to dramatize this ambivalence.

The temporal split in the film has particular salience for the characters. Temporality is a central part of the phenomenological impact of cinema in that films resonate with their embodied viewers through a moving flow of images consistent with their own continuous experience of time. Remarking how film "does *not* transcend our lived-experience of temporality but seems to partake of it" Vivian Sobchack notes that filmic presence is "a temporal *movement*—as a presenting felt presence and its passing" (Sobchack, 1992, 60-61). I contend that in addition to functioning this way as a viewing experience, *Midnight Cowboy* accentuates the embodied experience of time through Joe and Ratso's disabilities. Joe's struggle with mental illness, manifested in chaotic flashback sequences, situates his

character's consciousness as divided between past and present. Conversely, the short statured and limping Ratso, whose health fatally declines over the course of the film, seems torn between present and future. The coherence of their queer romance is contingent upon their viscerally tactile connection in the present.

Infirmity poses a particular question in *Midnight Cowboy*. As I will discuss later in the chapter, the film wrestles with the question of whether or not homosexuality is itself a sickness although it does not necessarily support a thesis of gay pathology. Rather the suppression and the expression of desire appear to manifest through illness. The film itself is temporally split between its focus on Joe's mind in the first half and Ratso's body in the second. This shift begins after Joe's climactic nightmare sequence and the subsequent homophobic exchange between the two men as will be discussed later in the chapter.

The breakdowns of Joe's mind and Ratso's body do not so much represent queerness as sickness as they embody the conflict of a love that cannot be fully recognized or pursued. In this sense, *Midnight Cowboy* might be considered a queer melodrama that culminates in Joe's tragic loss of Ratso. The poignancy of melodrama is not as much in tragedy itself but in the belief that it could have been avoided if only there were some way to intervene. Steve Neale's discussion of melodrama's 'if only' recalls that "[t]he words 'if only' mark both *the fact* of loss, that it is too late, yet simultaneously the possibility that things might have been different, that the fantasy *could* have been fulfilled, the object of desire indeed attained" (22). Through editing, cinematography and mise-en-scène, *Midnight Cowboy* uses disability to communicate ambivalence about queer embodiment. Both the

realization and suppression of homosexual desire work by an appeal to tactility, both of touch but also of near-touch.[1]

Joe's Mental Disability as Past-Present

Midnight Cowboy begins with an empty void on which desire may be projected. The film opens with a white screen and the sounds of yipping cowboys and racing horses typical of a Western. As the camera tracks back, the white screen is revealed to be a drive-in movie screen in Texas. Over these images, the sound of country yodeling can be heard and the singer is soon revealed as Joe, first shown naked in the shower. In an analysis of the homoerotic in *Midnight Cowboy*, Robert Lang addresses the function of this opening:

> Although the blank screen in the film's first shot is meant to evoke the site of the film viewer's desire, the soundtrack gives a subjective dimension to the shot that suggests the origin of the hero's desire. That this screen will soon be filled by an image of his beautiful, naked body is very much to the point, as the viewer's desire is recognized by that of the hero, and vice versa. (141)

The screen also suggests an understanding of Joe's self-made cowboy persona as an act of projection. To the extent that Joe's cowboy persona and gigolo aspirations are a projection, his flashbacks are a disabling of this projection in that the film does not grant Joe's projected masculinity a stable frame. As soon as he sets out into the world in his hyperbolically Western attire, flashbacks fragment his

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[1] A striking example of the poignancy of near-touch can be found in one of cinema's first overtly homoerotic films, Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950). Genet's tale of an unconsummated love between two prisoners closes with a shot in which one prisoner uses twine to pass a flower from his barred window to his lover in the adjacent cell. The arms of the men reach towards one another from the cell windows at the margins of the frame. The tenderness of this near-touch is underscored by the delicacy of the twine, which is barely legible against the imposing mass of concrete dominating the image.

image with memories of his childhood that work to undermine the integrity of his conventional virility.

Joe's journey to and within New York City is repeatedly dogged by disruptive flashbacks to his home life in Texas. At first the flashbacks sequences are brief vignettes of his time with his grandmother Sally Buck (Ruth White) and his lover Crazy Anne (Jennifer Salt), but as he negotiates the stresses of life in New York, they progress to more frenzied sequences alternating between past and present and between memory and fantasy. Critics at the time of the film's release often described these more chaotic visual sequences as being excessively "cluttered and overworked" (Terry, B5), but their jarring disruptions and confusing assemblage may also suggest the presence of what is now understood as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

A term coined in the 1970s to describe the experiences of soldiers returning from Vietnam, PTSD entails "symptoms of generalized anxiety and hyperarousal" and well as "persistent, intrusive recollections of the event via flashbacks, dreams, or recurrent thoughts or visual images" (Satcher, 4.2). In this sense, Joe's flashbacks are not simply a narrative device to provide character backstory but are kinetic expressions of a disordered perception of trauma.

Joe's disruptive memories accumulate in a panic attack shortly after meeting O'Daniel (John McGiver), the man Ratso has led Joe to believe will connect him to female clients. O'Daniel turns out to be a religious zealot and when he implores Joe to pray before an electric Jesus, Joe flees the apartment and runs through the streets of New York seeking vengeance on Ratso. Joe's panic attack is shown through a

rapid montage that combines objective shots of Joe running with subjective shots from Joe's mind. Among the subjective shots are four discrete lines of action: Joe's memory of his baptism as a young boy, Joe's fantasized vision of catching and confronting Ratso, fragmented memories of Joe and Crazy Anne being sexually assaulted by a group of men, and finally a brief memory of Joe's violent childhood tantrum in front of his grandmother. Though the sequence vaunts a stylistic flare through alternations between black-and-white and color, rapid zoom and embellishments of sound akin to a warping funhouse mirror, these elements are not simply an aesthetic indulgence.

Rather there is a certain kinetic energy at work that does more than merely represent mental chaos. The rapid cutting, disjunctive sound montage, and fleeting snips of violence effect an experience of chaos for the viewer as well and the disjointed nature of the cuts underscores a refusal of coherence consistent with mental disordering. The cuts present themselves as jumps of the mind, a mind that when overwhelmed by panic and rage refuses to stay with a single thought, and, in this way, the sequence causes the viewer to become similarly disoriented.

At this point in the film, the viewer is familiar with Sally Buck and Crazy Anne from previous flashbacks; however, the footage of gang rape of Joe and Crazy Anne is new and its brief and fragmented appearance in the montage makes it difficult to apprehend. Intercut with the black-and-white fantasy of catching Ratso, the rape is both visually and emotionally intrusive and serves to fuse Joe's traumatized state of mind with the viewer's disrupted grip on narrative coherence.

Additionally, the rhythm of the sequence is emblematic of the starts and stops

of a mental fit. The diegetic music from Joe's baptism abruptly switches to nondiegetic music during his chase of Ratso and then crossfades into diegetic music inside the bar when he arrives. While the abrupt change in sound between the baptism memory and the chase registers a sharp turn from fear to rage, the crossfade conversely presents a sort of catching of one's breath, appropriately when Joe finally stops running. The sudden shifts in perspective, sound and pace create sense of empathy between spectator and screen. Describing the spectator response to a film in terms of bodily empathy, Jennifer Barker writes:

> Our bodies' muscular empathy with the film's body emerges partly from experience. When the film swivels suddenly with a whip pan, or moves slowly with a long take or tracking shot, or stretches itself out in widescreen to take in a vast landscape, we feel those movements in our muscles because our bodies have made similar movements: we have whipped our heads from side to side, moved slowly and stealthily, and stretched our bodies in ways that are distinctly human but inspired by attitudes like those that inspire the film's movements. (75)

Similarly, the stops and starts, bursts of sound, and frantic pace in the sequence can recall our own experiences with frenetic fits of both body and mind.

While the trauma of rape presents the most obvious explanation for Joe's mental illness, its presentation is far from clear-cut. Joe's flashbacks consistently weave memories of the rape as a young adult with older memories of his time spent with his grandmother as a young boy. Joe's memories of his grandmother blur the boundary between familial affection and sordid scenario. Whether giving her a neck rub or lounging in bed with Sally Buck and her boyfriend, the young Joe's childhood innocence is called into question. The perverse suggestions become more pronounced in a nightmare sequence that intercuts the rape scene with shots of Sally spanking the young boy's bare bottom and administering an enema. Whether

the images present memory or fantasy is less important than the fact that the question of sexual pathology in Joe's past is what disrupts his projection of masculinity.

In contrast to the jumpy chaos of Joe's mental figuration of the past, the camera seems to savor his flesh in the present. From the opening shower scene onward, the camera frequently lingers over Voight's smooth and muscular physique. The tactility of *Midnight Cowboy* is most readily apparent in the lighting of human skin. In medium and close-up shots, there is a noticeable amount of light reflecting off of faces and in the abundance of direct light, the texture of skin can be perceived in resplendent detail. Wrinkles around eyes, dirty stubble on chins, the openness of pores and the sheen of sweat are all distinctly prominent.

Joe's first sexual encounter in New York is with a wealthy woman named Cass (Sylvia Miles) who misreads Joe's financial motives and becomes offended when he requests payment. While having sex, Joe and Cass repeatedly trundle over a television remote control that frenetically changes channels. The pace of the scene's editing quickens, excitedly intercutting roving close-ups of their bare flesh with snippets of TV. In a humorous interplay between skin and screen, the tactile experience of sexual contact is made conversant with televisual montage.

Among the many clips are those of a muscular aerobics instructor flexing his legs, scaly monsters thrashing through cities in a Japanese horror film, and an ad for some grotesquely runny cream-of-corn. The montage hastens to a furious speed before climaxing to a casino machine erupting with coins. It is a sequence that comically exploits erotic metaphor but it also makes literal the mediated nature of

sexuality. For both Joe and the viewer, there can be no easy separation of sex acts from the cultural discourses inscribing them. As such, the scene renders Joe's heterosexual desire ambiguous by implying that it is unclear whether it is Cass's body or cultural messages sustaining the connection.

As I will discuss in more detail later, homosexual desire is often implicated in the ambiguous space of near-touch. When Ratso first advises Joe on hustling, the film breaks from a shot-reverse-shot editing pattern to a close-up of the men's faces leaning in toward one another. Ratso's sweaty face is in sharp focus as he asks, "You know what you need?" Although he will go on to recommend O'Daniel's services, there is a possible double meaning to this line. The scene originally opened with a shot of an effeminate man gazing down the length of a bar. The camera tracks this look until it reaches Ratso, who is looking in the same direction at Joe who is seated beside him. Erotic desire and Ratso's intention to scam Joe are conflated in this opening shot. The scene progresses almost as a form of flirtation, so much so that the effeminate man later taunts Ratso by presuming the pair is meeting for sex. The two readings of Joe and Ratso's conversation, combined with the intimacy of Ratso's sweaty face in close-up, suggest that Ratso may be whom Joe will really need and desire.

Ratso's Physical Disability as Present-Future

In stark contrast to the tall, attractive Joe, Ratso is a small, grimy fellow with matted hair, decrepit teeth and a nasally little voice. For each of Joe's long strides, Ratso must perform several shuffling steps as he limps along dragging his leg. In the

film's most widely quoted line, Ratso connects his distinctive walk to his right to exist, yelling at the taxi that nearly runs him over, "I'm walkin' here! I'm walkin' here!" In addition to his jaunty gait, Ratso's corporeal presence is defined by the deep, percussive coughing and profuse sweating of an ailing man. Ratso does not have flashbacks and the only reference to his past are the few times he mentions his deceased father, an impoverished shoe-shiner whose sooty labor drove him to an early grave. At one point Ratso drags Joe along to visit the father's tombstone, a scene suggesting Ratso is cognizant of his own impending death. Ratso's struggle is not with the past but with the future and to this end, the film does contain a fantasy sequence in which Ratso imagines a brighter outlook for himself and Joe.

As Joe attempts to pose as a high-end escort at a hotel, Ratso watches from the opposite side of the street. Thinking this will finally be their big break, Ratso begins to fantasize about moving to Florida where he is convinced Joe will have better luck with retired women. In his fantasy, Ratso and Joe have taken root at a Miami resort where older women catcall from their balconies, begging a no longer limping Ratso for access to Joe. While older women adore Joe, Ratso becomes the beloved maestro of entertainment. He orchestrates gambling among the seniors, takes charge of the hotel's catering, pushes rich ladies in wheelchairs and even runs a bingo ring by the pool. But as becomes apparent, Joe lacks the skills to pull the gig off (he is slapped by the client), and Ratso's fantasy also takes a turn for the worse. The brigade of elderly women in wheelchairs begins to cycle furiously in a circle as the soundtrack's bouncy commercial jingle speeds faster and faster. The gang of senior women rolls towards Ratso as he backs up, finally pushing him into the pool as Joe is

tossed out of the New York hotel by security.

The style Ratso's fantasy sequence has the distinctive buoyancy of the sort of merry little montage that is self-consciously cliché. There is a touch of cheeky absurdity from its first shots in which Joe and Ratso playfully run along a beach. The perky music, the pat little scenes of better times, and the overhead shot of the elderly women wheeling in circle are purposefully gimmicky as Ratso is conscious that he indulging in what may only be a pipe dream. This stylization also situates Ratso's sudden possession of an able body within the cultural conventions of naïve fantasy.

As his body breaks down in present time, Ratso's mind is fixated on a future with dueling possibilities. On the one hand, he is reminded of his father's early death while on the other he holds out for the chance of moving to warmer climes. Appropriately, his grubby green apartment is decorated with advertising posters for Florida. The promotional ads celebrate the citrus industry through large cartoon oranges and a happy family of four standing in an orange grove. These cheery scenes appear almost comical inside the dilapidated apartment with its dingy, rusting appliances, rotting green walls and badly peeling paint. The mise-en-scène of Ratso's apartment epitomizes the conflict between his desperate hopes and his physical deterioration.

The distinction between Joe's fixation on the past and Ratso's preoccupation with the future may also explain why Joe refuses to steal like Ratso does despite their increasingly dire situation. For Ratso, the future holds terrifying possibilities against which he must shield himself by any available means whereas Joe's stronger

connection to the past binds him to the basic morals one learns as a young child. These character differences can be linked to a body breaking down towards death and a mind traumatically bound to the past. As such, the odd couple's oddness comes in part from their respective disabilities. Where they connect is in the gritty, tactile present and it is here that the queer romance finds its coherence.

A Queer Romance

To the extent that the relationship between Joe and Ratso can be read as a romance, its expression often relies on their disabilities. To some extent, illness serves as a platonic alibi in that moments of intimate touch can simply be ascribed to the necessities of caring for sick friend. However, there is a certain excess in the aesthetic emphasis on these moments that conveys something more than just friendship. The tactility of illness seems to work between the lines to give voice to subversive desire.

While the presence of gay characters and homosexual acts in *Midnight Cowboy* is easily identifiable, the homoeroticism between Ratso and Joe was not so readily acknowledged at the time of the film's release. *Los Angeles Times* critic Charles Champlin described it as "an invariably moving study of an unlikely (and unsexual) friendship" (1). Champlin's parenthetical reassurance that the relationship remains platonic indicates anxiety over the possibility of gay romance. The same anxiety saturates the film as both Joe and Ratso caustically question each other's sexuality. In a romance queered by their inability to recognize its potential, Joe and Ratso negotiate their affection in the nervous terms of near-touch. The

scene following Joe's nightmare exemplifies how the film aestheticizes the structure of this ambivalence.

On his first night at Ratso's apartment Joe has a nightmare about the rape as well as his childhood. Ratso appears intermittently towards the end of the nightmare, menacingly waving a broken bottle at the camera as if taunting Joe. When Joe wakes in a sweat-drenched panic he is upset to find Ratso using his only possession, a small radio. Unsure if he can trust Ratso, the two engage in a tense exchange:

> JOE: "Smart thing for me to do is haul my ass out of here."
> RATSO: "What's the matter now?"
> JOE: "Well, you want me to stay here, you after something…What the h—What you after?"
> RATSO: (shakes head)
> JOE: "Don't look like no fag."
> RATSO: "What's that supposed to mean?"
> JOE: "Well you want me to stay here tonight. That's the idea, ain't it?
> RATSO: "Look, I'm not forcing you. I mean, like uh, who's forcing you?"

The conversation continues awkwardly until Ratso convinces Joe he only wants friendship. While Joe's fear of homosexuality is readily apparent, the aesthetics of the scene connect this fear to erotic tension. The exchange begins by alternating between medium and medium long shots but upon Joe's utterance of the word "fag" the framing switches to close-ups of their sweaty faces. This shift to facial close-ups in combination with low-key lighting and visible perspiration creates a sense of emotional and physical intimacy. The intimacy is two-fold: the viewer is pulled in toward the emotional register of faces and the characters seem to have crossed physical space towards one another without even moving. Although their words negotiate distance, the film's editing brings them closer though still in separate

frames. It is this pressure between fear and desire that is so central to an aesthetic of near-touch.

In addition to these tender moments, the overall relationship between Joe and Ratso follows a noticeably romantic arc. Their first encounter occurs in a bar favored as a meeting place for gay prostitution. Except that when Ratso "picks up" Joe it is not for sex but because he sees the naïve cowboy fumbling openly with his cash as an easy mark for a quick scam. When Joe later angrily confronts Ratso, the latter offers the newly homeless Texan a bed in the abandoned apartment where they negotiate cohabitation. Thereafter the two settle into a sort of domestic partnership with Ratso fulfilling traditionally feminine roles of cooking, hairdressing, and laundering while Joe functions as an unsuccessful breadwinner, roving the city for work. In addition to this neatly domestic arrangement, the arguments between the men take on the tone of a couple's spat. For instance, Joe complains to the ailing Ratso that he should not smoke and then chides him for stealing a coat, to which Ratso whines with all the classic intonation of a jaded spouse, "I stoled it for you!"

In keeping with the romantic arc, the film's aesthetics imply consummation between the two men. After a luckless day on the pavement, Joe finds a different way to sell his body at the local blood bank. In the very next scene he dutifully forks over the majority of the cash received to Ratso, suggesting he buy medicine for his worsening cough. A sound bridge of Ratso's coughing connects the shot of Joe's blood in a medical bag with one back at the apartment where they live. In addition to sound, the shots are connected visually. The camera tilts down and pans right to

follow the blood as it travels through the tubing down into the bag while the subsequent shot presents Ratso hunched over in the frame's lower right as Joe enters from a door on the left and moves towards him.

This pattern is repeated after Joe finally succeeds in sleeping with a female customer. After taking her money and shaking her hand, Joe exits her apartment through a beaded curtain with his body in center frame and his back to the camera. Congruently, the next shot depicts Ratso centered and seated on his bed, facing away from the camera and toward a door. The graphic match between Joe's exit through one doorway and Ratso's coughing towards another visually reinforces the transaction between Joe's sex and the medicine he hands over to Ratso when he returns home. In this sense, Joe literally bleeds and ejaculates for Ratso, a fluid exchange running from Joe's body and through Ratso's in the form of a cough. Disability facilitates this aesthetic consummation of near-touch in which sex exists only in the implication between frames.

Disability also structures the changing roles of interdependency between Joe and Ratso. Their relationship begins with Ratso schooling Joe on life in New York and caring for him physically through laundering and haircuts. With the onset of winter and Ratso's physical decline, the latter half of the film focuses on Joe's tending to Ratso's ailing body, supplying food and medicine. These tender acts of care provide moments of physical contact that combine a sense of bodily presence with emotional poignancy.

Perhaps the most endearing moment in the film occurs when Ratso has difficulty climbing a flight of stairs, as Joe and Ratso are about to attend a

psychedelic party. When Ratso stops on the staircase and Joe turns back, the camera similarly whips around in concern, crossing the axis line to a medium shot that tracks downward and closes in as Ratso sinks to the floor. In its mimicry of the human body moving to help, the camera acts as proxy for the viewer but perhaps the most palpable sense of empathy for the characters comes from the blocking. The moment when Joe takes his shirt to Ratso's grimy, sweaty head and Ratso falls into an embrace possesses such a palpable sense of touch, a sense of the connection between bodies whose tactile presence has been so crucial to the romantic qualities of the film. In short, it is this sense of touch that makes the moment so very touching.

Loving as that moment is, it cannot last for very long. The men soon leave the stairwell for the party but return to it after Ratso brokers Joe's escort services to Sylvia (Brenda Vacarro), Joe's first paying client. The site of the intimate embrace changes dramatically when Joe and Sylvia kiss and Ratso suddenly collapses and crashes down the stairs. No longer falling into but now falling for Joe, Ratso's debility appears to protest the eminent heterosexual encounter. Ratso's sudden collapse dramatizes the extent to which he no longer controls the situation and the poignancy of Joe having to leave him in a state of frailty.

Drawing on work of Franco Moretti, Steve Neale argues that the tears produced in response to melodrama are ones of powerlessness. The spectator is made to wish something for the characters but feels powerless when the film denies or postpones the fulfillment of that wish. Neale identifies discrepancies in point of view, such as when the spectator witnesses two lovers who cannot find one another

in a crowd, as one of the signature devices in melodramatic narration. Another central element of melodrama Neale points to is that of timing. Melodramatic scenes are frequently constructed around fantastic circumstances of timing in which something occurs only moments too soon or too late. The ending of *Midnight Cowboy* exemplifies this when Ratso dies only minutes before he and Joe finally arrive in Miami.

In the closing sequence of the film, Ratso has grown deathly ill, so much so that he becomes incontinent, prompting Joe to purchase new clothes during a rest stop. Already matching in complementary purple shirts, Joe extends their couple aesthetic by purchasing yellow shirts for them. In an important departure from life in New York, he throws his Western wears in a trash can. After dressing Ratso, Joe tells him of his plans to find a typical job and speaks hopefully of a future free from the pressures of hustling. At this end of his optimistic speech, the camera pulls back to reveal an unresponsive Ratso, who has passed away in the very moments that Joe has relinquished his masculine façade. The film's conclusion carries the logic of near-touch to its most agonizing consequence when Joe wraps his arm around Ratso's corpse: their pursuit of love is now thwarted by the very boundary of life and can only be consummated in death. [2]

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[2] In his commentary for the film's special edition DVD release in 2004, producer Jerome Hellman recalls a remarkable occurrence in the production of this scene. "When we got the dailies back…we were astounded because as the bus started to cross the causeway and… the images were being reflected [off the bus window], raindrops started to fall on the window almost like tears. And I remember we were so excited we couldn't believe it, what had happened was that it had started to rain and then quite suddenly it was cut off and we realized that our operator…[had] stopped filming because he thought that the technical quality of it would be damaged….I think we always regretted that we weren't able to have those raindrop teardrops on the window at the end of the film." If only.

Mental and physical disability is not so much the subject of *Midnight Cowboy* as it is the means by which subjectivity is expressed. The conflict between Joe's wounded mind and the desires of his body and conversely between Ratso ailing body and the desires of his mind illustrate the painful discord of sexual repression. It is a film that seems to be at odds with itself in that it is telling both a story of friendship and rippling with the suggestion that something deeper it at sake. Though the entirety of a film cannot be attributed to the sentiments of its director, the biographical details of John Schlesinger are useful for contextualizing the film within the social pressures of its time.

Midnight Cowboy was the British director's first American film and the culture shock of researching New York City slums coincided with his process of coming of out of the closet and starting a relationship with the man who would become his life partner. According producer Jerome Hellman, Schlesinger confided in him several times that he was nervous that the rowdy masculine New York crew might perceive him as less than a man. Perhaps accentuating this discomfort was Schlesinger's balancing act of adapting James Leo's Herlighy's explicitly homoerotic novel into a more mainstreamed tale of heterosexual friendship. In an 2005 interview with the Los Angeles times, Hellman recalls: "[H]e made it clear he didn't want to make a gay movie out of it, that he saw it as an oddball love story" (Goldstein, 1). The persistence of homoeroticism in the film despite this claim suggests that Schlesinger's remark indicates the constraints placed on the expression of gay sensibilities in the late 1960s.

Part of the constraints on homoerotic expression stemmed from ideas that it was evidence of pathology. At the time the film was made there was considerable debate as to whether homosexuality itself could be considered a mental illness. In fact it was in 1968, the year of the film's production, that the American Psychological Association added homosexuality as a pathological condition in their second Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-II). Undergirding the APA's decision was a body of psychoanalytic theory suggesting that improper bonding between parent and child was to blame for homosexual desire.

To address the growing debates about the social status of homosexuality, *Time* magazine ran as its cover story on Halloween of 1969 the haughtily definitive title of: "The Homosexual in America." Its cover image featured a colorful pop-art styled portrait of a man's somewhat pensive face. Superimposed over this is a male figure standing, hands on hips and head bent downward, who appears to float within the head of the portrait. The image speaks to the idea that the eponymous figure is woefully lost in the malaise of his own mind. In its concluding paragraphs, the article specifically addresses this question:

> A violently argued issue these days is whether the confirmed homosexual is mentally ill. Psychoanalysts insist that homosexuality is a form of sickness; most homosexuals and many experts counter that the medical concept only removes the already fading stigma of sin, and replaces it with the charge—even more pejorative nowadays—that homosexuality is pathological. (*Time*, 43)

As a kind of barometer for popular attitudes of the time, the statement is useful for understanding the relationship between gay pathology and gay eroticism in *Midnight Cowboy*. To the extent that the film is invested in the tactility of flesh, it speaks to a cultural celebration of carnal sin that is in tension with the

psychoanalytic question of pathology. Carnal expression as a form of truth, even when sublimated, undercuts those frameworks of psychoanalysis that attribute deviance to developmental problems and lingering Oedipal desires.

Despite its genuinely tender moments of homoeroticism, the film appears haunted by this Freudian question. As discussed earlier, Joe's flashbacks to his boyhood imply his relationship with his grandmother, or, at least, his impression of it was one of incest. The notion of Joe's desire to remain an object of her affection seems to guide the kinds of women he imagines he will serve in New York. On the bus ride into the city, Joe listens to a radio interview of women talking about the kind of man they are looking for. With each interviewee, Joe imagines a different woman but notably they are always older women with blonde hair like Sally Buck. Indeed, in his first attempt at tracking rich women on the streets, the older blonde seems to always be his focus. However, the trope of the older blonde women appears even earlier in the opening credit sequence in which two blondes watch as Joe crosses a street. Additionally, both of the male clients that Joe meets mention their mothers. This recurrent trope of homosexual pathology suggests the film actively engages the question of pathology rather than either dismissing or accepting it outright.

The relationship between disability and queerness in the film is complicated by this question of pathology. To a certain extent, the mental and physical suffering of the two protagonists can be interpreted as evidence that their failure to perform heterosexuality demands a cure. Lang suggests this notion is implicated in the film's conclusion through his rhetorical question: "[I]f Ratso and Joe can get to Florida

without further delay, can their lives be saved—saved for heterosexuality?" (156) On the other hand, perhaps it is possible to view the debilities as a form of protest, of a certain testimony to what is authentic in opposition to what is culturally constructed. The televisual montage inscribing Joe's sex scene with Cass and the gimmicky musing of Ratso's fantasy of running in Florida position heterosexuality and able-bodiedness as culturally mediated ideals. By contrast, the gritty realism of their disabilities and the eroticism of near-touch appear unmediated and therefore more authentic.

Even the film's Oedipal specter can be resituated as a cultural construction. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the very notion of "Oedipus is not a state of desire and the drives, it is an idea, nothing but an idea that repression inspires in us concerning desire" (113). Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize Oedipal desire as an ideological mechanism whereby the family functions coercively on behalf of capitalist power.[3] Their critique points to the tremendous stakes inherent in questions of what constitutes "sickness" and "health" and to the intractably political nature of those tensions between an irreducible individual body and the unwieldy social body that subsumes it.

In *Midnight Cowboy,* this crisis between desires of the body and the repressive forces of society demonstrates the ambivalence of queer embodiment. While the

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[3] They elaborate on the function of the law in this formulation of power. "The law tells us: You will not marry your mother, and you will not kill your father. And we docile subjects say to ourselves: so that's what I wanted! Will it ever be suspected that the law discredits — and has an interest in discrediting and disgracing — the person it presumes to be guilty, the person the law wants to be guilty and wants to be made to feel guilty? One acts as if it were possible to conclude directly from psychic repression the nature of the repressed, and from the prohibition the nature of what is prohibited" (114)

narrative of the film refuses consummation, the aesthetics appear to celebrate homoeroticism in spite of the constraints on its expression. Ratso and Joe's disabilities do not simply mark their relationship as pejoratively 'other' but illustrate the toll of a love denied. Indeed, it may not be its measure within the forest but instead the texture of a tree that is the speaking of its life.

Chapter Three

The Imperfect Rhyme of Body and Mind: Poetic Cinema in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*

Crises of existence can be expressed through the palpable presence of bodies but can also present themselves in film through more abstract methods. In Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), for example, the director's experience with AIDS-related blindness is communicated not by showing a blind subject onscreen or even through a blindness of the camera via low-lighting or pitch-black frames. Rather, *Blue* is comprised of 76 minutes of a glowing blue screen and a soundtrack narration that situates Jarman's experiences politically within the AIDS crisis and poetically with symbolic resonances of the color blue.

For the spectator, the unwavering blue in some ways reproduces experiences described within the film. Without a figure to look at, the eyestrain and loss of focus can push spectators back into their own heads, back into a contemplative solitude that resists the body as a sign of fixity and embraces it as a signifier of transition. One begins to experience one's own body as a sign of flux, of shifting levels of patience and attention, and of the coalescence of sight and sound such that one senses the presence of colors only described through audio. To consider it reflexively in this way is to move "from *Blue* as a *visible object* to the film as a perceptual and somatic *visual experience*" (Sobchack, 2011, 197).

Blue presents disability as something to be felt through in both phenomenological and poetic terms. Similarly, Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and

the Butterfly (2007) explores disability as a way to understand a radical change in embodiment as a generative experience for understanding the coalescence of senses and the intersubjective nature of being. Based on the real life story of Jean-Dominique Bauby, it interprets its protagonist's state of total paralysis from a first person perspective that is bound to a motionless body but escapes through flights of imagination.

In December of 1995, Jean-Dominique Bauby, then chief editor of French fashion magazine *Elle,* underwent a massive stroke causing full paralysis. Affected by a rare condition known as Locked-In Syndrome, Bauby's mind remained unscathed but he was unable to speak or move anything other than his left eye. With the help of a therapist, Bauby learned to communicate by blinking. As the therapist recited a frequency-sequenced version of the alphabet, Bauby blinked when the preferred letter was reached. The painstakingly slow process allowed him to complete a short book describing his experiences with Locked-In Syndrome. It was titled *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon* (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*) and was officially published two days before his 1997 death from pneumonia.

Ten years later, director Schnabel's film adaptation of Bauby's book was released under the same title. The film version begins as Jean-Do (Mathieu Almaric) wakes from a coma; the first forty minutes are filmed largely through point of view shots from Jean-Do's perspective. Schnabel wanted viewers to have the sense of being inside Jean-Do's head, intimately tied to both his physical vantage point and his thoughts narrated in voiceover. As Ronald Harwood's screenplay stated in bold

across its first page: "THE CAMERA IS JEAN-DOMINIQUE BAUBY, KNOWN AS JEAN-DO" (Heidt, 133).

Indeed, the film takes a literal approach in having the camera act as roving eye and going out of focus whenever Jean-Do became tired or teary. The onset of Jean-Do's paralysis is even rendered through a disabling of the film in the opening credits. Tarja Laine describes, "[h]alfway through the opening credits, the projector appears to get stuck, rapidly jerking backwards and forwards for a moment before it continues. This moment suggests a reference to Bauby's accident, the attack on his bodily system that has left him hostage inside his own body" (296).

This conception of the body as a prison may be reductive but as the film progresses, the film figures Jean-Do's body as site of communication rather than isolation. Laine's statement underscores the existential crisis that a radical change in embodiment can bring and both protagonist and viewer are similarly tasked with navigating changes induced by the onset of disability. In this way, the film aesthetically renders disability something to feel through subjectively rather look at clinically.

Yet as this style rendered the inside of its character's mind in an acutely physical way, perhaps the most evocative sequences in the film are of Jean-Do's imagination. Envisaging his body as a heavy diving bell suspended in water, Jean-Do's imagination is pictured as a butterfly taking flight and allowing him to travel beyond his motionless body. Through images poetic in their resonance, the sequences of Jean-Do's imagination in some ways offer a more intimate connection to his character than the point of view shots. The imagination sequences suggest

that some of the profound aspects of inner life are those seeking to escape embodied experience.

In its address of immediate sensation and the escape to imagination, *Diving Bell* conveys Jean-Do's transition through two means. First, it aligns the viewer with the renegotiation of sensory perception that Jean-Do's disability requires him to perform in order to communicate with the world. Second, it broadens the significance of Jean-Do's experience through forms of poetic cinema. As in *Blue*, disability in *Diving Bell* is explored for both its symbolic and sensorial qualities.

Aesthetics of Sensory Perception

Sobchack claims that "although it is a favored description, there is no such abstraction as *point of view* in the cinema; rather, there is a specific and mobile engagement of embodied and enworlded subjects/objects whose visual/visible activity prospects and articulates a *shifting field of vision* from a world that always exceeds it (Sobchack, 1992, 62). In *Diving Bell*, this engagement is through Jean-Do's eyes, listening to his breathing and thoughts as others manipulate his body. Providing more than Jean-Do's physical frame of reference, the first person camera shifts in focus with his boredom, wanders carefully along the drawings from his children in contemplation and cuts and dissolves as his consciousness drifts in and out, losing track of time. Laine argues that this style places the spectator into a sort of affective communion with the character. Rather than watching from a distance, *Diving Bell* helps demonstrate the extent to which "we are part of cinema in its emotional eventfulness as a process that is affectively intentional in a

phenomenological sense, supporting the continuous, dynamic, and reciprocal exchange between the film's world and the spectator's world" (Laine, 302).

The emotional impact of this communion is quite poignant when Jean-Do tells his language therapist Henriette (Marie-Josee Croze) that he wants to die. Henriette grows so upset at the request that she leaves the room in distress. Shot through Jean-Do's eyes, the motionless screen waters for several seconds until Henriette reenters the room. While the tearing effect on the lens connotes the obvious (Jean-Do is crying), what is perhaps most affective is the act of sharing the duration and immobility with the protagonist. Without a shot from an alternate angle, the viewer is allied only with Jean-Do and made to understand his regret that if only he hadn't said that, she would still be there. The audience is with him in the indeterminacy of those seconds, equally uncertain when she will return.

Yet there is also something patently artificial about the camera's alignment with Jean-Do. In contrast to a classical breakdown of space into a series of shots, the singular position of Jean-Do makes the viewer more aware of the camera's location. In doing so, the film makes the presence of its director felt in that Jean-Do's "multiply mediated and technologically constructed" point of view "seems fated to see the world only through Schnabel's own lens" (Heidt, 135). The constructed nature of this aesthetic demonstrates the limits of the camera's capacity to seamlessly reproduce human perception. The limitation, however, is ultimately a generative one in that it makes the imagination sequences all the more crucial to developing Jean-Do's perspective.

Nevertheless, that which is artificial can be experienced as very much real. The camera itself was outfitted with a latex mask that provides a remarkable semblance of the warmly backlit skin of eyelids when Jean-Do witnesses his infected eye being sewn shut. While the actors of the film were tasked with speaking to a camera, Almaric spoke his lines from a separate room in which he could view the actors. In this way, the actors could pursue organic exchange of dialogue while maintaining the physical comportment necessary for the filming (Murray, 1).

In addition to the visceral scene of his eye being sewn shut, the point of view scenes elucidate the emotional impact of Jean-Do's perception as he gradually adjusts to his surroundings. A brief scene in which physical therapists flex his hands and feet begins with blurry panning across his appendages and then gradually stabilizes and grows deeper in focus. As the camera slows to a steady view of his leg being bent, a sharp sucking of his breath breaks the near silence of the sequence and signals that he has become fully aware that his body is being controlled. His first experience in a wheelchair presents another shift. When he is first wheeled into the hallway, his gaze settles on a young man seated in a wheelchair at the hall's end but when he glimpses the reflection of his face in a glass encasement, he narrates his horror at its appearance. The camera maintains Jean-Do's focus on the glass as blurred images of people in the foreground wash over. The difference between the relatively clear, deep-focus shot of the young man and the subsequent blurred images in the foreground registers Jean-Do's emotional transition from seeing someone he imagines himself to resemble to the disquieting sight of his actual face.

Later in a pivotal scene, a powerful synthesis of chaotic sight and intrusive sound illustrates the connection between the intensity of sensation and the need for escape. The scene alternates between objective and subjective shots of Jean-Do lying awake in his bed at night when his television suddenly switches to the static graphic and persistent tone of a station testing alarm. Unable to change the channel, Jean-Do's widened eye bulges with frustration as the wall clock reveals the time to be 2:30 in the morning, hours from the relief of hospital aides.

The stress initiates a turbulent montage in which he is first shown in his diving bell, drifting amid cloudy water. As the alarm unrelentingly blares, a slew of superimposed images appear to scurry under its weight. Quick pans and cuts weave together family photos, a flashing image of his son yelling, a long shot of the diving bell and finally an illustration pasted on the wall of Little Red Riding Hood's clothed wolf lying in wait. Perhaps seeing himself as a bedridden monster, his attention snaps to a close-up of his panicked face in the diving bell. The camera then cuts to a shot of a collapsing glacier and the maddening pitch finally cuts off. The sequence's rapid fluctuation and coalescence of Jean-Do perceptions of body and mind present several components: overwhelming sensory perception, a memory of his son's reaction to his stroke, an identification with a fairy tale, his poetic conception of his bodily entrapment, and finally a sharp break to an image outside this turmoil. The culmination of his urgent toggle between mind and body produces an escape to the poetic.

The sequence that follows has the distinction of lacking any direct reference to Jean-Do's surroundings or narrated thoughts. The mountainous glacier

beautifully crumbles in slow motion with tranquil piano as the only sound. In an escape from panic, the film breaks from the subjectivity of Jean-Do to an abstraction of his experience. After a period of only music, Jean-Do's voiceover conveys his reevaluation of life without any direct reference to the images: "Had I been blind and deaf, or did the harsh light of disaster make me find my true nature?" As the ice repeatedly breaks down, one senses its resonance with the breakdown of not only Jean-Do's body but also his resistance to its altered state. The crashing ice renders both a sense of calamity but also of meaningful change, of shifting into a new season of life. This shift of imagery into the distinctly symbolic is one perhaps best described as poetic cinema.

Poetic Cinema

While definitions of what constitutes the poetic are as various as they are sometimes vague, here I will focus on poetic communication as a means to surpass the embodied experience. In his writing on poetic cinema, Pier Paolo Pasolini argues that poetic cinema expresses itself in terms of free indirect style. Summarizing his argument, Homay King states, "Pasolini defines the free indirect style as a mode of cinematic perception and enunciation that complicates distinctions not only between subject and object but also between enunciator and *énoncé*, and ultimately between author and character" (King, 107). In other words, poetic cinema blurs the subjective boundaries between entities with distinctly separate embodied forms.

Another aspect of poetic cinema is its use of images that express concepts rather than functioning in strictly narrative terms. While point of view shots in *Diving Bell* reconstruct the daily life experiences of Jean-Do, cutting to the shots of him drifting through murky water in his diving bell does more than indicate that his attention has shifted. These shots also resonate on their own, leaving the viewer similarly adrift in reflection. Steve Dillon notes that "[a]rtifice and exoticism are clearly meant to help us transcend the everyday world and see deeper into the flowing essences of life" (18). As such, the film's poetic images express the need to escape by enabling the viewer to understand subjectivity as something beyond the embodied experience of its characters. The effect is entrancing and has the ironic distinction of drawing one closer into the film by pushing one further away from the materiality of its story.

One site that can have particular intersubjective resonance is the human face. Exemplary of free indirect style, emotions of the human face do not necessarily "'belong to the faces that express them, nor are they 'uttered' by their wearers in anything like a unidirectional manner," but are instead sites of interaction between subjects (King, 126). When shown in close-up, the face can "participate not merely in an expressionism but in something like…impressionism" in that "it is capable of both impressing and being impressed" (King, 128-9). Since his face is paralyzed, *Diving Bell* largely avoids shots of Jean-Do's face as a means to connect viewers to a sense of his interior. Though it does include some extreme close-ups of his eye, the film's is largely reliant on images of his mind. These images are sometimes derived from Bauby's text and are at other times completely inventions of the filmmakers.

The ambiguity of their source highlights the extent to which *Diving Bell* functions as a multitext, “a multigeneric, multiauthored cultural reproduction of Bauby’s lived life” (Heidt, 127).

As a film adaptation of an autobiographical text, *Diving Bell* works to bring to life the subjective experiences of Bauby through the subjective interpretations of the filmmakers. The point of view shot is not about subjectivity, argues King, but instead “represents perception as an objective affair” while “dream images, hallucinations, and false flashbacks often offer up a more fully subjective version of perception” (119). In *Diving Bell,* the sequences depicting Jean-Do’s fantasies and dreams construct them as spaces beyond his body.

While cinema engages the senses of its embodied viewers, it is also capable of simultaneously communicating in images that transcend embodiment. Images may also have the capacity to signify concepts large and small, both deriving from a film’s diegesis as well as reflexively pointing towards the dynamics between spectator and screen. In terms of its transcendent qualities, such images bridge the space between the interiority of its spectators and that of its characters. In the case of *Diving Bell*, this bridge takes the form of fantasy sequences connecting Jean-Do’s imagination viscerally to our own.

In terms of authorship, this connection presents questions about what it means to assume the voice of a deceased subject. Schnabel curiously described the film as “probably the most autobiographical film that I’ve made,” drawing attention to the ambiguous distinction between author and character in a film that seeks to resurrect the subjectivity of nonfictional life (Heidt, 140). In the fantasy sequence

stemming from the television station alarm, Sarah Heidt notes that "it is Mathieu Almaric whose body gives corporeal ground to Jean-Do's imaginative flight" and that the photos and live-action shot of Almaric's face at the end of the sequence "[remind] us that the body we are seeing is not Bauby's at all" (Heidt, 126).

One must ask whose interiority the poetic is providing access to. While the photos of Almaric's face do not necessarily channel an authentic sense of Bauby, the film does possess some resonance of his physical presence in space if not time. Filmed at the same hospital where he stayed, the *Diving Bell*'s shots from a balcony Bauby favored are perhaps a more evocative link to his physical viewpoint than the cagey point of view shots.

Ultimately, poetic cinema possesses a curious relationship to interiority. Poetic images can lead a viewer from the body and into a space of interiority that is somehow beyond the corporeal. As such, it would seem that the poetic bridges the gap between two distinctly separate spaces. At the same time, our very *sense* of interiority is an embodied one that stems from our perceptive engagement with the world. In terms of cinema, then, what does it mean to sense the inner life of a character if the true depth of that space is something beyond the realm of embodied perception? A closer examination of the imagination sequences and their poetic allusions reveals ways in which Jean-Do's inner life figures as not just beyond the physical space of his body but beyond its temporal space as well.

In his first act writing, Jean-Do feels through the meaning of bodily entrapment to understand his connection to both past and present inhabitants of the hospital. The scene opens up along the metaphor of duet. His transcriptionist

Claude (Anne Consigny) calls and Jean-Do blinks and at the moment she confirms his first letter, piano keys begin to break and fall in extended legato. The somber minor keys crawl along with the right hand as the left hand underwrites with patient chords. All this in a few cautious moments before the voiceover articulates the translation.

One cannot properly place this music outside the diegesis. Though it is not a sound within the room, it does encase the very shape of this encounter as a convergence of senses. To play the piano, often learned one hand at a time, is to feel unison between two parts of one body. Each hand is thought to have five points of sense but the keys take whatever touches them. It is in this way that writing can be understood not as the liberation of thought from body but as the synthesis of entangled subjectivities.

The voiceover begins the same as Bauby's book, "Through the frayed curtain at my window, a wan glow announces the break of day." Jean-Do's wistful view of the window gives way to his diving bell suit floating downward as he speaks of his aches but resurfaces to a shot of Jean-Do seated on a pier as he promises to deliver the "motionless travel notes from a castaway on the shores of loneliness." As such, Jean-Do's diving bell is not a prison but a corporeal refuge, from which he surfaces to describe the felt imprisonment of isolation.

Limited in space, Jean-Do turns instead towards time. "Originally, this Naval Hospital was a home for children with TB," he says into a scene of mixed temporality. The hospital corridor retains its modern décor but is now populated by the nurses and children from the past. The camera glides past a line of children on

gurneys and toward a young aristocratic woman Jean-Do informs us is Princess Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III and matron of the hospital.

Eugenie's gaze is fixed directly on the camera as it glides past her to the end of the hallway, where the young man in the wheelchair was positioned the first time Jean-Do was wheeled there. Only this time, instead of moving out to the balcony the camera reaches this point and smoothly rotates around to the reverse perspective. During this pivot Jean-Do narrates, "There was a large farm, a school and a place where, reputedly, the great Diaghilev rehearsed his Ballets Russes." At this point, the camera completes its arc revealing a costumed figure at the far end of the hall. Jean-Do continues, "They say it was here that Nijinsky made his famous leap twelve feet in the air." Nijinsky, clad as the spotted faun from *L'Apres-midi d'un faune*, leaps toward the camera and touches down in a reverse-angle shot in which Jean-Do and Claude now appear. Jean-Do continues, "Nobody leaps here anymore," as he goes on to describe the elderly and paralytic residents that now appear in their wheelchairs alongside the queue of children from the past.

The reference to Diaghilev and Nijinsky, absent from Bauby's text, is exemplary of the poetic force in Schnabel's adaptation. Sergei Diaghilev, director of the exemplary ballet company Ballets Russes and Vaslav Nijinsky, one of its most acclaimed dancers were lovers during the height of Nijinsky's career in the early twentieth century. One of the most famous references to the pair in poetry come in the lines from W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939": 'What mad Nijinsky wrote/ About Diaghilev/ Is true of the normal heart;/ For the error bred in the bone/ Of each woman and each man/ Craves what it cannot have,/ Not universal love/ But to be

loved alone." Auden's poem, written about the outbreak of World War II, forges an interesting link to the diary of Nijinsky that was written in 1917 shortly before Nijinsky was committed to an asylum for schizophrenia.

As Sara Acocella has pointed out in the introduction to an unabridged version of his diary, his writing reflects a frantic sense of awareness that his wife and doctors were preparing to institutionalize him for schizophrenia. Nijinsky's diary is remarkable as a phenomenological text and bears similarities with Bauby's. Like Bauby, Nijinsky struggled with the deficiencies of communication, of materials not keeping pace with the flow of thought. Nijinsky frequently commented on his pen going bad and needing to leave in such moments. Similarly, Bauby's frustration with the slowness of the letter-code translation often left him depressed.

In a broader sense, what connects Auden, Nijinsky, and Bauby is the urgency of writing when one cannot escape the calamities of the present and the future is grimly uncertain. Nijinsky's jumbled mind and Bauby's motionless body both serve to constrain communication but in Schnabel's film, they are put into a dialogue. It is the shot of Nijinsky's soaring leap that brings Jean-Do's figure into the hallway and its historical continuum. In doing so, Schnabel's cinematic language speaks both of and beyond the body and seems to echo the mantra touted by those in Diaghilev's World of Art circle: "Art is free, life is paralyzed."

The symbolist notion of life as paralyzed invokes the duality of prosthesis. It is to use paralysis as a metaphor for the restrictions of society. *Diving Bell* takes up this concept of paralysis as a form of hostage through the character Père Lucien (Jean-Pierre Cassel), a journalist who was taken hostage for four years after Jean-Do

gave him his seat on a plane that was hijacked. The journalist visits Jean-Do in the hospital because he feels a connection to Jean-Do's difficulties. On the other hand, what the journalist says—that in order to maintain sanity "you have to connect to what is human inside"—suggests the way in which paralysis requires a reorganization of the senses for self-preservation. The notion that life is paralyzed does not necessarily mean that paralysis is emblematic of all that is dangerous and oppressive in the world. Rather, it is evocative of the conflict between inner self and outer world that artistic expression seeks to reconcile.

It is fitting, then, that frenetic montage of Jean-Do's vision delivers Jean-Do from the sound of the monitor. The superimposed images convey Jean-Do's disoriented senses and the frantic urgency of his need to escape. Describing the poetic function of superimposition, P. Adams Sitney argues that it can "make a spectral light emanate from people and things, as if the spirit showed through the flesh and burst through the cracks in marble tombs" (155). Against the pressure of sound, the images of Jean-Do's memories of his accident seem to emanate through those of his frantic glances about his hospital room. This kinetic toggling between perceptual and psychic alarm seem to radiate as though Jean-Do's consciousness is escaping his flesh.

Shortly after the glacier sequence, Jean-Do resolves to stop pitying himself. Affirming his mental prowess he declares, "Other than my eye, two things aren't paralyzed. My imagination…and my memory. They're the only two ways I can escape from my diving bell." This realization elicits a fantasy sequence in which close-ups of an emergent butterfly fade into a tracking shot of the butterfly as it

darts through a field of dandelion tufts and looms over a towering cliff and expansive ocean. "I can imagine anything, anybody, anywhere," Jean-Do pronounces and a series of scenes follow. Shaky black-and-white footage of Egyptians on camels. Colorful, aerial drifts over sand and sea. Swooping romantic shots of Jean-Do and a woman passionately making love along a shore. Grainy stock of a matador daring a bull. Washed-out footage of a surfer riding a wave.

The aesthetically varied scenes appear to be an assembly of different types of film stock, suggesting Jean-Do's imagination draws from a well of mass media. Yet within many of these disparate scenes, a digitally inserted butterfly hovers, punctuating assorted footage with Jean-Do's authorial stamp. Later, as Jean-Do and Henriette persuade his publisher to proceed with a book deal, a butterfly lands on the publisher's lampshade. Beyond an overt metaphor for emergent creativity, its trembling wings rhyme visually with the flickering footage and the communicative flutter of Jean-Do's left eye. Moreover, it is a being whose short life is marked by constant movement, a reminder of the continually shifting vision Sobchack places at the center of perceptive expression.

Deepening the significance of the montage is a snippet of black and white handheld camerawork. The shaky footage briefly depicts large, dark structures protruding from a snowy hillside and seems to illustrate Jean-Do's voiceover narration "bowing to Ozymandias, King of Kings…" Jean- Do's line recalls the inscription at the base of a Ramesses II statue noted in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 sonnet "Ozymandias." An allusion not found in Bauby's memoir, Shelley's poem offers imagery the filmmakers perhaps found evocative of Bauby's drooping,

paralytic face: "Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown/And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command." Yet on closer examination, Shelley's poem relates to the film in a number of ways.

First, Shelley's poem contains a nested narration in which the speaker describes a traveler who in turn recalls a statue evocative of its sculptor and its subject's proclamation. As such, it engages with the same kind of multitextual web of subjects and artists in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly.* The film extrapolates images from a script based on book whose author had his thoughts mediated through an interpreter not unlike Ramesses II's proclamation is transcribed by the sculptor and in turn Shelley. The multiple voices converging in "Ozymandias" are similar to the process of filmmaking in which authorship is an expansive concept drawing from multiple stages of production. Moreover, Shelley's poem reflects upon the transformation of a powerful leader into an immobile statue, resembling Jean-Do's transition from chief editor to quadriplegic. Finally, the poem's last line, "The lone and level sands stretch far away" precisely describes the very next shot, a gliding view of a vast desert.

Jean-Do continues, "Now I'll remember myself as I was. Handsome, debonair, glamorous, devilishly attractive." A series of black and white stills of a striking man appear only it is not Jean-Do. "That's Marlon Brando, not me!" he exclaims, protesting the gap between word and image. "That's me." He remarks on a long shot of an alpine ski descent. Hand-held footage of Jean-Do and adult friends playing in snow freezes on a close-up of his face that is then positioned in split screen alongside a black-and-white photo of his face as a younger man. The sequence then

shifts into a photo-montage of Jean-Do at various ages from adulthood back toward infancy before cutting abruptly to a live-action image of his paralyzed face, shown in plaintive, medium close-up for the first time.

Through this sequence, the film transitions from moving images of fantasy through still photography of remembered photos and finally back into Jean-Do as an embodied character. In doing so, the film only arrives at a close look *at* Jean-Do by way of looking *through* his layered senses of self. Sobchack describes the photograph as "a 'hole' in temporality [that] announces a vacancy" whereas the "motion picture in its *motion* sufficiently fills up that vacancy and inaugurates a fullness" (Sobchack, 1992, 60). In transitioning from his innermost fantasies to his embodied present, the sequence renders this temporal hole by suggesting that his current face is similarly arrested in time. Yet paralysis does not entirely convey a stoppage of time since the live-action shot of his paralyzed face contains a fullness of being that the photographs do not quite possess.

The fantasy sequences offer a space in which Jean-Do and viewer leave his body for the sense of inner life. It is also a place that the transcriber of his book, a woman named Claude with whom he shares considerable affection, seems to be able to enter. Late in the film, Jean-Do and Claude have an intimate exchange on a boat. Clad in yellow wharf jackets and winter hats, the pair snuggles closely together. The warmly undulating guitar notes of The Velvet Underground's "Pale Blue Eyes" roll across the soundtrack as both boat and camera rock up and down against a crisp, blue sky. Having planned the outing, Claude produces a gift for Jean-Do: old,

leather-bound copies of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Elated and eager to enjoy his new gift, Jean-Do communicates via letter-code the section he wishes her to read.

Turning to section fifty-nine, Claude begins a passage describing Noirtier, an old man who sits motionless in a wheelchair. Jean-Do's voiceover remarks that the illustration is uncannily similar to his appearance. Claude reads aloud while Jean-Do's voice can be heard reading along as they conclude, "Sight and hearing were the only senses that still glimmered in his moribund frame." The two then have a direct exchange of dialogue, although only Jean-Do's in voiceover.

> JEAN-DO: That's me to a T, isn't it?
> CLAUDE: It's not.
> JEAN-DO-Do: It is. I scare people. I make them shudder.
> CLAUDE: Not true.

What is remarkable about this brief exchange is that it takes place in the absence of letter-code translation, as if the intimacy of sharing an imaginative text has enabled Claude to commune directly with Jean-Do's inner speech. While it is entirely possible that she is merely responding to what she believes he is thinking, the film continues the exchange with another shot of Jean-Do floating in his diving bell as he remarks, "My diving bell drags you down to the bottom of the ocean." A cut to a longer shot reveals a fully clothed Claude holding Jean-Do as they drift downward. She replies in voiceover, "Jean-Do, I don't mind you dragging me to the bottom of the ocean," and as the camera cuts to an intense close-up of her face back on the boat, "because you're also my butterfly."

Claude could very well have intuited his initial thoughts and since the second exchange is conducted entirely in voiceover, it could be the abridged version of an

off-screen translation. And yet such details are subordinate to the scene's broader significance. Claude has consciously entered into the kind of direct contact with Jean-Do's inner speech that the audience has shared throughout the film. The fact that sharing an imaginative text occasions this change is reflective of the film's endeavor to use Bauby's text in a similar manner.

The romance of the boat scene is swiftly deflated in the subsequent scene during which Jean-Do has a telephone conversation with his girlfriend Ines (Agathe de La Fontaine). Having never visited, Ines tearfully confesses her struggle with his condition and asks if he wants her to visit. Jean-Do, forced to awkwardly converse via a tearful Celine, painstakingly spells out, "Each day I wait for you." After repeating the phrase, Celine hangs up the phone in distress. Following this painful interchange, Jean-Do has a dream in which his reflections on death emphasize it as an escape from the difficulties of embodiment.

The dream sequence develops through the ethereal movement of steadicam as a shot from the foot of Jean-Do's bed floats eerily toward his sleeping body. After cutting to a dark hospital hallway the disembodied view drifts into a patient room. The room is completely void of furniture and bears only a large, inky black mark where the bed would have been. The camera whip-pans back out into the hall and to a room with an identical scene. Whisking to the hall once more, the camera now tracks behind the Empress Eugenie as she glides along in near-silhouette. When the camera tracks closer it is revealed that the Empress is pushing an unidentifiable person in a wheelchair. Throughout this twenty-five second portion of there is only

the faint sound of a heartbeat. As the Empress and her charge near the room, the sounds of waves and industrial white noise creep slowly in.

The new room is a partially demolished brick room with high ceilings. Construction materials, chunks of concrete and rolls of insulation litter the floor whereon the diving bell suit lies empty. The camera floats toward a group of doctors gathered around a gurney, cuts to a spot alongside the ensemble and tracks the back of Jean-Do's newly visible head as he looks down toward the object of the group's gaze. There is only another black ink stain on the blue sheets. Narratively, this sequence presages Jean-Do's death while aesthetically it inscribes death in phenomenological terms. Jean-Do does not see a corpse but only a void. While a corpse would bear resemblance to his own motionless body, the black ink signifies that to be dead is to be without a body. More specifically, to be dead is to be without an embodied mode of perception.

Generative Flux

Jean-Do's fluctuation in focus between the sensory experiences he cannot control and the imaginative journeys he directs exemplify the relationship between spectator and screen. The spectator, too, cannot control what the film will impress upon their senses but is always free to associate those impressions with the layers of memory and imagination in ways that are uniquely their own. Christian Metz describes the power of this dynamism between perception and the imaginary :

> "The unique position of the cinema lies in this in this dual character of its signifier: unaccustomed perceptual wealth, but at the same time stamped with unreality to an unusual degree and from the very outset. More than the other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present." (250)

It is Diving Bell's embrace of this fluctuation between the perceptual and the imaginary that makes its portrayal of Jean-Do so rich and engaging. The film thoroughly places the spectator into an affective communion with the flicker between Jean-Do's body and mind. It demonstrates that this flickering does not necessarily maintain balance but that it is through such imperfect flux that Jean-Do's subjectivity finds its most poetic expression.

Chapter 4

Waking Up: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Consciousness in *Avatar*.

In December 2009, James Cameron's highly anticipated 3-D blockbuster *Avatar* was finally released in theaters. Twentieth Century Fox's $150 million international marketing campaign had aggressively promoted the film through online interactive trailers, a deluge of television ads and promotional partnerships with Mattel, McDonalds and Coke Zero (Stanley, 13). While critical reception of the film was mixed, it undoubtedly lived up to its hype in financial terms, earning $77 million in its opening week and ultimately grossing a record $2.7 billion. Much of the excitement surrounding the film came from the technical advancements in 3-D filmmaking led Cameron, who had established reputation in innovative uses of digital effects in films such as *The Abyss* (1989), *Terminator 2: Judgment* Day (1991) and *Titanic* (1997).

While the production technology behind *Avatar* is complex, the narrative is relatively simple. Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a paraplegic former Marine, goes to work for RDA, a corporation mining a precious mineral on the distant moon Pandora. He is assigned to inhabit an avatar body to negotiate the relocation of the indigenous Na'vi in order to facilitate this corporate mining project. RDA's military chief, Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), offers to help Sully have his spinal cord repaired in exchange for military intelligence on how to forcibly remove the Na'vi. Although Jake accepts this deal, he later falls in love with female Na'vi member Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) and comes to sympathize with Na'vi resistance against the company. In the eventual military showdown, Sully leads the Na'vi to victory and

they reward him by transforming him into the avatar so that he may live among them permanently.

Avatar employs disability for a qualitatively different purpose than *Midnight Cowboy* or *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly. Midnight* attends to the crisis of queerness in an environment of repression and *Diving Bell* addresses the exigencies of radically altered embodiment. In the first two films, disability functions as a means to feel through existential conflicts but in *Avatar*, disability acts a loose metaphor for the dysfunctions of Western imperialism. Jake Sully acquires his injury in imperialist warfare in Venezuela making disability emblematic of the consequences of capitalist expansion. The particularities of Jake's paralysis have little relevance to the film. Instead, paraplegia symbolizes war's destructive use of technology while environmentalism's peaceful use of technology rehabilitates both Jake's attitude and his physical capacities. In *Avatar* disability is nothing more than a symbol of the deficiencies of the Western world from which both Jake and the audience desire escape into the dazzling paradise of Pandora.

It is a film concerned with both the perils and progressive functions of technology. There is an overt parallel, actively promoted by Cameron himself, between the use of special effects to promote environmentalism to the film's audience and the use of avatar technology within the film to convert Jake Sully from imperialist soldier to environmental crusader. Cameron has endorsed the film in connection with his advocacy for a group of indigenous Brazilians to thwart the government's construction of a dam that would cause devastating floods. Cameron described the dam a "quintessential example of the type of thing we are showing in

'Avatar' — the collision of a technological civilization's vision for progress at the expense of the natural world and the cultures of the indigenous people that live there" (Barrionuevo, 1). In Cameron's formulation, there is much more at stake in the expensive investment of 3-D technology than box office returns. As a component of his vision for environmental sustainability, the stunning dreamscape of *Avatar* is also meant to change hearts and minds about its real-world counterparts.

The importance of disability to the environmentalist story of *Avatar* seems to fit well with Snyder and Mitchell's notion of narrative prosthesis. After all, the entire plot hinges on Sully's desire escape from his disabled human form. Though it is not just Sully who is invested in escaping his disabled life. The allure of the enhanced cinematography also invests the film's audience in escaping the clinical light of RDA's base to the colorful digital landscape of Pandora. The technology is intended to provide escape and environmentalist persuasion to any viewer.

Avatar's vivid 3-D technology advanced the intensity of immersion to the extent that some viewers reported being depressed by their return to daily life. Waking from the dream of *Avatar* reminded them of how less adventurous, colorful and engaging their own experiences could be. One viewer wrote, "When I woke up this morning after watching *Avatar* for the first time yesterday, the world seemed ... gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, lost its meaning" (Piazza, 1). Just as technological wizardry makes the dream experience sensational for the film's audience, its science fiction counterpart within the film—the avatar biotechnology—also fosters a powerful sense of dreaming.

The concept of 'waking up' implies that one existence must be the dream and the other reality. As a reward for his courage, Jake Sully is allowed to make the able-bodied dream of his avatar life into a permanent reality and his disabled life in Western society is simply a nightmare to be forgotten. The use of paraplegia as a symbol for the intolerable excess of imperialism inscribes disability as a form of punishment. As Susan Sontag has written, "Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning—that meaning is invariably a moralistic one" (58). The reduction of disability to moralist symbol forecloses on the multiple meanings of embodiment as ambivalent. As a metaphor for the dysfunctional culture being critiqued, disability is only important to the film as a signifier for what must be escaped.

The film organizes itself around Sully's desire to escape his disabled body for the exceptional abilities of the avatar. While foregrounding the desire to regain bodily function and sensation is a common trope it is not an uncomplicated one. At the root of this representation is the assumption that the disabled body is only defined by lack and does not possess intrinsic value in and of itself. This reduction relies on what Robert McRuer has termed "compulsory able-bodiedness." Adapting Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality, McRuer argues that able-bodiedness is a cultural standard to which all people are expected to adhere. Noting that definitions of able-bodiedness consistently rely on the presence of disability in same way that heterosexuality is defined in opposition to homosexuality, he argues that the power dynamic integral to this binary presumes that "able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we are all, collectively,

are aiming for" (386).

Avatar relies on compulsory able-bodiedness in both how it approaches cinematic technology and in its use of disability in the narrative. The technology of 3-D cinematography relies on abilities of depth perception that are often unreliable but are important to the emotional investment of the audience. Correspondingly, the emotional investment that an audience places in Jake Sully is such that paraplegia functions as a sort of affective device. By centering his joyful waking, the film asks us to feel particularly happy for Sully escaping disability. The story relies on an affective logic in which transcendence to able-bodiedness is both the means to racial reconciliation and traditional heterosexual romance. As such, disability in *Avatar* is not explored so much in relation to ambivalence but as something to be eradicated in order to resolve crisis and access particular cultural values.

Compulsory Able-bodiedness and Technology

The cinematography of *Avatar* utilizes a combination of technologies to achieve its digital effects. While all the scenes in the forests of Pandora (which comprise the majority of the film) are computer generated (CG), the production combined live action footage of the actors through motion capture with the CG imaging. To refine the performances of the actors, Cameron combined the motion capture system with a SimulCam viewfinder that could display how the footage would look when rendered digital rather than waiting for the postproduction. As virtual production supervisor Glenn Derry described it, "All of this could be seen in real time through the SimulCam's viewfinder and on live monitors on the set,

allowing the human actors to interact directly with the CG characters and enabling Cameron to frame up exactly what he wanted" (Holben, 36).

In addition to the refinement of performance, the intensity of the 3-D was enhanced by the technical sophistication of a special camera system incorporating eleven channels of motion and greater control of the interocular distance and convergence technologies that provide illusions of depth. The richness of *Avatar*'s imagery produced a cinematic experience groundbreaking for its enthralling qualities, for its ability to make its virtual world feel real. Interestingly, the approach to depth of field is counter to that of traditional cinema. André Bazin extolled the use of deep focus in the films of William Wyler and Orson Welles for capturing a level of detail that enhanced the spectator's engagement with the image. He claimed that by allowing the spectators eyes to search through the layers of detail required "a more active mental attitude on the part of the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress" than that of analytical montage (Holben, 35-36).

Conversely, too much detail can undermine the particular effects of 3-D cinema. As *Avatar* cinematographer Mauro Fiore remarked, "if you have too much depth-of-field and too much detail in the background, your eye wanders all over the screen, and you're not sure what to look at…. We strove to minimize the distractions in the background" (Holben, 45). The realism of 3-D virtual cinema has a fundamentally different relationship to depth than that of traditional filmmaking. Whereas Bazin credits depth of field for "reintroduc[ing] ambiguity into the structure of the image" 3-D's illusion of depth depends on a suppression of

ambiguity and a visual passivity in the spectator. To watch a 3-D film is to feel as though depth has leapt off the screen toward you rather than inviting you into its web.

Even to the extent that 3-D can make its story world a rich and engrossing environment, there is a certain limitation in its stereoscopic effects. In manipulating the binocular vision of its audiences, it requires a certain proficiency of sight to have a fully satisfying effect. If one possesses even moderate astigmatism or decreased visual capacity in one eye, the 3-D effect can make one more aware of a vision problem they have learned to ignore in daily life. This is a curious deficiency considering that vision problems are quite common in contemporary audiences who spend many hours of the day straining their eyes to absorb information from electronic devices. In this sense, 3-D technology is invested in a form of compulsory able-bodiedness.

In addition to vision, the immersion of 3-D also intensely engages one's sense of touch. While it is admittedly difficult to write about a 3-D film three years after viewing it in its proper form, what may be most memorable about the lushness of the virtual Pandora are the white, iridescent tree seedlings that seemed to magically float throughout the theater. These seedlings sometimes appeared so close that audience members sometimes reached out to touch them. Fittingly, they often appeared in the film's more tender moments such the moment Neytiri recognizes Sully as trustworthy and the scene in which the pair make love. As I will go on to discuss, the affective discourse of *Avatar* is central to not only its digital effects but also its use of disability.

Disability as Affective Device

Avatar is as much a story about changes of mind as changes of heart. In fact, as the trajectory of Jake Sully's character demonstrates, a shift in consciousness is inextricably bound up in the act of falling in love. When Jake is forced to confess his involvement with Colonel Quaritch to Neytiri, he explains, "At first it was just orders…and then everything changed. Okay, I fell in love. I fell in love with the forest, with the Omaticaya people, with you." As such, it is Jake's desire to leave his disabled body that leads him to an affective awakening.

For Jake Sully, this enhanced physical ability fulfills a dream alluded to in the first moments of the film. The film opens with an aerial shot gliding over a lush and misty rainforest. Jake Sully's voice narrates: "When I was lying there in the VA hospital with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying. I was free. Sooner or later, though, you always have to wake up." Immediately after this is a shot is of Sully opening his eyes inside a cryogenic chamber that has arrested aging during a five-year journey to Pandora. This sharp transition from the open green lushness of the forest to the confined blue-tinted austerity of the chamber accentuates the abrupt process of waking and underscores the limitations of his human embodiment. Thus, from the very outset of the film, the wilderness of Pandora is equated with a freedom from disability and the process of waking is a lamentable return to the realities of physical impairment.

Additionally, the film uses affective discourse to deploy the concept of waking in two key ways. One is that the affective bonds to nature facilitated by the avatar lead Jake to identify more as Na'vi than human and the resultant racial

transformation leads Jake to undermine the colonial project of RDA. Secondly, Jake's growing love for Neytiri and the Na'vi that empowers him to restore order and peace when rational debate between RDA's CEO Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi) and lead scientist Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) fails to do so. Ultimately, it is love that enables Jake to escape his disabled body and the dysfunctions of Western capitalism that it symbolizes.

White Guilt to Indigenous Love

In the climactic showdown between Sully and Quaritch at the film's conclusion, Quaritch sneeringly remarks to Sully: "How does it feel to betray your own race? You think you're one of them…Time to wake up." Quaritch references a key facet of Jake: that the avatar has propelled him to undergo a change in racial identification. Aesthetically, the film dramatizes this transformation through the racial distinctiveness of the Na'vi. Visually, the ten-foot blue Na'vi can be described as a "pastiche of the 'ethnic,' with recognisably human features" whose adornment includes beaded jewelry in the style of East African tribes, black dreadlocked hair, Amerindian clothes and bow and arrow weaponry. (Heaven, 1). The Na'vi are coded as Other or non-white in relation to the colonizing humans, who, despite their multiracial make-up are situated in the story as a dominant race congruent to white. What unfolds, then, is a story of a white colonizer working to save an indigenous group in which he seeks full membership.

While waking between human and avatar modes of consciousness is the product of technology, the spiritual dimensions of nature offer their own modality

for enlightenment. The Na'vi religion is a sort of nature-centered pantheism in which trees contain the uploaded memories of their ancestors. Seedlings from these sacred trees are looked upon as messages from their omnipresent deity, Eywa. When Neytiri first sees Sully she raises her bow to kill him but stops when a glowing white seedling drifts down onto her arrow. Taking it a sign that Sully is more worthy than other human invaders, Neytiri not only halts her attack but ultimately rescues him from a pack of alien wolves. After the initial meeting, Neytiri quickly grows impatient with Sully's lack of appreciation for nature but as they make their way along a tree branch, a gauzy cloud of seedlings begins to condense on Sully's body. The bewildered Sully stretches out his glowing arms in a Christ-like pose. Sully's newly christened body glows with a kind of sacred importance, which Neytiri appears to comprehend as clear evidence of his goodness. She responds, "you have a strong heart."

The image of Sully bathed in white light christens him as a savior figure and persuades Neytiri to bring him to her father, the chief of the Omaticaya Na'vi tribe. Significantly, Neytiri imbues his connection to the sacred with an assessment of his emotional strength. Having only just met him, Sully's possession of a "strong heart" is something Neytiri intuits from the spiritual seedlings. Also overlain in his christening scene is a racialized coding of whiteness. The pure white light is not just spiritually metaphorical but also symbolic of the film's racial dynamics. While Sully is in his blue avatar body, the whiteness of the seedlings marks him as distinct from Neytiri. As such, they reflect the binary opposition between Na'vi as racial other and humans as white colonizers.

Another principal distinction between the colonizers and the indigenous is their respective relationships with the environment. The mining expedition is an environmentally destructive mission while the Na'vi spirituality is based on intimate connection with the forest. While this aspect of the Na'vi posits them as environmental protagonists, it also plays a discursive function in their racial encoding. In a book chapter entitled "Savages, Animals, Heathens and Races," Jan Pieterse notes that 18th and 19th century European philosophers defined Africans as savages based on their imagined proximity to nature. Hegel wrote, "The Negro represents natural man in all his wild and untamed nature. If you want to treat and understand him rightly, you must abstract all elements of respect and morality and sensitivity—there is nothing remotely humanized in the Negro's character" (34). Pieterse further states that the iconography of Africans as savages was "determined by the association with nature and flora" and that explorers' fixation on Africa as wilderness led them to view it as "vacant land, essentially uninhabited or at least uncultivated, and therefore rightfully available to colonization" (35).

Between his initial deal with Quaritch and his shift in allegiance, Sully is transformed by falling in love with Neytiri and the Omaticaya. The decision to forsake human able-bodiedness for the love he has established on Pandora is a traditional melodramatic sacrifice but it is also the basis for Sully's racial transformation from an identity based in white guilt to one of indigenous love. Through a series of rites of passage, Sully becomes part of the Na'vi and the culmination of this experience is romantic fulfillment with Neytiri.

After studying the life of the Na'vi under Neytiri's tutelage, Sully succeeds in

mastering enough of their language, hunting techniques and cultural life to be admitted in the group through a tribal ceremony. Immediately after becoming an official member of the Na'vi, Sully and Neytiri make love under the sacred tree of souls, linking heterosexual love to both spirituality as well as racial harmony. As a crucial benchmark in Sully's attempt to transcend his humanness/whiteness, sex with Neytiri seals his position within the Omaticaya (they pair off in strictly life-long monogamous bonds). The sexual aspect of Sully's affective journey from guilt to love exemplifies what bell hooks has termed "eating the other":

> The desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection. Most importantly, it establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other. (25)

Sully's racial transformation is both a desire for a post-race moment as well as an outgrowth of the privilege of whiteness itself. Rather than a complete disavowal of whiteness, a romantic racial transformation privileges an affective departure from guilt over the political process of racial justice. An outcome of this approach is that the colonizing savior retains the privileges associated with their position and turns them towards a paternalistic redemption of the persecuted indigenous group.

Just as love is the basis of Sully's desire for a racial transformation, it also undergirds his ascent as an authority figure. When RDA brutally attacks the Na'vi, seeming to crush their spirit and will to resist, Sully charges in to revive them. Having subdued the largest winged steed in the sky, a mythic symbol of epic battles

for the Na'vi, Sully commands a position of military authority and subsequently rallies tribes from all over Pandora to unite in driving out the humans. As Sully makes himself over as Other, he sheds the guilt of his role of colonizer but not necessarily the privileges ascribed to it. For Jake Sully's character, love serves a narrative justification for his rise to power within the Na'vi. Glossing over the thorny issue of an outsider's right to assume authority is the affective logic stipulating that Sully's leadership springs from the depth of this love.

Compulsory Able-Bodiedness as a Pathway to Love

The important connection between able-bodiedness and heterosexual romance is an integral part of McRuer's theory of compulsory able-bodiedness. Sully's emotional arc toward love begins with his exceptional attachment to his avatar experience. Sully's emotional development through use of the avatars is firmly connected to his access to able-bodiedness. The avatar technology allows humans to wake up to bodies much taller, faster, and stronger than their own. Although all humans gain physical ability in the avatar bodies, it is far more pronounced for Jake. He gains full sensation and the ability to walk, things his coworkers simply take for granted. The emotional investment that an audience places in its central protagonist is crucial to the success of a film and it stands to reason that paraplegia functions as a sort of affective device.

When Sully first inhabits the avatar body, he is overwhelmed by the emotional impact of suddenly having sensation and mobility in his lower body. His avatar eyes flicker with glee as he wriggles his large blue toes. While avatar attendants urge him to sit patiently through their tests, Sully stubbornly refuses to

wait, ripping the monitoring cables off and lumbering to his feet. Slamming a hand on the observation window he sheepishly grins at the other scientists and then bursts out of the monitoring center to run jubilantly through the Pandora forest.

While it is only through the able-bodiedness of the avatar that Jake comes to fall in love with Neytiri, the romantic arc is defined by his willingness to sacrifice able-bodiedness. Indeed, the emotional arc of Jake Sully is an unambiguous distillation of compulsory able-bodiedness. Midway through the film, after Sully has developed a strong attachment to his life with the Na'vi, there is a pivotal scene of reflection. Lying in the cold blue-lit avatar chamber, Sully remarks through voiceover on the difficulty of distinguishing his human and avatar states of consciousness. Spending longer and longer hours as an avatar, he begins to feel that the avatar life is real and his human life is the dream he seeks to wake from.

After hoisting his body out of the avatar chamber and into his wheelchair, Sully pauses for a moment and tenderly clasps his atrophied legs.[4] Sully realizes he is torn between his growing allegiance to the Na'vi and his desire to become able-bodied. While in this future world it is possible to repair severed spinal cords, Sully cannot afford the operation. Somber music cues in this moment of reflection and as Sully realizes he may not be able to satisfy Quaritch. The refrain of waking returns in his voiceover: "Sooner or later though, you always have to wake up." Hoping to forestall war, Sully meets with Quaritch to ask for more time for a diplomatic

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[4] To provide the appearance of a paraplegic's atrophied legs for Sam Worthington, director James Cameron commissioned the production of prosthetic legs and post-production digitally edited out any trace of the actor's actual legs. The special effects team, Legendary Effects, created these prosthetic legs by casting the legs of an actual paraplegic man demonstrating quite dramatically the extent to which able-bodiedness is always defined by the presence of disability.

solution. Quaritch looks suspiciously at him and seems to doubt his loyalty. In shifting allegiance to the Na'vi over Quaritch, he may be sacrificing the opportunity to become able-bodied.

As such, the entire storyline of *Avatar* hinges on how Jake comes to decide which of these forms will be his reality and which will fade like a dream. He ultimately grounds his decision to fully identify with his avatar life on the basis of his growing love for the Na'vi. Love is the principal operating force defining the difference between dreams and realities. In the final moments of the film, the Na'vi gather as the Na'vi matriarch rewards Jake's sacrifice of love by transferring Jake's reformed consciousness from his disabled body to the avatar body permanently. Ultimately, the film does not force Jake to choose between the fantasy of racial transformation and able-bodiedness. He achieves both and it is in this regard that the ideologies of compulsory able-bodiedness and whiteness are mutually constituting.

Ultimately, the story of *Avatar* rejects the human body as capable of resolving human problems and instead positions a combination of love and technology as a solution to social strife. Cameron's desire for the technology of his film to have a similar affective impact on his audience appears to imply that the audience itself is in some sense disabled and that 3-D digital cinema can restore its capacity to enact change. The capacity of the machine to expand human ability is a central aspect of its allure. On the science of aviation, Bazin remarks: "Thus, the myth of Icarus had to wait on the internal combustion engine before descending from the platonic heavens. But it had dwelt in the soul of everyman since he first thought of birds."

(22) Do the technologies of digital cinema make it possible to transcend the limitations of the body or do they ultimately melt like wax? *Avatar*'s technical achievements certainly expand cinema's sensory engagement but its utopian address of social problems and compulsory able-bodiedness may well position its idealist objectives a little too close to the sun.

In summation, it is possible to reconsider cinema's engagement with embodiment by examining how films address disability. Analyzing the extent to which a film feels through an existential conception of disability or leans on a symbolic use of disability may also provide a generative approach for disability scholarship to examining film style. As an invocation of the unstable relation between body and mind, the presence of disability in film ultimately engages with the ambivalence of embodiment as a central paradigm of cinema.

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