

Book Review

Title: *The Problem Body, Projecting Disability on Film*

Editors: Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic

Publisher: Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010.

Hardcover: ISBN: 13978-0-8142-1124-3

Cost: \$69.95; 239 pages (inclusive of index)

(may find less expensive copy at online booksellers):

(Also available in electronic form as PDF file): \$9.95

The electronic version also makes it accessible to readers with disabilities who may use their own text-to-speech technologies or require large font size for viewing.

Reviewer: Raphael Raphael, Ph.D.

The Problem Body considers projections of the body with disabilities in film, examining both the ways that disability is ‘projected’ on film, as well as what viewers ‘project’ onto these images of disability. Through a wide variety of essays, covering different genres and time periods, *The Problem Body* illustrates some ways these imaginary images may become important ‘real’ parts of discourses of disability in culture.

The essays also show how, in the charged space of cinema, disability intersects with other markers of identity, including race, gender and sexuality, as well as nationalism. Examining King Vidor’s celebrated *The Big Parade* (1925), Timothy Bernard shows how disability and masculinity connect in post-war American cultural politics. Michael Davidson adds consideration of the slipperiness of disability in film, how sometimes disability can stand in for other “social panics” (he focuses on sliding identification with homosexuality in the film noir).

This *dis-ease* with the connection of sexuality and disability is also at the heart of Eunjung Kim’s investigation of intersections between prostitution and rehabilitation. On one hand, Kim suggests this connection acknowledges the sexuality of people with disability (a truth many films deny); at the same time it aligns uncomfortably close with a medicalization of the sexuality of people with disabilities, as hired sexual services often seek to ‘cure’ disability.

This interrogation of the presence of the medical model in films is key to the essays in *The Problem Body*. Dawne McChance suggests Francois Truffaut’s *Wild Child* (1969) offers a powerful example; the famed director places himself in the central role as doctor, illustrating ways cinema participates in the medical model as he (and the film) interrogates a disabled child for proof of humanness. Similarly, Johnson Cheu suggests *Wait Until Dark* (1967) dehumanizes ‘blind’ women and perpetuates stereotypes of disability. Likewise, looking at *Whose Life is it Anyway* (1981), Paul Darke catalogs ways the film’s medical model of disability dehumanizes its central disabled character, presenting disability as a fate worse than death.

As this pervasiveness of the medical model is largely invisible to many viewers, Robert

McRuer investigates the gap between universal acclaim for *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and its equally unambiguous condemnation by disability rights communities disgusted by yet another film equating disability with a fate worse than death. He also places the film in tension with the radically different experience of disability suggested by *Murderball* (2005). Examining the film adaptation of Margaret Edson's *Wit* (2001), Heath Diehl suggests that the only films that can really begin to come close to authentically conveying the personal experience of physical pain are films that admit that it is impossible to do so.

Examining the pervasiveness of the medical model in shaping narratives about the experience of disability, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder suggest much of this is a function of genre, as many genres rely on disability to buttress the fiction of the "normal" body. They suggest 'New Disability Documentary Cinema' offers a powerful alternative space to express counter-narratives of disability. In doing so, though, the authors overlook the many ways audiences (both disabled and non-disabled) create their own unique meanings in their viewing experiences of any film.

Anne Finger's coda to the book hints at this unpredictable power of audiences with her "ficto-critical" reading of film's relationship with disability. Her provocative essay is about how a viewer with disabilities experiences the film *Mata Hari* (1931). It suggests ways a film's *meaning* can change depending on the audiences watching. It is this plasticity of film—a flexibility for the most part not addressed by most of this collection's essays—that allows film to offer such powerful experiences to so many very different audiences.

The Problem Body is an important contribution to the field and is highly recommended to students and scholars interested in the ways disability and the medium of film have intersected. While wide-reaching, it could be enriched by greater attention to the ambivalence of this relationship. For the most part, the essays assume static, passive audiences who digest films' ready-made *meanings*. This valuable collection points to the need for even further exploration into how disability has figured in the many unique ways viewers create *their own* unpredictable meanings with film.

A short glossary of films mentioned in review:

The Big Parade (1925) - Successful silent film in which an idle rich young man is transformed by his experiences of the horrors of war. The film was groundbreaking for its depiction of a soldier who becomes an amputee.

Wild Child (1969) - The film by famous French New Wave director Francois Truffaut tells the story of young man found living in the wild in the late 18th century who gradually becomes successfully socialized.

Wait Until Dark (1967) - Thriller in which a young woman who lost her sight in a car accident (Audrey Hepburn) battles criminals who break into her home.

Whose Life is it Anyway? (1981) - Richard Dreyfuss plays a sculptor who becomes quadriplegic and argues for his right to end his own life.

Million Dollar Baby (2004) - Clint Eastwood's sports drama in which he plays a gruff boxing trainer who helps an amateur boxer (Hilary Swank) achieve her dream of being a professional. When she becomes quadriplegic from an injury in the ring, he helps her take her own life.

Murderball (2005) - This acclaimed documentary film is about quadriplegic athletes who play wheelchair rugby.

Wit (2001) - The film, adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize winning film of the same name, centers on an English professor and her experience coming to terms with metastatic Stage IV ovarian cancer.

Mata Hari (1931) - Greta Garbo stars in this loose adaptation of the life of the famed exotic dancer Mata Hari who was executed for espionage in World War I.

Raphael Raphael, Ph.D., is a film and media scholar/producer whose work appears in Modern Language Association's *Teaching Film* and is a contributor to *The Encyclopedia of American Disability History*. His most recent work includes *Transnational Stardom: International Film and Popular Culture* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013). He serves as technology faculty for American Community Schools, Athens and lectures for the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. He will be co-editing a special issue of RDS on disability and popular culture in Summer 2014 (with Holly Manaseri).