

Disability on Film: Confronting the Unknown

IDEoGRAMS Symposium 2009

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In this paper I am going to be discussing, primarily, the representation of blindness in film but this will be the case study disability for a developing wider discussion around how disability is represented and discussed in films and other art forms. As part of this engagement I shall firstly outline some historical and mythical continuities in how disabilities, and specifically blindness, are often represented but also begin to look at these ideas within the contexts of postmodernism and the disavowal of the imperfect body - how films which represent disability, ultimately, are dealing with social abjection and putting “forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard, 1983)¹.

However, before I go further, I want to pose a question: what is disabled? Is it a term which is universal and precise and what does it mean when characters and actors with a wide range of experience affecting issues are categorised under one label. At the end of the main body of the paper, it is to this I shall return.

Part One: Blinded by Mythology

Disability, in its many forms, has been represented for as long as humans have owned the visual and verbal vocabulary to represent it. How disability has been represented, by whom, for whom, and to what ends, has varied hugely. In the ancient world, few visual representations have survived but a notable exception is when the gods of the ancients have been represented and then *that* language has emanated down the aeons – such as the blinded figure of Justice, based on the blind Egyptian goddess Ma’at and the Greek goddess Themis eventually developing into the Roman goddess, Justitia. Justitia is the image we recognise today, with a blindfold, sword and carrying a pair of scales representing impartiality and punishment as demanded by society but Themis was more peaceful and was not blinded, as she was capable of prophesy. Regarding Ma’at, she, like many Egyptian gods was connected to the rituals of death and weighed the hearts of the dead (a heart that

¹ Lyotard, Jean-Francois (1983) ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’ from *Innovation/Renovation* Hassan, I and Hassan, S (eds) Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 71-82 in *Postmodernism: A Reader* ed. Thomas Docherty (1992) New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 46.

weighs the same as a feather – the feather in her hair - is good) and it is from her that we get the term Magistrate, in the end. As such, the blinding is a Roman device within the figure which has its own roots elsewhere, in the myths which shaped the ancient world's moralities. As Nicole Kelley confirms in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in*



Ma'at



Themis



Justitia

Biblical Studies (eds. Avalos, Smelcher and Schipper, 2007) “Blind persons ... often appear in both mythological and ‘historical’ literature as prophets, poets and musicians” (p41)² and this is a language of representation which has continued into the how blindness, for one disability, is being represented even today (just think of the presentation of Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder in music). Of course there are exceptions (David Blunkett, for example) but mythologies has preserved the imagery of disability in narratives as being something which is about replacing the lost human sense or ability with a super-human ability to access Truth. The presence of disability in many narratives is still about the process of revelation, genius and the pursuit of knowledge. Consequently, this kind of representational engagement can be read in many different ways too and lead directly into the key way I which the disabled person, the body of the disabled, is figured and transformed from human into mystic or super-human – the mystic, the wise man, the seer, the savant, even – what one cannot see in material reality once can see in a truth greater than that beyond the flesh. It is no accident that the seer is usually blind and that the image of the witch is often with one eye blinded (balanced between here and there, perception and truth, they can only see half-truths). Two examples of blinded connected to revelation are to be found to have powerful influences upon the language of disabled blind characters: the myths of

² Kelley, N (2007), ‘Deformity and Disability in Greece and Rome’, in Hector Avalos, Sarah J Melcher and Jeremy Schipper eds. *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. 31-47.

Teiresias and Oedipus. Both of which lead to a conceptualisation of blindness being a metaphor for punishment for witnessing or participating in something 'carnal' as well as a route to knowledge (itself paralleled to sexual knowledge within mythology) and therefore beginning to link ideas of the disabled body to Judeo-Christian guilt matrices). As Kelley continues:

There are at least two different explanations for the cause of Teiresias' loss of sight, both of which revolve around the notion that he was blinded as a punishment from the gods. In Callimachus' fifth *Hymn* [one version of the myth], Teiresias is blinded because he sees Athena [the goddess of war and knowledge] bathing. He receives the gift of prophesy as compensation after his mother Chariclo intercedes on his behalf. In another version of the myth attributed to Hesiod and reported by Apollodorus, Teiresias is blinded by Hera [Zeus' wife]:

There was a Theban called Teiresias. Hesiod says that he witnessed two snakes copulating on Mount Kyllene and when he wounded them he became a woman from a man, but when he observed the same snakes copulating again he became a man. This is because Hera and Zeus had been arguing about whether men or women derived more pleasure from sexual intercourse, and had questioned him. Teiresias had replied that if you think of sexual pleasure as consisting of nineteen parts, men enjoy nine parts and women ten. For this Hera blinded him but Zeus granted him the gift of prophesy.

(Cited by Garland, 1995: 100-101)

Kelley in Avalos et al (2007): 41-42.

In the myth of Oedipus, too, blindness is linked to carnal knowledge and the extent to which the myth has entered popular culture means that it cannot help but have an impact upon the representation of many relationships in the media (even subtly, in a space beyond the exact myth, the Freudian take on the myth impact upon everyday readings of people and language we can use in jest as well as in all seriousness). As a reminder, however of the original myth, and with my tongue firmly in my cheek, a little of the wonderful Tom Lehrer on the subject (3'42'')

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mScdJURKGWM&feature=related>

The difference between the blinding of Teiresias and Oedipus's disabling is clearly self-mutilation but, also, Oedipus's attack upon his own eyes is not the preliminary to a compensatory 'gift' such as prophesy but rather more about the metaphorical double meaning of 'seeing' as physical and intellectual activity. Oedipus has passed a line which should not be crossed and thus his blindness is a complete punishment. He is disabled as retribution for a sinful action. This is a concept which we think of as being very biblical and,

indeed, principally a Catholic concept: the punishment of sin through violence and we can also see links in both versions of the blinding of Teiresias with biblical narratives through the use of the snake as a device and also in terms of Teiresias as a classic 'peeping tom' rescued from the severest punishment by his mother. Consequently, blindness in both myths is functioning as a response to the idea of seeing what you should not see and of trying to gain knowledge of something which is forbidden: blindness the punishment for witnessing the primal scene and for challenging authority. Yet, because of the blinded figures of Justitia and Ma'at, women, blindness is also linked to positive human traits and particularly positive feminine traits through mythology.

Etymologically, the word Ma'at (or Mayet) is very interesting as most words which include this configuration of 'Ma' are linked to the ancient word for mother, from which we get mater and its descendents and Masis (the ancient Armenian name of Mount Ararat, meaning Mother and Sister of the land) and . In paleolinguistics, it has been demonstrated that there are a limited set of words and roots which can be found in many languages for key concepts: and mother is one of these. Linguistics has actually divided languages into five key areas in terms of language development: Africa, Western Eurasia, Eastern Eurasia, Oceania and Americas; and only a handful of words appear to translate across these borders revealing a truly ancient linguistic source. However, the point here is that the blinded woman is mythologically linked to concepts of life and death, to caring and judgement and to the pursuit of the truth within men's (people's hearts). This means that when we see women represented as blind in any kind of text, they are more commonly associated with empathy and the discovery of truths whilst when men are represented as blind, it is more typically associated with the idea blindness as the result of something misjudged, even if they are also framed as now wise. This thing which is 'misjudged' may not be something they themselves have done but it the result of something represented as negative – for example the blind child as a result of the parent's failures, or the man blinded by violence. When women are represented as blind, however, there is also a configuring of fragility and a sexualisation of the blind woman which makes her, often, the fetishised victim. In contrast, the blinded man is treated more critically, and, interestingly with more variety. There are three films in which we can see these differences. The first is *Blindness* the 2008 film by Fernando Meirelles and the second is *Blink* (which is quite well known in terms of its

fetishisation of the blind character - Michael Apted, 1994). The third film and set of characters I want to raise is *Red Dragon* (Brett Ratner, 2002) or, if you'd rather, the original version *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986). Most people know *Blink*, *Red Dragon* and *Manhunter* quite well, but *Blindness* has sailed under the radar for many, despite being a very interesting engagement with "what if everyone suddenly became blind but one person could see?" It is also a kind of *Lord of Flies* narrative in many ways too, in that it is about the lengths to which people will go to survive. As such, it is this film upon which I shall focus here.

In *Blindness*, Julianne Moore's character remains sighted but, for much of the film, pretends she cannot see. She is an actress experiencing the filmic double-bluff. Of all the characters, however, only two were blind before the disease strikes, and whilst one becomes the wise-man within the film (Danny Glover), the other finds himself in a position of undeniable power and, ultimately, corruption (Maury Chaykin), as the jeweller on Ward 3. In the film, the premise is that there has been an epidemic of blindness and ignorant of what has been happening and kept distanced by the army, who jumpily shoot at the blind in fear, a large group of people are restricted to a facility for "the infected". Visually, one cannot help but draw comparisons to the palette of 1975's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (another film in which disability is debated and represented) but Meirelles gradually shows the environment turning into a pit of despair, with excrement on the floor and people urinating against the walls. Into all of this, Julianne Moore's character (who has no name) has chosen to come in support of her husband, an eye doctor played by Mark Ruffalo (who has seen a number of the first cases in his clinic). The fact she can see makes her occupy the position of us the spectator and one of the most important things in any film is the answering the question of how is the audience encouraged into the narrative. Here is it through her sight. Another key issue is how are empathy and sympathy encouraged with characters? Cognitive theorists in film, such as Murray Smith, have centred this process upon recognition, a visual property and, despite *Blindness* being an independent film with many financiers, this is achieved through casting two of the most recognisable actors in the roles of the men who were blind before the epidemic, especially Danny Glover. Ironically, in visual terms for the audience, the film draws on stereotypes of visual reading to construct narrative expectations of these two men, with Chaykin's corpulent figure a short-hand of extreme indulgence in contrast to

Glover's homeliness, dressed in a tweed coat and flat cap. This visual language is interesting because it pulls attention all the closer to the fact that touch is more important than sight in the film, along with the lack of touch, and a number of the characters wander the hospital wards un-embarrassed naked. Glover is also established right at the beginning of the film, in the doctor's surgery, as kindly, as he says to a protesting woman that she should let the *film's* first victim of the epidemic see the doctor first because "he is worse off than us". Each man is associated with the two key wards in the facility; Ward 1, in which the doctor and most of the other characters we meet before their institutionalisation 'live' is where Glover's character resides and Ward 3, where Chaykin's character stays, and where a pimping barman, played by Gael Garcia Bernal, becomes the villainous, sadistic, King of Ward 3. However, the drama within the facility is centred upon the bartering of, first, jewellery, for the food held by Ward 3 and, then, the rape of the wards' women for food. Of the jeweller, when the doctor realises he is blind, the King of Ward 3 says "He was born blind – that should make him some kind of superhero... he is not good, he is not bad". Yet, by association and through his participation in the rapes, even though couched in a strange kind of sincerity in asking "can I suck on your nipples a little", he is completely immoral. The men of ward 3 kill one woman, described as a "dead fish" and so Julianne Moore creeps into the ward and stabs Gael Garcia Bernal's dictator with scissors she has secreted.

There is only one voice-over narration in *Blindness* however, and despite Moore's centrality for the audience's perspective upon the film, that narration comes from Glover's blind man and firmly asserts the process of recognition and empathy creation with the blind character. This ensures that, from this point on, which is just before the bartering commences, the audience becomes a little distanced from Moore and she is not quite the complete seeing 'angel' she has been established as up to this point. In other words, the technique brings the audience closer to the philosophical engagement of the narrative whilst simultaneously permitting the doctors' wife some character freedom to go beyond the emergent stereotype. Here is the scene in question.

CLIP from *Blindness* – 2 mins

However, what we 'see' in *Blindness* still conforms to the imitation of the unrepresentable. The actors went to 'blind school' to learn how to perform blind and were taught by blindfolding them. As such, the performances are realistic because they are grounded in empathy and not sympathy. In this sense, the representation of the unrepresentable is not a representation of blindness but of abjection (which in *Powers of Horror* is clearly configured in the terms we see in the film, people placed on the edge of society and associated with nakedness and filth, with practically all biological functions being referenced in the film whilst at the facility). This links into Lyotard's description of "modern aesthetics" which is "an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognisable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (Lyotard, 1983 in Docherty, 1992, 46). To unpack this, what we are seeing is blindness imitated by actors, filling the gap of the missing content because their performance is grounded in empathy, making it realistic but, because visual languages which audiences recognise are being used to construct and communicate the narrative, the consistency of the form makes the narrative less challenging. It may not be pleasurable in the usual sense of the word but it is pleasurable in a filmic sense because how the blindness itself is represented, as a white-out, is acknowledged in the film as not blindness is the usual sense, of black-out: it makes the representation of going blind artistic, sublime and surreal within the realism of performance and is inherently theatrical.

Part Two: Representing the Un-presentable

For the unrepresentable to be postmodernist, and challenge the totalitarianism of realism in art, Lyotard seeks the "unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (ibid, 46). In representations of disability on film, I believe we are yet to see this achieved satisfactorily, although it has been attempted. What is inherently required for this achievement is for the film form itself to fragment our expectations of a narrative about disability and to truly attempt to gain an audience's complete comprehension. For a film about blindness, an experience which cannot be seen or which is filmed with a camera lens

imitating the specific perspective would be a model and, in this respect, would immediately be identified with art cinema or an art film designed for exhibition. Even the wonderful sculpture of Alison Lapper which sat on the fourth plinth at Trafalgar Square did not quite achieve this because it utilised a familiar form and context, the marble nude.



Alison Lapper Pregnant (Marc Quinn, 2005)

Another key issue in this respect of achieving what Lyotard would like in order to challenge our formulaic solace in reality, has to be the use of non-disabled performers for disabled characters. Ironically, this is a result of the tension between what used to be the common presence of those who are other-abled in entertainment more widely and the absence of these actors and performers, until recently, in film, television and theatre beyond those who have played the seven dwarves in pantomime, something which the recent series *Psychoville* (BBC, 2009) played with wonderfully in the narrative. A film which most audiences are deeply uncomfortable with now is Tod Browning's *Freaks* from 1932 because of the automatic assumption by audiences that the very fact it using the word 'freaks' means it is itself primarily negative about the characters. Ironically, however, the film's real intent was to criticise the 'normals' attitudes towards the circus performers and the film fits

into a particular kind of 1930s 'morality play' genre in which filmmakers tried to challenge prejudices, including *I Am A Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (also 1932, Mervyn LeRoy) and *The Good Earth* (Sidney Franklin, 1937). Today, the presentation of disabled actors on screen, however, is still very limited and, sadly, most are still placed into the visual boxes from which they should have been removed by now. Notable exceptions are there, and are often applauded for their performances in a strangely condescending way ("Oh, you can act, how wonderful"!) but it is in television that we see more successful examples of taking the disability as part of the character but not the role's entirety or even focus. *Eastenders* (BBC TV) is introducing a disabled character played by David Proud, who has Spina Bifida, and it is a few years now since Luke Hamill was on *The Bill* and was this month on *Casualty* (he was put in a wheelchair following an accident), and Paul Henshall in *Holby* as a student doctor who has cerebral palsy and has been quite successful in other series too. It is also notable that the web-editor for *Big Brother* has a form of dwarfism and was been a regular presence on *Big Brother's Little Brother* in 2009 and Frank Gardner (injured in the line of duty and in a wheelchair) and Neil Prior (who is blind) are regularly seen on television with no real questioning now. That said, Prior was a regular on radio for many years before the television news used him on camera, and the reasoning for this was debated in the press at the time and we cannot discuss this topic without considering the case of Cerrie Burnell in February of this year accused of "scaring children" by a malicious campaign of prejudiced parents. Gladly, the case has done her career a lot of good and she is now regularly seen on shows such as *The One Show* in a capacity which has nothing to do with her disability, just as she had been cast for her presenting duties on CBeebies.

Still, however, the form that Lyotard would seek seems impossible in the narrative forms outside of art. What we have to seek instead is a reversal of the Kristevan abjection and dejection of disability and disabled characters and performers in film. The *presentation* of the disavowal of abjection permits the representations on screen by able-bodied actors, such as Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989) and James McAvoy in *Inside I'm Dancing* (Damien O'Donnell, 2004) but also the presence of actors who are disabled on screen as characters who happen to be disabled (as in the case of the characters in *Psychoville*).

Explain Psychoville in more detail.

Lastly, now, I shall come back to that question I asked at the beginning: to remind us –

What is disabled? Is it a term which is universal and precise and what does it mean when characters and actors with a wide range of experience affecting issues are categorised under one label?

Notes for this discussion:

Foucault and categorisation – is the categorising of sexualities model seen in the categorising of disabilities?

Disability and terminology: disabled, other-abled, cripple, spastic etc... these are problematic and imposed upon people. How can the language of disability be taken possession of by the only people who really know what it means?