Disability on Film: An Exploration of Film Codes' Obstructiveness in *City Lights* and *Children of a Lesser God*

Le handicap au cinéma : Une exploration de l'obstruction des codes cinématographiques dans *Les lumières de la ville* et *Les enfants du silence*

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Abstract
Looking at two films that center upon a sensory disability (Chaplin's *City Lights* and Randa Haines' *Children of a Lesser God*), I propose that despite many gestures of sensitivity, these films reinforce an othering of the non-normative subject through conventional film codes and conventions. For example, in Haines' film, the protagonist James Leeds (William Hurt) delivers a lecture on facing his deaf students so that they can read his lips. However, this scene is shot with his back turned away from us (the viewer). Rather than presenting an instance of irony, moments like this reinforce notions of normativity. Specifically, it's the mechanism(s) behind and within film production that reinforce problematic notions of "normality" while trying to trump them.

En regardant deux films dont l'histoire est centrée sur un handicap sensoriel (*Les lumières de la ville* de Charlie Chaplin et *Les enfants du silence* de Randa Haines), je propose que malgré de nombreux gestes de sensibilité, ces films renforcent une altérité du non normatif à travers l'utilisation de codes et de conventions cinématographiques traditionnels. Par exemple, dans le film de Haines, le protagoniste James Leeds (William Hurt) donne une conférence sur l'importance de faire face à ses étudiants sourds afin qu'ils puissent lire sur ses lèvres. Cependant, cette scène est tournée de manière que lui-même nous (le spectateur) tourne le dos. Plutôt que d'être présenté comme des exemples d'ironie, ces moments renforcent les notions de normativité. Plus précisément, ce sont les mécanismes derrière la production cinématographique et au cœur de celle-ci qui renforcent les notions problématiques de normalité tout en essayant de les éclipser.

Introduction

Michael Davidson's 2005 talk, entitled "Nostalgia for Light: Being Blind at the Museum" (later published), focused on recent exhibits and colloquia exploring the relationship between blindness and museums. His overarching theme was that the blind have a great deal to teach the sighted, "not only about blindness but about seeing and the assumptions that sighted persons bring to the larger cultural field" (Davidson 2008, 143).

For instance, Davidson says the ocularcentric focus of modern art (the tendency towards privileging the visual in art if not interacting with art solely through the visual field) is challenged when we consider the work of blind photographers.[1] His overarching claim is that these exhibits "re-site" the visual through the very technological means by which modernist ocularity was created. He claims, "in their work the meaning of the photograph is diverted from the developed print to the discursive processes that precede and accompany the clicking of the shutter. In each of these cases, the great theme of modernist defamiliarization is revived to ask for whom is the familiar familiar and by what presumption of access is it made strange?" (Davidson 2008, 145). Hence it is through the discursive *process* of photography (and not the photograph itself) that the familiar can be questioned. It needs to be questioned as the process of defamiliarization itself typically carries with it a historic bag of biases and exclusions.

Davidson further extends this argument (somewhat implicitly) to include cinema in his 2008 book *Concerto for the Left Hand*. With a particular focus on film noir, he explains how disability on film subverts the viewer's gaze insofar as disability "surrounds the body with a visual spectacle that exceeds the narrative's ability to contain it" (Davidson 2008b, 61). Thus,

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[1] This includes photographers such as Evgen Bavcar, Flo Fox, Paco Grande, John Dugdale, Kurt Weston, Pedro Hidalgo, Alice Wingall, and Ryan Knighton.

even the representation of disability onscreen challenges a traditional ableist gaze. Again, he breaks past the technological capture of the image to question the discursive practices around it.

The camera (especially the film camera) contains ultra-standardized codes and conventions. Film codes are typically deconstructed into symbolic and technical codes, while convention simply refers to some way of doing something. What's most important to realize is that these behaviors and ideas are so standardized and embedded into our collective experience of film that they often go unnoticed.

In fact, film and photography are the "technological means" that Davidson explicitly references above. The catalyst for this article is the question of how a sensory medium such as film can address sensory disabilities with empathy and understanding, particularly when rendered alongside the consideration that they provide some of the biggest windows into a given disability for society at large.

I want to stress the importance of this last detail, namely that film is one of the largest-reaching forums for popular discourse. In Tom Shakespeare's 2002 exploration of the social model of the British disability movement, he provides several questions as to the difficulty of communicating to the world at large.[2] Similarly, Sally French notes the difficulty of the British model, writing:

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[2] Both the North American and British social models of disabilities can be traced back to the 1960s. The former is linked to the Disability Rights Movement (DRM), which developed in tandem with the Civil Rights Movement from the same period against racial segregation and discrimination. This model incorporated and related many civil rights concepts to the segregation and discrimination enacted against disabled people. Disability was seen to stem from "the failure of a structured social environment to adjust to the needs and aspirations of citizens with disabilities, rather than from the inability of the disabled individual to adapt to the demands of society" (Hahn, 1986, 128). Hence, this approach could be said to take a minority group rights-based approach, one "based on the individualization of disability" (Siebers 2002, 49). It is therefore often seen to omit the UK social model's focus on oppression, particularly as a result of societal more and structures. The North American model has received a fair amount of criticism, one of the most repeated criticisms being that "by concentrating on human rights, the problems faced by disabled people may be further exacerbated rather than solved" (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011, 1385). Regardless, the present analysis will not be conducted through a primary lens of discrimination. Instead, it's more analogous to the UK model insofar as it relates to the exploration of a structured status quo (here film codes instead of social environment) that marginalizes the disabled.

> It is no doubt the case that activists who have worked tirelessly within the
> disability movement for many years have found it necessary to present disability
> in a straightforward, uncomplicated manner in order to convince a very sceptical
> world that disability can be reduced or eliminated by changing society, rather than
> by attempting to change disabled people themselves. (French 1993, 24)

The difficulty of communicating to the world at large is only exacerbated by typical disability

narratives in which the plot revolves around the "fixing" of a disabled individual. Hence, film

can (potentially) be leveraged as a powerful tool to talk about dis/ability.

That said: is it an inherent paradox to use a sensory medium to quite simply "talk about"

sensory disabilities? I'll explore two films in exploration of this question -- Charlie Chaplin's *City

Lights* (1931) and Randa Haines' *Children of a Lesser God* (1986). While I have no desire to

demonize either film, I hope to show that the manner with which the film medium is utilized

often undercuts an otherwise (relatively) well-intentioned discussion of disability. However,

through a metaphorical lens, these films often *do* provide jumping-off points to productive

discussion and dialogue about disabilities.

These two American films exemplify two very different periods of American cinema

(early silent film and contemporary film). They were chosen for this analysis for a number of

reasons. First, they were both critical and commercial successes and thereby exist as powerful

vehicles to speak about disability insofar as cinema is a popular medium. Second, they exist

alongside an array of notable disability movements in the United States. *City Lights* (1931)

preceded an onslaught of disability rights regarding blindness.[3] Roughly fifty years later,

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[3] The items referenced here include the following: in 1935, the Social Security Act became U.S. law, providing
federally funded old-age benefits to states for assistance to blind individuals (as well as extending existing
vocational rehabilitation programs that benefited the blind). A year later, the Randolph-Sheppard Act became law,
which mandated a priority to blind persons to operate vending facilities on federal property (later amended in 1974).
The Wagner-O'Day Act was enacted in 1938, which mandated that U.S. federal agencies purchase products from
workshops for the blind that met specific qualifications. Lastly, 1940 (roughly a decade later) saw the formation of
the National Federation of the Blind in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania by Jacobus Broek and many other supporters.

Children of a Lesser God (1986) was similarly released a few years before the Americans with

Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) passed; its release was at the height of the campaigning *for* the

ADA (and also saw the groundbreaking casting of a deaf actor in a major role). Finally, these

two films were chosen as they were released during two different phases in disability history as

defined by Finkelstein (1980) and followed by similar theoretical delineations of history by

Oliver (1989) and Gleeson (1997). It is the second phase of industrialization from the 19th to 20th

centuries, roughly contemporary with *City Lights* (1931), that Finkelstein sees as most excluding

the disabled; those who did not fit within a Foucauldian disciplinary factory were discarded.[4]

Finkelstein argues that it was not until the third phase that there was a liberation of disabled

people through the utilization of technology (Finkelstein 1980). *Children of a Lesser God* (1985)

was released during this period; however, as this analysis will point out, many of the same ableist

tendencies within film codes and conventions still operated to (rather ironically) exclude disabled

viewers.

City Lights

City Lights is Charlie Chaplin's 1931 mostly silent comedy that many consider his *magnum opus*.

Its plot consists of Chaplin playing his typical Tramp figure who comes across a blind girl selling

flowers. He instantly falls in love with her, and the larger storyline consists of him attempting to

pay for an operation that would grant her sight.

I first want to explore the figure of the blind girl. In his "Autobiography as Performative

Utterance," Michael Bérubé marks the importance of autonomous self-identification. He argues

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(**cont'd from note 3**) This federation would advocate for numerous rights for the blind, including white cane laws and input from blind people for an array of programs for blind clients.

[4] Notably, Chaplin's Tramp can also be considered a symbol of exteriority to this system as well, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

that self-representation serves not only the personal but the political function of declaring a self as worthy to be named. "Owning" an identity disrupts the kind of dehumanizing ideologies that equate disability with inferiority (Bérubé 2000).

In Chaplin's film, it is worth questioning what autonomous self his heroine presents. The first complication to her character is that she is simply billed as "The Blind Girl." Her lack of even a proper name is slightly disconcerting. Now, in fairness, nearly every character is identified with some description of their character instead of a proper name. However, her lack of ever asserting a clear self via a name alone does seem to touch upon a larger issue.

Namely, running behind this narrative is the entrenched connection between "seeing" and "selfhood," whereby the blind are stereotypically construed as lesser or helpless characters. For instance, when the Tramp returns to the Blind Girl's apartment after becoming a street sweeper, he finds an eviction notice given to the girl and her grandmother. After reading the message aloud to the girl, he vows that he will pay the rent. To briefly play Devil's advocate, this film *was* released during the Great Depression and benefactor narratives were not uncommon - and often played quite well with audiences. Nonetheless, whatever the reason, it is hard not to see the stereotype of helplessness attributed to this blind character.

But there is an even greater *narrative* stereotype behind this character. Georgina Kleege writes of her aversion to the word "blind:" "But I did not use the word. I was not blind. Blind people saw nothing, only darkness. Blind meant the man in the subway station, standing for hours near the token booth, tin cup in hand, a mangy German shepherd lying on a bit of blanket at his feet" (Kleege 1999, 17). Similarly, Rod Michalko challenges the singular understanding of blindness: "I drew a distinction between living *with* blindness and living *in* blindness," stating, "living *in* blindness allows for the possibility of many blindnesses" (Michalko 1999, 174, 182).

The word "blind" does not (and should not) only contain a flat stereotype; it is quasi-narrative and remarkable in its fullness of narrative detail. While the girl in *City Lights* (1931) is not at a subway station holding a tin cup, she is on a street corner holding flowers. In a way, she's pre-narrativized.

In "From the Mute God to the Lesser God," Lois Bragg contests this treatment with that found in Old Norse and Celtic literature, in which what we would call "disabilities" nowadays are presented in a much different fashion. In this archaic literature, he notices a general disinterest in how impairments might affect a character's competence (Bragg 1997). While there does seem to be some desire for cure in these myths, there is little in the way of recognizing impairments as medical conditions and much less in the way of marginalizing pity and/or consequent charity.

This is not the case with *City Lights* (1931). While at her apartment, the Tramp sees a newspaper ad by a Viennese doctor who claims to provide an operation to cure blindness, forming what Darke calls a "normality drama" (Darke 1998). Essentially, this term refers to storylines which focus upon the effort to "cure" disability in one way or another (in this instance, the Tramp has undertaken the goal of curing the girl's blindness).

Nordern argues that disability was over-represented in silent movies. Moreover, not only did approximately one-third of all films have some disability content, but most of these featured some effort to cure the disabled (Nordern 1994). He writes:

> From 1912 to 1930, a time-frame that included a handful of disability-related feature films made before the war and, at the opposite end, the earliest sound films, the industry produced approximately 430 feature films with disability themes. Of that number, about 150, or 35 percent, had their disabled characters eventually gain or regain the use of their sight, hearing, legs, etc., through corrective operations, God's will, or sheer good fortune (Nordern 1994, 58-59).

City Lights' plot is one exemplar of the medical perception of disability prominent during this time period (and lasting well after). Hughes notes that medical experts have historically sought different ways to regulate disabled bodies, primarily focusing on ways to "fix and improve the 'performance' of broken bodies" (Hughes 2002, 63). Moreover, "virtually every medical issue affects persons with disabilities as advances in medicine are often described as new tools for 'fixing' disabilities" (Jaeger & Bowman 2005, 124). In fact, Cumberbatch and Negrine carried out a statistical analysis of contemporary images of disability in 1992. Their findings claim that the vast majority of these images are ones of "medical triumph" and/or a story in which one bravely overcomes the struggle to be "normal" (Cumberbatch et al. 1992).

The motivation for "fixing" was not solely medical but also social; this model perpetuates the notion that to have a disability is to be broken and unable to socially engage in "normal functioning" (Hughes 2002, 40). In many ways, the disabled were delineated as those who were unable to function within the factory system of the early 20th century, which in part connects the girl to the Tramp figure who also exists outside the working world.[5] Rod Michalko explicitly connects blindness to social deviance: "I began to see both blindness and sightedness as 'cultures' possessing different customs, norms, and belief systems. It was a small step from there to understand blindness in terms of the sociological dichotomy of deviance and conformity" (Michalko 1999, 4). As previously stated, *some* of this narrative could be ascribed to the Depression era at large rather than a problematic statement about the blind at large. However, even when considering the era, it is at this point where I believe conventional film codes in particular reinforce an "othering" of the non-normative subject.

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[5] During this period, "cure" was often used to indicate some medical procedure that would biologically erase a condition understood as a disability while "fix" was often used to describe one's reintegration not only into some biological sphere of normality but also into the capitalistic, factory sphere of working.

For instance, consider the physical appearance of the girl. In her series of narrative essays, Georgina Kleege writes of the ridiculous visual representations of the blind by the sighted:

> Looking sighted is so easy. For one thing, the sighted are not all that observant. And most blind people are better at appearing sighted than the sighed are at appearing blind. Compare the bug-eyed zombie stares that most actors use to represent blindness with the facial expressions of real blind people, and you'll see what I mean (Kleege 1999, 19).

In fact, Virginia Cherrill - who plays the part of the blind girl - was very near-sighted. Chaplin cast her in part because her unfocused gaze suggested blindness in his mind. However, this vacuous stare only reinforces a *sighted* image of cluelessness or inability.

As Kleege states, the sighted are not that observant – in this case, via the camera (Kleege 1999). Consider the scene in which Chaplin gives her the money he has acquired for her rent and surgery. We have a typical medium shot in which Chaplin and the girl are framed equally. The shot is steady as he counts off a wad of bills that he has in his hands - she's staring off in the aforementioned "lost" manner with her hands held oddly close to her chest. Her helplessness is on full display.

Chaplin then holds up two bills and the intertitle comes up reading "This is for the rent." I say her hands are held oddly to her chest as she would have no visual access to the amount of money the Tramp is holding up. Continuing, Chaplin's (and silent films') mimetic codes become even more disruptively normative. He points to the remaining amount of money, at which point an intertitle comes up reading "And this is for your eyes." Immediately after the intertitle, he points to his own eyes as a visual gestural clarification. Again, this is not for her benefit, but for

our benefit as onlookers. The silent film codes as embodied and performed here trump the film's

narrative logic.[6]

The conclusion to *City Lights* (1931) is heart-wrenching. Moreover, metaphorically we

can find precedent of Chaplin being equated with disability. The scene plays as follows: the

Tramp comes across the "Blind Girl" in front of a flower shop she now owns following the

surgery he bought her. Naturally, she does not visually recognize him, and he shyly scuttles

away. Yet, as she extends a flower out to him, she gently takes his hand in hers, prompting her

recognition. We fade to black on a close-up of Charlie agonizingly biting his finger so that his

characteristic speechlessness is not specified as bated breath.

In the "Abstract of a Critical History of the Cinema" Salvadore Dali very

problematically writes of "the infinitely prosaic gaze of Charlie Chaplin at the end of *City Lights*,

the gaze of a gentle *arrivisme* which has no other equivalent save that implied by odious blind

men or the phenomenal and stinking, pickled and vernal legless cripple" (Dali 2000, 67). Here,

Chaplin is equated with blindness and disability. Yet the problem with this analogy is that it is

not even a visual representation of blindness that Dali identifies, but the stereotype of

helplessness and marginalization itself.

Alternatively, we could claim that in this final shot, the acceptance Charlie could not dare

hope for is finally granted under the faux-cover of blindness, which the girl momentarily relives

through the camera's fade function. Calhoon claims this moment "allegorizes the society that

Charlie finds so elusive" (Calhoon 2000, 383). In some ways, Charlie's existence on the outskirts

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[6] It is worth mentioning the various levels with which the film could be read allegorically. For example, Kleege comments that "it's no accident that the eyes are the most often mentioned feature in love poetry" (Kleege 1999, 23). We might be tempted to say that there's an undercurrent that in granting sight to the blind girl, Chaplin is allegorically declaring his love. I'm reluctant to affirm this notion, but I do think it leads into a good thought exercise insofar as we can ask: why would Chaplin need to give the girl her sight?

of society is communicated via the mechanism of the film camera. Is this what Davidson (2008) was talking about in my introduction? I doubt it.

In fact, I would be reluctant to equate this experience to anything in our reality. Instead, I turn again to Kleege, who writes:

> Once, at a party, a man I was speaking to was almost reduced to tears to learn that I am a blind writer. There was a tremor in his voice as he kept repeating something about 'the word fading.' As far as I could understand it, he was picturing a page of print disappearing before my eyes word by word, as if written in invisible ink. It was a vivid image but bore little resemblance to my reality (Kleege 1999, 13).

Here, the film world literally fades, but if I may equate Kleege's experience with this allegorical moment, it is not much of a reflection of blind reality. I am not passing judgment but defining the lines of limitation of using a sensory medium to talk about senses. At best, this camera trick might work as an allegory for the sighted (and only the sighted).

There was a deleted scene from *City Lights* (1931) during which the blind girl fantasizes about what type of gentleman her savior might be. Naturally in a film medium, her imagination is presented *visually* as she imagines Chaplin in a white military uniform complete with hat and cape. Of course, this image once again is fully intended for a sighted viewer's benefit and *not* a true point of view of the blind girl. It operates according to the simplest of traditional film codes.

Calhoon further characterizes the operation from a psychoanalytic bent, "the surgery -- the *suture* -- that enables her to see does not diminish her naiveté: it merely naturalizes a perspective into which we are drawn" (Calhoon 2000, 402). That perspective *is* a naturalized perspective of film codes. Further, in film theory, the *suture* is the condition that arises when the audience relates to the film's field of view as if they were in control of the visual field. By doing so, the audience disavows the loss of its visual control and subscribes to the fantasy of its own

all-seeing gaze; the audience is affirmed to be "sighted". What may be allegorized by her surgery

is the medium of film itself (though, fully as a sensual medium of sight).[7]

I'll take a step back here and speak of some reluctance toward this approach. I ask: am I

simply falling back into what Kleege defines as the "Hypothetical Blind Man," a stock character

of western philosophical tradition who serves as a prop about theories of consciousness?[8]

(Kleege 2010) The danger of taking the blind girl as allegory is to dehumanize her in another

way. She is not subhuman per se but made to be nonhuman by an analysis that only speaks of her

in abstraction.

Another route might unfold as follows. Kleege writes:

> The visual studies scholar, highly skilled in understanding images, who loses
> some or even all of her sight, will not lose the ability to analyze images and to
> communicate her observations. Professor Mitchell's classroom exercise,
> 'Showing Seeing', assumes that some students will be better at the task, while
> others might improve their performance with practice, and in all cases their
> aptitude would have little (if anything) to do with their visual acuity (2010, 188).

Instead, "seeing" can be mediated through the telling of images. Inherent in this act, vision itself

becomes a topic to be seen and interrogated: "I would argue that Kleege's suppression of

personal revelation serves an important feminist argument, in that it calls particular attention to

the dynamics of gazing. Kleege makes *specularity* the spectacle, putting vision itself, rather than

her body, on display" (Mintz 2002, 157). If we turn the lens back on Chaplin, if we gaze at the

gaze, *then* we might have a route of analysis that is more conscientious of the disability being

portrayed in this film.

This, too, is not without precedent:

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[7] We could even connect this allegory to Walter Benjamin's "optical unconscious". Benjamin claims that just as psychoanalysis introduced a hidden layer of the mind, film reveals hitherto hidden layer of sight. Hence, the *suture* of the camera is an operation on a sighted viewer insofar as a new type of sight is granted, yet it is one wholly visual and soon coded by conventions.

[8] We find this briefly in the theories of Descartes, Locke, and Diderot for instance.

> If indeed Chaplin's gags unmask poverty as a "distortion of good living" [...] then the flower girl represents the vantage point from which the distortion is undone. She is the credulous spectator, divided off as a separate person and located squarely within the diegetic frame. Like Hamlet, she anchors a credible mimesis (Calhoon 2000, 402).

Hence, as a spectator, the blind girl could be read as an anchoring not just from which to look from, but from which to look at looking. Only in this sense does her character provide a useful allegory for the *sighted* -- even if the traditional film codes and conventions inhibit a truly empathetic lens to those who are blind.

Children of a Lesser God

Nominated for several academy awards, *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) was arguably the most mainstream movie about deaf culture in the last century. Speaking recently, Lennard Davis compared the recent demonstrations at Gallaudet University to the film, stating "they did more to launch deafness and deaf culture onto the national scene than any event since the release of the [film]" (Lennard 2007, 1). More so, according to the book *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Industry* (1988)*,* it was the first major motion picture since the 1926 silent film *You'd Be Surprised* to cast a deaf actor in a major role. Directed by Randa Haines and adapted from Mark Medoff's stage play, the film focuses on a hearing speech teacher James Leeds [William Hurt] and deaf custodian Sarah Norman [Marlee Matlin], who both work at a school for the deaf. Their conflicting ideologies on speech – he insists that she speak *verbally* – create the central tension in their budding romantic relationship.[9]

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[9] Although etymologically the name "Norman" simply means "northman," it is interestingly through the *sound* of the name that a connection might be made to such terms as "normal," "normalcy," "normality," etc. Medoff was certainly addressing this common concept in disability studies in his original play.

It is a conflict with a broad history. In his introduction to "Deafness and Insight" within *Enforcing Normalcy,* Davis writes, "'to speak of deafness' is, strictly, not what I shall do, since I do not speak at all but write. The act of writing is falsely given the qualities of sonic duration. That very paradox goes to the heart of this book" (Davis 1995, 100). Davis mentions that Derrida powerfully demonstrates in *Of Grammatology* that Western civilization has greatly privileged the oral form of discourse as *the essence* of language itself. Inasmuch as Plato described the written word as a "fatherless child," oral discourse has been seen to have primacy over other forms, being the origin from which these lesser forms spring.

Similarly, in *The Order of Things,* Michel Foucault writes:

> With alphabetic writing, in fact, the history of men is entirely changed. They transcribe in space, not their ideas but sounds, and from these sounds they extract the common elements in order to form a small number of unique signs whose combination will enable them to form all possible syllables and words. Whereas symbolic writing, in attempting to spacialize representations themselves, obeys the confused law of similitudes, and causes language to slip out of the forms of reflective thought, alphabetical writing, by abandoning the attempt to draw the representation, transposes into its analysis of sounds the rules that are valid for reason itself (Foucault 1994, 112).

Foucault's statement speaks to the impossibility of a written system tied to direct representation. In other words, it is impossible to form - or find - a collection of written words that naturally and directly tie to the thing they represent. Instead, it was only through the deconstruction of words into sounds and sounds into writing that the written word can exist. Hence, within these lines is the sentiment that the aural not only enabled language but the very *reflective capabilities* that come through such a system. The privileging of the aural extends beyond a mere sensory medium to a conceptualization of the very process of thought itself.

Sadly, this denial of non-aural language is something with an all-too-real history. The book *Forbidden Signs* (1996) by Douglas Baynton explores American culture from the mid-

nineteenth century to 1920 through one stinging tale: the campaign led by Alexander Graham

Bell and many other prominent Americans to actively suppress the use of sign language amongst

the deaf.

To some extent, Leeds' very presence in the school is seen by some characters as an

assault against sign language. In the first class session, Leeds attempts to get his deaf students to

participate in a *spoken* discussion by having them speak about a cheeky topic (suggested by one

of the students), "how to pick up hearing girls." Two male students stay outside of the circle of

desks. Leeds asks them: "how about you guys? Do you want to join us?" However, they maintain

their silence and another student clarifies: "They don't talk." The students not only remain silent

for the rest of the class but do not participate in class in *any other way*.

Davis further outlines:

> The first definition of silence in the Oxford English Dictionary is 'to refrain from
> speech,' and almost all the examples it gives are ones of a ruling male silencing
> subordinates […] The response to God is reverential silence…while on the one
> hand the deaf person might stand for the ideal reader, on the other deafness retains
> its traditional sense of absence of language" (Davis 1995, 110, 113).

Hence, deafness insofar as it manifests as silence is repeatedly put at odds with language (and by

extension, it is also put at odds with communication, connection, and empathy). As such, when

the two students refuse to verbally speak (to remain "silent"), they abscond from all participation

in the class whatsoever.

I will now turn to question how traditional film codes and conventions treat an

understanding of deafness even in a film that attempts to sensitively (and often successfully)

address deaf culture. Do these film codes perpetuate this aforementioned notion of "silence?"

Perhaps there is a self-awareness demonstrated in the film on the impossibility of using

traditional film codes from its very beginning. As the school Headmaster goes over Leeds'

resume in the first five minutes, he notices that Leeds was a disc jockey. "I used to broadcast in sign language," Leeds responds. It's a funny quip, but it *does* speak to a limitation of non-verbal speech across technology. Obviously, film has a visual component, but the question at hand is to what extent *its codes* effectively communicate or bar non-verbal speech. Secondly, during the first class session, we begin the scene with a slow pan across all of the "silent" students. We – the hearing audience – hear a protracted buzzing of some kind on the soundtrack. I speculate if this scene is a nod to the hearing. To me, the buzzing sounds like a power tool of some sort. As the camera pans, we see it is actually the razor of one of the students who is shaving in class. However, the sound is so prominent that I initially read the sound image as a class derailed by some nearby construction in the building. Naturally, this is a perspective that only a hearing audience could have, but that's the point. Even if the scene is not meant to be read as suggesting construction, the entire tone of the scene, the droning-on of the first day is communicated by the *sound* more than the image. This is a scene shot and constructed for a hearing audience.

As a romantic tale, *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) contains plenty of sentimentality. In an interview with *American Film,* its director Randa Haines was questioned as to how conscious she was of using the camera to convey very specific emotions. She responds: "where to place the people, in what environment, what it looks like if the camera's looking up or down. You're hoping that it will convey what you're feeling to other people. The thing about images -- and this is something I really feel strongly about -- it's important to be responsible" (Haines 1992, 18). She further elaborates, "People can surrender to the images we have created, and those images go inside their heads and stay there forever.... You're always looking for images that tell the story without dialogue: where you place the people" (Haines 1992, 18). In many ways, this is a discussion of cinematography and *mise-en-scène,* which is old hat for film scholars. However,

there's a dimension of social concern – namely, the responsibility she speaks of – that offers

fodder for reflection. In what manner is her directing *aware* of deaf culture in the face of

traditional film codes and conventions that are highly normative?

Shortly following the film's release, there was some criticism that the film was told

entirely from a hearing perspective and for a hearing audience. First, the film is not subtitled

(neither for the spoken dialogue or the signing). Instead, the signed dialogue is *always* (and I

would add rather awkwardly) repeated aloud by Leeds as if to himself. He's a type of surrogate

character for hearing audiences around which the entire movie is framed.

In his initial review of the film, Roger Ebert even succinctly commented that:

> I suppose this sounds like the complaint of a crank, but I would have admired
> *Children of a Lesser God* more if some of its scenes had been played without the
> benefit of a soundtrack. If a story is about the battle of two people over the
> common ground on which they will communicate, it's not fair to make the whole
> movie on the terms of only one of them. (Ebert 1996)

However, there is a counterpoint to this idea of "replicating" (and I use quotes very deliberately

around this word) the experience of being deaf worth noting. Baynton writes:

> As used by hearing people, 'silence' is a metaphor rather than a simple
> description of the experience of deaf people. Deaf people may use the analogy of
> visual clutter to understand noise, and blind people may use tactile sensations of
> heat and coolness to approach the idea of color. Such *analogies*, in the absence of
> direct experience, can promote understanding because they juxtapose equally
> complex phenomena; neither is reduced by the comparison. On the other hand,
> hearing people may plug their ears and sighted people may close their eyes and
> then, speaking of silence and darkness, use these experiences to try to understand
> deafness or blindness. But these *metaphors* are less helpful. Speaking of deaf
> people as inhabiting a world of silence is metaphorical rather than analogous
> because it is an attempt to understand the complex and abstract in terms of the
> simple and concrete (Baynton 1996, 23).

This is understandable. The approximation of hearing-loss that a hearing person achieves via

metaphor is only-ever abstract. However, this is not to say there is *no* benefit from an attempted

empathetic outreach, but it certainly delineates the shortcomings of such an act. The film does

not *try* to place the average viewer into a "deaf experience" (for lack of a better term). In other

words, the soundtrack never cuts out, conversations are never communicated off screen which

we have to catch up on, and a soundtrack plays consistently over the entire movie. The closest

thing we get to such a metaphor are scenes with Sarah in water, first seen about twenty minutes

into the film. Here, the soundtrack becomes *very* quiet - but not silent. The water may suggest a

type of sensory deprivation – it will cover our ears, and we will temporarily lose our hearing. A

close-up shot on Sarah's face suggests that we are to empathize with her in the water. However,

sound is used to indicate this silence – a long, ethereal note is played quietly over the scene.

Silence can only be suggested ironically through sound.

      Even still, there is even greater hypocrisy in the film's construction to be found beneath

the surface if one explores the (somewhat) unconscious film conventions often at play. To move

into this discussion, first consider a handful of scenes that address lip reading. In fact, in the

aforementioned first day of class scene, Leeds introduces himself after tipping over his chair as

follows:

> James Leeds: Hi. I'm James Leeds. My signing is rusty so how many of you can read lips?
> [*After a moment of silence.*]
> James Leeds: No one? OK. Class dismissed!
> [*Everybody leaves the class*.]
> James Leeds: No, no, no, no. Just testing, sit down.

Leeds speaks his name off-screen, introducing himself as visually inaccessible to a deaf viewer

(although we do see him sign the second sentence). In addition to this introduction, there a

handful of other moments that a little didactically touch upon lip reading.

One of the most compelling examples is when Leeds first introduces himself to Sarah. He approaches her intending to introduce himself: asking when she graduated and if she works at the school. They both wind up sitting in desks across from each other on opposite ends of the frame; the shot is framed at medium level such that both their bodies can be seen from the side. It is held for some time until Leeds proceeds to ask, "Are you reading my lips?" He does not sign when he first asks this question, and while I would not say it would not be impossible for a viewer to read his lips from the side at that distance, it's certainly not the easiest angle to do so. This scene was not shot for a deaf audience. In rebellion, Sarah doesn't respond to him. Leeds then states, "I don't think you are reading my lips." This time, however, he uses sign language to ask just as the camera simultaneously cuts to face him directly. In the context of the story, Leeds is clearly testing Sarah to see whether she could read his lips. However, there is a certain irony here that it is only in the shot in which a deaf viewer could easily read his lips that Leeds signs. In the shot in which lips could not be read, he does not.

The scene can be further analyzed through the lens of film conventions of symbolic framing. Two characters sharing a frame typically indicates that they share a connection. When the frame is broken, it can indicate a shattering of that connection – a fight a fallout, etc. Here the characters share the frame when Leeds speaks, unaware if Sarah can read his lips. As soon as the frame *breaks* to show each character individually, Leeds starts signing -- as if the signing itself was the break that separated the characters. Hence, implicitly it is the sound (at least via the lips) that brings them together, whereas the visual sign language seems to break them apart. In the context of the story, this makes a certain type of sense. It is only when Sarah is willing to speak verbally that the two connect fully. However, this framing also means that the deaf audience could only be welcomed into the scene during the break. In other words, the thing that brings the

characters together in the frame is the very thing that excludes the deaf audience out of the

frame. Once again, the film codes – even symbolically – exclude the very group the film means

to represent.

Later in the film, another school official, Dr. Curtis Franklin, chides Leeds as he gets

frustrated with Sarah: "Yelling at the back of a deaf person, very good James." However, there is

a hypocrisy to be discovered in the film production here insofar as this is shot exclusively for a

hearing audience: the film does not follow its own advice. Immediately following this scene, we

see Leeds descend a staircase in a long shot from his back. Obviously, when he speaks, we -- as

viewers -- cannot read his lips (nor would we be able to see him signing). We can only rely on

the aural dimension to understand is dialogue. The irony here is that the film itself is often

yelling at the back of a deaf person (so to speak). There is no empathy for deafness in terms of

the camera. Instead, we have a film (perhaps unconsciously) following the conventions of

filming an exit from the back (as opposed to requiring that all shots include a character's lips or

other similar message to make the scene accessible to the deaf).

Conclusion

I'll return to my opening question: to what extent and in what manner(s) can a sensory medium

such as film address issues of sensory disability? It seems that -- *at best* -- most films centering

on a disability provide a type of analogous understanding for those traditionally labeled "not

disabled." Obviously, both films more specifically represent American cinema in two distinct

periods. However, the analysis can easily be expanded to any number of films.

Moreover, due to its immense popularity, film can certainly provide a forum for social

discussion on disability. As stated, the grand popularity of both films upon release was the

reason they were chosen to represent their respective time periods as well as representing two of Finkelstein's three-phase history of disability rights.[10]

Further, technology has ensured that these films remain culturally relevant today through various means of availability (DVD/Blu-rays, streaming services, restoration processes, etc.), but perhaps more importantly for this article, technology has also made these films more accessible for disabled audiences. The first attested showing of a sound film with subtitles was the original screening of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) in Paris with French subtitles. However, subtitles were designed for *hearing* audiences as a translation whereas closed captions were designed for the hard of hearing as a transcription. In other words, they communicate *all* audio information (including sound effects, speaker ID's, and other such audio elements in addition to speech). These did not originate until the 1980s (roughly contemporary with *Children of a Lesser God*) and are now required by law for most programming within the United States. Afterwards, subtitles for the deaf or hard-of-hearing (SDH) emerged with the DVD industry.[11] Accessibility to the blind came even more slowly but is now becoming standard. "Described movies" refer to an audio description of the events on the screen intended for a blind audience. The first commercial DVD with this description was released in 1997. However, it was not until 2009 when Blu-ray discs began to include description tracks as a standard practice. The number of movies released today (reissues included) with description tracks is dramatically greater than roughly a decade ago. Hence, these films are far more accessible to a disabled audience now than at their release. It's important to consider how the film codes *within* the film might continue to produce access issues while technology *outside* of the film is reducing them.

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[10] *Children of a Lesser God*, the play, is currently experiencing a Broadway revival as of 2018.

[11] The only significant difference between SDH and closed captions is their appearance: SDH subtitles are often displayed with the same proportional font used as translation subtitles on the DVD whereas closed captions are displayed as white text on a black band (which can block a portion of the image).

If we look back to the social model theory of the UK, we see a distinction between *impairment* (an attribute of an individual body or mind) and *disability* (a relationship between a person with an impairment and society). Hence, there was a binary division created between the biological and the social (Shakespeare 2002, 15). Vaguely speaking, film can act as a forum between this division.[12]

However, there are the many limitations discussed. In short, traditional film codes and conventions are often ignorant in addressing a disabled audience even if the film takes disability as a subject matter. I would liken Liz Crow's (1996) criticism on the social model theory to what we find here: both fail to encompass the personal experience and pain which is often a part of impairment/disability.

Having said this, I conclude that it is *film theory* that can learn more from disability studies than vice versa. First, much as Davidson claimed the ocularcentric focus of modern art can be challenged when we consider the work of blind photographers, so can film codes and conventions be challenged when we consider disability discourse (Davidson 2008). First, we can "re-site" the visual as stated, adding a new dimension to the field of the visual *via* blindness. Much of this can be accomplished through an examination of the discursive processes that surround the clicking of the shutter. Applying this idea to film, a discourse on disability can add new dimensions to its production.[13]

Similarly, we can turn to Deaf-gain for an enlightenment of film codes and conventions. Bauman and Murray speak on how deafness grants unique visual fields: "[a]nother significant

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[12] Of course, it's worth noting that Shakespeare's larger criticism of the UK social model is that "people are disabled by society as well as by their bodies" (2002, 11).

[13] I deliberately avoid making a perfunctory list of all that these discourses can accomplish for several reasons. 1) Frankly, I don't believe I have the authority to speak on the delineations of such a discourse. 2) I think whatever those possibilities might be, they are numerous and the strength of such an idea comes from their number (which I do not want to inadvertently limit). 3) It's simply beyond the scope of this article. Its depth requires more than can be tacked on here.

area of future research in the area of Deaf-gain is the particular, highly developed visual ways of being in the world brought about by the unique sensory orientation of deaf individuals" (Bauman and Murray 2013, 248). Once again, the extent to which these visual fields can provide a "newness" to film and challenge often unconscious codes speaks to something larger than I can address. Overall, it speaks to a very enticing and interesting possibility.

In fact, Arijon even linked sign language to film production in 1991. He claims that sign language can be seen as a type of film grammar. It presents a constant tableau of close-up and distant shots, containing dimensions of camera movements and editing techniques (Arijon 1991). Baumann and Murray agree: "In addition to a traditional linguistic means of describing sign languages through phonology, morphology, and syntax, one may also see fluent signers as everyday filmmakers, a skill that is heightened in the literary and dramatic uses of sign language" (Bauman and Murray 2013, 250). Brooks even traces the gestural language of film to a richer history originating in 19th century melodrama:

> The articulation of melodrama's messages in this kind of sign language – and in verbal language which strives towards the status of sign language in its use of a vocabulary of clear, simple, moral and psychological absolutes – suggests the extent to which melodrama not only employs but is centrally about repeated obfuscations and refusals of the message and about the need for repeated clarifications and acknowledgements of the message (Brooks 1976, 28).

Well before film was even considered a possibility, Rousseau identified gesture as a type of first sign, "a kind prelangauge, giving a direct presentation of things prior to the alienation from presence set off by the passage into articulated language" (Brooks 1976, 66). This type of self-awareness of language and visual production can bring about a more conscientious discussion of language amongst other things. However, more enticingly, each of the above comments speak to the richness of viewing film codes as not *antithetical* to various cultures of disability (as the

above discussions of exclusion demonstrate), but actually *complimentary* to them, if not already

partially constituted on them. Ultimately this is a possibility in which continued discourse can

blossom.

A reflection of how film can address sensory disabilities is an important point due to

film's prominence in society -- if nothing else. Historically, it has brought discussions of

disability to a national stage, albeit through dominant, normative lenses which are only

reinforced via the filmic mode. An awareness of this occurrence is certainly important, and the

expansion of analyses like the above towards different time periods and geographic regions is

one fruitful avenue of study.

However, just as fruitful in the nexus of film studies and disability studies seems to be a

reflection on how the latter can challenge and modify these codes and conventions of the former,

when brought into conscious and focused discussion. The impact of bringing these two areas

together -- beyond the examination of a single work -- can establish new modes of interacting

with the sensory fields themselves.

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