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DISABILITY STUDIES

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With its depictions of future worlds and alternative societies, and its explorations of the limits and possibilities of the human (and non-human) body and mind, *sf* provides plenty of opportunities to question the normative ideas and taken-for-granted truths of present-day society. Much has been done by scholars, writers, filmmakers and fans to critically examine sexist, racist and homophobic depictions in *sf*, to reveal the ways in which the genre has reinforced biases and discriminatory power relations, and to demonstrate how such ideas and attitudes are culturally, socially and historically constructed. Until recently, however, few have critically examined and questioned how *sf* narratives depict power relations of disability/ability or ableism. Disability is often unquestioningly represented as an undisputed fact of individual bodies and minds, rather than as a socio-cultural phenomenon in need of critical scrutiny. *Sf* can showcase that the present-day biases and normative notions of disability are ideas that can be challenged, and that the future can offer other possibilities, while disability studies can further our understanding of individual *sf* texts and genre conventions.

This chapter conceptualises disability ‘not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice’ (Siebers 3). Such an approach does not seek cures or the elimination of disability but is instead devoted to studying the ‘social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and ask[ing] how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression [so as to attack] the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being’ (Siebers 3–4). This involves not only issues concerning disability and impairment but also the wider social system of power around disability and ability that, like gender or class, addresses both marginalised and privileged groups (Schalk ‘Resisting’ 137).

Disability and *sf*

Questions about disability have for a long time been the domain of moral and medical discourses, in which disability was conceptualised as either a divine punishment for sinful behaviours or a pathological defect. The moral discourse has been prominent throughout history, but the medical perspective originates from the mid-nineteenth century and eventually became hegemonic in societal views on disability (Goodley 7–8). From these perspectives, disability is solely considered an individual concern, a personal tragedy that requires rehabilitation, treatment and cures (Goodley 6).

Disability studies, a critical reaction to the dominance of these moral and medical models, instead understands disability as a socio-cultural phenomenon as well as personal, psychological and corporeal (Goodley 6, 1). It emerges from two main perspectives, both with roots in academic and activist circles. The social model of disability, developed in the 1980s in the UK, adopted the divide between *impairment*, which is located in the individual's body or mind, and *disability*, which describes limitations upon or loss of equal participation in society because of social and physical barriers (Oliver *Social Work*, 'Social'; Goodley 9–11). A minority model, developed in North America and influenced in part by civil right movements of the 1960s and 1970s, considers people with disabilities a minority group and thus a Civil Rights concern. By theorising disability as a social construction, disability studies moved focus from the individual to social and environmental barriers as the causes of disability. Rather than advocating for the individual to adapt to society, like the moral and medical models, disability studies instead contends that social changes are required to incorporate a wider spectrum of bodies and minds. The problem of disability, then, is not located in the individual but in society, including preconceptions about people with non-normative bodies and/or minds. Since then, disability studies has developed as an interdisciplinary field, with different branches of theory and practice from across numerous academic disciplines.

In its early stages, disability studies was the domain of the social and political sciences, but by the end of the 1990s it was also becoming more common in the humanities, in for example cultural studies and literary theory (Davis 508–9). Among other things, disability scholars from the humanities, influenced by postcolonial, queer and feminist theories, investigated disability across culture, media and literature as a cultural construction (Goodley 18). David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder suggest that studies of images of disability in the humanities developed from an initial focus on theorising negative images of disabilities (such as stereotypes in film and literature), critiquing inaccurate portrayals of disability, and investigating representations in their historical contexts, to uncovering authors and filmmakers with disabilities and reclaiming representations that had been seen as stigmatised (15–45). Their seminal research into disability as a 'narrative prosthesis' explores the cultural abundance of disability and its symbolic or metaphorical uses.

A more recent development, referred to as critical disability studies, extensively incorporates the intersection of disability with other vectors of power, including gender, class, sexuality, race and ethnicity (Goodley 191). It includes perspectives such as crip theory and studies in ableism, which both focus on questioning normativity, centring not only upon disability but also on normative ableism. Critical disability studies could also be seen as a methodology for 'studying power, privilege, and oppression of bodily and mental norms' informed by disability (Schalk 'Critical' n.p.).

Critical engagement with disability in the study of genre texts is also quite recent. In a 2012 special issue of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* dedicated to the topic, editor Ria Cheyne ('Introduction' 117) notes how limited disability perspectives on popular genres, including crime fiction, romance and sf, were. Realist fiction was the main focus for the study of disability (Ellis 58; Schalk *Bodyminds* 21), and those scholars who did discuss genre fiction were reluctant 'to discuss popular genre texts as popular genre texts – to engage fully with the genre context' (Cheyne 'Introduction' 118). Hence, her call to deal specifically with genre, so as to broaden the understanding of disability representation and advance the understanding of specific texts and forms (117).

Despite increasing critical interest in sf scholarship engaged with gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and postcolonialism, few scholars worked with disability perspectives prior to the 2010s

(Cheyne ‘Introduction’ 118; Allan ‘Introduction’ 2). There were some notable exceptions (Cheu; Kanar; Melzer; Moody; Stemp; Weinstock), but pivotal to the emergence of the field was Kathryn Allan’s edited collection *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (2013), the first comprehensive work devoted to disability and sf. (Other notable publications at this juncture include Allan ‘Disability’; Cheyne ‘She’; and a chapter on sf cinema in Ellis.) The subsequent increase and interest in disability perspectives on sf is evident in special issues of *Journal of Science Fiction* in 2019 and *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* in 2020, as well as Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (2018) and the chapter on sf in Cheyne’s *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction* (2019). Over the course of the decade, this research has expanded from sf literature and film to include television, games and comic books.

Why a disability perspective on sf?

People with disabilities have throughout history been subjected to various types of oppression, such as discrimination, hate, violence, pity, objectification, social exclusion and limited access to different parts of society, including education, and uneven distribution of economic resources; moreover, disability is recurrently connected to debates about what constitutes quality of life, including questions about assisted suicide, eugenics and reproductive technologies (Goodley 2). The negative views and discourses that underscore such oppressions are often (re)produced in representations of people with disabilities. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, the dominating narratives of disability across culture are oppressive, disempowering and prejudicial. Seldom is disability portrayed as an integral part of life or as part of the wide spectrum of what it is to be human. Instead, it is presented as a tragic flaw in individuals, when it should in fact be understood as one of the most universal experiences: we all eventually become disabled if we grow old enough (Garland-Thomson 1567–8). These types of representations perpetuate a medical model of disability, in which disability is seen as nothing else than a tragic loss for an individual who needs diagnosis, rehabilitation, cure and normalisation. These stories circulating in culture shape our society, relationships, our views of ourselves and others, and how we view disability (Garland-Thomson 1567; Cheyne ‘Introduction’ 117). It is thus vital to critically engage with such narratives.

Mainstream culture and literature have often been criticised for their lack of depictions of marginalised groups. In contrast, however, images of disability appear widely throughout history, although paradoxically this frequency has often been overlooked (Mitchell and Snyder 52; Longmore 131–2). A similar paradox can be found in sf. Ever since its inception, sf has not only included but been quite preoccupied with depicting disabled bodies and minds. Allan contends that ‘SF has long explored deviant and disabled bodies: from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster to James Cameron’s wheelchair-bound hero, Jake Sully [...] in *Avatar* (2009), SF is inhabited by people (and aliens) whose embodiments are situated along the entire spectrum of ability’ (‘Introduction’ 2). Despite this abundance, disability has been rendered peripheral and the presence of disabled bodies and minds obscured in many of the critical approaches to sf. Schalk argues that the lack of scholarly investment and recognition of disability in sf is part of the erasure of disability in speculative media (‘Resisting’).

Allan argues that critical engagement with representations of disability in sf narratives are important not least in order to ‘condemn the repeated instances of the erasure, “curing,” prosthetization, and negative marginalization of people with disabilities’ in the genre – a critical endeavour that sf scholars must undertake as they have with racist, sexist, classist or homophobic representations (Allan ‘Disability’ 1.1). These motives for studying disability in sf are important,

but it remains imperative not only to condemn negative imagery. Scholars must also explore and understand the place disability takes in sf, how it can be conceptualised specifically within generic conventions, and how perspectives on disability and ability can contribute to interpreting individual texts and the genre as a whole.

As Allan and Cheyne note, the groundwork is currently being laid to bring disability studies and sf together (393). While there are several ways in which disability can be read in sf and numerous issues within sf that could benefit from a disability perspective, this chapter focuses on two interrelated issues. First, by applying a critique of the medical model to sf narratives about the future, it demonstrates ways in which sf narratives perpetuate this view of disability. Second, by considering not only the presence but also the absence of disability, it establishes the imperative to consider non-realist elements when analysing disability in sf.

Conceptualising the future: Medical and technological cures

The medical model is closely intertwined with discourses of the future and often (re)produced in cultural representations. Johnson Cheu, for example, argues that '[p]opular media is already pushing society toward a Utopian model of bodily perfection and cure' (198). Future discourse is often framed in terms of a linear process: from the past, into the present and towards the future. As I have argued elsewhere, this linear process is infused with discourses of progress, development and betterment, and the future is presented as a site in which present-day issues potentially can be solved and our world improved as it leaves its shortcomings in the past (Wälivaara 'Marginalized'). Depending on when a story is created, different issues, such as racism, sexism or homophobia, can be framed as regrettable remnants of the past, while the future holds the promise of a more developed society. Sf, of course, deals with such promises as well as their failures.

For some, this unfortunately means the risk of not having a future at all. From the perspective of the medical model, any improved progressive future society is a society where disability no longer exists. This 'disability-free future' is taken for granted as the valued and 'good' future, the future everyone should strive for, while failing to recognise that there is value to be found in futures that include people with disabilities (Kafer 3). In her exploration of the use of the disabled body in imagined futures, Alison Kafer shows this connection between the way disability is understood and its relationship to the future:

If disability is conceptualized as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid. A better future, in other words, is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies; indeed, it is the very *absence* of disability that signals this better future. The *presence* of disability, then, signals something else: a future that bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable.

(2)

One recurring way in which the medical model becomes apparent is found in variations of the cure narrative, one of the most prevalent types of disability narrative. The issue is not to argue for or against medical interventions or cures, but to question the hegemonic discourse of the medical model in order to counteract its view of disability. Cure narratives perform cultural work in spreading beliefs about disability and quality of life, and thus devalue different bodies and minds. In his historical overview of disability representation in cinema, Martin F. Norden points to what he calls 'Cure or kill', a recurring narrative in which the character with a disability is either cured

and thus reintegrated into society or killed (107). Reflecting the medical model, such stories imply that having a disability is a tragic fate worse than death, and if the individual cannot be cured, they are better off dead.

Cure narratives are frequent in sf. Norden points to the return of such stories in genre films of the 1970–80s, with the original *STAR WARS* trilogy (1977–83) as a one of the prime examples (Norden 292–5). Instead of the miraculous interventions common throughout film history, these films introduced technological cures. Allan contends that ‘more often than not, whenever there is disability in a SF narrative, there is the parallel trope of “cure”’, a trope that runs through the history of the genre in a variety of forms, including utopian sf that imagines the end of disability and dystopian sf that depicts failed cures or societies in which only some can afford cures (‘Introduction’ 8–9). Cheu argues that the medical cure is a recurring theme in sf cinema (199), and Jane Stemp likewise suggests that writers of sf, even those who otherwise seem eager to challenge notions of progress, seem unwilling to abandon the idea of a medicalised future of cures. While these cure narratives are problematic in themselves, as they often adhere to a solely medical understanding of disability, suggesting that disability is only tragic and in need of curing or elimination, they also serve as a device for the eradication of disability in narratives, or at least, for the ‘ambiguity of existence’ of disabled bodies and minds (Wälivaara ‘Marginalized’ 229).

Reading the absence

Technological or medical interventions can serve to eradicate explicit representations of disability from fictional worlds (Cheyne ‘Freaks’ 41; Cheu 198–9). Therefore, it is important also to read the absence, and the social meanings of this absence, in visions of the future. The absence (or presence) of disability reveals, as Allan argues, the text’s implicit assumptions about ‘the ideal future human’ (‘Disability’ 3.4). If the absence signals a better future, as suggested by Kafer, then how does this absence relate to the systems of exclusion or oppression, as asked by Tobin Siebers?

Schalk contends that when sf deals with issues of oppression and privilege, it typically does so either through a future setting in which these issues have already been resolved, which often leads to an erasure of all difference, or by relocating difference onto non-humans, such as aliens or robots (*Bodyminds* 86). Such allegorical figures – a quite specific trait of speculative or fantastic fiction – often obscure the presence of disability, as they are more commonly read in terms of gendered, sexual, racial or national difference and thus might appear to not be dealing with disability at all. For example, disability scholar Michael Bérubé describes his surprise upon realising that sf narratives, which he ‘never considered to be “about” disability’, were indeed filled with ‘blind Daredevils, mutant supercrips, and posthuman cyborgs’, leading to suggests that the genre ‘is as obsessed with disability as it is with space travel and alien contact’ (‘Disability’ 568).

Disability studies commonly critiques metaphoric uses of disability rather than depictions based on the lived experiences or the political and social dimensions of disability (Mitchell and Snyder 48; Schalk *Bodyminds* 39–45). But applying a disability perspective to speculative fiction, where the texts often rely on worldbuilding that differs from our own, requires us to consider and take seriously those depictions of disability that per definition cannot be based on lived experiences, such as cyborgs, aliens and mutants in order ‘to engage fully with the genre context’ (Cheyne ‘Introduction’ 118; cf. Wälivaara ‘Blind’; Schalk ‘Reevaluating’ and *Bodyminds* 26–8).

If disability is considered a social and cultural construction, then it can take on different meanings and guises in sf's non-realist cultures and societies. It is thus important to read disability not only in terms of our own society, but also in relation to the premises of the fictional text itself and the genre's conventions.

Indeed, the most frequent way in which disability is 'deployed' (Bérubé *Secret 2*) in sf is not through realistic representations of characters with disabilities or through depictions of 'realist disabilities' recognisable from our world (Schalk *Bodyminds* 118). There are unquestionably sf characters who quite easily read as representations of disabilities, such as Charles Xavier in *X-Men* (1963–), Davros in *DOCTOR WHO* (1963–), Captain Pike in *STAR TREK* (1966–) and Jerome Morrow in *Gattaca* (Niccol 1997). However, the genre particularly engages with representations that, at a first glance, do not seem to deal with disability because they lack the more explicit, culturally recognisable, realistic traits that dominate more conventional representations of disability. Instead, sf invites multiple deployments of disability: the many unruly human and non-human bodies and minds infused with technology or prosthesis, or with different abilities, or living in alternative societies or temporalities. For example, Schalk shows how speculative fiction's portrayals of realist disabilities on 'nonrealist bodyminds' and in fantastic worlds, and portrayals of 'nonrealist disabilities' that do not exist in current reality, serve to defamiliarise disability – and thus can encourage readers to question taken-for-granted understanding of categories, their boundaries and their meanings (*Bodyminds* 118).

Therefore, the absence of explicitly (realist) disabled bodies and minds does not always mean that disability as a system of power and oppression is omitted. For sf scholars, reading this relocation of difference from a disability perspective can make visible how certain generic conventions (non-realist elements, characters and worlds) relate to systems of power and oppression in terms of disability/ability. As Cheu argues, even though disability as a medical construction seems to be eradicated in such films as *Gattaca*, *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski sisters 1999), it remains a dominating social construction.

Conclusion

While it is important to critically engage with those more explicit, realist representations of disability in sf, it is equally important to theorise and make visible the ways in which the genre narratively deploys disability as a system of power and injustice. This means that a disability studies, or critical disability studies, approach is useful for analysing not only explicit representations of disability, but also the wider social system of power associated with normative notions of disability/ability, bodies, and minds – even in those narratives where disability seems absent. It is also important to remember that disability does not stand alone but intersects with other categories and representations of identity, such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class.

Allan and Cheyne's contention that disability is a central concern of the sf genre, across time and in all its forms (389–90), is borne out by the growing field of research that deals with sf and disability. But there is paramount work to be done to adapt and incorporate disability theories with non-realist explorations of disability, and make visible the ways in which disability is, explicitly and implicitly, deployed and represented in sf. This extends beyond physical disabilities to include questions of neurodiversity and able-mindedness.

Sf is often framed in terms of its potential for social critique and commentary. This capacity can be used to challenge normative conceptions about disability as a solely individual concern in need

of curing or elimination, and instead provide alternatives to those many disability-free futures, alternatives in which the presence of people with disabilities are of value.

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