crip experiences. Collectively, these essays generate for cinema and media studies what Kolářová has elsewhere termed "crip signing"—that is, a mode of analysis that always gestures toward other possibilities for producing, consuming, reading, and interacting with disability representation.[15] Crip signing is necessarily invitational, and this In Focus is thus an invitation for other scholars to think more expansively about the ways in which disability has been an unacknowledged but central aspect of most forms of cinema and media for more than a century, and to think about how cripping cinema and media studies might reshape the field in the future.   ✷

15 Kateřina Kolářová, "The Inarticulate Post-Socialist Crip: On the Cruel Optimism of Neoliberal Transformations in the Czech Republic," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 257–274.

Studying Disability for a Better Cinema and Media Studies

by Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick

I f you are reading this, you are probably already on board with the study of difference. Gender, critical race theory, class analyses, postcolonialism, or queer studies are a part of your scholarship, or at least a grace note in your graduate education. (If you are not reading this, let us take a moment to say that you should be. You're missing much of the most exciting work in cinema and media studies.)

Despite your best intentions, however, you may not have encountered critical studies of media and disability in any meaningful way. It is not just missing from our scholarship; there are few job calls for experts in media and disability, precious few graduate seminars, rarely even a unit on disability in undergraduate courses. Disability is not listed as an area of expertise when you join SCMS or as a keyword when you submit to its conference. Disability largely remains what Goggin and Newell fifteen years ago identified as a "lacuna" in our field.[1]

Rather than bemoan this state of affairs, we pose a challenge: start incorporating disability into your work. We call for a disability media studies that advances the field by integrating disability and able-bodiedness as a category of analysis for film and media scholars.[2]

1   Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell, *Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 115.

2   May we modestly suggest, as a starting point, Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, eds., *Disability Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

Like feminist film and media theory, a disability perspective is not primarily about the study of representations. Over thirty years ago, Joan Scott had to explain to her colleagues that a gender perspective is not primarily about the ontology of sex differences; similarly, we want colleagues to realize that disability is not the ontology of impairment but, borrowing Scott's phrase, "a primary way of signifying relationships of power."[3] We are not simply looking for "the cripple in the text"; we are interrogating the dynamics of power and normalization that produce certain kinds of bodies, sensoriums, and cognitivities as "able, normal, better" and others as "disabled, abnormal, worse."

A disability perspective, then, is about decentering the physically and cognitively "normal" character, the "normal" viewer, the "normal" producer, and so on; this has profound consequences for the study of media texts, industrial practices, social relations, media policies, modes of reception, and the design of technologies and spaces. It is about rethinking the stories told, the writers and actors hired, the economics of industries, the politics of access and representation, and the range of possible readings (think "cripping the text" as analogous to "queering the text"). It is about listening to new voices and engaging in new political struggles over power and privilege.

Disability raises fascinating new questions, offers intellectually compelling new perspectives, and reveals exciting new insights about media and society. Cinema and media studies as a whole can benefit if disability is better integrated into our working knowledges, routine frames of analysis, standard professional and pedagogical categories, curricula, and understandings of the archive. As the essays in this In Focus—and a growing body of scholarship elsewhere—abundantly demonstrate, the transformation is already under way.

Here, then, are some ways that a disability lens can help transform cinema and media studies into a better version of itself.

"Disability" Is an Operation of Power. When most people hear "disability," they imagine an ontological medical impairment that, in an ideal world, would be "fixed." In contrast, scholars in disability studies understand disability as a condition of difference that has been produced through discourse, by the built environment, and through social relations.[4] The classic example: a wheelchair user is not inherently "disabled" but rather is produced as "disabled" in the absence of ramps—a social and political choice. What is hegemonically understood as the normal, able body is, in this view, simply the "normate," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's term for a privileged body, without stigma, that functions as a universal and unmarked type in a given society (analogous to "cis" in queer theory).[5]

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3   Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1067.

4   There is a robust literature theorizing disability beyond medical models. See, e.g., Michael Oliver, *Social Work with Disabled People* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1983); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

5   Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

By moving away from a singular medical model of disability that sees physical and cognitive difference as "impairment in need of a cure," and recognizing that all bodies are constructed and valued according to shifting categories of deviation and difference, cinema and media studies can better grapple with the role of media in constructing normate "bodyminds" (entwinements of the mental and physical).[6] For instance, medicalized representations of the body—from X-rays to fitness-tracking apps—serve as mediated representations of what is a normal (or desirable) bodymind, and in doing so, they also produce visualized outliers and forms of deviance. These mediated categories are then made meaningful through the allocation of social and economic power according to different kinds of embodiments and cognitivities. What appears to be immutable difference turns out to be part of the processes of domination.

We have been here before. For example, most students come in thinking that race is essentially biological, so we introduce them to critical race theory. They imagine that sexuality is ahistorical, so we assign Foucault on the invention of the homosexual. Now it is time to challenge their—and our own—unexamined medicalization and stigmatization of different bodies and minds, helping them see the operations of power in "disability."

Disability Is Everywhere. Disability is relevant to whatever interests you as a scholar. It will not be central to everything, but like race, class, and gender, it will never be far away: ideas about disability and able-bodiedness routinely and often invisibly inform characterization and narrative, assumptions about audiences, aesthetics, policies, technologies, and so on.

For example, scholars interested in gender can benefit from recognizing how disability functions as a master narrative underlying gender constructions—mental disability as constitutive of femininity and physical disability as signifier of inadequate masculinity.[7] Analysts of film and television style can learn much from a disability perspective that examines how the "abnormal" body disrupts traditional approaches to shot scale and spatial relations in the frame.[8] Those studying labor, globalization, and/or the environment can better understand disability as an outcome of media production and consumption.[9] And this is just for starters; as more scholars pay attention to disability as a category of analysis, we can expect many more rich and rewarding insights into film and media. To paraphrase the historian Douglas Baynton, disability is everywhere once you begin looking for it.[10]

6   Lennard J. Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3–19. For more on bodyminds, see Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

7   See, e.g., D. Travers Scott and Meagan Bates, "'It's Not Just Sexism': Feminization and (Ab)Normalization in the Commercialization of Anxiety Disorders," in *Disability Media Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 152–173; Ellen Samuels, "Prosthetic Heroes: Curing Disabled Veterans in *Iron Man 3* and Beyond," in Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick, *Disability Media Studies*, 129–151.

8   See, e.g., José Alaniz, "Deafness in Russian Cinema: 1964–2005" (presentation, Global Histories of Disability, Washington, DC, July 13, 2018).

9   See, e.g., Toby Miller, "The Price of the Popular Media Is Paid by the Effluent Citizen," in *Disability Media Studies*, 295–310.

10 Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in *The New Disability History*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 52.

We Can Have Scholarship without Ableism. As several scholars have pointed out, a problematic ableism informs many of our core theories. McLuhan's "frankly ridiculous" rantings about media and "self-amputation," Sedgwick's limited understanding of stigma in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the ways that cyborg theory "has traditionally assumed a fully functioning human"—our field is rife with unquestioned ideas about the universality of the able-bodied subject and the undesirability of nonnormative bodies and minds.[11]

Disability media studies, in contrast, highlights the embodied nature of all moments of media production and consumption, a starting point that can lead us toward "new stories about media, new histories, but also new theories that do not rely on disability as their, well, crutch."[12] How much richer might media theory become if the variations and assemblages suggested by disabled experiences were taken as the foundation of, and not the exception to, the field?

Everyone Needs Access. When we consider disability, we are confronted with different modalities of media access and experience. This, in turn, can inform deeper analyses of the relationships among media content, interfaces, bodies, and circumstances that characterize any experience of media usage, production, or engagement. Importantly, no one "has" access to the media—it is always produced, limited, granted, and lost—yet cinema and media studies has too often left the moment of access untheorized and underexplored.

What is it, for instance, to "watch television"? Although scholars have investigated many components of televisual media and viewership, it is rare to see theorization of the mundane procedures by which someone accesses television: sitting, standing, punching tiny buttons on a remote, or remembering passwords for a streaming service. In such mundanities, it is impossible to miss variations of access. Disability is one such variation, and in its stark differences from "normal" viewing positions, it illuminates the possibilities of many other viewing positions and ways of access.

Disability Transforms Media History. Awareness of disability and the technologies, dedicated distribution and exhibition channels, and grassroots means by which people have engaged with media opens up new histories and new perspectives from which to consider canonical versions of film and media studies.

Captioned Films for the Deaf, for instance, was founded in 1949; for decades, it produced captions for educational and popular films and distributed them to "Deaf clubs" around the United States.[13] Meanwhile, Gallaudet (a university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students) has a long and possibly surprising history of radio clubs. There are entire histories of minority media production, postproduction, distribution,

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11   The cited critique of McLuhan is in Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne, "Afterword II: Dismediation—Three Proposals, Six Tactics," in Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick, *Disability Media Studies*, 369; the critique of Sedgwick is from Tobin Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade," *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 4; the problems with cyborg theory are discussed in Margaret M. Quinlan and Benjamin R. Bates, "*Bionic Woman* (2007): Gender, Disability and Cyborgs," *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 9, no. 1 (2009): 51.

12   Mills and Sterne, "Afterword II," 370.

13   John S. Schuchman, *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

exhibition, and reception that remain so far largely unexplored. Digging into them will reveal a long and illuminating history of assistive technologies, media hacks, multitasking, repurposing, and community practice.

Disability Offers New Objects of Study. What is cinema and media studies? Disability points us toward new answers to that question. Media systems and representations are central to how we know and manage our bodies, and a disability perspective leads us to considerations of medical media, diagnostic media, assistive technologies, and hybridized consumer-medical devices like the Fitbit.[14] Such work is not entirely new, but our current moment demands more of it, including more conversations with medical humanities scholars who are wrestling with similar concerns about the representation and ontology of illness and impairment.[15]

Furthermore, people with disabilities are producing excellent creative work, and there are fascinating dimensions of film and media work connected to disability yet to explore. These include the labor of closed-captioning, the production of audiobooks as assistive and mainstream media, and other specialized paraindustries that serve disabled audiences, often through innovative uses of audiovisual media capabilities.[16]

The Media Industries Need a Disability Perspective, Too. The college classroom has long been a crucial site where future workers in the media industries are introduced to questions about power, access, and representation. But our work is not done, and disability is an important new frontier. For example, when nondisabled actors play (and commonly win awards for playing) disabled characters, it limits opportunities for disabled actors and affects the work in a range of problematic ways (analogous to nontrans* actors playing trans* characters). This is part of the larger scarcity of persons with disabilities at all levels in the industry, which in turn is connected to the ongoing retrograde representations of nonnormative bodies and minds. As with race, gender, and sexuality, our field needs to bring these issues to the attention of students if we want them to help effect long-term change.

We Must Expand the "Us." More women got into cinema and media studies when the field began opening up to questions of gender, thereby accelerating the transformations in our teaching and scholarship. Analogous expansions happened with people

14 Mack Hagood, "Disability and Biomediation: Tinnitus as Phantom Disability," in *Disability Media Studies*, 311–329; Amelie Hastie, "TV on the Brain," *Screen* 50, no. 2 (July 1, 2009): 216–232; Meryl Alper, *Giving Voice: Mobile Communication, Disability, and Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Julie Passanante Elman, "'Find Your Fit': Wearable Technology and the Cultural Politics of Disability," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 10 (October 2018): 3760–3777.

15 For example, Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

16 In addition to work cited elsewhere in this essay, see Katie Ellis and Mike Kent, "Accessible Television," *First Monday* 20, no. 9 (September 10, 2015), https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6170; Mara Mills, "What Should We Call Reading?," *Flow* (blog), December 3, 2012, https://www.flowjournal.org/2012/12/what-should-we-call-reading; David Parisi, "Game Interfaces as Disabling Infrastructures," *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 2 (May 30, 2017), http://analoggamestudies.org/tag/disability-studies; Elizabeth Petrick, *Making Computers Accessible: Disability Rights and Digital Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Sean Zdenek, *Reading Sounds: Closed-Captioned Media and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

of color and queer scholars. With disability media studies, we can show students with disabilities that there is a place for them in our field, thereby diversifying the next generation of scholars. Furthermore, by considering disability as worthy of scholarly attention and moving away from ableist understandings of disability as "lack," we can create a better environment for academics who already identify as disabled.[17]

It helps to recognize that the fundamental practices of academia often revolve around assumptions of able-bodiedness. Anyone who has worked to caption a screening, teach editing to someone with a visual impairment, give a conference presentation in a technologically unfamiliar setting, or battle optical-character-recognition software to make a PDF accessible has encountered an intersection of media and disability in everyday professional practice. Furthermore, few universities provide adequate training in these skills—an additional reflection of the marginalization of disability that disproportionately affects our media-reliant field. Although these can be frustrating experiences, they can also be opportunities to consider the ways that everyone would benefit from more social and institutional support and from reforming our ableist structures and assumptions.

Conclusion. We hope that you recognize yourself and your ambitions in one or more of these points. Disability is not an additive or another list item to demonstrate our inclusivity, but a fundamental turn away from normate media studies. Disability studies and film and media studies have much to offer each other and much to contribute through their intersections. The fundamental shift we are calling for can produce further shifts in the kinds of questions and practices that are taken for granted in the field. The result will be a better cinema and media studies.   ✳

17   Research on faculty with disabilities reveals a general lack of awareness of available accommodations, a reluctance to disclose disability (especially mental health conditions) to peers, and a host of small ways that the academy marginalizes disability experiences and expertise. See, e.g., Jay T. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, Laura T. Eisenman, and James M. Jones, eds., *Negotiating Disability: Disclosure and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Margaret Price, Mark S. Salzer, Amber O'Shea, and Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, "Disclosure of Mental Disability by College and University Faculty: The Negotiation of Accommodations, Supports, and Barriers," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2017), http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5487.

personalities advocates for gender diversity within a cognitive schema of multiple sub-jectivities. Although *Inside Out* does not venture into the radical, gender-risky terri-tory of *Being John Malkovich*, the animated film's driving objective is to portray a child experiencing sorrow and loss. For a long time, the original plot of *Inside Out* focused on Joy and Fear getting lost together, because, director Docter says, "It seemed like the funniest choice."[14] But, he says, he couldn't write an ending that worked and feared getting fired. He went for a walk and thought about what he would miss most. It wasn't the project itself, but friends he'd made working at Pixar. "At that moment, I realized that Sadness was the key," Docter says. "We were trying to push her to the side. But she needed to be the one going on the journey. Joy needed to understand that it's O.K. for Sadness to be included at the controls."[15] Joy is nearly defeated by Riley experienc-ing misery to the degree she does, but ultimately Joy—and the film's viewers—comes to realize that Sadness does have a unique purpose. In this manner, a film directed toward a young audience suggests that personalities can be multiple and concurrent, explores the intricate moods of a prepubescent girl, and also appreciates that sadness is necessary and distinct from, perhaps even a salve for, depression.   ✳

14   Barnes, "'Inside Out.'"

15   Barnes.

Contributors

Elizabeth Ellcessor is an assistant professor in media studies at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participa-tion* (New York University Press, 2016) and coeditor, with Bill Kirkpatrick, of *Disability Media Studies* (New York University Press, 2017).

Bill Kirkpatrick is an associate professor of media studies in the Department of Communication at Denison University. He is coeditor (with Elizabeth Ellcessor) of *Disability Media Studies* (New York University Press, 2017) and is completing a book on health and disability and early US radio.

Kateřina Kolářová is an assistant professor of cultural studies in the Department of Gender Studies, Charles University, Prague. Her work has appeared in *Feminist Review*, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, *Iterationen: Geschlecht im kulturellen Gedächtnis*, and *Somatechnics.* Currently, she is working on a book project titled *Postsocialist Rehabilita-tive Citizenship: Disability, Race, Sexuality and the Limits of National Belonging*.

Nicole Markotić is author of four poetry books, three novels (including the recent young-adult *Rough Patch*), and a collection of essays, *Disability in Film and Literature*. She has worked as poetry editor for Red Deer Press and as fiction editor for NeWest Press. She is currently working on a book on disability in children's literature and is a

professor at the University of Windsor, where she teaches creative writing, disability studies, and children's literature.

Robert McRuer is a professor of English in the Department of English at George Washington University. He is the author of *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York University Press, 2018) and *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York University Press, 2006). With Anna Mollow, he edited *Sex and Disability* (Duke University Press, 2012).

David T. Mitchell and **Sharon L. Snyder**'s work primarily focuses on representations of disability in literary and filmic texts. Their most recent book, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (University of Michigan Press, 2015), considers how contemporary practices of social inclusion for people with disabilities have proved anemic to more significant engagement with nonnormative embodiment as a map to an alternative ethics of living outside of normalcy. Mitchell's book project, tentatively titled *The Geopolitics of Disability*, theorizes the fraught relationship between experiences of disability and the "precarity" born of processes of globalization.

Carrie Sandahl is an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the Department of Disability and Human Development. She directs Chicago's Bodies of Work, an organization that supports the development of disability arts and culture. Her research and creative activity focus on disability identity in live performance and film.