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Do You See What I Mean? Charting Changing Representations and Receptions of the Disabled Body in Contemporary and Pop Cultural Performance

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The meaning of the body emerges through acts of seeing, looking and staring in daily and dramatic performances. Acts that are, as Maike Bleeker argues¹, bound up with the scopic rules, regimes and narratives that apply in specific cultures at specific times. In Western culture, the disabled body has been seen as a sign of defect, deficiency, fear, shame or stigma. Disabled artists – Mat Fraser, Bill Shannon, Aaron Williamson, Katherine Araniello, Liz Crow and Ju Gosling – have attempted, via performances that co-opt conventional images of the disabled body, to challenge dominant ways of representing and responding such bodies from within. In this paper, I consider what happens when non-disabled artists co-opt images of the disabled body to draw attention to, affirm, and even exoticise, eroticise or beautify, other modalities of or desires for difference. As Carrie Sandahl has noted², the signs, symbols and somatic idiosyncrasies of the disabled body are, today, transported or translated into theatre, film and television as a metaphor or “master trope” for every body’s experience of difference. This happens in performance art (Guillermo Gomez-Pena’s use of a wheelchair in *Chamber of Confessions*), performance (Marie Chouinard’s use of crutches, canes and walkers to represent dancers’ experience of becoming different or mutant during training in *bODY rEMIX /gOLDBERG vARIATIONS*), and pop culture (characters in wheelchairs in *Glee* or *Oz*). In this paper, I chart changing representations and receptions of the disabled body in such contexts. I use analysis of this cultural shift as a starting point for a re-consideration of questions about whether a face-to-face encounter with a disabled body is in fact a privileged site for the emergence of a politics, and whether co-opting disability as a metaphor for a range of difference differences reduces its currency as a category around which a specific group might mobilise a politics.

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¹ Bleeker, Maaïke. (2008) *Visuality in the Theatre*. Palgrave MacMillan

² Sandahl, Carrie. (2004) “Black Man, Blind Man: Disability Identity Politics and Performance”. *Theatre Journal* 56, pp. 579-602.

Do You See What I Mean? Charting Changing Representations and Receptions of the Disabled Body in Contemporary and Pop Cultural Performance

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For the past few years I've been researching the performance practices of artists with disabilities, particularly those who work in live art, performance art and public space performance. Mat Fraser playing the sideshow imaged of Seal the Sealbody across his own body. James Cunningham making us engage with fractured experiences of our selves in mirror boxes. Noemi Lakemeier asking ask to interact in big balls she calls Weebles. Bill Shannon making a show of picking up a water bottle whilst on crutches, Aaron Williamson asking people to sign a petition to get wheelchair user Katherine Araniello to a country where assisted suicide is allowed, or Liz Crow sitting atop to four plinth in Trafalgar square in her wheelchair in a Nazi uniform, to see how passersby will react. Whether they're working with sideshow images, medical images, or mundane images drawn from the daily social drama of disability, each of these artists operates in the paradigm Rebecca Schneider calls the explicit, replaying the roles culture assigns them across their own corporeally suitable bodies with exaggeration, comedy, or confrontation, in public spaces – or, at least, outside conventional theatre spaces. Most importantly, each uses some mechanism – from an in-the-round stage, to installation, to setting spectators up as a spectacle themselves – to position spectators as coperformers. They don't just draw attention to the terror-inducing, tragic or helpless roles culture assigns disabled people, but, rather, draw spectators attention to the fact that – when they enact habitual responses to the disabled body – they too are complicity in constructing the disabled body as an object of curiosity, discomfort, shame or stigma.

What sits under this research, then, are broader questions about the body, liveness, the live encounter, and the ethical encounter, and whether live performance can, as theorists like Peggy Phelan would suggest, be a privileged site for repetition, repetition with a difference, politics and ethics.

As I've analysed these artists, I've observed the way they blur representation and reality, drawing spectators into what Hans Thies Lehmann would call a confused, uncertain or undecidable meaning-making encounter, and a dual consciousness in which they are both reacting (to reality) and becoming aware of their reaction (to a representation of reality). A dual consciousness that can engender reflection, and what Helena Grehan has called ambivalence as a dynamic physical, emotional or intellectual engagement with and estrangement from something that leaves spectators wondering how to respond and thus “engaged with the other, with the work, and with responsibility and therefore an ethical process long after they have left the performance space” (2009, 22)

I'm haunted, though, but the question of whether the live presence of the disabled body makes a difference to this sort of work. Theory – which emphasises the

constructedness of both bodies and bodily encounters – would suggest this is a dangerous track to take, but at the same time my heart still wants to go there. So, reading the CFP for this conference – and thinking about where my work sits in relation to issues of culture, translation and reception – I’ve decided to consider this question. And, in particular, what happens when artists without disabilities coopt images, and even performance strategies, similar to the disabled artists I’ve studied in a cultural strategy that is not blackface, or yellowface, by what David Kociemba has called cripface or cripdrag.

The two cultures in play here are not those of gender, race or class – though these are inflected in dominant conceptions of disability in complex ways – but dominant culture and disability culture. Which tend to have quite different degrees of consciousness of the stakes at play in cripface performance. Perhaps as a result of the scholars, activists and artists who’ve preceded me, images of the disabled body as sideshow freak have in the past century given way to images of the disabled body modern medical systems prefer, images of a sufferer who needs to control, cure or overcome an unfortunate individual problem – and, often, as Sharon Synder, David Mitchell, and Petra Kuppers say, possesses privileged insights into life because of this. More recently, subcultures that adopt images of the disabled body to engage with the idea that difference is good, powerful or personally liberating have emerged, returning in a strange way to some of the initial power people associated with freakshows. So, whilst disability has traditionally symbolised flaws, corruption, an object of pity, or at best an example of the human capacity to overcome ... As Carrie Sandahl has noted, the signs, symbols and somatic idiosyncracies of the disabled body are today being transported or translated into theatre, film, television and popular cultural as a metaphor or “master trope” for expressing every body’s experience of or desire for difference / Otherness. Disability signifiers are being appropriated as positive symbols of – amongst other things – difference, self-determination and sovereignty over one’s own mode of being, as part of a move from a coalitionist identity politics to a queer politics concerned with diverse mobilisations of difference. Whilst not wanting to limit the possibilities of representation, scholars like Sandahl, Kuppers, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson worry about appropriation of images around which a specific community of affinity might build a politic ... And fact that, as Kuppers puts it, “[W]hen nondisabled people don disability paraphernalia or masquerade as disabled, the results rarely offer interesting insights to disability scholars looking to dominant images of disability” (Kuppers 07:17)

Given the limited time available here, I’ll offer three examples to consider what happens when non-disabled artists coopt images of the disabled body to draw attention to, affirm, and even exoticise, eroticize or beautify, other modalities of and desires for difference

Performance art - Guillermo Gomez-Pena’s *El MexTerminator*

The first example is from performance art. In works like *Museum of Fetishised Identities* (2000), Guillermo Gomez-Pena uses a plethora of pop cultural signifiers – including wheelchairs – to create provocative, confrontational and politicized representations of racial otherness. His strategies are similar to those of disabled artists who work with remobilisations of the freakshow. He and his collaborators create a bizarre collection of characters which embody the traits Latin American's are associated with in the US cultural imaginary, and replay these across their own bodies, resenting themselves as museum exhibits for the audience's education and amusement. As Petra Kupper notes, "In the figure of El Mex Terminator [who sits in a wheelchair in leather chaps, smoking, twitching with "various spastic movements" (07:82) and being fed by his collaborators], a number of these [anglo American fears and] fantasies coalesce, exposing configurations of difference ordered around a figure of disability" (07:83). This figure, literally, metaphorically, and somewhat paradoxically, invokes narratives that characterise Latin Americans as less powerful, less productive or a threat to jobs on the one hand, and as responsible for things like gang violence on the other hand (Kuppers 2007:83). But the figure is complicated by the proliferation of signifiers in play – from guns, to high heeled shoes, to religious icons - as the effect of power on a range of marginalised people and identity positions is invoked in tandem (07:83-4), and by interactions in the installation space which spectators very literally become co-performers (07:82)

Performance - Marie Chouinard's *bODY rEMIX /gOLDBERG vARIATIONS*

The second example is from contemporary dance. In Marie Chouinard's *bODY rEMIX /gOLDBERG vARIATIONS* 10 dancers clad in tiny beige bandages are born and reborn as an increasingly bizarre series of biotechnical mutants, monsters and hybrids. The mechanism which drives the transformations is the unconventional use of prosthetics, including canes, walkers and crutches, and the equally unconventional use of dance equipment such as barres and ballet point shoes as prosthetics. The pseudo-organs are perpetually displaced onto different parts of the dancers' anatomy – foreheads, hands, mouths, crotches (Thain 2008: ?). A female dancer uses short crutches to move across the stage, her legs and feet splayed behind. A female dancer puts a mic in her mouth producing distorted grunts, groans and breaths Dancers move on mobile walkers, and wheelboards, or fly into each other in harnesses, and don ballet shoes on one foot or two, one hand or two, manipulating them to make images of birds, herds of strange gazelle galloping across the stage, etc. The piece ends with a striking image of a female dancer suspended above a set of prostheses used throughout and hanging around her (Thain 2008:89). Watching this generally well-received work, two things stand out. First, whilst *bODY rEMIX* uses symbols of disability, deformity and bodily difference, these are not signs or warnings of what human beings should not be. As in Gomez-Pena's work, they have power, potential and status, and, indeed, the whole thing comes across as an exercise in activating and exploring new, extended amplified possibilities for embodiment (Thain 2007:72). Second, *bODY rEMIX* isn't "about" disability. The able-bodied dancers

work with the canes, crutches and walkers to construct a metaphor for their own sense of difference as their body morphs through the demanding regime of dance training – particularly the pain of pointe training - their own overcoming, their own reconciliation with a new, mutant, bodily state. Dancers try to stand on single pointe shoes, letting out sounds of strain and distress (Thain 2008:92). Or, in harnesses, walk their point clad fee – portrayed as tender, painful or pleasurable – across the hands of other dancers supporting them from below (THain 2008:87). So, whilst Chouinard casts the work in terms of formal exercises which fabricate strong, suggestive images without necessarily telling a story (THain 2008:79), there is, for me, a clear story about the dancer's body – about the self-inflicted pain dancers experience during training as a 'disablement' that is ultimately 'enabling' – told through the symbolism of disability

Pop culture - *Glee*

The third example is from pop culture – the increasing presence of characters using crutches, canes or wheelchairs in tv programs like Artie Abrahms in *Glee*, Gregory House in *House*, or too many to mention in kids TV programs. These programs have been more controversial than Gomez-Pena and Chouinard's type of work, because of the emphasis on character, story and content over form, the pop audience, and the use of disability as an affirmation of difference that ultimately only re-confirms its use as a convenient narrative shortcut for expressing a need to overcome problems and get on with life.

The creators of *Glee* for example, use able-bodied actor Kevin McHale to play Artie Abrahms, leading to claims they're continuing economic and employment discrimination by excluding disabled people from roles they'd be well-positioned to play, and relegating Artie to a relatively minor role. In other words, the disabled character services storylines about tolerance, inclusion and integration. Plus, of course, commentators like David Kociemba lament the fact that the creators appear ignorant of cultural forms like integrated dance, or flashmobs, or public space performance – the forms the artists in my broader study are drawn to – and their wheelchair routines are just boring, functional movements.

For Kociemba (2010), and others, *Glee* plays out a "cripface" (Smith 2010) performance in which able bodied actors don the costume of disability to play out cultural fantasies about bodies, bodily difference, desire and overcoming. Every plotline involving the Artie character does this. In the episode *Wheels* the gang get funding for a bus to get Artie to a competition where they do a (dreadful) wheelchair routine to Ike and Tina Turner's *Proud Mary*. In the episode *Dream On*, the creators appropriate the flash mob form, with Artie leaping from his chair to do a routine to Men Without Hat's *The Safety Dance* during a dream sequence – for a moment, he can dance the way he wants to, including images of the other flash-mobbers supporting him to move from below not dissimilar to the dancers in the harnesses in *bODY rEMIX*, but then he drops back into his chair and is again a sad

and lonely figure others pass by ((Smith 2010; Kociemba 2010b). In the episode, *A Very Glee Christmas*, after Artie's girlfriend Britney makes a Christmas wish for him to walk, Coach Bieste buys him a robotic exoskeleton from Israel.

Analysis

In *Performing as Moral Act*, Dwight Conquergood (1984) identifies four ethical pitfalls for performers – the skeptic who cops out by distancing or detaching from the 'Other' depicted, the exhibitionist who sells out by making the 'Other' the subject of eroticised display, the custodian who sells out by concentrating only on curiosities that will make a good show, and the enthusiast who falls into the trap of energetic identification with and celebration of the 'Other' that ends up denying and erasing differences. Each pitfall works against the dialogue of different worldviews and voices that, for Conquergood (9), typifies an ethical encounter.

Gomez-Pena's work is hard to classify in these terms. As Kuppers argues, Gomez-Pena creates "a rich sematic field through which the audience can construct their own pathways. But this field is too rich; it clogs the act of reading" (Kuppers 2007:83). The performance is overpopulated with ideas, ideologies and discourses, colliding in different ways as spectators try to navigate a pathway through it, and responding becomes difficult. Spectators are not, Kuppers says, "safely tucked into their own fictional universes," "Gomez-Pen'as performance took place in a gallery, and the tableaux were set up in scenes reminiscent of an anthropology museum's 're-creations' of the exotic Other. ...But this museum is alive with real bodies breaking through the glass – a far cry from the odourless, clean, divorced organization of a 'real' museum where colonial violence is coded into pristine, disinterested knowledge" (Kuppers 2007:83). As spectators negotiate this terrain of icons, tropes, connotations and flesh in the *Museum of Fetishised Identities* there is, therefore, a dual awareness of reality and representation – both the old museum and it's clogging with corporeality and cluttering with oversignification – and this leaves spectators in an undecidable space in which they cannot immediately figure out how to respond. There's a dialogue between different discourses, that "denies the possibility of any single reading" (Kuppers 2007:84). This makes it makes it more likely that the encounter will be marked by awareness of what Emmanuel Levinas would call the Other's radical alterity in the pre-ontological realm, rather than immediately reduced by generalisation, domestication and containment in the ontological realm.

bODY rEMIX and *Glee*, on the contrary, do seem to exoticise, erase and ultimately contain difference in an ethically problematic way.

bODY rEMIX, uses disability to construct an image of change, and ultimately of overcoming, without links to the specific, corporeal realities of disability, or to historical,

cultural or political narratives of oppression of any sort. The transmutations are so complete, so committed, that the dancers – and, the risk is, the spectators too – become caught up in rapturous over-identification, the real-time reaction to the intensive renderings and relations of the body onstage, without retaining / or / combining this with the distance required to reflect on what the images mean.

Glee's disabled characters (Kociemba 2010; Smith 2009) prop up a cultural script in which disabled people need to be taken care of, cured, supported to overcome, and examples of such overcoming are to be celebrated as an inspiration for all of us. The disabled characters are visible, but not on their own terms, only as an example of struggle, strength and triumph over adversity which allows non-disabled characters to be comfortable with disability, take pride in their own tolerance, and things like that (Smith 2010).

In both *bODY rEMIX* and *Glee*, disability really is just a rhetorical device. There is no engagement with the lived experience of the Other – with any lived experience of the Other, be it based on gender, race or ability. As a result, there is no blurring of the relationship between reality and representation, between performer, stage and spectator, or between One and Other. Unless a spectator – like me – brings with them a specific personal tendency to see these images with a critical eye, there is no complexity, uncertainty or undecidability in the spectatorial experience. Spectators need not – and, indeed, given the rhythm, rapture or joy of the pieces, in many ways cannot – engage the capacity BOTH to see what they are seeing, AND also to see the way they are implicated in what they are seeing that, for Mindy Fenske, following Conquergood, characterises the ethical encounter (2004:14). There is nothing to engender the dialogue between different voices, worldviews, habits, memories and histories that characterises the ethical encounter (9).

The fact that 'different' bodies are absent is actually central to this erasure of the ethical. The use of able-bodied actors eliminates the presence of a truly 'Other' body, any truly 'Other' body, any body – anything at all - which might show up the problems, paradoxes and tensions inherent in efforts to enact these cultural fantasies. Whilst the creators provide a variety of reasons for using able bodies actors – particularly the idea that disabled people might not be up to the physical demands of the work – this seems to have more to do with the fact that both *bODY rEMIX* and the *Glee* episodes would be very different – and would mean something very different - if an 'Other' body, any Other body, were present. There would be denser signification, deeper engagement with the paradoxes inherent in the cultural fantasies displayed, far greater complexity, and far more potential for the "unexpected" that Nicholas Ridout characterises as a component of the ethical encounter. There would more opportunity for the dual awareness of what we see and how we are implicated in it – and thus for the reflection, self dialogue, social dialogue and struggles to know how to respond – that characterises the ethical encounter. Instead, these works use very able bodies to erase extra layers of signification that might clog or

complicate the encounter. To erase the physical, theatrical or metatheatrical elements that might prompt spectators to think about the fictions permeating the realities, and the realities permeating the fictions, and thus reflect on the productive dissonances between them in or after the moment of encounter.

In this sense, whilst spectatorship is an individual as well as a group response, and spectators may bring personal factors that enable them to engage in a reflective, ethical consideration of any text ... For me, thinking through it here, engagement with the physical, with overpopulated signficatory systems, and the paradoxical relationship between non-normative bodies and signficatory systems, does to me seem to be a factor in creating – or thwarting – the conditions of possibility for a fully ethical encounter.

Without it – or some other signficatory device that would bring a similar sort of complexity or undecidability - we aren't necessarily challenged to "see" what other bodies mean – or fail to mean, or might mean – in non-reductive, ambiguous or ambivalent ways.

Websites

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwCoSxi9TJU&feature=related>
<http://videos.nymag.com/video/Glee-Safety-Dance>
<http://www.israel21c.org/201012098607/health/a-moment-of-glee-for-argo-medical>

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