

## **Overturing Feminist Phenomenologies: Disability, Complex Embodiment, Intersectionality, and Film**

Feminist phenomenologies, queer phenomenologies, and phenomenologies of disability and race all intersect. In order to account effectively for the structures of subjectivity, they are reliant on mutual transactions between their respective epistemological claims, and are predicated upon the lived and/or represented experiences of people. While each of these phenomenological modes puts forward substantively different methodologies, their common ground is found through a critique of the normative boundaries of the body as constituted by the white, male, able-bodied subject of philosophical and political discourse. Broadly speaking, their aims are also to create alternative visions of what these non-normativised subjectivities might be. Concomitantly, while seeking a means of explaining or defining feminist *film* phenomenology, I often find myself returning to my previous writing: there is no one phenomenology so much as many plural *phenomenologies*.<sup>1</sup> Phenomenologies extend far beyond the field of philosophy: examples of phenomenological praxis are also found in cultural studies, visual cultures, anthropology, the medical humanities, and, of course, film.<sup>2</sup> The epistemological claims of feminist phenomenologies are therefore necessarily interdisciplinary. Not only this: I argue that feminist phenomenologies ‘inform’ the study of film no more and no less than the study of film informs the development of feminist phenomenologies. No one single relationship, identity or definition can designate the ways in which feminist phenomenologies contribute to ongoing intellectual conversations about the place of bodies and embodied experience in the world; the means by which these experiences and bodies are performed and represented in the world, through film, constitutes a vital dynamic in the development of feminist phenomenologies.

Like all human beings, people living with impairments are also gendered beings with complex bodily experiences of the world. Gender is inseparable from race, impairment, age,

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<sup>1</sup> See Jenny Chamarette, “Embodied Worlds and Situated Bodies: Feminism, Phenomenology, Film Theory” *Signs: Journal of Woman and Society*, 40:2 (2014) 289-95; “Embodying Spectatorship: From Phenomenology to Sensation” in E. Ann Kaplan, Patrice Petro, Dijana Jelača and Kristin Hole (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2017) 311-321.

<sup>2</sup> See Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004); Jenny Slatman, *Our Strange Body: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Medical Interventions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014)

and all the other conditions of bodily experience; *ergo* disability too becomes a feminist concern. The disembodied transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl's *epoché*, with its desire to get to the thing *in itself*, bracketed away from lived experience, has a far lesser place in a complex, intersectionally informed understanding of phenomenologies of lived experience, than the work of, for example, Simone de Beauvoir or Sandra Bartky.<sup>3</sup> The relationships between intersectional feminist phenomenologies, complex embodiment and film are, as I argue in this chapter, mutually constitutive and interdependent. Without an intersectional approach to complex embodiment, there can be no feminist phenomenology worthy of its name. In this chapter, I argue that innovative cinematic representations of impairment and disability help to dynamise the intersectionality of feminist phenomenologies, acknowledging the interdependent cultural and embodied relationships between gender, race, and disability.

Understanding complex embodiment in relation to gender is one of the definitive intellectual contributions of feminist phenomenologies, which have strived towards a more holistic and equitable model of phenomenological experience given that no two bodies which identify themselves as female experience identical environmental conditions.<sup>4</sup> However, the development of feminist phenomenologies has always been contingent on a more subtle and nuanced understanding of complex embodiment, coming from elsewhere. While feminist phenomenologies offer an inaugural line of enquiry for complex embodiment, screen representations 'complexify' embodiment still further, thereby re-invigorating the epistemological claims of feminist phenomenologies. Co-incidentally, the complexity of bodies is also what contributes to more diverse and holistic visions of disability on screen. While Hollywood cinema especially continues to perpetuate distorted tropes of impairment, looking beyond the mainstream Anglo-American bubble presents a wealth of alternatives. In the last quarter of a century, innovative embodied representations of impairment and disability have flourished in global and art house cinema. Astra Taylor's *Examined Life* (Canada, 2008), Nadine Kutu's and Eddie Ndopu's viral video campaign, *#OxfordEddicated* (South Africa, 2016), and Jacques Audiard's feature film *Read my Lips* (*Sur mes lèvres*,

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<sup>3</sup> See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011 [1949]) Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990)

<sup>4</sup> See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception" in Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (eds.) *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 85–100

France, 2003) all invoke complex forms of embodiment, ability and interdependency, impairment and disability, and form the basis of my analyses in this chapter. Before I do so, however, some clarification is required in relation to my underpinning theoretical terms, specifically: impairment, disability, and intersectionality.

### **Impairment and disability, intersectionality, and feminist phenomenology**

I use the terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ to designate two separate but interrelated issues, following critical disability studies’ reorientation of the methodologies of feminist and queer theory to explain these distinctions. ‘Impairment’ refers to physiological or psychological attributes that an individual may have, which are then medically designated as ‘abnormal’ or socially constructed as ‘disabled’. ‘Disability’ refers to the social oppression or discrimination that people with impairments may experience as a result of a social and cultural failure to adapt to their needs, often described as the ‘social model’ of disability.<sup>5</sup> What disables individuals is not their impairments, but the ways in which society fails to adapt to variations in everyone’s physical, emotional, and intellectual needs, in order to support all people equally in their environment. Disability is therefore not the problem of the individual with an impairment, but rather a social and cultural problem which leads to the disempowerment of individuals. The social model arose in part as a patient-led counter-response to the medical model of disability, which categorises individuals with impairments as ‘lacking’ normative functions, who thus ‘fail’ to uphold a normative standard of embodied existence.

The relational concepts of impairment and disability are a crucial connection between feminist discourses and disability studies. Both disciplines deal with intersecting social oppression, discrimination and bodily regulation, acknowledging the relationship between embodied and social conditions. Social regulations of gender, sex, race and disability predominantly assume the white, male, able-bodied figure to be the ‘representational norm’; deviations from that norm become in some sense aberrant, abnormal or in need of medicalisation or control. Carolin Ahlvik-Harju describes this orientation towards social regulation as a “comforting narrative” used to assuage the anxiety that abled-bodied individuals often feel when encountering the bodies of individuals living with visible

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<sup>5</sup> See Carol Thomas, “Disability and Impairment” in John Swain, Sally French, Colin Barnes, Carol Thomas (eds.) *Disabling Barriers, Enabling Environments*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn (London: Sage, 2004): 21-27.

impairments.<sup>6</sup> The intersections between feminist discourses and disability studies are already well recognised. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson aptly sums up the offering of feminist disability theory to these debates: “disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender.”<sup>7</sup> Disability, like gender, is a pervasive social structure embedded in cultural artefacts, which results in oppression. Furthermore, as Tobin Siebers writes, the critical study of disability as a social discourse reveals a highly nuanced and multi-layered understanding of human embodiment:

Disability creates theories of embodiment more complex than the ideology of ability allows, and these many embodiments are each crucial to the understanding of humanity and its variations, whether physical, mental, social or historical. [...] disability is not a pathological condition, not only analyzable via individual psychology, but a social location complexly embodied.<sup>8</sup>

This model of negotiation between plural social and cultural locations of disability, and individual embodiments, advances earlier modes of situated, lived, feminist phenomenology, such as those of Iris Marion Young. Drawing both upon Beauvoir’s situated body and Merleau-Ponty’s lived body,<sup>9</sup> Young constructs an understanding of “the contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence.”<sup>10</sup> And while feminist phenomenology and phenomenological approaches to disability are not the same, the “contradictory

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<sup>6</sup> Carolin Ahlvik-Harju, “Disturbing bodies – reimagining comforting narratives of embodiment through feminist disability studies”, *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 16:3 (2016) 222-233: 223.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” in Kim Q. Hall (ed.) *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) 13-47: 17

<sup>8</sup> Tobin Siebers, “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment – For Identity Politics in a New Register” in Lennard J Davis (ed.) *The Disability Studies Reader* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn.) (London, New York: Routledge, 2010) 316-335: 317, 321

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge 2002 [1945])

<sup>10</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-45: 38. Originally published in *Human Studies* 3 (1980), 137–56. See also Kate Ince, *The Body and the Screen: Female Subjectivities in Contemporary Women’s Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 34-5

modalities of feminine bodily existence” can and should also extend to the specific cultural and historical contexts of differently abled bodies, which have also been marginalised and omitted. This is, in part, what Alison Kafer does in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, which advances the transformative intersectional potential of disability studies with relation to feminist theorisations of time, futurity, and labour.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere in phenomenological disability studies, the “contradictory modalities” of bodily existence have also helped to refine the social model of disability, which does not always acknowledge the fully-fleshed agency of individuals with impairment/experiencing disability: “within disability studies, the term ‘body’ tends to be used without much sense of bodiliness as if the body were little more than flesh and bones. This tendency carries the danger of objectifying bodies as things devoid of intentionality and intersubjectivity.”<sup>12</sup> The social model of disability is critiqued for its failure to actually talk about the distinctive qualities of bodies and embodied experience. The abstract concept of ‘the body’ used to describe the social construction of bodies sometimes obliterates the many material, diverse and concrete experiences of disability and embodiment. Vivian Sobchack, writing on her own prosthetic leg in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, identifies this strange schism between talking about a generic or abstract body, and a materially embodied one:

there is not only an *oppositional tension* but also a *dynamic connection* between *the* prosthetic as a tropological figure and *my* prosthetic as a material but also a phenomenologically lived artifact—the *the* and the *my* here indicating differences both of kind and degree between generalization and specificity, figure and ground, aesthetics and pragmatics, alienation and incorporation, subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>13</sup>

For Sobchack, the abstract body that is used in philosophical phenomenology, critiqued in feminist phenomenology and in critical disability studies, should not be rejected, so much as understood to be in a constant and dynamic relationship with the lived body—the “my prosthetic” which has for many years been both part of her body and apart from it. Sobchack’s perspective aligns itself closely both with Siebers’ model of complex embodiment, and Petra Kuppers’ discussion of the relational model of disability, where the social and cultural situation of bodies, and their particular phenomenological experiences,

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<sup>11</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Paterson and Bill Hughes “Disability and Phenomenology: The Carnal Politics of Everyday Life” *Disability and Society*. 14:5 (1999) 597-610: 600.

<sup>13</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*: 206.

meet reciprocally.<sup>14</sup> Phenomenologies of disability reveal the interdependence of feminist phenomenologies upon other, continually complexifying theorisations of embodiment.

It may still not yet be clear why talking about disability is so essential to an edited volume on feminist phenomenology. I want to return to the claim that disability is a social and cultural problem which leads to the disempowerment of individuals with particular characteristics. Sexism and racism are also social and cultural problems which lead to the disempowerment of individuals: the disabling forces of systemic inequality are common concepts to feminism, and to critical race theory. But as Black feminist law scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw explains, sexism and racism together operate in distinct and qualitatively different ways compared to their separate effects. Crenshaw and others' concept of intersectionality aimed initially to uncover the distinctive qualities of discrimination and disadvantage pertaining to race and gender, but also to other related issues: class, sexual orientation, and colour.<sup>15</sup> Since then, intersectionality has become a means of exploring the "vexed dynamics of difference" across other fields of identity.<sup>16</sup> Intersectionality has been welcomed in critical disability studies, particularly to acknowledge the exclusions often made by feminism and other critical and political movements vis-à-vis impairment and disability. If we consider feminist theory, critical race theory, and disability studies intersectionally, then it behooves us to expand the remit of feminist phenomenology. The white, female, disabled body and the queer, black, disabled body both intersect within the gender-race-sexuality-class-age matrix. These bodies need rightfully to take up space within feminist thought and, indeed by extension, feminist phenomenology. To put this another way: *a feminist phenomenology that fails to acknowledge the complexity and intersectionality of the lived body is neither feminist, nor phenomenological*. This chapter therefore places its focus on the interdependence and collaborative potential of an intersectional feminist phenomenological approach to the complexities of embodiment in on-screen representations, and vice versa.

## **Disability on-screen**

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<sup>14</sup> Petra Kuppens, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003)

<sup>15</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" *Stanford Law Review*, 43:6 (1991) 1241-1299: 1244n9

<sup>16</sup> Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Leslie McCall "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38:4 (2013) 785-810: 787.

As Siebers has argued, representations of disability have long functioned as essential components of narrative and visual cultures: “To argue that disability has a rich but hidden role in the history of art is not to say that disability has been excluded. It is rather the case that disability is rarely recognized as such, even though it often serves as the very factor that establishes works as superior examples of aesthetic beauty.”<sup>17</sup> The Venus de Milo is one of Siebers’ primary reference points for his *disability aesthetics*. The sculpture’s absent arms—in effect, its imperfections and disharmonies—are essential to it being considered as “beautiful by the tradition of modern aesthetic response.”<sup>18</sup> While Siebers’ account focuses primarily on modern and contemporary Fine Art, the ‘rich but hidden’ rather than ‘excluded’ role of disability is equally true in cinema. Performers with physical impairments and representations of disabled characters were common from cinema’s earliest days.<sup>19</sup> One of the most contentious cinematic examples is Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932): featuring a cast of performers with diverse physical impairments, *Freaks* was banned at the time of its release and has subsequently attracted substantial scholarly attention.<sup>20</sup> The freak, the monster, and the pathologised criminal all feature prominently in horror, gothic and other film ‘body genres’.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere in mainstream fiction films, characters with disabilities frequently become what David T Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder describe as “narrative prosthesis:” prosthetic devices which support dominant narrative structures.<sup>22</sup> The pitiable cripple, monstrous exception, threatening alien, or maimed superhero are all powerful narrative prostheses for literature as well as film: “stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, [but] rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political

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<sup>17</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010): 4.

<sup>18</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> See Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994) for a comprehensive history of physical disability and cinematic representation

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Norden, *Cinema of Isolation*, 115-19; Anthony Enns and Christopher R. Smit (eds) *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (Lanham, New York, Oxford: University Press of America 2001) 47-86; Eunjung Kim, “‘A Man, with the Same Feelings’: Disability, Humanity, and Heterosexual Apparatus in *Breaking the Waves*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Breathing Lessons*, and *Oasis*” in Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić (eds.) *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 131-158: 131-134;

<sup>21</sup> See J. A. Nelson (ed.), *The disabled, the media, and the information age* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994); Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić (eds.) *The Problem Body*:

<sup>22</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000)

dimensions.”<sup>23</sup> Many of these tropes repeat ad nauseam socially-constructed ‘personal tragedies’ of disability, where “disability, or rather, impairment which is equated with disability, is thought to strike individuals causing suffering and blighting lives. [...] The tragedy is to be avoided, eradicated, or ‘normalised’ by all possible means.”<sup>24</sup>

There is an understandable parallel between the critiques above of disabled bodies exploited by literary and cinematic narratives and critiques of the gendered body in feminist film theory and phenomenologies. If on-screen representations of people with impairments follow the narrow narrative frameworks outlined above, they sustain a construction of disability that alienates, mystifies, and objectifies, just as mainstream representations of women have done. As Snyder and Mitchell point out, “disabled bodies have been constructed cinematically and socially to function as delivery vehicles in the transfer of extreme sensation to audiences. [...] They] rely to a great extent, on shared cultural scripts of disability as that which must be warded off at all costs”.<sup>25</sup> It is not difficult to see the shared modalities of oppression that operate both for representations of people with impairments, and representations of women — and exponentially so for representations of women with impairments.

Nonetheless, alongside its historical incompetencies, cinema also has the capacity to innovatively revise disability narratives, particularly where films focus closely on the embodied experiences of characters and individuals living with impairments. Representations on film of mental illness and poor mental health have been studied copiously, though many are not specifically discussed within the context of ‘disability’.<sup>26</sup> It is no surprise that the audio-visual nature of film has led to extensive writing on blindness, cinema and the visual

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<sup>23</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 48

<sup>24</sup> Sally French and John Swain, “Whose Tragedy? Towards a Personal Non-tragedy View of Disability” in John Swain, Sally French, Colin Barnes, Carol Thomas (eds.) *Disabling Barriers, Enabling Environments*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn (London: Sage, 2004) 34-40: 34.

<sup>25</sup> Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell “Body Genres: An Anatomy of Disability in Film” in Chivers and Markotić (eds.), *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, 178-204: 186

<sup>26</sup> See Otto Wahl, *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Dinesh Bhugra, *Mad Tales from Bollywood: Portrayal of Mental Illness in Conventional Hindi Cinema* (Hove: Psychology Press/Maudsley Monographs, 2006); Sally Chivers, *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2011)



arts.<sup>27</sup> This chapter unfortunately does not have space to discuss excellent examples of disability cinema from the global south, such as Seung-jun Yi's *Planet of Snail* (South Korea, 2011) a tender non-fiction portrait of facilitative interdependency between the deaf-blind poet and screenwriter Young-Chan, and his wife Soon-Ho, who has a spinal deformity, or Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's complex thriller *Grigris* (Chad, 2013). Films such as these demonstrate complex intersectional models of gender, sexuality, race, class, geopolitics and impairment. *Grigris* for instance, features protagonist and petrol-trafficker Souleymane (Souleymane Demé), whose character directs, rather than supports the narrative: he is sexually desiring, physically dextrous and morally ambiguous, and experiences his paralyzed and atrophied leg simultaneously as a socially excluding characteristic which cuts him out of the legitimate job market, and as an essential part of his gymnastic nightclub dances, central to his ongoing survival.

Thoughtful examples of film beyond the Hollywood matrix therefore can and do present lived, embodied sensation from a differently ordered perspective, and thus have the potential to challenge and reshape social and cultural attitudes to bodily complexity, as well as confirm and reassert the ways in which bodies are viewed, understood, empowered, desired or subjugated. The films in this chapter demonstrate the plurality and specificity of body-world relationships between on-screen bodies and their environments, particularly via gendered relations on screen (queer facilitative companionship and intimate relationships, especially). Rather than depicting disabled protagonists as objects to be classified or clarified, or as narrative prostheses that restabilise cinematic visions of loss or tragedy, they emphasise subjectivity, imaginative extension, and ambiguity through their cinematic language. In doing so they challenge cultural delineations of ability and disability, disrupt generic notions of phenomenological experience and operate in dialogue with feminist phenomenologies, in their shared ambitions to critique the whiteness, masculinity and able-bodiedness of the subjects which formed the basis of many transcendental and existential phenomenologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this small, non-exhaustive selection, the first two examples, *Examined Life* and *#OxfordEddicated*, feature individuals with physical impairments who both articulate insightfully their positions in relation to ideological

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<sup>27</sup> Though see John Hull, *Notes on Blindness* (London: Profile Books, 2013) originally published as *Touching the Rock* (London: SPCK, 1990), and the recent hybrid film on Hull's writing and experiences of visual impairment, *Notes on Blindness* (2016); Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance*; Hannah Thompson, *Reviewing Blindness in French Fiction, 1789-2013* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

structures of able-bodiedness. The next case study, *Read My Lips*, features representations of deafness, where the figures do not address their ideological oppressions so much as embody and contest them.

**Abstract Concepts, Concrete individuals: *Examined Life* (2009) and #OxfordEddicated (2016)**



**Examined Life**

Directed by Astra Taylor  
Produced by Bill Imperial (Sphinx Productions), Lea Marin (NFB)  
*Sunaura Taylor and Judith Butler.*

Photo taken from the production  
© 2008 Sphinx Productions and The National Film Board of Canada. All rights reserved.

Figure 1: Sunaura Taylor and Judith Butler, *Examined Life*. Directed by Astra Taylor. Produced by Bill Imperial (Sphinx Productions), Lea Marin (NFB). Photo taken from the production c) 2008 Sphinx Productions and The National Film Board of Canada. All rights reserved.

In the film *Examined Life* artist Sunaura Taylor and scholar Judith Butler take a walk together through San Francisco (Fig. 1). Together, Judy and Sunny laugh, shop, and talk about the language of philosophy and identity, and tacitly gendered assumptions about what a body can, or cannot do. While walking through the streets of San Francisco, they talk about the ways in which this city's built environment not only increases accessibility for people

with physical impairments, but also enhances social accessibility: greater numbers of people with impairments in public space both increases familiarity and diminishes the social stigmas of disability. Their conversation about Taylor's political activism evolves into a discussion about interdependency: how the vision of radical self-sufficiency is an able-bodied myth. Walking always requires some sort of support outside of individual bodies, whether that is a shoe or a road, a pathway or a wheelchair. Ultimately, we all need our environments, and each other, for our survival. In *Examined Life*, Taylor is a co-creator of an intellectual conversation about interdependence with Judith Butler, who is neither her carer nor her savior, and it is no coincidence that it is with Butler that Taylor is engaging. Scholarship on phenomenology, the body, gender, and disability share a common friend in Butler's work, which the film inevitably cites through the physical presence of Butler on screen, and the manner of her speech. Disability studies have, since the early 2000s, been influenced significantly by Butler, transposing issues of gendered and body performativity onto ongoing debates about impairment and disability.<sup>28</sup> The reciprocity works both ways: in February 2017, Butler opened a lecture at University College London by stating publicly that the event was not accessible to all people with impairments and that this was in contravention of the Equalities Act 2010. A few days later, she met with several scholars with impairments to discuss how they had been treated by UCL's administration, and committed not to speak again at any venue without disabled access.<sup>29</sup>

This question of access: of who can be made visible on a university campus and how, becomes all the clearer in Eddie Ndopu's *#OxfordEddication* campaign. In 2016, South African queer thinker of colour, policy advocate and disability activist Eddie Ndopu launched, a viral video campaign to support his access costs to the MA programme in Public Policy at the University of Oxford. In this nimbly shot and edited campaign, which depicts energetic, smiling young bodies of colour moving through an unnamed city, Ndopu emphasizes the illusion of adult independence, brought about by the environmental interventions of human beings. Interdependence with the lived environment and with others is therefore a fundamental part of human culture. As he states in voiceover in the film:

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<sup>28</sup> Ellen Samuels, "Critical Divides: Judith Butler's Body Theory and the Question of Disability" in Kim Q. Hall (ed.) *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011) 48-66

<sup>29</sup> See Naomi Jacobs, "Why We Have to Fight for Access to Theory: Judith Butler and the UCL Lecture" *Lighthouse blog*. <https://butlighthouse.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/why-we-have-to-fight-for-access-to-theory-judith-butler-and-the-ucl-lecture/> Accessed 28 April 2017

What so many of us know to be true, is that able-bodied people fail to recognize that their bodies as so-called able-bodied people disappear into the background of the built environment, making it look like they are independent [...] your body is carried, held tightly to make it look as if you are the one doing all the work when in fact, you are just a beneficiary of able-bodied supremacy.<sup>30</sup>

Ndopu's account of normative assumptions about bodily and cognitive ability resonates powerfully with what Siebers describes as "the ideology of ability"<sup>31</sup> and what Robert McRuer, drawing on Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, calls "compulsory able-bodiedness".<sup>32</sup> The term 'supremacy' also usefully and tacitly highlights the relationships between disability and race, as expressed through Ndopu's environment, and the body he inhabits.

In both cinematic examples, two disability rights activists provide insightful commentary on models of disability. Ndopu chooses his words carefully: by speaking of the concept of 'able-bodied supremacy', the traces of white supremacy, of racial subjugation, hang in the air. Taylor speaks of the able-bodied myth of radical self-sufficiency; a trope which shares significant overlap with feminist critiques of bodily autonomy.<sup>33</sup> From their own embodied experiences, as thinkers and individuals, Ndopu and Taylor redevelop versions of the social model of disability while speaking and living on-screen. And yet, neither film is *about* Taylor or Ndopu's physical impairments as such. Neither Taylor nor Ndopu are represented as impoverished, lacking or pitiable—models of representation to which film cultures have had frequent recourse. Their faces are framed in close-up as they speak; where their bodies are fully framed within the shot, attention is paid explicitly to the colour and texture of their clothing, makeup, and accessories, and not the culturally informed 'incapacity' of their bodies. Through their body movements, clothing, and physical and verbal forms of expression, both individuals are depicted with agency, cogency and perceptive insight into ways that social and cultural norms restrict and disempower

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<sup>30</sup> Eddie Ndopu in *#OxfordEddicated* (dir. Nadine Kutu, South Africa, 2016)

<sup>31</sup> Siebers, "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment"

<sup>32</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York and London: New York University Press 2006) and "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence" in Lennard J. Davis, ed. *The Disability Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2006) 88-99; see also Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" *Signs* 5:4 (Summer, 1980) 631-660

<sup>33</sup> See Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*; Slatman, *Our Strange Body*.

individuals, including themselves, by virtue of their differences. In addition to their distinctive voices, the shape, perspectives and gestures of their bodies are foregrounded in the films, without framing them as objects of scrutiny. For instance, significant portions of the cutaway and contextual shots that show Taylor and Ndopu's environments look as if they have been filmed at wheelchair height, thus producing a perspective on the lived environment that does not take able-bodied upright adult eyelines as a cultural norm.

Ndopu clearly states his own position as an advocate for queer and intersectional disability rights, while the video itself is part of a crowdsourced fundraising campaign to enable him to pay for the permanent care he needs while studying at Oxford. The video collages visual styles, drawing on documentary and lifestyle filmmaking, and making use of golden-hour lighting and slowed-down footage of the ambient urban environment alongside atmospheric music. Ndopu's body and speech are not undermined or devalued; rather, he is iconically dressed in a series of outfits that emphasise flexible and genderqueer modes of attire, including makeup and eye-shadow, softly textured clothing in black and pink, business suits and a checked shirt and bow tie. In other words, his embodied and fluidly gendered position in the film's world is pronounced and distinguishable. Ndopu acknowledges his distinctive relationships to disability while advocating for the empowerment of all people living with impairments, from a position in which his body is not subjected to narratives of pity, tragedy, or helplessness. He offers leadership in exchange for crowdfunding: a mutual transaction of interdependence. He is not a narrative prosthesis: he is making a case. If feminist phenomenologies are predicated upon a) the 'destabilisation' of the ontological claims of the phenomenological subject with regard to gender b) the recalibration of intellectual enquiry towards subjects who are gendered, embodied and situated and c) the reorientation of subjectivity from containment within a single body to interrelationality between subjects, objects and others, then Ndopu and Taylor both embody these aims on screen. The films become, in effect, a form of phenomenological praxis, which is feminist, intersectional and complexly embodied. Both films employ aesthetic and formal techniques, choices of transition in editing, and the youthful, fashionable contexts of urban environment, in order to create new narratives about human interdependency. The observation of such detail, of examining and representing the embodied conditions of individuals, of the interplay between filmed conversation or speech, and the bodies who issue forth that speech, and the interdependent bodies who pass through space, is what a phenomenological attentiveness to the film brings — attending to the filmic world *as it appears*. Certainly, this critical, detailed attention is a means by which the gendered, lived experience underpinning the work of

Beauvoir and Young, becomes so vibrantly important for phenomenologies of film, and for complex embodiment.

Neither Taylor nor Ndopu are represented within these films as exclusively "disabled" and thereby ungendered bodies. Beyond the screen, Sunaura is a white woman, artist, activist and writer whose recently published book emphasizes the entangled nature of issues of disability and animal justice.<sup>34</sup> Eddie is a policy-maker and advisor, a "black, queer, feminist thinker."<sup>35</sup> Neither Sunaura nor Eddie are in any sense average or typical; they are unique and talented individuals who advocate for disability rights and act in a representative capacity, but whose bodies do not claim to "represent" disability universally. Neither protagonist embodies a 'standard' representation of disability, because there is no such thing. Their particular bodies, environments, and development intersect with their gender, race, education, creativity, and intellectual clout. Both films produce complex forms of embodied representation, where dialogue, communication, reflection and creative voice are central to Ndopu and Taylor's differential modes of embodied expression. Through this differential complexity, both films critique the "ideology of ability". In particular, *#OxfordEddicated* emphasizes the complex and conflicting relationships between Ndopu's body and his environments. For example, he describes himself variously as sexually desiring but "unfuckable" in relation to the displays of able-bodied sexuality in nightclubs, as a vocal advocate for disability rights at board meetings when he is often also considered to be a "pity case," as an employer of his carers who is marginalized when strangers on the street praise his employees for their "bravery." This is what Siebers describes as a model of complex embodiment: the ways in which individuals sense and experience their worlds diversely and divergently, and the ways in which social structures and lived-body experiences are reciprocal and mutually transformative.<sup>36</sup> Gender, sexuality, race, and bodily engagement with the world are mutually constitutive elements of these cinematic representations: they demand an intersectional approach to their phenomenological complexity. It is from the basis of an intersectional phenomenology of complex embodiment, that I proceed with the

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<sup>34</sup> Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Pontsho Pilane, "Eddie Ndopu is ready, willing and able to conquer space" *Mail and Guardian*, 11 July 2016, <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-07-11-00-eddie-ndopu-is-ready-willing-and-able> Accessed 20 April 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Siebers, "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment," 328

subsequent analysis of complex embodiment, sense experience and film aesthetics in a fiction film featuring deaf characters.

### **Sound as Sight: *Read My Lips***

Both films above offer positive examples of a film-phenomenological praxis of complex embodiment, taking into account the impact of intersectionality and complex embodiment on the lived experience of the protagonists. The models of interdependence put forward by Ndopu and Taylor support a theorisation of complex embodiment which incorporates gender, race *and* impairment. However, these protagonists are, more or less, aligned with non-fictional subjects — individuals with impairments who continue their lives off-screen. The issues of phenomenological praxis through film becomes more ethically complex in relation to fiction film, though examples outside the English-speaking world continue to offer insightful ground. *Sur mes lèvres/Read My Lips* offers a reorientation of the conventional divisions and orders between sight and sound, as well as a different orientation again of models of dependence and interdependence explored in the previous two examples.

*Read My Lips* is broadly a thriller in genre, adopting a narrative in which the under-appreciated, and partially hearing receptionist Carla (played by the non-deaf actor Emmanuelle Devos) hires an ex-convict, Paul (played by Vincent Cassel) as an assistant.<sup>37</sup> Initially mistrustful of each other, they gradually develop a working relationship, which allows Carla to build confidence in a sense of her own desires, both sexual and professional, and enables Paul to acquire something resembling an everyday life. When Paul is dragged back into the underworld from which he has only recently emerged, he enlists Carla's skilled lip-reading to set up a heist. They plot to rob the petty criminal and nightclub owner, Marchand, who has blackmailed Paul into working nights at his club, while Carla watches Marchand's dealings from a nearby rooftop every night in order to lip-read his conversations. The subsequent double-heist structure releases both Paul and Carla from their unfulfilling earlier lives, ending in a somewhat conventional heterosexual romance between the pair.

Disabled, minority, or disadvantaged characters feature prominently in films directed by Audiard. However, *Read My Lips* and Audiard's later film *Rust and Bone* (*De Rouille et*

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<sup>37</sup> In line with current scholarship, I use the term *deaf* to describe hearing impairment, and *Deaf* to describe individuals who identify as being part of a community and culture of deaf people. See for example, Robert Sparrow, 'Defending Deaf Culture: The Case of Cochlear Implants', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 13: 2, (2005) 135–152.

*d'os*, 2012) both experience similar criticisms from the perspective of complex embodiment and disability studies. Both the female performers cast in central roles, Devos in *Read My Lips* and Marion Cotillard in *Rust and Bone*, are able-bodied actors who perform their characters' respective impairments and disabilities on-screen. For example, Cotillard wore green stockings on her lower legs that could be edited out in post-production in order to technologically imitate amputation.<sup>38</sup> Interchangeability and flexibility are demanded of actors such as Cotillard and Devos, since the circulation of their images within the matrix of commercial feature-length narrative cinema is what in part supports the popularity of the medium. However, casting able-bodied actors in disabled roles effaces the visibility both of impairments and disability. If an "able" body can "perform" any disability adequately enough on-screen, then disability is only seen as a cinematic performance, rather than a complexly embodied existence. This is what Siebers describes as "disability drag:" the performance of disability by able-bodied actors, which diminishes the agency of disabled performers in mainstream representation, and thereby makes disability less, not more, visible.<sup>39</sup> Deaf communities have pointed out the implausibility first of Carla's role as an office receptionist, and second of her superhuman lip-reading powers.<sup>40</sup> As a result, *Read My Lips* is certainly not immune to its own narrative prostheses. What is more, Carla "passes" most of the time as a woman without a hearing impairment: she is fully bilingual in French and in French Sign Language (FSL), and she is a gifted lip reader.<sup>41</sup> She can hear more or less perfectly with the facility of two hearing aids, and in an episode in which she encounters another Deaf person and rejects his urgings to communicate with him via FSL, she demonstrates her self-exclusion from Deaf communities.<sup>42</sup> However, reading the film purely in terms of its narrative structures leaves out its more complex sensory representations, where aesthetic form, rather than narrative structure, produces an intersection between complex embodiment and phenomenological experience.

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Kitchen, "The disabled body and disability in the cinema of Jacques Audiard," *Studies in French Cinema*, 16:3 (2016) 229-247: 232.

<sup>39</sup> Siebers, Tobin "Disability as Masquerade", *Literature and Medicine*, 23: 1, (2004) 1-22: 16-20

<sup>40</sup> See Kitchen, "The Disabled Body", 245n2.

<sup>41</sup> For more on 'passing' in the context of disability, see Siebers, 'Disability as Masquerade'.

<sup>42</sup> See Timothy E. Wilson, "Deaf Sexy: Genre and Disability in *Read My Lips*" in Marja Evelyn Mogk (ed.) *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television*. (Jefferson, Carolina and London: McFarland, 2013) 17-27: 18.



In a sequence towards the latter part of the film, Carla breaks into Marchand's flat above the club in which Paul is working in search of bags of stolen money, and is interrupted by Marchand's unanticipated arrival. Her moral ability to do this is facilitated by her emerging sexual confidence with Paul, with whom she has agreed to this undertaking: there is a tacit agreement of mutual aid. Nonetheless, here I want to focus on the complex interplay of soundtrack and close-up, handheld camerawork, which also inverts the gendered power dynamics of the peeping Tom.

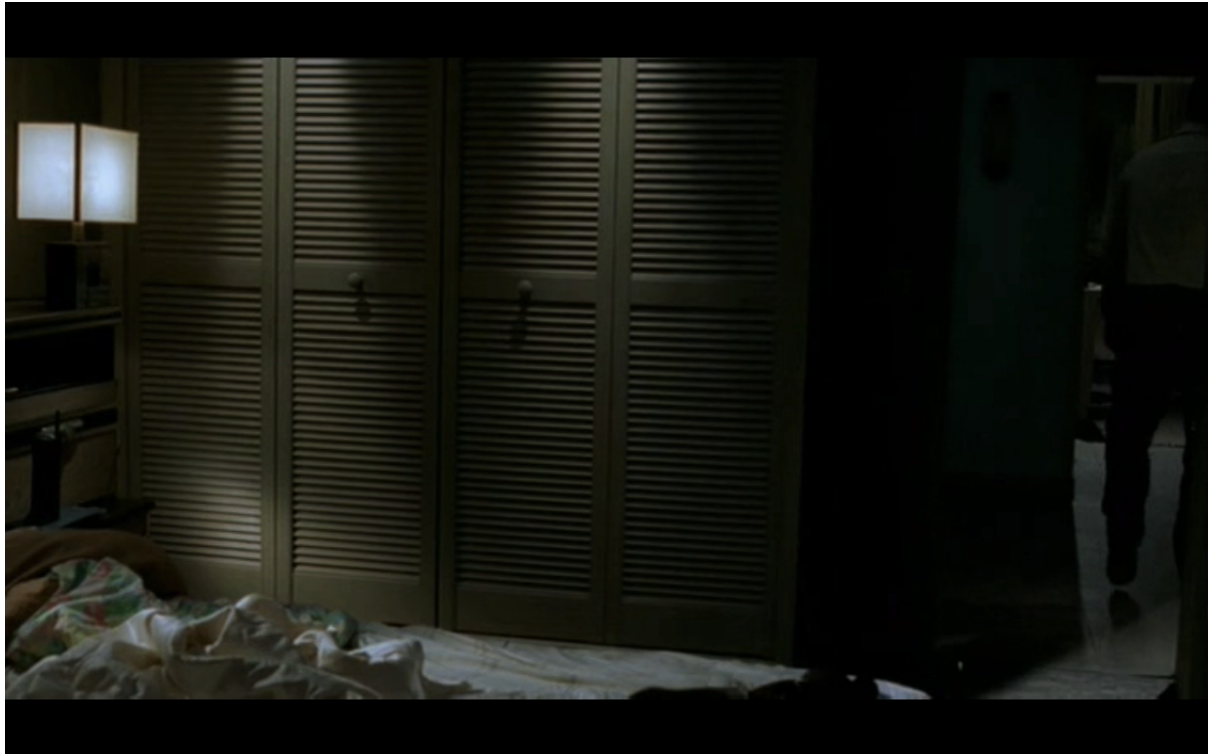


Figure 2: *Read My Lips*. Reverse-shot of the closet in which Carla is hiding.



Figure 3: *Read My Lips*. Extreme close-up of Carla's nose and mouth, hidden inside the closet.

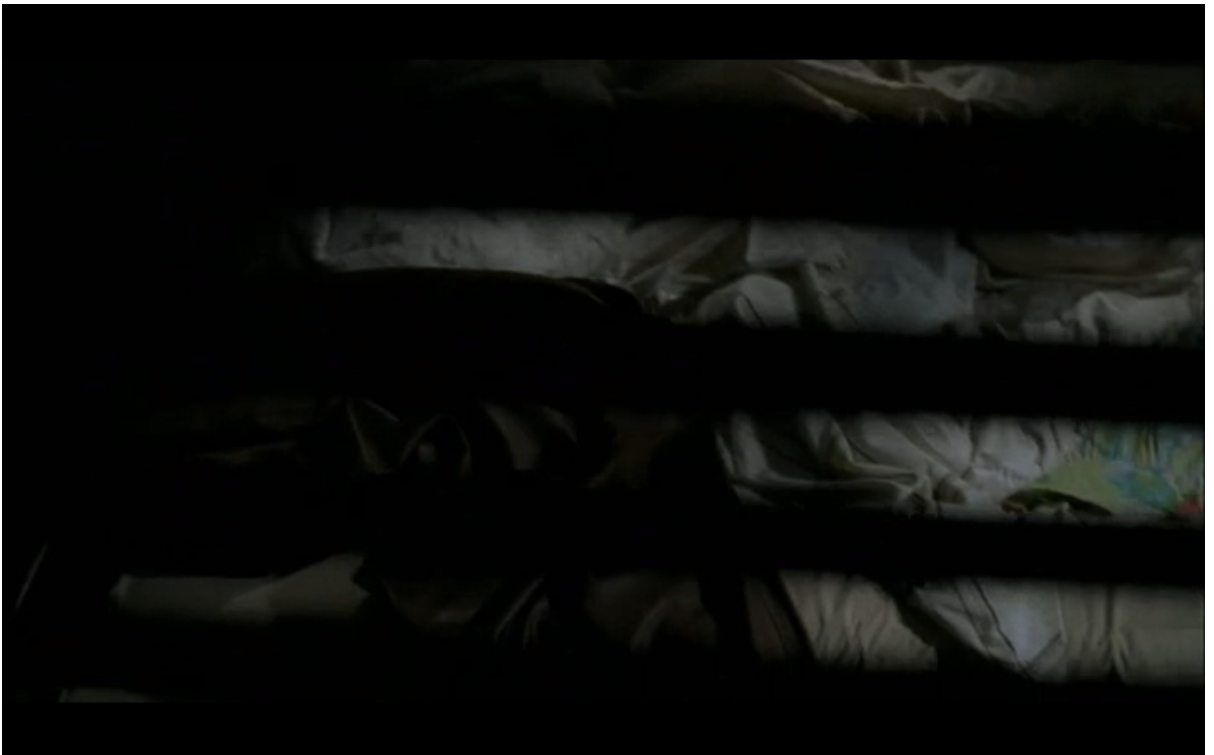


Figure 4: *Read My Lips*. Carla's point-of-view shot from within the closet



Figure 5: *Read My Lips*. Return to extreme close-up of Carla's closed eyelids and nose.

Mostly obscured by darkness at the outset of the scene, Carla's face emerges from the lattice pattern of light and dark (fig. 6) from the slatted wardrobe we know her to be hiding in from its frontal display in the previous shot (fig. 5). Close miked sound and a quick point-of-view shot confirm Carla's positioning in the dark, confined space of the closet (fig. 7). A sweep of darkness passes across the frame, Carla flinches as her face re-emerges into the light. A moment later, the faint crash of bottles in a fridge door off-screen provokes another on-screen grimace from Carla, as she turns her head away from the camera, and, we assume, towards these muffled sounds. As the camera cuts again to an even closer shot of Carla's lips, nose and chin, she yanks her hearing aid from her left ear. The film's soundtrack responds to this gesture with muffled microphone sounds; as Carla tweaks the aid, close-miked clicks and a faint hiss of radio interference again imitate her intimate physical actions. Once replaced in her ear, the adjustment noises of muffled microphone indicate that the aid is back in place. During this very short sequence, from the moment the aid is removed, to its replacement, the faint bottle sounds discontinue. As soon as the aid is back in Carla's ear, a subdued wash of amplified clinking and rustling combines with camerawork so close to Carla's face that it shakes and shifts in and out of focus. The extreme close-up and the extremely amplified sound together imply that the soundtrack has switched from a mode of hearing outside of Carla's body, to one within a zone of intimacy almost inside her. As she closes her eyes,

Carla's aid seems to enable her to hear proximity at a distance (fig. 8). In the subsequent scene, Carla uses her embodied memory of sound to orientate herself towards the kitchen, and ultimately to locate the bags of money in a freezer compartment.

The formal aesthetics of sound and image in the scene imply that Carla is facilitated, and not diminished, by her combination of technologically enhanced and physiologically diminished hearing, but also that they heighten her physical sensations to a level more akin to desire or fear than impartial observation. Rather than acting as the voyeur of the scene, as we might expect from her position in the wardrobe, listening is a mode for her desire, and the audience is encouraged to 'sit' with that mode of hearing. Carla employs her skills as an embodied listener, to envision at a distance what she cannot initially approach. Rather than operating according to the normative hierarchies of sense experience, where vision takes primacy, instead this sequence implies a mutual dependence between sight, sound, embodiment, imagination and sexuality. Carla's bodily experience is represented through complex camerawork, editing and sound engineering, offering the *imaginative potential* for a dynamic reorientation of sense experience.

It is difficult to dismiss the pervasive ideologies of ability in such a sequence, since Carla's "enhanced" hearing still implies superpowers on the part of a technologically enhanced body with a hearing impairment. *Read My Lips* receives warranted criticism with regard to its disability drag and overdependence on narratives of impoverishment and supercapability. However, the aesthetic and formal qualities of the film draw attention to the sensory experiences *of* the central Deaf character, rather than sensory experiences *about* her. The film both disrupts commonly-held assumptions about "sight" and the eyes, "hearing" and the ears, "language" and verbal speech, and embodied orientation. This offers imaginative potential to explore Carla's lived body as a Deaf woman, intersecting with her desires as a heterosexual woman, and her experiences of discrimination as a white-collar, female worker, facilitated by her relationship with a non-deaf, white working class man. Other scholars have already noted the interdependent and transactional relationships initiated between Carla and Paul in *Read My Lips*.<sup>43</sup> Like *Examined Life* and *#OxfordEddicated*, it also explores the tensions and proximities of intimately bonded groups, and therefore, includes rather than stigmatise disability.

## Conclusion

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<sup>43</sup> See Kitchen, "The Disabled Body" and Wilson, "Deaf Sexy".

Almost without exception, the films discussed in this chapter provide examples of interdependent, transactional or mutually enhancing relationships between characters or individuals with visible impairments and those without. Perhaps this is a single uniting feature amongst such diversity: that the functioning of human life is predicated on the support and help of others. These contemporary forms of cinematic representation have the potential to overturn the cultural discriminations of disability, particularly through recourse to the interactions between the films' aesthetics and sensory experience, and in models of agency and interdependency.

The representations of complexly embodied experience in this chapter demonstrate not only human interdependence but also the disruptive critical forces that an intersectional feminist phenomenology can bring to bear on understanding what senses, lived experiences, and environments are common, shared or in fact, uniquely variable. Bodily variations are potentially as complex and multiple as the seven billion people who inhabit this planet. As exponentially huge, perhaps, as the number of individuals that we might consider to have a body—human and non-human animals alike. It therefore makes more sense not to try to account for bodily variation empirically, according to norms which are subject to the constant flux of change, but to attempt to understand cultural systems of complex embodiment which designate and stigmatise bodies. This is the aim of intersectional feminist phenomenologies of the situated, lived body: to understand the political and cultural ramifications of how bodies experience limitation and disempowerment, and to put forward a form of praxis that might expand and empower subjects and the ways in which they articulate their world-body connections. Analogous to the protagonists of these films, feminist and intersectional phenomenologies co-exist in a mutually interdependent relationship. Screen representations of bodies create narratives about bodies and embodied sensation: whether they end up reproducing stigmatising narratives, or actively engage with bodily difference and the necessity of human interdependence, is where criticism such as my own can make a useful intervention. I therefore invite other feminist phenomenologists to think intersectionally—to meet with the specificities and complexities of lived experience and their ongoing representations on-screen, to go 'beyond' feminist phenomenology in fact, in order to refine it.

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### **Filmography**

#*OxfordEddicated* (dir. Nadine Kutu, South Africa, 2016) 4 mins.

<https://www.facebook.com/oxfordeddiecated/videos/vb.1008619005894350/1040508662705384/?type=2&theater> Accessed 28 March 2018

*Examined Life* (Dir. Astra Taylor, Canada, 2008). 88 mins. DVD.

*Freaks* (dir. Tod Browning, US, 1932). 90 mins. DVD.

*Grigris* (dir. Mahamat Saleh Haroun, Chad, 2013). 100 mins. DVD

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*Planet of Snail (Dalpaengee eui byeol)* (dir. Seung-jun Yi, S. Korea, 2011) 88 mins. DVD.

*Read My Lips* (dir. Jacques Audiard, France, 2001). 119 mins. DVD

*Rust and Bone* (dir. Jacques Audiard, France, 2012) 123 mins. DVD