The Problem Body
We dedicate this book to Emma, the pre-eminent Vampire Slayer.
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Beyond all our fabulous colleagues in Disability Studies, especially the contributors to this volume, we’d like to thank Martin Boyne for his careful indexing, Sandy Crooms for her amazing editorial support, Maggie Diehl for her exhaustive copyediting, Jennifer Shoffey Forsythe for exemplary patience in vetting and giving advice regarding images, Malcolm Litchfield for his permissions advice, and Jonathan Pinto for his technical expertise. We also thank our wonderful families and our partners, Louis Cabri and Wade Matthews, for always reading. Lastly, through our work on this book, we have developed a remarkable collaborative companionship for which we are both immensely grateful.
Introduction

In this compilation we have gathered a set of essays that explore representations of disability on film. One of the quickest paths to critical acclaim for an able-bodied actor is to play a physically disabled character in a manner that a largely uninformed audience finds convincing. Filmic narrative fictions rarely ignore disability. Examples of lauded performances include those by Daniel Day Lewis (My Left Foot), Tom Hanks (Philadelphia), Sean Penn (I Am Sam), and Hilary Swank (Million Dollar Baby). As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out in Narrative Prosthesis, disability in narrative is both excessively visible and conversely invisible (15). Rather than absent, as other stigmatized social identities can be (for example, films can entirely avoid lead female or racialized roles), disability is highly and continuously present on-screen. However, it is not always agential. Often, disabled bodies appear in order to shore up a sense of normalcy and strength in a presumed-to-be able-bodied audience. In this book we follow this argument into narrative film, noting the contradiction between how many characters in films display disabilities and how seldom reviewers and audiences “notice” disability as a feature within the film. This characteristic disability haunting of contemporary film merits critical scrutiny and warrants a set of critical terms that separate disability studies from past film criticism. In what follows, we focus on critical notions of “projection” and filmic constructions of “problem bodies” to contribute such scrutiny and such terms.

Filmic narrative often aligns the bodies it represents with an elusive and ideal norm of the human body that William Blake designated “the

1. All films cited and discussed in the essays are listed in the Filmography at the end of the book.
human abstract.” Most bodies are presented as normative by default, implicitly—self-evidently, or so it might appear to a viewer—achieving the norm, while other bodies are designated “abnormal,” failing to achieve, or even to aspire to, that norm. As Robert Bogdan, quoting his young son in his pivotal publication *Freak Show*, points out, typically, in mainstream films, when characters “look bad” they “are bad” (6). Frequently, a disabled body is represented as a metaphor for emotional or spiritual deficiency. Unlike normative filmic bodies that literally advance the plot, the disabled body often exists primarily as a metaphor for a body that is unable to do so. Rarely do films come along like Crispin Hellion Glover’s, David Brothers’ and Steven C. Stewart’s *It is fine! EVERYTHING IS FINE!* a film written by and starring a disabled actor, which presents a disabled character as exactly that—disabled, yet still a fully participating character in the film. So what happens when a disabled body metaphorically becomes a site of projected identity? The essays collected in this anthology take on the poetics and politics of that question.

**Projecting Disability**

In this book we analyze the “projection” of disability. We include in our analysis the act of the film projector displaying disability as well as what film viewers project—in the sense of prediction—disability to be. According to Sigmund and Anna Freud, projection is an emotional defense mechanism, whereby one attributes one’s own negative or unacceptable thoughts and emotions to others. Rey Chow, in her book on cultural otherness, *Ethics after Idealism*, discusses the notion of fascism as “projection, surface phenomena, everyday practice, which does away with the distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’” (19). In writing about fascism through the lens of Freudian projection, Chow

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2. Blake speaks, for the most part, about the human soul. But his notion that “we” need to make others poor or unhappy in order to recognize our own satisfaction speaks to the us-them relationship that normalizes the body as well as the spirit (Plate 47).

3. So, for example, in the film *Shallow Hal*, the Jack Black character “evolves” emotionally into the kind of man who could love a “fat chick,” while Gwyneth Paltrow’s character remains a physically repellant figure, but one who audiences must learn to see as “beautiful on the inside.”

4. Although none of the films in this collection address *It is fine! EVERYTHING IS FINE!* much could be said about the representations of heterosexual masculinity in the film, as well as the ways in which the film disjunctively approaches the too-often-taboo subject of sex and disability.

5. Citing her father’s book *Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality*, Anna Freud labels projection as a “defensive method” (43) that immature egos (she speaks predominantly of children) employ “as a means of repudiating their own activities and wishes when these become dangerous and of laying the responsibility for them at the door of some external agent” (123).
insists that the more obvious meaning of projection, that is, “as an act of thrusting or throwing forward, an act that causes an image to appear on a surface” (21), shifts the discussion of a subject’s anxiety mediated via expulsion (from the inside to the outside) to one where the subject’s apparent lack collides with and thus forms a surface. Film, says Chow, is the external image that represents both the act of expulsion and projected otherness.

Chow’s discussion offers an analysis of the ways in which film creates a literal surface upon which narrative projects identity. Spectatorship (both public cinema viewings and private DVD rentals) allows audience members to take on the unique and contradictory position of what we call the “panopticon voyeur.” Film critics since Laura Mulvey have outlined and analyzed the myriad ways that film audiences embody the hidden nature of the voyeur. But as the panopticon’s power relies on its dwellers’ awareness of being observed, few critics speak to the normalizing power of projected viewing audiences. Unlike the literary notion of the “ideal reader,” the panopticon voyeurs of film shape and establish subject matter, cultural representations, and even changed endings (in the case of audience test screenings). For an example of how projected audiences determine race representations, one has only to look at the contrast between Disney’s Pocahontas and Mulan films, both of which focus on “real” historical figures. The former, for the most part, was directed at non-indigenous audiences, and subsequent criticisms of its racism and historical inaccuracies did not affect its box-office success. For the latter, however, Disney, keen to promote films in China, strove to ensure geographical and historical accuracy. The film was, for the most part, praised for its cultural sensitivity and artistic renditions of local landmarks and a brave heroine. Although at the time of its filming, Disney did not know whether or not the Chinese government would permit wide distribution of Mulan, the studio treated future Chinese audiences as both subject and object, as spectators who would have a vested (and thus a controlling) interest in the bodies projected on-screen. Chow would say of these binary positions that, as subjects, spectators react to the filmic narrative also as studio projections, as viewers assumed by the industry to have a participating and controlling interest in the storyline and its unfolding. These projected viewers also act as objects: they accept the film as spectacle and their own physical selves as Disney fodder; they accept the graphic images on-screen as representative of their bodies as national story. The panopticon voyeur, then, straddles a position between passive

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6. For explication of film and voyeurism, see critics Mary Ann Doane, bell hooks, Christian Metz, and Linda Williams.
observer and normalizing surveyor, playing a role both in the film’s ultimate screening and in how a film projects its characters.

Disability activists frequently point out that those who live long enough eventually become disabled; the statistical probability that a portion of life will be lived with a disability increases with age. This disability axiom strategically implicates a wide public under the disability rubric with the political goal of broadening an activist base. In keeping with this axiom, we argue in this book that there are many ways of living with disability. Narrative film presents some of those ways. How experience is represented textually and how that representation is projected onto and via audiences are both central aspects of the experience itself. That is, the representation of disability does not exist separate from disability itself. Accordingly, we propose that—disabled or not—when “we” all watch a film, we all participate in disability discourse.

Film theory requires disability analysis and critique, particularly because of its longstanding attention to spectatorship and to the gaze. While the gaze is a form of physicality that disability studies seeks to redirect, the mis-assumed relationship between looking and knowing is particularly salient to film reception. In front of a screen—in an audience-directed cinema or individually at home—lies a space for a normative and deviant public not just to look but to stare at disabled figures without censure. Before the screen lies a place where many people can take an extended look at the disabled body and live comfortably or even uncomfortably with their reactions, be they to shudder, to desire, to identify, to pity, to turn away. While we intervene in scholarly debates about projection and the gaze by refusing to accept the filmic frame as seamless representation, we recognize the value of film analysis and movie watching. While we challenge basic tenets of film theory, presuming to redirect them, we also recognize that a collection of essays such as this one contributes to film theory’s continued but expanded relevance to contemporary social issues, notably those involving disability.

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7. As James I. Charlton points out, disability is “a significant part of the human condition”; knowledge about disability, he argues, is therefore knowledge about “the human condition itself” (4).

8. The very category of ubiquitous “we” becomes suspect when discussing bodies that do or do not fit a normative ideal of health and well-being. It is therefore incumbent on each viewer to understand the consequences of such visual participation. For the duration of this essay, “we” indicates “we two book editors.”

"We Are All Handicapable"

In the 1990s, the weekly Canadian television skit show *Kids in the Hall* confronted socially problematic comedy. Unlike other male-dominated comedy troupes (such as Monty Python), dressing up as women (or other characters physically different from their own bodies) for the actors in *Kids in the Hall* is not the punch line. Indeed, representing bodies not their own (the troupe comprises five male actors) is rarely the source of amusement so much as are the social situations that represent such bodies within contemporary mass culture. Although *Kids in the Hall* does not deal extensively with issues of disability, the comedy troupe often focuses its humor on the representations of bodies that do not “fit” implicit normative standards, thus presenting to the viewer a full range of what we call problem bodies—awkward, medicalized, edgy bodies.10 Their comedy helpfully prevents the viewer from falling passively into the long-available role of gawker at nature exhibited as freakish. We include an analysis of their work here not as an example of television representation but as an example of cultural criticism of the reception of cinematic portrayals of disability.

We focus here on one notable *Kids in the Hall* skit that highlights and parodies film studio and audience responses to disability-focused movies. The skit, “The Academy Awards,” plays off a social situation that frequently accompanies celebratory ceremonies for and about mainstream film, a social situation whose allegorical proportions motivate this collection of essays. This skit makes fun of the “issue film” and its supporters while at the same time exposing the limits of the metaphorical language available for disabling declarations. “The Academy Awards” features four actors receiving nominations for Best Actor category at the Oscars.11 The skit does more than offer merely another parody of the Oscars, for it also returns the viewers’ attention back onto the language that des-

10. The term “problem body” is explicated in the next section of our introduction.
11. In the skit, *Kids in the Hall* pokes fun at the viewers who participate in what Tobin Siebers calls “disability drag”:

The modern cinema often puts the stigma of disability on display, except that films exhibit the stigma not to insiders by insiders, as is the usual case with drag, but to a general public that does not realize it is attending a drag performance. In short, when we view an able-bodied actor playing disabled, we have the same experience of exaggeration and performance as when we view a man playing a woman. (115)

The *Kids in the Hall* skit anticipates Siebers’s nuanced critique of actors who “play” disabled and are then rewarded for their (overly sentimentalized, yet assumed-to-be verisimilitude) role with a shared Oscar win. In the drag films Siebers points to, audiences expect the depiction to be unmistakably exaggerated, whereas these Academy Award winners—though obviously overacting, even within the melodramatic milieu of an “issue”-focused film—are received (and hailed) as representing “true” disability experience.
ignates one kind of body as having a say over another kind. In the skit one actor is nominated for his role as Hamlet, a role that is dramatically and expertly depicted in an exceedingly short “Oscar clip.” The remaining three have all played characters with disabilities. Predictably, rather than a single Oscar winner, there is a three-way tie among the able-bodied actors playing disabled characters. As one of the award presenters calls it, “Everybody but the Hamlet guy!”

Charles Riley drolly points out in his book on disability and/in media, “The safest nomination bets for Oscar gold, year after year, are disability flicks” (70). Playing on this pattern of recognition, of the three Kids in the Hall “victors,” the first actor is nominated for his role as a Deaf activist. In the clip, from a film named Hear the Light, he speaks to a group of anti-Deaf protestors, declaring: “I can’t believe what I am lip-reading here today. Now I may not be able to hear with these [points to his ear], but you people, you can’t hear with THIS! [makes a fist over his heart].” The second actor is nominated for his portrayal of a wheelchair activist, righteously struggling against the big-business company determined to install “bumps” in every road and sidewalk. The clip from his film, named Rolling Tall, also includes a speech: “Large bumps?! . . . Well if that’s your idea of AMERICA then count me out. [points to himself] I’m not the one that’s handicapped. [points to the crowd] YOU’RE the ones that are handicapped . . . IN HERE! [points to his heart].”

Breaking the mold, the third actor depicts a character with a traumatic head injury. The first two “clips” in this skit set up and remind viewers of the sentimental genre that a third such “clip” would then demolish: how will a character convincingly (even tongue-in-cheek convincingly) accuse anti-head-injury crowds that they are the ones with a head injury, “IN HERE! [pointing at heart]” As avid Kids in the Hall fans, and nascent disability scholars at the time the skit began circulating, when we two view a film or performance particularly guilty of depicting the usual suspects of disability clichés, one of us invariably remarks to the other: “I’m not the one with a spike in my head, you’re the one with a spike in your head, in your heart!” in effect parodying the parody. Needless to say, the Kids in the Hall skit does not present this exclamation as a well-set-up punch line: They do not project the humorous logic of their skit to its ultimate conclusion. Rather, the clip for the third actor playing a disabled character

12. In the various clips from the nominated films, “protestors” carry signs reading “SCREW THE DEAF” and “I LOVE BUMPS.” Meanwhile, the obviously hearing actor, during his nomination clip, is shown signing (in popular idiom rather than in ASL) a single word: “OK.”

13. For an extensive list of such filmic clichés, see Martin Norden’s significant publication Cinema of Isolation, where he expands upon various disabled “types” (such as “Tragic Victim,” “Noble Warrior,” etc.).
opens at his birthday party. After being given a hat for his birthday, he says to his mother:

You know I can’t wear this. I’ve got a spike [points to spike] through my head. . . . I’ve accepted it. Why can’t you? I’ve got a spike through my head, a spike through my head, spike through my head, a spike through my head, a spike through my head!”

The Oscar audience reacts as appreciatively to this film “clip” as to the other issue-focused clips. The cliché invoked and “driven” home here is the attempt by well-meaning family and friends to ignore a disabling injury and pretend the injured character is “the same” as before, or “the same” as “us,” or, in the cynical reading of the initial plural evocation in our introduction, “we are all” handicapable (as one character in the Kids in the Hall skit sarcastically names it). The Kids in the Hall’s ending to their “Academy Awards” skit invokes issues films about disability and parodies the predictable moment in these films when a disabled character “overcomes” disability to end up “just like” everyone else.14 The character needs to convince his mother that he will never be “the same,” will never fit, will always have a spike in his head. This is a funny and useful parody; still, we prefer to think of our own ending to the skit as leading us to that narrative projection, eminently theorizable, where disability clashes uncomfortably with disability metaphors, where “having a spike in your head, in your heart” is not only an “issue” of disability but also a problem of spectatorship, meaning, and the normative gaze. That is, we’re not the ones with spikes in our heads, in our hearts—you are. In this book we collect a set of critical essays about disability in cinema that collectively identify and reimagine the spectatorship, meaning, and normative gaze that settle upon what we call “the problem body” on film, transforming the spike from our joke into what Canadians would recognize as “the last spike.”15

Through their characters’ continuing refrain that “I’m not the one who’s disabled [blind, Deaf, injured, etc.], society is,” we read this Kids in the Hall sketch allegorically as a challenge to rethink every social situ-

14. One Hollywood example of this plot structure is the character of Sam (Oscar-nominated Sean Penn) in I Am Sam who proves that he can draw on aspects of his cognitive disability to parent “just like” other parents.

15. “The last spike” is a titular element of both popular Canadian historical accounts and popular narratives about the completion of a transcontinental railroad, constructed in the name of nation building with underpaid immigrant labor across unceded indigenous lands. Just as The Kids in the Hall’s spike illustrates the twisted logic required to maintain patterns of disability representation, the railway’s “last spike” illuminates the violent logic of nationalism.
ation that entails a response to disability that follows such sentimental logic. These comedians reveal underlying social expectations for and about the disabled body not only to successfully and invisibly function within an ableist society, but also to represent, for the general public, a moralizing symbol. This moralizing symbol acts as a commodity for viewers not only to reject particular bodies, but also to expect accumulated metaphorical weight (morally and symbolically) from those othered bodies.

For the most part, in independent cinema, representations of illness and disability can interrogate the various binary constructions of “healthy” versus “ill” that mainstream films have traditionally constructed around “our” bodies and the bodies of others. In most mainstream films, not only are disabled individuals relegated to marginally participating identities, but so too are groups who prefer to identify themselves as socially and politically determined, rather than as medically defined. The irony of the *Kids in the Hall* skit is that, as the “disabled” character points an accusing finger at others, the metaphor perpetuates itself as a literal and self-reflecting mirror for audience members. Ultimately, the “I’m not but you are” binary of the skit reconfigures the notion of a disabled body, judged by an ableist projection of a “healthy” attitude onto the “ailing” attitude.16

### The Problem Body

We propose and examine the term the “problem” body which Nicole Markotić first used for critical analysis in an essay on the “coincidence” of body and texts in the Canadian feminist journal *Tessera*. We propose this term in alliance with—and juxtaposed to—other terms upon which theorists have drawn to investigate the role of the disabled body constructed within the framework of the normative body. Some examples include Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s the “extraordinary” body, G. Thomas Couser’s the “recovering” body, Susan Wendell’s the “rejected” body, and Michael Davidson’s “defamiliar” body.17 In our usage, the term

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16. Disability as social metaphor has been discussed greatly by such critics as Lennard Davis, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Martin Norden, and others. An obvious example of such a conflation comes in the movie *At First Sight* where Val Kilmer’s character, newly sighted after growing up blind, reacts badly to his girlfriend urging him to walk quickly past a homeless man. In the subsequent scene he rants against sighted people who “don’t want to see” unpleasant truths.

the “problem” body refers to various manifestations and representations of the Deaf body, the disabled body, the aged body, the ill body, the obese body. In presenting this term, we do not intend an emphasis on physical disability per se but an emphasis on the transformation of physical difference into cultural patterns of spectacle, patterns that replicate a range of pathologizing practices that oppress people. We trace the history of the phrase to Louis Althusser’s term “problematic,” which he uses to indicate how a word or concept cannot be considered in isolation. Indeed, the problematic points to the fundamental contradiction within the capitalist apparatus. Althusser’s term invokes a Marxian history of production relationships, in order to “define the nature of a concept by its function in the problematic” (39), but it allows us here to analyze the problematic construction of bodies as essentialized, rather than merely contextualized, contradictions within an ideological framework. Thus we evoke a status that is both discursive and material.

Michel Foucault invokes the problematic in Madness and Civilization less to designate cause and effect and more to scrutinize the idea of subjectivity within scientific power structures. Such science-based power structures construct the subject based on classification rather than subjectivity. Psychiatry, for example, divides the “sane” from the “mad”; similarly, medical practice has routinely divided the normal body from the disabled body, rendering the latter a “problem” within normative hierarchies and creating both the category of “normal” and of “disability.” For our purposes, the “problem” body stands for those bodily realities that—within shifting ideologies—represent the anomalies that contradict a normative understanding of physical being. In the context of this collection we examine the problems and possibilities of filmic representation that classifies and thereby problematizes bodies. The essays collected herein each take on a cinematic process of division in order to transform disability into a representative signal for a set of social problems that extend beyond the interpretive bounds of medical practice. As Susan Crutchfield

18. We thank many writers and critics (especially Julia Gaunce) who helped us develop this term as a useful marker of physical and mental difference.

19. This list expands with each revision of our essay, and with other essays we research in this field, an expansion that we find to be reflective of the ongoing work by disability scholars in the humanities who seek to define disability without confining it and who aim for inclusion but not dilution. We hope that adjectives left off this list intrude conceptually through our term “problem” body, and we hope the ever-expanding list speaks to such “problems.”

20. The physicality of this process hides but does not obliterate the relevance of mental disability to filmic representation and the pathologizing practices which oppress people. We do not separate physical from mental disability in our work, believing the binary set up between them to be false. As Eunjung Kim’s included essay makes clear, disability in the film Oasis is not clearly physical or mental. With that noted, we and our contributors are careful throughout to heed ways in which film projects physical disability as though absolutely distinct from projections of mental disability.
and Marcy Epstein argue in the introduction to their collection, *Points of Contact*, “disability, like art, has no particular physical geography, though history has treated the category as something manifest, palpable, boundaried” (3), thus aligning the “category” of disability with the cultural landscape of “art” and representation. They are, they say, interested in “disability as a farrago of contradictory effects, a sideshow in which there is no outside” (9). In this collection we not only challenge looks from the outside but also invite critical responses to how that outside gaze refigures the body as a problem, as a sideshow in which, for many film spectators, there exists no perceptible inside.

The word “problem” shows up throughout disability studies to signify how lived bodies participate in a web of social relations and especially how certain lived bodies strain the threads of that ideologically delicate web. Simi Linton provides a perfect example of the role the adjective “problem” plays in disability studies: “the fact that impairment has almost always been studied from a deficit model means that we are deficient in language to describe it any other way than as a ‘problem’” (140). To date, disability theorists have avoided the conceptual lens of the “problem” because it is situated outside disability studies actions and inside oppressive social structures. For example, in *Disability, Self, and Society*, Tanya Titchkosky sketches out her section, “The Problem of Disability”:

“Problem” is the definition of the situation of disability. . . . Such an understanding does not arise simply because our bodies, minds, or senses give us problems; the problem is brought to people through interaction, the environment, and through the production of knowledge. (131)

In *Reading and Writing Disability Differently*, Titchkosky hyphenates Markotić’s term, “problem-body,” and draws on it to evoke this sense of how disability connotes problem in a broader social sphere.

In returning to the articulations of Althusser and Foucault, our goal is to take on and expand the concept of the “problem” body to include multilayered corporeal realities and the intersections to which such realities lead. In particular, our objective is to define and reveal the “problem” body as a multiplication of lived circumstances constructed both physically and socially, in order to call into question the ways that certain bodies more frequently invite the label “problem” than do others. This critical strategy is in keeping with recent theoretical work in disability studies, and especially Snyder and Mitchell’s concept of the cultural model of disability that imbricates the physicality of disability with the social and imagines the two always working in concert.
Cultural Locations

Through our collection we hope to shift the “either/or” structure of disability studies to a “both/and” model so that disability can be understood as both physical and social. In narrative filmic representation disability is both given and taken away, both opportunistic metaphor and phenomenological experience. In order to encourage and account for multiple readings of the disabled body on-screen, we shall also examine the “problem” body as it is projected along with gendered, homosexual, racialized, classed, and abused bodies. As Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Vogler point out, “disability studies reminds us that feminism, sexuality, gender studies, and critical race theory meet at a point of incomprehension when faced with the corporeality of the disabled body” (350–51). We hope to shift that sectioned meeting from incomprehension to renewed interest in the multiple deviations and differences that bodies share. The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film will bolster readers’ and critics’ conceptualization of problematized bodies in Althusser’s sense of the term “problematic.” Our projection of Althusser’s term into film and disability studies directs our argument that it is not that disabled bodies pose social “problems” so much as that disabled bodies both materialize and symbolize moments of interaction between the social and the physical, and among many other so-called identity categories.

Our project, then, is to examine projection (in both Freud’s and Chow’s sense of this notion) through the ways in which disability, gender, race, cultural otherness, and sexuality intersect. Intersectionality has become a pivotal critical term to call attention to the need to think of difference in context. Kimberlé Crenshaw solidified the term in order to “[highlight] the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). Her work on race and gender reveals the need to think through structural intersectionality about how black women’s experience of violence differs from white women’s experience of violence, through political intersectionality about how identity-based politic movements have “marginalized” violence against women of color as a political issue, and through representational intersectionality about how women of color are culturally constructed, specifically in popular culture (1245). We consider how projected images of disabled characters require analysis that attends to the experience of disability. Vivian M. May and Beth A. Ferris, in their analysis of Atom Egoyan’s film The Sweet Hereafter, draw on what they call the “productive methodological practice” of intersectionality in order to adequately account for agency on the part of a young, female,
newly disabled character (132). Disability theorists engage with literary and cultural theories in order to argue the necessity to account for race in critical analysis and to ground scholarly work in geographical, political, and gendered landscapes.

We wish to distinguish disability as a category of identity as well as investigate the usefulness of expanding disability’s definition and challenging identity as a critical paradigm and a political strategy. Most importantly, we hope to demonstrate the importance of disability as a category of analysis even in those blurred instances where disability may not overtly preside. We recognize that adding yet another adjective in front of the noun “body” (in identity discourse, critics speak of the “female” body, the “queer” body, the “racialized” body, etc.) cannot replace the critical work of designating and examining the role of bodies in scholarly criticism through simple nomenclature. Rather, we hope to open up the discussion for readers to further examine the discourse that perpetuates and challenges ongoing projections of “problem” bodies. We seek what Alexa Schriempf calls an “interactionist model” for the analysis of “problem” bodies, rather than an additive model that risks ignoring the fusion of identity categories (65). Othered bodies often reveal a self/other edge that not only marks gendered borders but also limits configurations of the physically ideal such that physicality both is and is not a problem. As Jim Overboe argues, the disabled/non-disabled binary model elevates the able-bodied argument to tout it as superior because “normalized embodiment and sensibility sets not only the parameters of ‘what the problem is,’ but also the limits of the discussion and the type of communication required to take part in the dialogue” (25). The body’s literal edges and social roles—our focus here—discount the economy of normalized embodiment and instead demand cinematic challenges to visual conventions, to able-bodied actors, and to narrative genres.

The social contexts surrounding the physical other invite further discussion about a spectrum of physically diverse bodies. At times that spectrum threatens to become so diffuse as to render disability irrelevant or merely a subcategory competing for status, albeit marginal. Our collection draws on disability theory to provide a viable framework for examining the complicated and socially enriched process that determines the boundaries between the “normal” body and the “problem” body. We shall concentrate on bodies repeatedly left out of—or exploited by—tra-

21. Our argument is not simply a reframing of the claim that all bodies are ultimately, or will ultimately become, disabled. Rather, we find disability theory an effective starting place for the scrutiny of physicality, and, as such, it promises a mode of analysis that refuses the normativity of the white, male, heterosexual, fit, young, tall, athletic body.
ditional cultural and especially film criticism, and on the social problems that so-called deviant bodies confront because of normative cultural expectations. Rather than claiming the disabled body as an object that existing theories could simply reconfigure, we wish to reveal—through the visual dramatization of disability—the “problem” body as a challenging multiplication of physical and social problems. The “problem” body, then, demands a rich discourse to advance thinking beyond a focus that limits itself as either this body or that body.

Our aim is not, of course, to conflate all otherted bodies into one trope but rather to suggest and examine the terminology of identity in order to better recognize ways in which disability has, historically, been assigned to the margins of the margins. By proposing our term, the “problem” body, we look critically at filmic bodies termed, rendered as, dismissed as, and rejected as “problematic.” We explore the changing rubric of disability against such traditional rejections, and continued projections, and we consider the role of disabled bodies—and of other bodies configured as problems—in the emergence of public, and culturally determined, identities.

**Projecting the Problem Body**

“Project,” both verb and noun, slices through the history of film studies to ground visual ideals and to highlight the problematic in filmic narrative. Though disability scholars discuss film frequently, especially on academic listservs and at scholarly meetings, omnibus publication about the relationship between film and disability is scant. In the following essays, this book seeks to solidify and clarify that widespread interest and dialogue. In addition to the need for more attention to what have been variably named mental/cognitive/intellectual disabilities on film, there is a continued need for further film scholarship on disability and race, sexuality, international cinemas, gender, and documentary. Essays in this volume begin the work in these areas, but we do not organize them under such headings because the articles, like the disabilities they parse, do not lend themselves to easy categorization.

In the first essay, “‘The Whole Art of a Wooden Leg’: King Vidor’s Picturization of Laurence Stallings’s ‘Great Story,’” Timothy Barnard points to the interest an early Hollywood film, *The Big Parade*, takes in the portrayal of realism and the “great story” of the amputee war veteran. Thanks to King Vidor’s portrayal of “absence” as high pathos to an
audience just beginning to come to terms with postwar masculinity, Jim Apperson (John Gilbert) became a “triumph” of early war movies. The spectacle of Apperson as simultaneously embodied and disembodied, argues Barnard, provided a means to present “real” war and “real” war casualties. Post-WWI, then, the war vet reemerges, this time on film, as a powerful symbol—as well as a problematic sign—of both “exceptional masculinity and exceptional masculine loss.” The hero’s “loss” of a leg becomes also his gain of an exceptionally stiff phallus, one that he removes to sleep and puts on to run, awkwardly, toward his love and his new life.

Michael Davidson’s essay, “Phantom Limbs: Film Noir and the Disabled Body,” continues this investigation of the relationship between masculinity and disability in early U.S. cinema. Davidson looks closely at film noir images of gendered, queered, and disabled bodies. Such projections allow for minor, often cameo, characters to enable a non-normative narrative about the protagonist. Namely, Davidson says, “the disabled character represents a form of physical deviance necessary for marking the body’s unruliness.” But he argues beyond the simple narratives based on disabled characters as foil for the non-disabled. In his argument, the disabled body is a site for “social panic” about problem bodies, and the film’s narrative presents such characters’ stories as “phantom limbs” that would—given the time period and the Production Code—be unspeakable. Citing numerous gay icons that emerged from the film noir oeuvre, Davidson discusses the noir hero’s heteromasculinity as dependent on the gay and lesbian counter-figures. He points out that the psychoanalytic gaze has relied on the act of looking as formulated through a trope of castration, thus—in contrast to Barnard’s argument about The Big Parade—equating the missing limb with the missing phallus. For Davidson, moments of social agency in film noir undermine and relinquish the normative narratives the films endeavor to bolster.

Also focused on the psychoanalytic gaze, Johnson Cheu’s essay, “Seeing Blindness On-Screen: The Blind, Female Gaze,” revisits Laura Mulvey’s classic argument, but in his argument the gaze is an ableist trope, signifying particular ways of seeing for sighted audience members. As the male gaze reconfigures all audience members into male voyeurs, so too does the normative gaze configure and insist upon audience members as not only assuming the identity position of non-blind, but problematically infusing audience members with the power-laden act of viewing blind (female) characters as particularly needy and disadvantaged. Presuming from the start a “disabled gaze,” Cheu goes on to discuss the on-screen gaze of blind female protagonists and argues that
such characters are “co-opted in order to take away the blind woman’s agency.” Rather than repudiating simple stereotypes, film and filmmakers co-opt a Blind gaze for the benefit of the (projected) able-bodied audience members. Relying on critical race and postcolonial theory, Cheu observes the normative gaze as defining racially dominant identity groups and the normative gaze as defining bodies as either able or not able.

Focusing on the interconnectedness of physical, cognitive, and sensory disability, Dawne McCance examines the relationships among speech, subjective autonomy, and medicalization in her essay, exploring projections of modernity in François Truffaut’s *The Wild Child* (*L’enfant sauvage* [France, 1970]). This film, McCance argues, offers a speech-and-hearing model as trope for other (mental and mobility) disabilities. Such an approach allows her to investigate, via Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (chief physician at the Paris Institute for Deaf Mutes), early-nineteenth-century crises of how to define humanity, intersecting with late-twentieth-century crises of narrative representation. Positing what she calls the “theatre of mimesis,” McCance places the film within the hybrid genres of “memoir, confession, family history, and political commentary,” ultimately demonstrating how the director doctor projects the intertwined notions of speech and autonomous subjectivity onto the character of Victor. Throughout the film, argues McCance, Truffaut “portrays Victor’s incapacity to hear-and-speak as what keeps him from crossing the human/animal line,” thus revealing the doctor’s and the director’s investment in human realization as aligned with hearing and verbal articulation.

Paul Darke’s essay, “No Life Anyway: Pathologizing Disability on Film,” also articulates the challenges of imagining disability as a human trait. Darke posits that the projection of an overly medicalized character and a narrative that advocates de-medicalization in *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* locates itself on the bodies of the disabled. In other words, any argument against medical intervention conflates into the argument against keeping disabled patients alive. Darke analyzes the implications of portraying disability rather than pathologization as burdensome. In doing so, he points to the demeaning technology that “unnaturally” perpetuates “sub-human” life. Such routine devaluing of the disabled body on-screen, argues Darke, becomes increasingly circular: as the film insists on the protagonist Ken’s dehumanization, it must more and more depict Ken’s body as inhuman. Ken himself rejects the hospital’s medical intrusions; the film portrays him as refusing to consider himself as fully human. Like a “good cripple,” says Darke, Ken “overcomes his abnormality by preferring death to impairment.” Death, then, and a hero’s choice for death, project as superior the character “trapped” inside an
inferior container. Ken’s “body logic,” suggests Darke, best describes the default sacrifice for disabled characters that pervades the cinematic representation and construction of normalcy.

Projecting notions of illness and treatment, of terminal disease and its exacerbating “cures,” Heath Diehl’s essay, “‘And Death—capital D—shall be no more—semicolon!’: Explicating the Terminally Ill Body in Margaret Edson’s Wt;,” circles around the protagonist’s terminal illness and her own problematic articulation of that illness as a grammatically definable experience. The patient is in constant pain, not so much because of her illness, but because of the treatment. Vivian Bearing, projected as pure intellectual, becomes invested in her own ongoing analysis of the process, particularly its semantics. By examining this film through the trope of literary criticism, Diehl connects the meaning (or lack of meaning) of the body dying in pain to the representational strategy of analogy. Diehl argues that the film “voices a meta-filmic commentary on how instances of pain and suffering complicate the process of cinematic creation.” Diehl argues that the role of the protagonist, Vivian Bearing, is not so much “true” confessor as “first-person narrating I.” Bearing, a New Critic, attempts to render her physical experiences as readable and as “research” for other scholars, based on her training as a scholar who relies on analysis and poetics. But Diehl argues that the film’s conflation of the body as a screen of pain and scrutiny relies on Bearing’s textual embodiment as sentient experiment: her words, in other words, fail her.

In “‘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,” Eunjung Kim argues that many cinematic representations of disabled men attempt to sexualize them, usually by means of non-disabled, usually non-white, female prostitutes. The prostitute characters pity, fall for, service, or swindle the male characters, these “once men” who must now pay to participate in their own sexuality and thereby “rehabilitate” their masculinity. She concludes her argument with a contrast to the South Korean film Oasis. Whereas the disabled characters in the preceding films are each presented as “a man, with the same feelings they have” (i.e., they are each offered as sexually desiring and deserving intimate attentions from non-disabled women), Oasis presents disabled female sexuality as a “deviant” means to a normative end. As Kim puts it, “The film plays on the belief that sexual abuse is a part of the experience of heterosexuality, yet problematically disallowed to disabled women because violent sexual attacks are regarded as “saving” them from asexual genderlessness.” She argues that cinematic portrayals
of disabled sexuality rely on heteronormative apparatuses that emphasize the ways in which presumed desexual beings are resexualized into a humanized presence.

Looking closely at the representations of gender and sexuality in *Million Dollar Baby* and *Murderball*, Robert McRuer’s essay, “Neoliberal Risks: Million Dollar Baby, Murderball, and Anti-National Sexual Positions,” argues that these films are “haunted” by a “proper sexuality” that supposedly provides stability within a politically and economically unstable world. Beginning with Fredric Jameson’s notion of the comfort of nostalgia in film, McRuer examines how *Million Dollar Baby* positions itself as a “comfort” to millions of viewers, while at the same time offering death as the radical solution to its recently disabled protagonist. The “currency” for such a disability story, says McRuer, circulates throughout the film, indicating a homogenized subtext about the “confluence of market and state.” Watching Hilary Swank’s character, Maggie Fitzgerald, audiences are schooled, argues McRuer, on “what it means to be an American.” McRuer furthers his argument to look at the ways that *Murderball* may—and may not—function as an antithesis to *Million Dollar Baby*. The nationalism in *Murderball* is more overt and thus also becomes easier for audiences to challenge in the moment of the viewing. Patriotism as depicted through the disabled individual turns on the responsibility characters express toward the “common good,” by remaining personally responsible for their own bodies.

Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, in their essay, “Body Genres: An Anatomy of Disability in Film,” proceed from their notion of the “cultural location of disability” to discuss viewer identification or, as they call it, “dis-identification” with visual disability performances. Viewership itself, Snyder and Mitchell argue, provides an opportunity for audiences to play both witness and gazing subject upon marginalized and exoticized object. They discuss normative views and viewing practices, critically addressing the “dynamic relationship between viewers and disabled characters.” Taking up Linda Williams’s argument about excessive (female) bodies on film, they argue that disabled bodies, within the rubric of “excess,” form a critical nexus in film viewing practices. Simply put, they point out that disabled bodies in film function as “delivery vehicles” in order to transfer extreme sensations to audiences, positioning disabled characters as a physical and emotional “threat” to the supposed “integrity” of the able body. The out-of-control, excessive, disabled body both slips easily within and challenges the “shared cultural scripts” that audiences recognize as they view disabled characters on-screen. Audiences
approach these cinematic bodies with a social investment that displays disabled bodies as anomalous and incorporates all other bodies within a “masquerade of normalcy.”

As a coda to the book, Anne Finger’s short story, “‘Blinded by the Light’ OR: Where’s the Rest of Me?” fictionally reassesses the value of disabled bodies as depicted on-screen and as viewers. In her narrative Finger begins with a “fictional character” who is “limping towards a movie theatre.” The fictional character gains a name, a social context, and a relationship with the narrator herself. Indeed, Finger presents her character and her narrator engaged in a metafictional relationship that comments on the film viewing experience as much as on film’s representations of disabled (female) characters. The narrative layers unfold through the film: the viewing of the film and the telling of that viewing come to readers through Irma’s limping body. Refusing to settle on the “cause” of Irma’s limp, the narrator manages to convey the importance that question has for readers (and viewers). The story asks, How does cause signify identity? Disability, Finger concedes, “requires a narrative.” And as she gives one, that narrative grows into a commentary about going to see Mata Hari, about “fire-engine red” crutches, and waiting for a friend as endless well-wishers attempt to hold open doors. “Imperfectly blind,” Irma’s friend, Linda, needs to sit close to the front of the theatre; Irma needs to sit on the left aisle. As Finger’s story winds through character development and plot development and narrative development, the plot in the story—so to speak—thickens. Mata Hari falls for a good man, the good man becomes a disabled good man, Mata Hari goes on trial for treason, and her blind lover sees nothing of her impending doom. And Irma and Linda? They fall into the film entranced, but as “THE END” appears on-screen, Linda snaps open her cane and Irma picks up her crutches: The End.

**Conclusion**

Many scholars who focus on representations of the body come to rely on terminology that refers to physicality as existing within a “sliding” or “floating” scale of subjectivity. The problem in relying on such gradation lies in definitions of disability that include, ultimately, virtually every physical signifier indicating any deviation for the “ideal” body. As illustrated in the preceding essay descriptions, the focus in *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* is rather an appraisal of certain focal points
on that sliding scale between the normal body and the problem body that scholars here address and that we deem valuable: junctures illuminated by filmic projections that deserve critical consideration.

Does the significance of ever-expanding bodily realities on film permeate the social/political construction of marginal bodies? By analyzing bodies that cultural labels render into “problems,” we have turned to disability theory’s ongoing attempts to revamp the social model and re-incorporate the body into a cultural model. We look to disability studies to provide a rich methodology for critics to re-enter and re-evaluate complicated filmic narratives that do not simply exploit or resist repeated stereotypes of disability. We argue that such use of disability theory promises to strengthen film analyses, which need to take into account narrative arguments currently at risk of over-dilution and reckon with the role of the panopticon voyeur. The unpredictability of disability—its refusal to be confined within current paradigms of study—leads to a reading of the body as a projection of constantly in-process theoretical shots. In turn, readings of such films through disability theory offer a means by which to grapple anew with the role of the body in film and disability studies.

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