

# A New Evaluation of Disability

Murray, Stuart 2020. *Disability and the Posthuman: Bodies, Technologies, and Cultural Futures*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. (258 pages)

**STUART MURRAY'S NEW** book is a fascinating and brave excursion into the intersections between disability and posthumanism that is long overdue. Specifically critical disability studies have been making waves in this direction for some time, but mostly through journal articles, while the wider field has remained solidly rooted in humanist values. It is very encouraging, then, to read this full-length study of how the coming together of bodies and technologies can offer a highly productive future scenario in which being disabled – far from being a devalued status subject to technological overcoming – is shown to be at the heart of a new and more inclusive understanding of embodiment. Going further, Murray postulates that people with disabilities are already posthumanist subjects and that their input to changing cultural imaginaries will be a crucial component in subverting any negative formations that the future may bring.

As Murray is a professor of contemporary literature and film, his approach is interwoven throughout with analyses of the significance of disability and the posthuman in those two media. As he puts it: “imaginative portrayals possess a capacity to inform our understanding of disability that other forms of enquiry cannot replicate” (29). Tellingly, many of the texts and films cited do not explicitly engage with disability even though one or more of the central characters may be disabled and often

use a prosthesis. Right from the beginning, Murray's acute reading of L. Frank Baum's novella, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, outs the Tin Woodman as a disabled character – a fact both obvious and occluded – to demonstrate the strength of a humanist imaginary in which rationality, autonomy and above all wholeness are assumed to be an integral part of a coherent self. The technological augmentations of the Tin Woodman are often substantially more sophisticated in subsequent narratives, but not necessarily more significant in how readers and viewers are guided to assign particular meanings to disabled characters. In terms of the positive impact of science fiction in contesting contemporary attitudes and values, Murray suggests that literature is more adventurous than film, which too often reverts to familiar humanist norms.

The problem is that technology has a sheen of futuristic excitement about it where the embodied difference of disability does not. Under neoliberalism in particular, the marketisation of prosthetic aids devolves on narratives of overcoming or restoration rather than on the posthuman possibilities of human/machine entanglement. Although he recognizes the radical thought experiments of posthumanism – represented here by Cary Wolfe – Murray is impatient with them and wants to engage with the materiality of technological developments that may prove efficacious for people with disabilities. But there is a delicate balance to maintain here, between having a critical approach to augmentations that offer quasi-cures for disabled states and those developments in which difference itself becomes the norm. At a meta-level, the issue is one that marks out the distinctions between transhumanism, which emphasizes expanding capacities and overcoming restrictions, and post-human embodiment, which welcomes technology that is aligned with disability possibilities (64). Not all interventions are rarefied, however, and Murray offers a timely skeptical take-down of Pepper the care robot. Like many other so-called companion robots, Pepper is becoming increasingly familiar as an “aid” to care home residents (and may in fact cover over the societal reluctance to adequately fund care home staff, though this is not Murray's point), and although invoking human interaction, it remains starkly artificial. More worrying, as Murray points

out, is the implicit gendering of robots in terms of male functionality, from which other acts of implicit discrimination must surely follow. Not surprisingly, the analysis of the gender politics of robots and cyborgs leads into an excellent analysis of such films as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Ex Machina* (2014). In the former, the “mad scientist” Rotwang, with his prosthetic hand, is the representative disabled figure, but neither film is overtly *about* disability. What justifies Murray’s focus on *Ex machina* is “that it has a continual emphasis on the embodied nature of selfhood and because it visually figures the complex difference of the body” (107). The link feels a little laboured, but what is engaging is the reading of the film’s racial politics.

Many readers will know that Murray has strong credentials in his post- and decolonial readings of literature, an approach that is particularly apparent in his pleasingly provocative Chapter 3, where he undertakes to analyse film in the context of how disability functions in “contemporary posthumanist global biotechnology economies” (134–5). Taking war and conflict as the main focus, the text looks first at a series of deeply western cinematic representations – *Source Code* (2011), *Green Zone* (2011), *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *American Sniper* (2014) – before moving on to some very different Iraqi and Iranian directed features, notably *Alhaam* (2005) and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). As before, the analyses are very sharp, make sense regardless of whether the reader is familiar with any specific title, and, certainly in relation to the films which I had previously viewed, offer surprising new insights. The links are debility, trauma, vulnerability and posthumanist military capability played out in opposing contexts and given different meanings. Where in the American movies the positive possibilities to reconfigure the material embodiment of disability are pushed aside in favour of narrative resolution, in the local films such bodies are viewed not as narrative prostheses but as brutal facts of life in a conflict zone. Disability is accepted for what it is, not as something subject to individual restitution. As for the posthuman, advanced technology is here equated with the destructive machinery of war, but paradoxically trauma is the very state that opens on to a more inclusive way of accepting fluid embodiment.

A further chapter on posthuman work turns back to literary sources and plays around with issues of speed and temporality, both of which are aspects of cripqueer theory. Murray is by no means categorized – or limited – by that label, but he has no hesitation in citing scholars in that mode. What is even more striking is perhaps his commitment to post-humanist feminist theorists: all the usual big names and many newer ones to chase up. Alas, I have no space to say more than that this is a beautifully produced book both as an aesthetic object and as a thought-provoking text. Together with its compelling scholarship, the reading experience of Murray's *Disability and the Posthuman* could scarcely be bettered.

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## **FILMOGRAPHY**

- Albaam*. 2006. Film directed by Mohamd Al-Daradji. Iraq.  
*American Sniper*. 2014. Film directed by Clint Eastwood. USA.  
*Ex Machina*. 2014. Film directed by Alex Garland. UK.  
*Green Zone*. 2011. Film directed by Paul Greengrass. USA.  
*Metropolis*. 1927. Film directed by Fritz Lang. Germany.  
*Source Code*. 2011. Film directed by Duncan Jones. USA.  
*The Hurt Locker*. 2008. Film directed by Kathryn Bigelow. USA.  
*Turtles Can Fly*. 2004. Film directed by Bahman Ghobadi. Iraq/Kurdistan.