



Disabled-Artist Subjectivities and the Question of Cruel Optimism: A Study of *Sound of Metal* and *Artist*

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Abstract

The paper attempts a comparative analysis of two films: Darius Marder's *Sound of Metal* (2019) and Shyamaprasad's *Artist* (2013). Both films portray the struggles of artists who become disabled in the prime of their youth. Interestingly, the artist-subjects in both films lose the sensory experience they consider the most important for their art. In this paper, I examine the portrayal of disabled artist subjectivities through the lens of cruel optimism, an idea propounded by Lauren Berlant. I argue that the films, despite being realistic, end with pessimistic overtones, reaffirming the normative ideas of disability ingrained in the sociocultural imaginary.

Keywords: *Disability, Cruel Optimism, Artist-subjectivities, Disability in films*



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Disability became a serious concern in academia starting from the second half of the twentieth century. The origins of this in Western academia can be traced back to the works of Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman. Foucault's approach was centred around the notion of social management of disabled subjectivities, which society perceives as docile bodies. Foucault argued that these docile bodies were always the subject of clinical gaze and were controlled by the institutions. Even before that, along with the civil rights activism of the 1960s, movements of the disabled started gaining momentum, arising from a sense of solidarity among different groups facing discrimination. Therefore, as an academic discipline, disability studies borrows ideas and theoretical models from feminism and theories of essentialism and social construction.

Disability Studies as an academic discipline employed a social model in the initial stages, which primarily focused on societal attitudes towards disabled people as deviant rather than paying attention to the disabled bodies and their subjectivities. However, later developments in the field called for an interdisciplinary approach drawing from various disciplines, including medical and sociopolitical. Theorists like Tom Shakespeare advocated for incorporating different levels of analysis rather than reducing disability to a mere social model. By the 1990s, development in the field led to a literary and cultural turn in disability studies. The transition gave rise to diverse methods and methodologies to understand and analyse the "way disability is conceived" (Fraser 2) and represented through literature, cinema, and art. Theorists like David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder started questioning the use of disability as a narrative device by canonical authors in literature. Later developments in the field of disability studies expanded its purview to the studies on filmic representation of disabilities and their inherent flaws. It can be observed that, being one of the most popular art forms, cinema offers a wider scope for such analyses.

Cinema becomes a reflective mirror, a productive expression, or a theoretical ground for the integration of perception and concepts that inform our socially negotiated understanding of disability. Because of the way indexical, iconic, and symbolic/arbitrary signification blend in the cinematic sign, film becomes, like

reality, a cognitive code that actively requires questioning, understanding, and perhaps decipherment. (Fraser 7)

A major problem in cinematic representations, as observed by Fraser, is that they “can be reductively violent and normative, on one hand, or potentially transformative on the other” (8). In this paper, I attempt to work on a comparative analysis of the representation of disabled artist subjectivities in two films released in the second decade of the twenty-first century: *Sound of Metal* and *Artist*. *Sound of Metal* (2019) is an American English-language drama film. Directed and co-written by Darius Marder, the film features Riz Ahmed in the title role. The film won the Academy Award for best film editing and sound. *Artist* is a 2013 Indian film from the state of Kerala, directed by Shyamaprasad, a critically acclaimed director from India. The film is an adaptation of the novel *Dreams in Prussian Blue* by Paritosh Uttam. The film features Fahad Fazil and Ann Augustine in the title roles. The paper examines the portrayal of disabled subjectivities in these films in the light of Lauren Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism and problematises such representations.

According to Berlant, cruel optimism is a kind of optimism that thwarts a person’s journey forward due to an excessive attachment to a desire or an idea that is the source of optimism. Therefore, in Berlant’s words, optimism becomes cruel when the object that ignited optimism leads to an impossibility of attaining the goal. Berlant states that all attachments are optimistic and are always tied to something, for instance, a person or a good idea. When the optimistic desire turns out to be impossible or sheer fantasy, it becomes cruel, something that impedes further growth or progress of the subject.

Darius Marder’s *Sound of Metal* (2019) begins with a compelling musical performance featuring the protagonist and his girlfriend. The protagonist, Ruben, played by actor Riz Ahmed, is a heavy metal drummer. The film narrative progresses with the portrayal of the daily routines of the artist in his recreational vehicle, where he resides with his girlfriend. The movie, from the very beginning, establishes that music is a very integral part of their life, and the central characters nurture dreams and aspirations of expanding their music career through forthcoming performances.

The narrative soon takes a striking turn as Ruben begins to experience a gradual loss of his hearing abilities. Confronted with the rapid deterioration of hearing, Ruben, a surviving addict, exhibits violent tendencies, unable to bear his new existence marked by disability in a world which favours “able-bodiedness” (McRuer 91).

The film, interestingly, employs the protagonist’s perspective when it comes to the soundscapes. The moment he loses his hearing ability, the film becomes silent. In this way, the film captures the onset of hearing impairment and invites the audience to partake in his subjectivity. The film narrative features the routine activities of the protagonist, now devoid of sound, and what happens around is conveyed through a dismal expression on his face. Naturally, the first move of Ruben is to seek medical advice to check what is happening to him. As part of the treatment, the doctor suggests avoiding exposure to loud noises and mentions the possibility of implants. Ruben’s trauma in dealing with his new reality is further heightened when all his hopes are shattered after consulting the doctor. He finds it extremely difficult to reconcile with his new existence, leading to moments of hysterical outbursts.

Lou, Ruben’s girlfriend, realising that the situation is getting out of hand, insists that her partner reside with a deaf community to overcome the crisis sensibly. Despite his initial hesitations, Ruben had no other option but to join the community. Although Ruben finds himself alienated in the deaf community, he eventually begins to feel at home and finds happiness living in the community. It is interesting to note that Ruben’s happiness is a natural result of his optimism of regaining his “normal life” by undergoing surgery: “In order to dissociate one’s disability from stigmatizing associations, disabled people are encouraged to “pass” by disguising their disabilities. Prosthetic devices, mainstreaming, and overcompensation techniques, all provide means for people with disabilities to “fit in” or to “de-emphasize” their differences (Mitchell and Snyder 3).

Mitchell and Snyder observe: “A body deemed lacking, unfunctional, or inappropriately functional needs compensation, and prosthesis helps to effect this end. Yet the prosthesizing of a body or a rhetorical figure carries with it ideological assumptions about what is aberrant” (6). The deaf community in the film, however, is founded on a conviction that flaunts such notions of aberration which exist in the mainstream social imaginary: “The need to restore a disabled body

to some semblance of an originary wholeness is the key to a false recognition: that disabilities extract one from a social norm or average of bodies and their corresponding (social) expectations” (Mitchell and Snyder 6). Ruben’s act of undergoing the surgery is in liaison with social norms in order to gain acceptance and to embrace what he considers his “normal” life. However, his decision makes him unfit to continue in the community as it is against the very ideals they uphold.

A problem with the measures to compensate for disability is that it can never bring back the normalcy the subject dreams of experiencing: “If disability falls too far from an acceptable norm, a prosthetic intervention seeks to accomplish an erasure of difference altogether; yet, failing that, as is always the case with prosthesis, the minimal goal is to return one to an acceptable degree of difference” (Mitchell and Snyder 7). In Ruben’s case, his strong optimism to regain hearing is met with utter disappointment when he starts hearing again with the aid of an implant. As Berlant observes, “These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). Listening to the distorted noises, Ruben comes to the realisation that he can never go back to his old life. His realisation is further endorsed when he meets Lou again at her father’s home. The film depicts Ruben’s sense of isolation at Lou’s home and ends with a scene in which Ruben is sitting in the middle of nowhere, caught in an eternal impasse.

Artist, a Malayalam language film helmed by Shyamaprasad and released in the year 2014, delineates the life of a blind artist and his miserable girlfriend. In the film, the protagonist, Michel, played by Fahad Fazil, is not congenitally blind. However, Michel, a budding painter, loses his eyesight following an accident. The film, while portraying Michel's struggle in grappling with the new realities of his life, emphasises his girlfriend's efforts to sustain their lives.

Michel, from the beginning, is portrayed as a self-absorbed artist obsessed with a passion to excel in his art. He finds happiness in the diversity of colours and considers painting as the essence of his life. Michel, in a fit of passion, invites Gayatri to live with him. Enthralled by Michel’s bohemian lifestyle and artistic vision, Gayatri agrees to live with him. However, as

they embark on their new life journey, mutual adjustments become challenging, leading to recurrent conflicts between them.

With the onset of blindness, Michel turns into a docile body in contrast to the active and obsessed artist he used to be. He finds it extremely difficult to accept his present existence, which is a “deviation from cultural imperatives of normativity” (Mitchell and Snyder 8). His eccentricities further heighten, and he often abuses his girlfriend out of his remorse and pessimism. Although Michel is completely dependent on her, he is unwilling to accept it, which manifests in his uncontrolled bouts of anger.

The narrative takes a turn when the artist-subject starts his desperate attempts to pursue his art. Despite being blind, Michel finds his way and means to paint again with the optimism that his insight can make him a successful artist. Here, Michel’s optimism is fully dependent on Gayatri as he relies on her for everything, including his basic needs. While Gayatri is affectionate towards him, the financial strain of procuring expensive paints and brushes weighs heavily upon her. Eventually, Michel places all his hopes in a new painting project which, according to Michel, will usher in a new chapter in his life: “Whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 24).

When Michel completes his new project, Gayatri is compelled to secure a sponsor for the exhibition of Michel’s paintings. However, Michel is unaware of the fact that Gayatri, in her difficult circumstances, resorted to deception, supplying him solely with Prussian blue paint instead of the variety he had requested. When Michel realises at the exhibition that his painting in the series “Dreams in Prussian Blue” comprises solely paintings in Prussian blue colour, his optimism is thwarted, leaving him wholly disillusioned. As Berlant observes:

Optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation,

such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming. (2)

Michel's state becomes even more precarious when his sponsor interprets the paintings as reflections of the monotony and darkness of a blind man's life. The scenario resonates with Leslie Fiedler's notions on people's fascination with non-normative human bodies and their display for profit (2). This is further explored in the film narrative when the media, present at the exhibition, showers questions on Michel based on his disabled subjectivity rather than his persona as an artist. The film concludes when Michel and Gayatri resolve to end their relationship as Michel is unable to cope with her betrayal.

Sound of Metal and *Artist* try to portray the precarious existence of disabled-artist subjects amidst their aspirations and struggles. The subjectivities portrayed in the film are characterised by their boundless optimism for a better life where they can pursue their arts without any hindrance. However, there is a marked difference in the nature of optimism that the subjects nurture. While Ruben in *Sound of Metal* attaches his sense of hope to medical interventions, Michel attempts to get back to his former life by surpassing the limitations imposed by his blindness. Nevertheless, in both cases, their subjectivities are disintegrated as their optimism turns cruel, leaving them stranded in an uncertain future. Hence, despite being realistic, these films reiterate and appropriate normative ideas on disability ingrained in the socio-cultural imaginary. The uncertainty and pessimistic overtones with which both films end reinforce that the desire for a better life is unreachable for a person with disability, and the desire and optimism prevent the subject from moving forward.



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