

# Apocalyptic Disability: Mass Disability and Fear in Apocalyptic Narratives

by

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## Abstract

Depictions of a mass onset of sensory disability have become a recent trend in popular apocalyptic narratives. *Bird Box* (2018), directed by Susanne Bier, *Blindness* (2008), directed by Fernando Meirelles, and *Perfect Sense* (2011), directed by David Mackenzie, all portray an apocalypse of disability. Likewise, H.G. Wells' story "The Country of the Blind" and the television show *See* (2019), directed by Francis Lawrence, depict post-apocalyptic societies of disability. These narratives amplify fears of the body: bodily vulnerability and bodily inadequacy, as well as fears of disability: of gaining a disability and of proximity to disability. Narratives that depict the onset of disability as a catastrophic, apocalyptic event rely on, and generate, fears of becoming disabled. A critical lens of disability theory offers a way to study fears of disability and to recognize the social repercussions of these narratives.

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## Introduction

### Making No Sense: Disability in the Media

Whether we are aware of it or not, disability has, or will, come into each of our lives at some point. Through depictions in media, social interactions, or personal experiences, disability is relevant to everyone. Despite the prevalence of disability in society, many people do not have positive associations with disability or disabled communities. Disability is largely associated with weakness, dependence, incapability, and the notion that something is *wrong* with a disabled body. Negative associations are harmful to disability communities in many ways. Low expectations of the abilities of individuals with disabilities lead to lower employment rates, inadequate access to education, and higher rates of economic inequality and social exclusion. Such notions about disability are often detached from knowledge of disability. It is necessary that these ideologies towards disability change, and that beliefs about disability are based on experiences rather than assumptions. A significant contributor to false assumptions about disability is the negative and inaccurate representation of disability in popular media.

This thesis will argue that negative and inaccurate depictions of disability in film, television, and literature promote fear of disability rather than understanding. Negative depictions of disability, including depictions that focus on the initial difficulty that may accompany the onset of disability or the supposed hardships of life with a disability, are harmful to individuals with disabilities. These negative representations promote feelings of pity,

frustration, sadness, and fear in audiences, using disability as the catalyst for these responses. While these associations exist, true understanding cannot. The fear of disability emerges in the form of feelings of discomfort around people with disabilities, social aversion, exclusion, underestimation, ridicule, and cruelty towards those who have disabilities. Negative representations of disability directly affect public opinion, which then affects social realities, including the limited accessibility of public and social spaces, and educational and working environments. According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, as of 2018, “While Canada’s unemployment rate is currently sitting at about 5.8%, the rate for disabled Canadians is much higher. Canadians with ‘mild’ disabilities are most likely to find employment, and their unemployment rate is 35%. For those with ‘severe’ disabilities, the rate jumps to 74%” (Raso). As well, according to the organization Scope, as of 2017, “85% of adults aged 18 to 34 with a disability felt lonely, and [...] one in eight adults with a disability had under half an hour of daily interaction with someone else” (qtd. in Bedei). The organization Sense, states that, “49% of non-disabled people feel that they do not have anything in common with people with a disability and 26% admit to avoiding engaging them in conversation” (qtd. in Bedei). People with disabilities are shut out from the social and economic privileges that many able-bodied people enjoy. Misrepresentation and misconception play significant roles in these social and economic limitations, which is why it is imperative that popular media reframes and reshapes perspectives on disability.

This thesis explores the basis of fears surrounding disability, both fears of being around disability and fears of the onset of disability, and demonstrates the ways in which these fears have been presented and promoted in various media. One of the reasons for the fear of

disability is the ever-present possibility that one could gain a disability. In their book *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (2010), Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić explain that, “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” (4). The looming possibility of disability instills fear in many able-bodied people. Disability is something that can happen to anyone, at any time. But why is disability something that is feared? In his book *Disability Theory* (2008), Tobin Siebers describes what he calls the “ideology of ability” (8). He explains that this pervasive ideology is “at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness” (8). The general preference for able-bodiedness stems from a history of misconceptions and misinformation, a history of fear. Misconceptions that disability means incapability, physical/mental weakness, and confusion both distract from and perpetuate the true difficulty of disability: social and environmental inaccessibility. Siebers writes, “disability identity [...] is the identity most associated with pain, and a great deal of discrimination against people with disabilities derives from the irrational fear of pain” (20). Irrational fear leads to discrimination. This is, of course, the case with many minority identities. Misinformation breeds irrational fear, which then breeds prejudice and discrimination.

Films that employ fear of the onset of disability in order to provoke fear in audiences perpetuate harmful misconceptions about disability. In this thesis, I explore the fear of disability in apocalyptic films, television shows, and stories that depict the mass onset of disability. There has been a trend in recent years in which films have used the traditional apocalyptic narrative to depict pandemics of sensory disability. *Bird Box* (2018), directed by Susanne Bier; *Blindness* (2008), directed by Fernando Meirelles and based on the 1995 novel of the same

name by José Saramago; and *Perfect Sense* (2011), directed by David Mackenzie, all depict an apocalypse of disability. In each of these films, the human population faces an unknown threat that causes the mass onset or adoption of sensory disabilities. The fear in these films is not generated from the films' depictions of mostly unseen beasts or unknown viral catalysts; it is generated instead by the depiction of either the onset of a sensory disability or the forced adoption of behaviours associated with sensory disabilities. Whereas *Perfect Sense* and *Blindness* explore the literal loss of sensory abilities, *Bird Box* differs in that the imagined tragedy it explores is the widespread disablement of individuals as they either give up abilities or adopt behaviours associated with disability in order to survive. I will focus on this trend of mass disability and the reasoning behind the fear that fuels, and is generated by, these narratives. As I will explain, narratives that depict the onset of disability as a catastrophic, apocalyptic event rely on, and generate, fears of becoming disabled. This thesis explores the social repercussions of these narratives and argues that they promote fear of disability rather than understanding. To contrast my analysis of filmic depictions of the sudden onset of disability, I will discuss the television show *See* (2019), created by Steven Knight, and H.G. Wells' story "The Country of the Blind," written in 1904 and rewritten in 1939. These narratives explore the lives of people in communities generations after the populations of the communities have become blind. These narratives do not depict disability as something to be feared, for the most part, but instead focus on the ways in which people, both individuals and societies, adapt to disability over time.

When it comes to the typical representations of disability in film, depictions of people with disabilities, although prevalent, tend to be inaccurate. In her introduction to *Different*

*Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television* (2013), Marja Evelyn Mogk explores the difference that depictions of disability make to film and television:

The fact is that there are many more disabled characters than most viewers realize in film and television, and they have more culturally critical roles than we recognize. Beyond disabled characters themselves, disability contributes to characterizations of the nondisabled, it shapes storylines on a range of topics, facilitates genre and metaphor, reflects deeply held social beliefs and values, and constructs difference across a range of matrices. (1)

Attitudes towards disability are directly influenced by representations of disability in popular media. These depictions have been studied by film theorists and disability studies scholars using various approaches. Mogk describes the first common approach as “image-analysis,” which consists of analyzing the “proliferation of negative or stereotyped disabled characters who typically appear as isolated, psychologically enmeshed figures in medical model plotlines. Stock characters like the disabled waif or victim, the disabled villain or avenger, and the disabled ‘supercrip’” (6). The second approach, which Mogk labels “the social-realist approach,” “evaluates whether representations accurately reflect the specifics of lived experiences of disability or reinforce misperceptions with either negative or positive image, occluding social contexts” (6). Mogk outlines the goals of these two approaches:

Both approaches interrogate the ways in which stylized, distorted representations of disability become naturalized, functioning to achieve a range of narrative effects. The work of both the image-analysis and social-realist approaches openly combines cultural inquiry with social change advocacy. At its heart is the larger quest of identifying sites at which disability becomes suppressed, manipulated, conflated or constructed in ways that are inimical to the full inclusion of people with disability or the recognition of the rich complexity of their experiences, or that furthers the mythologies of ableism and normalcy. (6)

Mogk's explanation of the intersection between the social-realist and image-analysis approaches describes the goals of many disability-film scholars, like myself, who seek to uncover the ways in which negative depictions of disability establish and reinforce negative attitudes towards disability. However, as Mogk explains, more disability-film scholars are needed: "There is a gulf between film studies and disability studies. Few film scholars appear familiar with disability studies. Some disability studies scholars have a depth of experience in film theory, technical terminology or practice but more are needed" (10). Until more accurate disabled perspectives, shared by people with disabilities, become the norm for depictions of disability, scholars must continue drawing attention to this issue. Mogk explains that a core ideal in the field of disability studies is to "speak about, for, and with disabled people' towards a more inclusive and aware society" (7). The solution to the spread of media misinformation is for people with lived experience of disability to represent their own experiences.

Western culture's fascination with depicting disability in visual mediums is worth noting.

In his book *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007), Ato Quayson writes,

Disability has always been the object of a negative comparison to what is typically construed as corporeal normality. The attitudes that have historically attended people with disabilities have varied over time, but reiterated in all epochs is the idea that they carry an excess of meaning and therefore offer an insistent invitation to a series of interpretive and institutional framings. (4)

He goes on to cite Rosemarie Garland-Thomson on the display of "freaks": "By its very presence, the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation" (qtd. in Quayson 4). It appears as if able-bodied people are fascinated by the

supposed “mystery” of the exceptional body. The disabled body is something that is perceived as an object to be represented, interpreted, and explained. However, these efforts to understand the disabled body through representation should involve people with disabilities, who would provide necessary insight. In their essay “Narrative Prosthesis,” David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder explain that, “while stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions” (274). Disability is often used merely as a narrative device, rather than being depicted as a lived experience with depths to explore. Mitchell and Snyder go on to explain that,

The politics of this recourse to disability as a device of narrative characterization demonstrates the importance of disability to storytelling itself. Literary narratives support our appetites for the exotic by posing disability as an “alien” terrain that promises the revelation of a previously uncomprehended experience. (280)

In film or television, disability functions as a narrative device that allows able-bodied audiences to view the unfamiliar and the unknown without meaningfully engaging with experiences of disability or coming to understand them. When disability functions as part of an apocalyptic narrative, the “alien terrain” and “uncomprehended experience” of disability become chaotic, world-shifting forces that the surviving characters must grapple with. It is not such a stretch for these narratives to connect disability with apocalypse when we consider pre-existing societal attitudes toward disability. Mitchell and Snyder explain, “disability also serves as a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse. Physical and cognitive anomalies promise to lend a ‘tangible’ body to textual abstractions; we term this metaphorical use of disability the *materiality of metaphor*” (274). Often, narratives that depict disability, especially the onset of disability, will employ disability as a metaphor for a character’s downfall. Many

writers consider disability to be a useful narrative device to instigate conflict in a plot. Films such as *Wait Until Dark* (1967), directed by Terence Young; *The Theory of Everything* (2014), directed James Marsh; and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), directed by Clint Eastwood, all employ disability, and fears of disability, as the plots' major conflict. While disability is often used as a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse, narratives that depict apocalypses of disability interpret this metaphor very literally. Disability is depicted as the reason for social and individual collapse in apocalyptic films about the mass onset of disability. When a narrative uses disability as the catalyst for this collapse, Mitchell and Snyder's concept of the materiality of metaphor is demonstrated in tangible and very direct ways.

It is not common for people with disabilities to be involved in representations of disability in film or television. It is very common, however, for able-bodied actors to perform characters who have disabilities. Films such as *Forest Gump* (1994), directed by Robert Zemeckis; *Rain Man* (1988), directed by Barry Levinson; and *Philadelphia* (1993), directed by Jonathan Demme, all star able-bodied actors who play disabled characters. With limited experience or knowledge related to disability, actors involved in these roles of "playing disabled" can produce depictions that are harmful to disability communities because of the spread of misinformation. Interestingly, as Chivers and Markotić note, "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" (1). It is considered an acting feat to perform an experience that is so outside of one's own experience, and the general unfamiliarity of disability lends performances of it increased chances for critical acclaim and awards. Many critics and disability scholars have

noted that films about disability, in which able-bodied actors play characters with disabilities, are fairly effective “Oscar bait.” Disability studies scholar Charles Radley explains, “The safest nomination bets for Oscar gold, year after year, are disability flicks” (qtd. in Chivers and Markotić 6). In an article for the *Washington Post*, Justin Moyer writes, “Since Dustin Hoffman won a Best Actor Oscar playing ‘Rain Man,’ a majority of Best Actor Oscars were taken home by men playing the sick or handicapped,” and that since *Rain Man*, “14 of 27 Best Actors tackled characters facing significant mental or physical barriers” (“Welcome Eddie Redmayne”). Disability seems to function as a tool in popular film that is used to challenge the ability of actors and to appeal to critical audiences. It seems that disability is not yet something that is critically engaged with in popular film.

While popular films and television shows tend to exclude people with disabilities both in front of and behind the camera, it is not unusual for films and television shows to hire a “disability consultant.” Unfortunately, the role of the disability consultant is, typically, not to provide valuable advice as to the ethical handling of topics related to disability. A disability consultant is usually hired to help the able-bodied actors to better portray characters who have disabilities. Unsurprisingly, this is not always effective. In Jenni Gold’s film *CinemAbility: The Art of Inclusion* (2018), the narrator describes able-bodied actor Jane Wyman’s experience with disability consultants in preparation for her role as a deaf woman in the film *Johnny Belinda* (1948), directed by Jean Negulesco:

Jane Wyman plays a deaf woman who learns how to communicate through sign language before a series of tragic events puts her on trial for murder. Though she learned to sign for the role, she attributes the honesty of her portrayal to a ball of wax, stating, “Although I trained with the deaf for six months, nothing seemed to work until I plugged my ears.” (qtd. in Gold)

Ironically, Wyman found *not listening*, literally, to the lived experiences of those she was representing to be the most effective method of portrayal. It is not yet generally understood that more is at stake than an actor's performance when representing disability. As long as able-bodied actors continue to perform roles of disability, it is necessary to be attentive to the lived experiences of those who are being portrayed.

However, Wyman's form of method acting is not unusual. It is notable that *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, *See*, or *Perfect Sense* do not feature disabled actors in leading or major roles. In preparation for the filming of *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, and *See*, the able-bodied actors spent time wearing blindfolds and working with blindness coaches in preparation for their roles. In an interview for *Blindness*, director Fernando Meirelles, while "describing the challenge of convincingly portraying 200 [...] sighted people as blind" (Seguin) states, "We've done a lot of workshops" (qtd. in Seguin). As we will explore in Chapter Two of this thesis, it is not clear exactly what the actors learned in these workshops. As for *Bird Box*, Sandra Bullock, who plays the leading role, explains that she spent time learning blindness navigation techniques from a blindness consultant on set (Hammond). *See* took a different approach with the show's blindness consultant. Joe Strechay, who is blind, was credited as both a blindness consultant and an associate producer for *See*. This credit implies that Strechay was able to advise the crew on the accuracy of the show's depiction of blindness, while also teaching the sighted cast blindness techniques and ways to "act" blind. Chris Danielsen, writing for the National Federation of the Blind, explains that:

The cast reportedly includes at least five blind actors. Marilee Talkington, an advocate for the authentic representation of blind people onscreen, appears to have a strong supporting role in the show. But by their own admission, the producers sadly missed the opportunity to cast Talkington or any other blind actors in leading roles with top billing. Producers have emphasized that most of the blind actors lacked experience and polish, requiring extra training to make up for that deficit. This may be true, but that is because there has been little or no effort in the entertainment industry as a whole to cultivate blind talent. Why was the effort in training blind cast members not explicitly directed toward cultivating any of that talent toward a leading role? (“Treading Carefully with New Blindness Drama, *See*”)

Danielson notes an important discrepancy in the entertainment industry’s treatment of disability. While it is common practice to hire disability consultants, who for the most part have disabilities themselves, to teach able-bodied actors how to “act disabled”, why is there little to no thought given to directing this time, money, and effort to teaching disabled actors acting techniques suited to leading roles? The answer is in the question: more disabled actors will seek acting training when attaining major roles is a possibility. Interestingly, Danielson notes that, “*See* has already cast more blind actors than any other film or TV show that we know of, so progress, while perhaps incremental, has been made” (“Treading Carefully with New Blindness Drama, *See*”). When we remember that *See* has cast approximately five blind actors to portray a society of blind people, this measure of progress should be startling.

The first chapter of this thesis will consider the film *Bird Box* in terms of its depiction of behaved disability on a mass scale. In the film, the only way that the characters can defend themselves against beasts who kill through being seen is by wearing blindfolds at all times when outdoors. The use of blindfolds, a form of behaved blindness, features primarily in circumstances of heightened anxiety and pressure. The resulting associations between

blindness and vulnerability evoke and increase already-existing fears of disability that many have. Because the characters in the film must behave as if they have a disability in order to survive, the film presents the alternatives of disability or death as the plot's grim reality. The film suggests that this blindfolding limits the characters' quality of life, as they cannot live fulfilling lives without the use of sight. The film also does little to depict the ways in which characters might adapt to life without sight. Through emphasizing the hardships of blindness, and the sense of loss that is associated with it, the film reinforces the harmful feelings of fear that are associated with disability. I argue in this chapter that the fear in this thriller film is not generated by the mostly-unseen beasts but instead by the blindness that the characters must adopt in order to survive them.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I compare the films *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense*, noting their similar portrayals of pandemics of disability. Unlike the forced behaviours of disability in *Bird Box*, the populations in these films acquire actual disabilities. Because disability in these two films spreads via a contagious disease, disrupting social order, these films depict a much more direct and literal apocalypse of disability. These films lay particular emphasis on the difficulties that may be faced with the onset of disability, and amplify these difficulties on a mass scale. Despite this important connection, the treatment of disability in these films does differ. While *Blindness* languishes in, and relies on, images of struggle, vulnerability, and confusion associated with blindness for the drama of its plot, *Perfect Sense* makes a point to depict the ways in which people can adapt to disability. Depictions of disability that focus solely on the initial frustrations that may occur, rather than drawing attention to the learned adaptive behaviours that lead to independent living, can promote misconceptions of disability that

emphasize a connection between disability and incapability. Because disability is the cause of societal and individual collapse in these apocalyptic films, disability is presented as something to be feared. In this chapter I also discuss real epidemics of disability that have occurred in recent history, with attention to the sense of fear that followed them. This chapter seeks to pinpoint the source of fears surrounding disability and to study how these fears are projected on screen. It also considers the harmful effects of these fears on individuals with disabilities in the real world.

Currently, I am writing from home in self-isolation in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Writing about fictional pandemics, while experiencing a real one, has lent me some first-hand experience with the public fear and frenzy generated by a pandemic. While fear is warranted when lives are in danger, the frenzy of overbuying, the lack of government support in some countries, and the empty streets have, according to many, mirrored aspects of apocalyptic films. As many have likened the current situation to a sort of apocalypse, it is important to note that fictional apocalypses and the frenzy of Covid-19 are linked by fears of the body. During the current pandemic, many people have become more aware of the vulnerability of their bodies to external factors. A mass contagion is a threat to the body. Covid-19 has exposed fears of rapid and unpredictable bodily change on a mass scale. *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* employ the same fears that we are witnessing across the world today: fears that the body is now subject to, and vulnerable to, the environment around it.

This thesis concludes with a discussion of the changes that must be enacted in regards to depictions of disability in popular media. I argue that allowing disabled people to depict their

own stories will create positive changes in the ways that disability is perceived by the general public. Disability will no longer be perceived as something to be feared when more accurate depictions of daily life with a disability exist in popular media. When film and television focus on adaptation to disability rather than solely on the initial stress of the onset of disability, audiences will learn about the ways in which life can be lived independently, and without fear, by people with disabilities. In my conclusion, I draw on H.G. Wells' story "The Country of the Blind" and the television show *See* to demonstrate the ways in which attention to adaptation (rather than to struggles related to the initial onset of disability) can create a more positive image of disability. While these narratives are not without flaws, their depictions of well-functioning societies of blind people provide a welcome contrast to depictions of societal collapse caused by disability in *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, and *Perfect Sense*. The presence of sighted characters in both narratives complicates the positive depictions of blindness, however, as both texts present a sort of contest of ability between the sighted and blind characters. I argue in my conclusion that representations of disability that rely on accuracy and lived experience rather than assumptions and misinformation can create more positive attitudes towards people who have disabilities.

Film and television have been major contributors to misconceptions surrounding disability. While the "ideal" body is typically lauded in these visual mediums, the disabled body is presented as a sort of contrast, a negative alternative to the ideal. Chivers and Markotić write:

Filmic narrative often aligns the bodies it represents with an elusive and ideal norm of the human body that William Blake designated "the 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. (1)

The preference for able-bodiedness and the positioning of able-bodiedness as the standard or norm in film and television leaves disability as the unwanted and abnormal alternative.

Disability should not be the tragic end, the conflict, or the apocalyptic event in a narrative.

Attitudes towards disability are cyclical: beliefs of incapability, vulnerability, and ineptitude foster representations of disability that promote these same ideals. These representations then create or confirm negative attitudes towards disability in audiences and the general public, who may go on to create media with these beliefs in mind. Chivers and Markotić succinctly explain: “We propose that— disabled or not— when ‘we’ all watch a film, we all participate in disability discourse” (4). We have always already been involved with disability discourse, whether we have known it or not, which is why issues of disability are matters that involve each and every one of us.

## Chapter One

### Blinded by the Fright: Blindness and Behaved Disability in *Bird Box*

Traditional apocalyptic films typically explore the ways in which societies must adjust to, and survive, world-altering events. In doing so, traditional apocalyptic films explore human vulnerability in the face of unfathomable and unrelenting forces. These films depict fears about the body— its safety and survival in conditions where both are nearly impossible. Often in these films, the survivors are the ones who rely on their primal instincts. The fears explored in apocalyptic films are fears of bodily inadequacy, physical weakness, and mortality. These notions of bodily vulnerability and the survival of the fittest are very directly exemplified in films in which the unfathomable and unrelenting apocalyptic force is disability itself.

In *Bird Box* (2018), directed by Susanne Bier, creatures who are unseen to the film's audience make themselves visible to their victims, inciting a form of psychological warfare, in which victims immediately and unwaveringly commit suicide. The film depicts the ways in which daily life changes radically with the arrival of these creatures as the world's population must learn to live without the use of the sense of sight, or, alternatively, face certain death. In order to survive the creatures, the characters in *Bird Box* must blindfold themselves when outdoors and learn to navigate the changed landscape without the use of sight. The characters must behave as if they have a disability, specifically a visual disability, in order to survive. This blindfolding, a form of behaved disability, ensures the characters' safety from the creatures, but, as the film suggests, disability limits their quality of life and risks their bodily safety when

they are performing necessary tasks outdoors. *Bird Box* emphasizes the hardships of life without sight. In addition to exploring blindness, the film engages with mental illness as the creatures cause mental illness or intensify it in cases where it preexists. In people who do not have a mental illness, the sight of the creatures instills a deep, hypnotic depression, causing victims to immediately commit suicide. Complicating this scenario, characters within the film who have more severe mental illnesses prior to the invasion are somehow immune to the sight of the creatures and are used to do their deadly bidding. Engaging with both vision loss and mental health, the film depicts an apocalypse of disability. This chapter will argue that the fear in this film is not generated from the mostly unseen beasts, but is instead generated by the widespread and necessary adoption of disability. The supposed tragedy of this film is the onset of disability— the characters' abandonment of vision in order to survive.

In *Bird Box*, blindness is, for those who do not have a severe mental illness, the alternative to being killed by the creatures. The characters in the film repeatedly adopt behaviours associated with blindness when necessity requires it. When the characters are indoors, they are able to take off their blindfolds and regain their sight. In this sense, the film depicts the temporary adoption of an impermanent disability. Through their adaptive behaviours, most prominently their use of blindfolds, characters repeatedly re-blind themselves throughout the film. Disability in this film is behaved, temporary, and strategic. Because the characters are constantly re-gaining disability throughout the film, oscillating between sightedness and blindness, the film is saturated with the immediate difficulties that accompany the loss of this sense. *Bird Box* emphasizes the sense of loss that may follow from acquiring a

disability. The conflict in the film's narrative is the discovery of ways to survive both the external threat posed by predatory creatures and the challenges of life with a disability.

In the sections that follow, I explore the negative depictions of blindness in *Bird Box* through a discussion of the sense of loss that accompanies the repeated act of blindfolding in the film. I discuss ways in which the film establishes its idea of the importance of sight for emotional connection and expression before taking sight away from the characters. The discussion moves next to the depictions of mental illness in the film, specifically the ways in which mental illness is villainized. As an important second dimension of the apocalypse of disability, mental illness runs parallel to blindness and blindfolding, such that each character must choose between the alternatives of blindness or severe mental illness. Because disability is depicted as a loss in the film, the film makes a point to conclude with opportunities for characters to "overcome" disability. Disability is presented as a hurdle that the characters must surmount in order to regain their ability to connect with others and to live fulfilling lives. The depiction of disability as a loss, and the emphasis on the vulnerability of the characters while blindfolded, promote feelings of fear in audiences. As this chapter will argue, portraying disability as a threat plays on, and promotes, deep-seated fears that many people have about gaining a disability. The film goes so far as to "blind" the audience on some occasions through disability simulation in order to incite fear. This chapter concludes with an examination of the cultural afterlife of *Bird Box*, most notably, the "Bird Box Challenge" and the negative perspectives towards disability that this social media trend promotes.

## The Significance of Sight

*Bird Box* depicts life without the sense of sight as empty. After the invasion, the film's protagonist, Malorie (played by Sandra Bullock), struggles with viewing life as more than merely surviving. She lives a life devoid of hope. This behavior blindness is shown to prevent meaningful bonds between Malorie and the other characters, as sight is depicted as necessary for human connection and expression in the film. In the opening scenes of *Bird Box*, while inside a hideout, the stakes are laid bare: Malorie tells two young children, "You never, ever take off your blindfold. If you look, you will die" (Bier). As Malorie delivers this rule, there are close-ups of each of the children's faces, as they gaze at her with wide, understanding eyes. We are given the immediate sense that these children are at particular risk because of their naivety and their instinct to look, but we are also given the sense that these are the very things they will lose. In the next scene, which takes place before the apocalypse, Malorie is shown in her house. This scene establishes the importance of sight to Malorie's life in a number of ways. First, we learn that Malorie is a visual artist, specifically a painter. As Malorie and the two children, all blindfolded, take to the river on their boat, in a return to the beginning scene of the film after the children have been cautioned by her, the camera cuts to show a bird's-eye view of the current of the river rushing ahead. This shot dissolves into a close-up of a paintbrush painting a thick black line slanted across a canvas. The forward movement of the camera following the river ahead contrasts the slant of the brush, which disrupts the flow of the previous shot, as this scene disrupts the flow of the narrative; this shot includes the label "Five years earlier." The following shots alternate between extreme close-ups of Malorie's analytical eyes and the

canvas that she is painting. The juxtaposition between these images suggests her reliance on her vision for her creative expression and possibly also her livelihood.

In another scene early in the film that establishes the importance of sight, Malorie's sister, Jess (played by Sarah Paulson), arrives at the house and the two of them gaze at the painting that Malorie is working on. The painting depicts a group of people who are together, some sitting and some standing, all close enough to be touching shoulders. None of them are facing or looking at one another. All of them have downturned eyes, and the portion of their eyes that is visible below their lids stare blankly, as if they are in a daze. It could be argued that Malorie has painted a group of people who are blind. Malorie asks Jess what she thinks of the painting, and Jess responds, "I think I see a whole bunch of people sitting together, but they all feel incredibly lonely" (Bier). Malorie then explains, "The loneliness is just incidental. It's really about people's inability to connect." To Malorie, a lack of eye-contact represents an inability to emotionally connect with others: literally, an inability to see eye-to-eye. Sight, rather than the physical contact and spatial closeness of the people in the painting, is the key to meaningful relationships and emotional understanding. This moment, like the close-up of Malorie's eyes earlier, signals that to Malorie, vision is vital. We are given the understanding that Malorie depends on sight for both her emotional expression and her emotional connections with others. These moments are meant to heighten the sense of loss that accompanies her impending experiences of adopted and impermanent blindness. The importance of sight is established early on in the film in order to increase the audience's perception of behaved blindness as tragic.

In this same scene, Jess turns on the news to alert Malorie of recent events overseas, in which masses of people have been committing suicide without apparent reason. The reporter says, "The eyewitness reports tell of people exhibiting psychotic behaviour. Our sources are telling us this does not appear to be pathological or viral. US authorities are advising the public to remain calm" (Bier). Before we learn that creatures are the cause of this crisis, we are told of the effects of these creatures. The fear of psychotic behaviour precedes knowledge, and fear, of the creatures who have caused the mass suicides. Before it becomes an apocalypse of blindness, the crisis begins as an apocalypse of widespread mental illness. Shortly after the scene in Malorie's home, Malorie visits a hospital for her prenatal examination, where the crisis reaches her and Jess with full force. Malorie says, "That thing in Russia that's making everybody crazy, it's here now" (Bier). As they attempt to escape the city in their car, Jess sees one of the creatures. There is a close-up of her eyes as she stares wide-eyed ahead. As her eyes tear up, her irises appear as if they are fragmented and leaking out with her tears. Her eyes, here, are visual evidence that she has been taken over by one of the creatures. Like others who view the creatures, Jess soon dies, stepping in front of a moving car to bring about her own death. In the film, the hazy and fragmented appearance of the eyes of victims repeatedly indicates their hypnotized, psychotic possession by the creatures. Mental illness is physically marked by a change in the appearance of the eyes.

## The Threat of Mental Illness

While the creatures are depicted as giving otherwise “sane” people mental illnesses, those who had mental illnesses prior to the invasion are not moved to suicide by the sight of the creatures as are other characters in the film. Instead, these characters act as vessels for the creatures to work through. The figure of the possessed and so-called “mad” character dates back through the history of storytelling. In his book *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, Ato Quayson explains that,

Even as there appeared to be a variegated response to physical disabilities, madness, on the other hand, was consistently viewed throughout the Middle Ages and even into the Renaissance period as a form of divine punishment. Examples abound from the work of didactic writers such [as] Aelfric, Abbot Leofstan of Bury St. Edmunds, John Mirk, and others to show how clearly the link was made between madness, divine retribution, and demoniacal possession. (8)

*Bird Box*, like many other historical and contemporary representations of mental illness in media, depicts the well-established assumption that people with mental illnesses are either possessed by demons or are conduits to a demonic dimension. We have not progressed much beyond images of Renfield raving from the asylum while under Dracula’s influence. Like Renfield, the characters who have prior mental illnesses in *Bird Box* are instruments to the creatures. Because they are immune to the depressive effects of the creatures, the characters who originally had mental illnesses seem to fall enthusiastically into servitude. Those with mental illnesses prior to the crisis carry out physical acts for the creatures because the creatures lack a substantially powerful physical form. Such demands include forcing the surviving population to remove their blindfolds. This effort by the characters with mental illnesses is repeatedly depicted as an act of conversion. When Malorie and the children are on

the river, a man fishing in the river calls out to them and tries to pull their boat to shore. He attempts to convince Malorie and the children to take their blindfolds off. As he does this, Malorie holds a gun out in front of her, unsure of where to aim. Because the man is immune to the deathly effects of the creatures and does not wear a blindfold, the film suggests that he has the advantage of sight. He grabs Malorie and she kicks him, causing his sunglasses to fly off of his face; this reveals his altered eyes to the audience. He says, "I've seen one. I've seen the truth. Take your blindfold off. It's beautiful. It's beautiful" (Bier). Malorie reaches for her machete and strikes him with it. As he falls into the water, he says, "It shall cleanse the world. Everyone must look." This moment presents as alternatives for survivors of this apocalypse either death by suicide or degeneration into a zombie-like servant to these creatures, the fate of people with serious mental illnesses in the film.

In another run-in with madness, Malorie and her group restock their food supply at a grocery store. When they hear a voice calling to them from behind a loading dock door, Charlie, one of the members of the surviving group, recognizes the voice of his former co-worker, Fish Fingers. Charlie explains, "He's been to prison and he's a bit crazy, but he's always been nice to me" (Bier), indicating a connection to mental illness and depravity or danger right before Fish Fingers becomes violent. When Fish Fingers pushes on the door, Charlie runs at him to save everyone else. We can hear him saying "Look at it Charlie. It's beautiful," followed by the sound of slashing and a shot of blood flowing under the door. As the group leaves, Fish Fingers returns to banging on the door, asking to be let in. Douglas (played by John Malkovich) asks, "How is that guy alive in there" (Bier). To the characters in the film, the ability of an individual to look at the creatures that have caused this crisis and yet to survive is unnerving. Characters with

mental illnesses are repeatedly shown to trap, manipulate, and trick the surviving characters into removing their blindfolds. These moments are presented as acts of religious conversion. The man on the river speaks of a reckoning, where the act of looking will provide the truth and will cleanse the world. Both he and Fish Fingers mention the beauty of what they see, as if they have access to a sacred sight that only few will have the privilege of viewing. The film implies that this cleansed world will consist of only the creatures and those who are able to view them and survive, namely those with preexisting mental illnesses.

In another encounter with severe mental illness, the surviving group of characters meet Gary. When Gary, a stranger to the group, enters the home where they are staying, the group questions him. He explains, "We went to my colleague Carl's house to lay low. Everything was fine until they broke in" (Bier). Malorie says, "The creatures don't break into peoples' homes" and Gary responds, "No, not the creatures. These psychos. These psychos from Northwood." Douglas adds, "It's a mental institution for the criminally insane. Well it's nice to know they have hall passes now." Gary continues, "They took us outside and they forced our eyes open so that we would have to look at the creatures." Douglas asks, "Did you look?" and Gary says "No. Somehow my friend Carl managed to tackle one of these people to the ground and the rest of us made a run for it. I just kept on running and running until I got here." Gary goes on to say, "The scariest thing was, uh... when these people broke in, they weren't wearing blindfolds. It's like they didn't need them. [...] These crazy guys weren't affected like everyone else. They wanted to see. They were happy. They were so glad. And they said everyone needed to see" (Bier). Here, we are given the film's clearest explanation of the connection between mental illness and immunity from death by the creatures. Of course, there is no distinction between

various mental illnesses that do or do not provide immunity from the creatures, but the references to Fish Fingers' time in prison and Douglas' mention of the asylum for the "criminally insane" provide some indicators of the supposed severity and dangers of these forms of mental illness.

Gary, who we learn is hiding his mental illness from the group in order to trick them, describes the sort of conversion that he will soon enact. Because his eyes are not marked until later in the film, when his intentions are revealed, he is able to perform both vulnerability and sanity, gaining the trust and pity he needs to enact his goal of conversion or death. As he has explained, the escapees from Northwood want everyone to see the creatures. We are presented with the notion that these escapees are forcing everyone to see, with the intention of their victims either dying by suicide or joining their ranks in the quest for world cleansing. The "mentally ill" want to spread their illness. In a scene in which both Malorie and Olympia, a second pregnant member of the surviving group, give birth simultaneously (a miracle!), Gary makes himself comfortable alone in the living room. He plays classical music; spins behind some low-hanging, enlarged light bulbs, in which the clear glass distorts his face to indicate the secrets that will soon be revealed; and lays out a series of his own drawings on the coffee table. Gary displays charcoal drawings that he has made of the creatures so that he can gaze at them. The crude black lines depict spider-like bodies, close-ups of distorted eyes, and wicked-looking faces. It is notable that this is the only visual depiction of the creatures that we are given in the film. The creatures are invisible to the audience throughout the film and only make themselves visible to their victims. Once the drawings have been laid out, there is a close-up of Gary's face as he gazes down towards the drawings with wide eyes. His eyes have been wide-open since his

arrival in the house— a marker of his madness. His large eyes are an indicator that he has seen too much. His unnatural gaze signals his warped visual pleasure. With frantic pencil strokes, Gary begins his next drawing. His creation of art here mirrors Malorie's own earlier in the film. Like her, he is a visual artist. However, now, at a time when looking is prohibited, the creation of art has become a tainted act. Malorie has abandoned her visual medium of expression in the crisis. She cannot experience the pleasures of looking or creating, even though she is fully able to do so indoors, as she did pre-invasion in her studio. Both the act of looking and the experience of visual pleasure have become corrupted. The desire to look and to experience beauty using the sense of sight becomes associated with death or madness.

Gary goes on to expose some members of the household to the creatures outside of the windows (on the second storey of the house no less), causing them to kill themselves right after the birth of both babies. Tom (played by Trevante Rhodes), another member of the group, then kills Gary, leaving only Malorie, himself, and the babies surviving. The film cuts to a scene that takes place years later, when the babies have grown to young children. Set in a garden in the days before Malorie and the children embark on the river, the scene depicts Malory teaching the children echolocation. In addition to maneuvering outside while wearing a blindfold, the characters perform blindness while learning adaptive behaviours. Malorie and the children walk around the garden blindfolded, presumably near the house where they are living. Malorie teaches the children how to click stones together to measure the distance of the objects around them. Malorie says, "Listen to the clicks. Listen to the sounds, if they're softer or louder. [...] When they're louder, you're in an open space. Do you hear that? But if they're softer, something is very close" (Bier). We are given the sense that this technique will not only be used

for everyday practical purposes, but for survival. Interestingly, this technique is never used again in the film. To the characters' disadvantage, they do not use many adaptive techniques for blindness in situations where such would be helpful. Would Malorie have fallen down a hill in the forest near the end of the film if she had fashioned a cane out of a stick?

### **Disability as Loss**

Although the characters in *Bird Box* do not gain actual blindness, the film suggests that behaved blindness is just as "tragic." There are many instances in the film in which the characters regain the use of their sight. Whenever the characters enter a building, most obviously, they are able to take their blindfolds off. Conveniently, the creatures who kill by being seen cannot enter doorways. The film seems to imply that the creatures' lack of physical form means that they cannot move anything heavier than the floating leaves that indicate their presence in forest and garden scenes. This plot "rule" allows the characters in the film breaks from their behaved blindness. What would the film have been like if the characters were depicted learning to cook within a home they find shelter in without the use of their sight? The film instead focuses on the dangers of life outdoors as a blind person, with the addition of the threat of these creatures, but it allows a return to sight for the indoor, low stakes household duties. In this way, *Bird Box* depicts blindness as dangerous. Rather than showing minor inconveniences of daily life as the characters learn to complete necessary tasks, the film depicts blindness only in high-thrill life and death scenarios that take place outside, such as the navigation of unfamiliar spaces, including natural spaces. Because the film depicts moments

indoors, where characters have the use of vision, as safe experiences, the moment the characters put on their blindfolds to go outside, there is a sense of doom and loss.

Moments in which characters return to ability may also provide a relief for able-bodied audience members. In Jenni Gold's documentary *CinemAbility: The Art of Inclusion* (2013), which explores the representation of people with disabilities and characters with disabilities throughout Hollywood's history, Gold interviews influential people involved in disability studies and/or Hollywood filmmaking. She interviews, for example, Martin F. Norden, who has studied the role of disability throughout film history with a focus on the topic of able-bodied actors playing characters who have disabilities. Referring to able-bodied actors' performances of disability, he explains, "Audiences like this kind of image. For starters, they know that the actor isn't really disabled and that gives them a kind of out" (qtd. in Gold). The knowledge that the actor will go back to living life as an able-bodied person when the film is over provides an emotional "out" for able-bodied audience members, who would otherwise be in a position where they might wonder about this person's daily life outside of the film. It is more than typical— it is currently the standard— that able-bodied actors play characters with disabilities in popular North American film and television. Following Norden's argument regarding able-bodied actors playing disabled characters, one possibility for this casting choice could be that it provides a definitive limit where the empathy generated in the film can end.

In regards to *Bird Box*, regular breaks from visual disability in the film function in a similar way. Because the film depicts the loss of sight as inhibiting emotional expression and connection, the moments in the film when the characters are able to use this sense allow for more "normalized" emotional highs in the film. These moments are not only emotional releases

for the characters in the film, they are also emotional releases for the audience as well.

Audiences can have a moment of rest between the more thrilling life and death scenarios to learn about the characters, as they are able to express themselves. These moments of ability are also used to heighten the sense of loss that the film depicts once the characters must return to their behaved disability.

### **“Overcoming” Disability**

*Bird Box* has a complex relationship with actual disability, one in which it is in some ways beneficial to the characters, while it is also in some ways a hindrance. Ultimately, disability provides a solution for the able-bodied characters to return to their normal way of living. The very first lines in the film are spoken over images of the river. A man’s voice, that sounds as if it is coming through on a radio, says, “We have a place, a compound. We have a community. It’s safe here” (Bier). Later in the film, we reach the moment in the narrative that explains this voice. Through a walkie-talkie, a man named Rick contacts Malorie and Tom, who is now her partner. Rick explains that if they can make the journey through the rapids on the river, then they will find safety in his compound. Rick says, “You need to see clearly” (Bier). Tom responds, saying, “What do you mean, see clearly?” and Rick says, “You will have to look.” Tom says “Rick, we’ll have blindfolds on. We can’t look,” to which Rick responds, “I’m glad you said that. Someone will have to take a—” before he is cut off by radio static. The fact that Rick does not assume that Malorie and Tom can see points to something that we learn towards the end of the film: Rick is blind. When Rick learns that they are wearing blindfolds, Rick is relieved to hear

that either Malorie or Tom will be able to take their blindfold off when it becomes necessary on the rapids.

When Malorie finally arrives at the “compound” after the film’s climax, she meets Rick, whose face is out of the frame. He guides Malorie, as she is still blindfolded, into another room, the upper half of his face remaining out of the frame. When she takes her blindfold off, she turns to the wall beside her, where she sees a sign that says, “Janet Tucker School for the Blind.” Malorie runs her fingers across the braille on the sign, her final act of behaved blindness. She turns to look at Rick, the camera following her gaze, and we are shown his face for the first time in profile, his gaze directed away from us to signal that he is blind. Her behaved disability meets actual disability. Fiona L.F. Kelly writes about this interaction in her article “*Bird Box* and *A Quiet Place*: The Trope of Disability as a Superpower and Sensory Horror”: “Rick, the man they speak to on the radio who describes their perilous journey on the river [...], is revealed to be blind, and he then provides a face to the disability the characters have been simulating throughout the film” (*The Mary Sue*). It seems that the presence of real disability causes the behaved disability of the sighted characters to vanish. Rick brings Malorie to the school’s utopian garden courtyard, where students and teachers of the blind school and the sighted people they have taken in all intermingle. Rick leaves Malorie, as he has played his brief role, so she can take in the visual wonders of the garden. The camera shows her looking in every direction: up at the vine-covered lattice ceiling that keeps the birds in the courtyard; at the birds themselves flying around, inspiring her, in a symbolic act, to release her own birds from their box; and at the faces of the many blind people at the school, shown in a series of shots,

one after the other. Here, she is finally free to look. Just as her birds have been released from their cage, her eyes have been freed from the constraints of her blindfold.

Now that Malorie has been released from blindness, she is also free to express herself once again. When Malorie's obstetrician, Dr. Lapham, finds her at the school, Malorie introduces her children as "Girl" and "Boy." Realizing that life can now be more than mere survival, Malorie finally gives them names: "Olympia" and "Tom," naming them after the people she has lost. Malorie holds her children tightly and gazes lovingly into their eyes, something she has not been able to do before this, even when safe indoors. Because she is free to see once again, she can now develop a connection with her children. In the last shot of the film, a close-up of Malorie's face shows her gazing upwards, hopeful for the first time. In the resolution to *Bird Box*, characters who are permanently blind provide a space for sighted people to be free of their behaved blindness. In the film, the characters who have disabilities help to "cure" the able-bodied characters so they can regain the sense that they have been unable to use and with it, forms of pleasure and emotional connection temporarily lost to them. In the film, the regaining of sight parallels the regaining of emotional connections and safety.

Terri Thrower explores "overcoming narratives" in her article "Overcoming the Need to 'Overcome': Challenging Disability Narratives in *The Miracle*." She analyzes *The Miracle* (2007), a film about a mother's fears and anxieties about her disabled daughter, and the strain on their relationship that is caused by this fear. Specifically, she discusses the ways in which the film subverts the traditional narratives and tropes that shape many depictions of disability on film. Thrower explains how to recognize overcoming narratives:

Narratives about actual miracles and cures are passé these days, not to mention physiologically unrealistic. Twenty-first-century disability portrayals in film and television have moved on to ostensibly more realistic overcoming narratives, ones that involve personal triumph over individual tragedy. (206)

The characters with actual visual disabilities in *Bird Box* seem to triumph in this apocalyptic world. Their disabilities make them more suited to this sensorially-deprived environment. However, the film does not depict their personal triumphs over the “tragedy” of disability, or their journeys to self-acceptance. Instead, the film depicts characters with disabilities helping the able-bodied characters to triumph over their temporary and behaved disabilities. Rather than teaching these able-bodied characters to accept life under these new conditions, blind people provide a solution, a “cure,” so that the able-bodied characters can return to the way they were before—to full sensory experience. These able-bodied characters are not depicted as overcoming obstacles related to the onset of disability; they are depicted as overcoming disability entirely. Thrower provides a possible reasoning for this narrative choice in her analysis of a scene in *The Miracle*: “This fantasy pokes fun at overcoming narratives that provide the heroine with an unrealistic social triumph that redeems disability” (214). Thrower’s notion that characters with disabilities must be shown to triumph over the plot’s hardships in order to “redeem disability” may ring true in *Bird Box* as well as *A Quiet Place* (2018), directed by John Krasinski. Throughout *A Quiet Place*, we are shown the dangers that Regan’s deafness may bring into a world where silence keeps people safe from creatures who hunt using their sense of hearing. However, the ending scene seemingly “redeems” deafness as a sort of “superpower,” a narrative trope that many disability scholars find troubling. Kelly mentions this role in *Bird Box* and *A Quiet Place*, stating:

The disabled characters, with their ability to adapt to a hostile world being positioned as more or less a superpower, are still othered and placed in supporting roles. *A Quiet Place* addresses this in the narrative, whereas *Bird Box* glosses over the issue. Malorie is able to “try on” blindness as the point-of-view character for the audience, but the audience doesn’t meaningfully interact with any actually disabled characters. (*The Mary Sue*)

The characters with disabilities in these films may also be “redeemed” because of the roles they play in the film’s solutions to these behaved disabilities. The able-bodied characters are “saved” by the characters who have disabilities, while the characters with disabilities remain on the sidelines in, literally, *supporting* roles.

### **Fear and Disability**

Despite the family drama narrative that is at the centre of *Bird Box*, the film is classified as a thriller. While the presence of the creatures in the film builds tension, what sets this film apart from traditional monster movies is the added fear of living with a disability. The fear of disability is a fear of the vulnerability of the body and the sense of loss that many believe follow disability. Able-bodied audiences repeatedly see negative representations of disabled people that pervade many narratives about disability. Because of these representations, able-bodied audiences learn to approach disability with fear and to associate disability with tragedy and loss. The creatures in *Bird Box* are never shown, but their influence is felt every time a character seems to struggle with their behaved disability. Overall, the fear in the film comes not so much from a fear of the creatures, but of what they cause: disability or death. Through the depiction of a widespread onset of disability, the film shows that disability can happen to anybody,

because it does happen to the survivors in the film, that is, the survivors without preexisting mental illnesses.

In the introduction to their book, *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (2010), Sally Chivers and Nichole Markotić explain that, “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” (4). The knowledge that most people will eventually develop some sort of disability in their lives could instill fear in many, especially considering that the proclivity of media to depict disability as a purely negative thing has had a major influence on the public perception of disability. Marja Evelyn Mogk also discusses the “looming” potential of disability in her introduction to *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television* (2013): “Disability is perhaps our only temporally contingent minority category: anyone can join at any time. The possibility of impairment—or additional impairment— is presumably daily and lifelong for all of us, although we often choose not to recognize it” (10). She goes on to cite Tobin Siebers’ book *Disability Theory* (2008), in which he says:

I know as a white man that I will not wake up in the morning as a black woman, but I could wake up a quadriplegic. [...] Able-bodiedness is a temporary identity at best, while being human guarantees that all other identities will eventually come into contact with some form of disability identity. (5)

Because disability is a “temporally contingent minority category,” many able-bodied people perceive and fear *disability as possibility*. *Bird Box* depicts the possibility of disability that “we often choose not to recognize.” While it may be uncomfortable for many able-bodied people to consider the possibility of gaining a disability at any point in time, the film monopolizes on this

discomfort, pushing this narrative of mass and sudden disability in order to instill fear in able-bodied audiences. In contrast to the audience responses intended by *Bird Box*, disability activists note the possibility of disability not to incite fear in able-bodied people, but to give them a reason to care about issues of disability, accessibility, and inclusion. If able-bodied people realize that they could join this minority category at any time, serious change in legislation and social attitudes towards disability may occur.

### **Simulated Disability**

In a similar vein, disability simulations in film also put able-bodied audience members in the position of asking what they would do if they had a disability. Arielle Silverman studies disability simulations and the impact that they have on both able-bodied and disabled people. In her article “Disability Simulations: What Does the Research Say?”, she explains,

Disability simulations are one of the most popular activities used to teach about disabilities. They generally involve having people perform everyday activities with a temporary disability, such as a blindfold, earplugs, or a wheelchair. Notably, they are popular with educators, but highly controversial among disability activists. (Silverman)

A disability simulation is a type of experiment that consists of a non-disabled person temporarily adopting behaviours that are meant to mimic the experience of having a disability. Silverman explains that the most common simulations include wearing a blindfold to simulate blindness, earplugs to simulate deafness, or using a wheelchair to simulate a mobility disability. Disability simulations are often used in educational environments with the intention of teaching understanding of, and acceptance towards, those who have disabilities. As we know, the

characters in *Bird Box* very directly simulate blindness by using blindfolds whenever they are outside. The audience observes their tribulations as they struggle with mobility and try to defend themselves against threats posed by other humans, threats posed by the creatures, and environmental threats, such as cliffs and rapids. However, the film simulates blindness in another way as well. On many occasions in *Bird Box*, we, the audience, are given the perspective of being blindfolded. Early in the film, after Malorie has cautioned the children about remaining blindfolded when they take to the river, the trio run outside to the boat blindfolded. The camera cuts from a shot of the group as they run, to a shot of dark fabric with specks of light shining through. Fabric has been placed over the camera's lens to simulate the characters' blindfolding. The specks of light move as Malorie, whose body we are inhabiting in this moment, runs. This shot is paired with very close sounds of heavy breathing and hard footsteps on a dirt path, which sound as if we, the audience, are the ones creating those sounds. In this moment, we are the ones who are blindfolded, running for our lives to an unknown destination. We have become participants in a two-leveled disability simulation. However, rather than simulating disability for a moment of learning, this shot promotes or instills feelings of fear and vulnerability. Shortly after, Malorie feels for and locates a guiding wire that she has left for herself, which she follows to her boat by counting her steps. In these brief moments, we are shown Malorie's "disability" and the adaptations she has made for herself.

Silverman explains that one of the issues with disability simulations is that they tend to promote fear rather than understanding. In "The Perils of Playing Blind: Problems with

Blindness Simulation and a Better Way to Teach about Blindness,” she explains the findings of various studies that she has conducted:

Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of personal experience in shaping people’s beliefs about conditions like blindness. If people are given a blindness experience marked by fear, frustration, and incompetence, they will be apt to conclude that blind people’s lives are similarly marked by fear, frustration, and incompetence. This could inspire low expectations of blind people, or inspire paternalistic actions to ease the blind person’s fear or protect the blind person from his/her own helplessness. (Silverman)

Silverman argues in favour of conversations between sighted and blind people so that sighted people can better understand the personal experiences of those who are blind, as opposed to experiencing disability simulations, which focus on the initial fear and frustration of the loss of sight. In *Bird Box*, the scenes in which the characters are blindfolded are dominated by fear, frustration, and incompetence. They are meant to point to the vulnerability of the characters. The scenes in which we, the audience, are blindfolded are meant to do the same. As far as Silverman’s alternative to simulations go, because we only briefly encounter people who are blind at the end of the film, and we do not make any meaningful connections with blind characters, the film is missing a crucial remedy to a fear of disability: knowledge of disability.

Soon after the release of *Bird Box*, a cultural phenomenon of disability simulation called “The Bird Box Challenge” became a popular viral trend. Across many social media platforms, sighted people filmed themselves attempting to complete everyday tasks while wearing a blindfold in order to mimic the necessity of performing tasks while blindfolded in *Bird Box*. Participants in the challenge misguidedly attempted to perform tasks such as walking through a city, crossing the street, cooking, and even driving a car without the use of sight. The challenge

began as a way to answer a question that arose in many of the film's audience members: "What would I do if I had to wear a blindfold for a prolonged period of time?" However, the challenge quickly developed into a source of physical comedy, for video-creators and their audiences, as videos of clumsiness, confusion, and real danger were made and shared widely. In fact, Netflix was obligated to release a statement condemning the challenge because of the danger it posed for participants: "Can't believe I have to say this, but: PLEASE DO NOT HURT YOURSELVES WITH THIS BIRD BOX CHALLENGE. We don't know how this started, and we appreciate the love, but Boy and Girl have just one wish for 2019 and it is that you not end up in the hospital due to memes" (@Netflix January 2 2019). Julia Alexander notes the irony of the film's popularity and Netflix's response to the challenge:

It's an ironic situation for Netflix to be in. Part of *Bird Box's* immense success stems from the instantaneous memes it spawned within days of being released. Without memes and a constant discussion about the movie online, *Bird Box* may not have reached the record-breaking numbers that it accomplished, including being the most-watched Netflix original within its first seven days of release. ("Netflix Warns Against Bird Box Challenge as Dangerous Trend Goes Viral")

The public's reaction to the film, expressed by the Bird Box Challenge videos and memes, garnered even more popularity for the film. In this way, people were either brought to the film through the viral depictions of ridicule and danger, or were brought to these viral depictions through the film. What started as a viral internet challenge based on curiosity shifted into a source of ridicule: towards both the participants in the challenge and the blind community who they sought to imitate.

In his article “Bird Box When You’re Blind,” Robert Kingett explains the social repercussions of the Bird Box Challenge: “They don’t learn about smart canes, or braille, or screen readers: they just stumble around in the dark for twenty minutes, and then make like they have some profound new understanding of what unique and tragic heroes we blind people are” (*Folks*). Kingett argues that without experiencing adaptive techniques, including the use of adaptive technologies, participants in the challenge cannot begin to understand the experience of a blind person while wearing a blindfold. Ria Andriani notes similar issues in her article “Bird Box Challenge: Why Blindfolding Yourself and Walking into Walls is Even More Stupid than it Sounds.” She notes the parallels between the disability simulations that are used in educational environments and the simulated blindness in the Bird Box Challenge:

After being blindfolded for a short stint, people feel it as a more debilitating condition than it really is; they underestimate the adaptive capability of blind people and end the experiment more likely to agree with statements such as: “If I were blind, I would do anything to get my sight back.” This is because those participants focus on the beginning stages of the disability, the shock of it, rather than the adaptation process that comes with lived experience. (Andriani)

Like Silverman, Andriani notes that the initial experience of disability, which may include fear or confusion, does not represent the experiences of those who have had that disability for an extended period of time and have been, over time, able to adapt to it. Andriani goes on to argue, “Living without vision is a lot more involved than it seems when you pop on a blindfold and hope for the best; it takes skills, creativity and appropriate aids and training. It’s not as hazardous as the meme makes it seem – but it’s not something that can be learned in 24 hours, either” (“Bird Box Challenge...”). Dave Brown echoes Andriani when he writes of the Bird Box Challenge:

It is insensitive. It doesn't take into account that orientation and mobility is something that blind/low vision folks work on from birth or from the onset of vision loss. It can be rife with challenges and failures. Those moments are not funny. Those moments are indeed extremely difficult emotionally. They are not fodder for comedy and clicks. (“How a Legally Blind Man Sees the ‘Bird Box Challenge’”)

The Bird Box Challenge added significantly to social harm done by the negative depictions of blindness within the film. While *Bird Box* emphasizes the loss, fear, and vulnerability of characters when they are blindfolded, the Bird Box Challenge multiplied these depictions of loss, fear, and vulnerability on a viral scale, essentially “proving” these associations to be accurate through, very temporary, first-hand experience. Countless participants in the Bird Box Challenge enacted and experienced the fears that many have about disability, and blindness in particular. Every misstep, moment of disorientation, or injury in these videos has the potential to confirm any preconceived notions about disability that members of the able-bodied majority may have.

One must wonder, if more accurate representations of disability existed in popular media, and if those representations were created and performed by people who have those disabilities, would these associations of disability with fear, tragedy, and loss still exist in the able-bodied person’s concept of disability? Thrower points to this notion in her discussion of the conflict between the mother and daughter in *The Miracle*. Thrower says,

Their misunderstanding is mirrored in common misperceptions and misrepresentations by a nondisabled society, often rejecting disabled people as they are. When film audiences are situated with an able-bodied perspective, when disabled characters are isolated rather than integrated, and when the ubiquitous overcoming narrative remains unchallenged, disability remains restrictive, unacceptable and misunderstood. (217)

It is the misunderstanding of disability that generates the fear surrounding it. *Bird Box*, which depicts disability as restrictive, dangerously and irresponsibly employs disability as the conflict that fuels both the horror narrative and family drama narrative. Disability is depicted as a reason for the characters' inability to connect with others, emotionally express themselves, or lead "normal" lives. Fear of disability is fear of the unknown. Once there are more truthful and accurate representations of disability, connection can replace fear.

## Chapter Two

### “One of Us”: Contagious Disability in Apocalyptic Narratives

Films that depict an individual’s journey through the onset of a disability have been common over the span of film history. We are shown disabled characters’ experience with hardships, the ways in which their relationships change, their struggles while learning adaptive techniques, and finally either their acceptance of, or success *despite*, their disability. As mentioned in Chapter One, these types of narratives have been labelled “overcoming narratives.” Terri Thrower defines this form of narrative as one that depicts “personal triumph over individual tragedy” (206), the tragedy being, in the case of films examined in this thesis, disability. Thrower explains that these narratives are not so distant from narratives of cure and assimilation, in which the characters overcome their disabilities altogether and go on to live “normal lives” as their “physical bodies can be restored to their ‘natural’ states” (Thrower 206). These narratives are harmful because they are “structured to separate the person with the disabled body from their disabled body in order to emphasize the human spirit” (Thrower 208). These narratives include positive endings only in cases when the character learns to be disassociated from the embodiment of disability. While the majority of mainstream depictions of disability employ overcoming narratives focused on a highly individualized and indeed isolating experience of disability, other films move beyond the individual to explore shared experiences of disability.

The narrative of individual overcoming has burgeoned into narratives of a shared experience of acquired disability, extending the overcoming narrative beyond the individual to encompass entire societies. Films about disability pandemics, namely *Blindness* (2008), directed by Fernando Meirelles, and *Perfect Sense* (2011), directed by David Mackenzie, depict worlds where sensory disabilities are contagious. In *Blindness*, an entire city, and we can assume the entire world, becomes blind because of a contagious disease. Many societal structures collapse as the pandemic leads to an apocalypse, defined in the genre of apocalyptic film as a world-changing, catastrophic event. Similarly, *Perfect Sense* depicts members of the population gradually losing four of their five senses in increments over time, beginning with smell and concluding with vision. Once deafness hits, the second to last sense that the characters lose in the film, some characters attempt to continue living daily life as usual, while the rest of the world descends into social chaos. As I argued in my first chapter, the apocalypse in *Bird Box* (2018) depicts the imposition of a behaved form of disability on the surviving population. In the film, the characters must wear blindfolds in order to survive the influence of creatures, the sight of whom causes viewers to immediately commit suicide. Disability in *Bird Box* is behaved and temporary. The film depicts an apocalypse of behaved disability. Conversely, disability in *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* results from an infectious disease that spreads throughout the population, causing the onset of actual disability. The characters in *Bird Box* are able to shed their blindness as, for example, when they remove their blindfolds while indoors. These pauses from disability, as the film suggests, allow the characters to enact the routine behaviours of life with the use of sight. In *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense*, chaos ensues as the characters are unable to complete the necessary tasks of daily life, unable to take breaks from their newly acquired

disabilities. Nonetheless, all three films depict apocalypses of disability and apocalypses *caused by* disability.

This chapter will explore fictional pandemics of disability as they are represented in film. Disability, when portrayed as an apocalyptic event in *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense*, is meant to elicit feelings of fear in members of the audience. This chapter will argue that these feelings of fear, which are often already associated with disability in media representations and daily life, perpetuate harmful misconceptions about disability. The experience of disability and the onset of disability elicits fear in many people. This fear manifests as social aversion, stigmatization, ridicule, and cruelty. Narratives that employ disability, and that depict the onset of disability, as a catastrophic event to be feared both contribute to and confirm a widespread pre-existing fear of disablement. This chapter explores what is at the heart of this fear, how this fear is represented in film, and the effects of this fear on real communities of people with disabilities. It begins with a discussion of the link between fear and contagion in both *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense*, with an emphasis on the chaos that is caused by the mass onset of disability in both films. It will then consider the fear of disability that is tied to contagion, with a brief discussion of Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) to explore notions of fear and conversion in regards to disability. The discussion leads into a brief overview of real epidemics of disability in recent history, with a focus on the fear generated by these events. A discussion of contagion and the body, specifically, of the body as vulnerable to the environment around it, provides context for my analysis of the contagion narratives in *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense*. After a discussion of the ways in which the films depict the early struggles associated with the onset of disability, I explore the ways in which these films simulate disability for the audience through editing

techniques. This chapter will conclude with public responses to the depictions of disability in *Blindness* and some reflections on the need for changes in social attitudes toward both disability and people with disabilities, beginning with more accurate representations of disability in popular media.

In *Blindness*, a contagious disease, what the film calls “white sickness,” infects the population. The first person in the film to experience this blindness describes the feeling: “It’s not like the lights are turned off, it’s like all of the lights have been turned on” (Meirelles). The man who first shows signs of infection is taken to an ophthalmologist’s office by his wife, where he learns that although he cannot see, there is nothing physically wrong with his eyes. The next day, the ophthalmologist (played by Mark Ruffalo), and those who have come in direct contact with him at his practice, become blind as well, with the important exception of his wife (played by Julianne Moore). Eventually, this blindness spreads throughout the entire population, excluding, still, the ophthalmologist’s wife. As cases start to increase, the government forcibly quarantines all those who are infected in an abandoned mental institution. The ophthalmologist and his wife are sent to live in Ward One of the institution, where they are joined by others who had visited the ophthalmologist’s office. Without any help from the outside uninfected world, and with limited supplies—the only outside support is a minimal packaged food delivery once a week—, the institutionalized characters in the film are depicted as unable to care for themselves. Whatever order exists in the institution turns to chaos when one man, self-titled “The King of Ward Three”, who possesses a gun, takes control of the weekly food supply with the help of a man who was blind prior to the pandemic, and therefore has no trouble navigating the changed world.

The only support that the people in the institution have is provided by Julianne Moore's character, who has not contracted the viral blindness and seems to be immune to it. When her husband becomes blind, she feigns blindness in order to live with him in quarantine at the institution, and she continues to hide her sightedness while living there. The film suggests that because of her sight, she is the only one who can restore order to the institution. She takes a motherly position in her ward, tirelessly cleaning up after, feeding, and guiding those in her group. After a coup on "The King of Ward Three," led by the members of Ward One, Julianne Moore's character and others in her ward escape the institution by burning it down only to find that the guard towers are now empty. When they reach the city, they discover that the rest of the population has been infected with the blindness. They now enter a post-apocalyptic world, where cars are abandoned in the middle of the street and people are either wandering aimlessly or fighting over limited food supplies. The group of former inmates of Ward One find shelter in Moore and Ruffalo's untouched, chic home, where they eat a family meal at the dinner table and help each other to shower and bathe. The next morning, the man who was patient zero begins to regain his vision. The camera takes his viewpoint to simulate the blurriness of a coffee cup as his view of it becomes clearer. The camera follows his perspective as he greets the members of the group, each face now smiling with the hope that they will soon regain their vision. Amidst the excitement, Julianne Moore's character looks out the window at the city. Looking through her perspective, the camera shows complete and bright whiteness, suggesting that she may have become blind. The camera then pans down to show the city line in the final shot of the film, leaving the possibility that the bright white image is only the sky, and that she has not lost her sight. In its themes and filmic techniques, *Blindness* invests heavily

in the value of vision and identifies visual disability as a tragedy that threatens individuals and a society with chaos and collapse.

Like *Blindness*, *Perfect Sense* depicts an apocalypse of contagious disability. In *Perfect Sense*, the narrative follows two people who live in seaside Glasgow, Michael (played by Ewan Macgregor) and Susan (played by Eva Green), as they meet and begin a romantic relationship. Michael is a chef at a restaurant located next to Susan's apartment. Susan is an epidemiologist who is studying a new virus that causes those infected to lose their sense of smell. An unseen narrator guides the film as the virus progresses and causes in turn a population-wide loss of taste, then hearing, and, at the film's conclusion, sight. In the film, the loss of a sense is preceded by an intense, symptomatic emotional response. The loss of smell is, for example, presaged with extreme sadness. The loss of taste is accompanied by feelings of terror and then ravenous hunger. The loss of hearing is preceded by anger and rage. Finally, the loss of sight is accompanied by feelings of forgiveness and love.

After the loss of each sense, the population attempts to adapt to a new way of life, evoking the remaining senses to fill in for what has been lost. When the population becomes deaf, and has experienced the feelings of anger and rage associated with the loss of this sense in the film, we are shown signs of a beginning apocalypse. The city streets are now filled with debris and people wander aimlessly, either angry or seeking help. During Michael's anger, he badly insults and berates Susan, who believes these words to be his own rather than a symptom of the virus. Susan leaves to go to her lab, where she finds everything in disarray. When Michael, after becoming deaf, phones her to apologize (texting, although more logical, would incidentally not have the same emotional weight?), his voice incites her own

symptomatic rage. Eventually, as the narrator explains, some members of the population adjust to the loss of hearing, while others believe it to be the end of the world. Michael returns to his restaurant and finds ways to communicate with his coworkers and Susan returns to her lab where she and her coworkers return everything to order, but the couple remain separated after their argument. As the population adjusts to deafness, the narrator describes a new widespread and symptomatic emotional response: “A profound appreciation of what it means to be alive. But most of all, a shared urge to reach out to one another to offer warmth, understanding, acceptance, forgiveness, love” (Mackenzie). Struck with this feeling, Michael and Susan desperately seek each other to reconcile. When they finally reach each other, they begin to lose their vision. The screen goes black and the narrator describes what we are no longer shown: the image of their embrace. Finally, the narrator says, “Because that is how life goes on. Like that” (Mackenzie). Similarly to *Blindness*, in *Perfect Sense*, the loss of a sense is depicted as causing individual and societal collapse. In effect, both films suggest that these senses are necessary for social order and function. However, while *Blindness* portrays only the difficulties that initially follow the loss of a sense, *Perfect Sense* includes as its message the notion that societies and individuals can adapt to disability, at least to some degree in the film.

### **Fear and Contagion**

Contagious disability in *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* is an expression and representation of the widely felt fear of gaining a disability. These films emphasize the vulnerability of the body, how it can be exposed to contagious disease and infection, and how it can change. The

films expose fears that the body could very suddenly be altered. As apocalyptic films, these narratives suggest that people cannot cope and cannot function with disability. We are shown the chaos, the sense of loss, and the desperation as society begins to collapse in these films. Individual fears that able-bodied people may have about loss of control, vulnerability, and oppression are magnified on the screen into apocalyptic events. If the fear is that to lose ability is to lose the orderliness of daily life, these films depict the stability of life in the world as crumbling without full sensory ability. The onset of disability is an apocalyptic event in these films. As fictional thought experiments, they take a question that an able-bodied person may have, such as “What would happen if I couldn’t see?” and extend it beyond an individual to encompass a community, reframing the question as: “What would happen if everyone in the world couldn’t see?” These extreme portrayals of disability as being tied to chaos and societal collapse feed on the fears that able-bodied audiences may have about their own bodies.

*Blindness* signals the collapse of existing ways of life early in the film. The opening shots establish the functionality of life. There are close-ups of traffic lights as they change colour; these shots are juxtaposed with shots of cars driving by in a blur. The noises of traffic intensify as sounds of tires squealing, horns honking, and sirens blaring become more frequent. These noises, paired with the alternating shots of the traffic lights and moving cars, come to a sudden halt with an aerial view of the traffic from above, the vehicles quiet and moving slowly in an orderly line. Life is hectic, but methodical. This functionality is disrupted when one car does not move forward at a green light. A close-up into the car reveals that the man has suddenly become blind. This collection of shots is an early indicator in the film that sudden blindness will unsettle the systems by which society functions.

Later in the film, at the institution, one man (played by Danny Glover) from the ophthalmologist's waiting room joins Ward One after other quarantined people are already settled in. He updates the group as to what has changed in the world outside of the institution. He describes the sense of confusion and the government's ineffective solutions. The first man to become blind in the film asks, "What about roads and traffic?" (Meirelles). For him, as we have learned in the opening shot of the film, traffic is a symbol of the functionality of life. By asking about the traffic, he seeks answers about either the chaos or order of the world outside. Danny Glover's character responds:

Chaos as usual, but then a report came of a bus crash with 23 casualties. That same day, two planes collided. No one could really say if the disease was the cause of the accidents, but people were terrified. And either the panic spread the blindness or the blindness spread the panic. Casualties multiplied, people decided to stay home, and the traffic problems were solved. (Meirelles)

To mark total societal collapse, Glover's character describes the many accidents that have occurred during the pandemic. Although he explains that it is unknown whether the accidents occurred because of the drivers' and pilots' sudden blindness, the frequency of the accidents depicted while Glover's character speaks suggests that the two are correlated. As Glover's character lists these accidents in voiceover, what appears to be real footage of these events plays in a montage on the screen. The ethical implications of the use of this footage are worth exploring. The use of real footage functions as the film intends it to: to produce real fear in the audience members. The real catastrophic events that are shown demonstrate real dangers. The film takes the fears that are attached to these real dangers and associates them with disability. These shots depict, at the very basis, a loss of control. The fear generated by these shots is a

fear of the loss of control of the body, represented through the loss of control of a vehicle.

Disability equals chaos and catastrophe in this sense. Panic and contagious blindness are linked in a cycle, one always feeding into the other. Just as the blindness spreads, so too does the panic.

Like *Blindness*, *Perfect Sense* employs a similar sort of montage, also featuring real footage, to demonstrate the chaos that comes with the mass onset of disability in the film. When Susan and her fellow researchers learn that people are beginning to lose their hearing overseas, one of her coworkers says, "I guess it's okay to panic now." The narrator continues, saying, "And that's basically what the world does" (Mackenzie). Supporting the film's thematic association of the loss of hearing with symptomatic feelings of anger and hatred, the film uses real footage of violence and destruction in a montage as the narrator describes these events in voiceover. The use of real footage to demonstrate fictional events, as in *Blindness*, is an ethically misguided choice. Both films use these scenes of horrific events and chaos to elicit feelings of panic in audiences. This footage is used in both films to depict a contagious loss of control of the body, a chaos of the body. The narrator explains how the anger has spread with the virus: "Severe Hearing Loss Syndrome spreads from Thailand, to India, to China, Russia, and beyond. Rage, anger, hatred, and then the loss of another sense. All the unaffected can do is wait" (Mackenzie). Contagion is the threat of disability and destruction.

## Fear and Disability

The concept of contagious disability marries two fears surrounding disability: the fear of becoming disabled and the fear that is at the heart of social aversion. In the case of contagious disability, contact equals infection equals disability. In this way, social aversion seems to be the only way to avoid contracting a disability, which is why the characters who become infected with the virus in both films are forcibly isolated from the rest of the population. The fears in these films are proximity to disability and the possibility of gaining a disability. These fears are elucidated in Tod Browning's 1932 horror film *Freaks*, a film with significant influence on both the cultural history of disability and the scholarly analysis of depictions of disability. At the time of the film's release, it had a negative reception. Audiences found the film to be too "grotesque" in its depiction of real people with severe physical disabilities: "Called 'ghastly' and 'repellent' by critics, *Freaks* was banned in several places—including in the United Kingdom for some 30 years" (Pfeiffer). The film eventually found popularity in later years once bans were lifted: "Though it later attained cult status, the controversial film effectively ended Browning's directorial career" (Pfeiffer). Now, audiences and critics note its more humanizing qualities, although this humanization is not present throughout the entire film. Browning, who spent time with disabled performers in a sideshow in his youth, depicted real people with disabilities, who were rarely shown on film at that time, in a more equalizing manner than was typical: "Browning, who ran away from school to join a circus where the 'freaks' performed, was concerned not to make his strange performers objects of horror or pity but to show them in [...] a matter-of-fact manner" (Malcolm). *Freaks*, through its early history up until the present day,

has served as a fascinating study of the perceptions and receptions of disability as it has been represented in film over time.

The fear of, and aversion to, disability that is a thematic element of *Freaks* is reminiscent of the fears in *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense*. *Freaks* opens with a circus leader speaking to an audience. He says,

We didn't lie to you folks. We told you that we have living, breathing monstrosities. You laughed at them, shuddered at them, and yet, for the accident of birth, you might be even as they are. They did not ask to be brought into the world, but into the world they came. Their code is one unto themselves. Offend one and you offend them all.  
(Browning)

To incite both curiosity and fear in his audience, the circus leader emphasizes the fact that disability could happen to anyone. He brings the onlookers to a pen, into which they look down and scream. He explains that they are seeing what was once a beautiful woman, the object of this spectatorship remaining unseen to the film's audience. Through flashback, we learn that this woman is Cleopatra, an able-bodied circus performer who marries, swindles, and poisons Hans, a performer who has dwarfism, in order to gain his fortune. At their wedding dinner, they are joined by the other disabled performers. One of the performers, in celebration, says, "We'll make her one of us!" (Browning) and passes around a loving cup filled with wine for everyone to share in a sort of initiation ceremony. The group begins to chant the now famous line, "We accept her. One of us!" (Browning). Cleopatra becomes disturbed at this notion and tosses the wine back at the rest of the table, calling the group "freaks". The thought that through association with her new husband Hans, she would become one of the so-called "freaks" upsets her. Here, once again, proximity equals disability. The chant "One of us. One of us" has in fact

become the most memorable element of the film, notably outliving the rest of the phrase: “We accept her.” The chant “One of us” has been referenced countless times across various media platforms—almost every time used to signify the threat of conversion. Someone who follows the norms of societal standards faces a group of “freaks” who chant the phrase as they attempt to convert this person into one of their own.

The second fear of disability, the fear of becoming disabled, is also realized later in the film. Upon learning that Cleopatra has been poisoning Hans, the disabled performers plan an attack. When the performers’ carriages are overturned in a storm while travelling to the next town, Cleopatra and her also villainous lover, Hercules, are left outside. In an image that instilled fear in the film’s early audiences— “People supposedly went screaming down the aisles” (Norden) — the disabled performers crawl through the mud carrying weapons towards Hercules, and the camera, with the intent to kill. While this is happening, the rest of the performers chase Cleopatra through the woods. The camera then cuts back to the first scene in the film, the present day, to show her fate. She has been mutilated and dressed as a bird, losing her humanity. The “freaks” have made her into “one of them.”

The notion that someone could become the very identity that they had previously despised is unique to disability. In his book, *Disability Theory* (2008), Tobin Siebers writes,

Ideology and prejudice, of course, abound in all circles of human existence, labeling some groups and individuals as inferior or less than human: people of color, women, the poor, people with different sexual orientations, and the disabled confront the intolerance of society on a daily basis. In nearly no other sphere of existence, however, do people risk waking up one morning having become the persons whom they hated the day before. [...] We require the stuff of science fiction to describe these scenarios, most often for comedic effect or paltry moralizing. But no recourse to fiction is required to

imagine an able-bodied person becoming disabled. It happens every minute of every day. (26)

The aversion to, and fear of, disability stems from the fear of gaining a disability. The notion that someone could become the identity that they had ridiculed the day before, however, does not seem to produce empathy, but rather incites fear. While the moral lesson in *Freaks* is that the ridicule and manipulation of disabled people is wrong, the very gruesome punishment of disability-through-mutilation enacted by the disabled community in the film does more harm than good. The fear of disability, of gaining a disability or of being around someone who has one, is also a fear of becoming someone who is *disabled*, of becoming part of a marginalized community. It is a fear that one will experience the ridicule and aversion that they had previously felt towards others. This cycle of fear causing fear can only be disrupted through understanding. The fact is that, “The longer we live, the more likely we are to be disabled” (Davis 8). Lennard J. Davis goes so far as to refer to able-bodied people as “temporarily-abled people” (1). Because most people will come into contact with disability in their lifetimes, whether personally or interpersonally, it is imperative that the general population learns behaviours of acceptance and inclusion.

### **Real Epidemics of Disability**

Fear and contagion have been closely linked throughout the history of epidemics and pandemics. When it comes to real epidemics of disability, such as the polio epidemic, which peaked in the US between the 1940s and 1950s, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, one

of the aspects of these viruses that is most remembered is the public fear and frenzy they generated. Polio had many of the same symptoms as the flu, however, for a portion of the population, “polio affected the brain and spinal cord, which could lead [to] meningitis and, for one out of 200, paralysis. For two to 10 of those suffering paralysis, the end result was death” (Janssen). The virus began as a mystery to the population, and to scientists: “Since little was understood about the virus that left some paralyzed and others dead, fear filled the vacuum” (Janssen). In fact, “A 1952 survey found that Americans feared only nuclear annihilation more than polio” (Janssen). The US would experience this same fear and confusion during the HIV/AIDS epidemic 30 years later.

HIV/AIDS was tied to the gay community, but the way that it was transmitted was unknown. Gwendolyn Barnhart has noted, “The AIDS epidemic brought with it a significant amount of stigma. When the AIDS epidemic first hit people were afraid, afraid of what it was, afraid of what it could possibly do to them, afraid of the unknown” (“The Stigma of HIV/AIDS”). Uncertainty bred fear, which in turn bred social aversion and stigma towards the gay community. The fear related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic “severely hindered the U.S. gay rights movement, which was still in its infancy. Among Americans who reported knowing a gay person, more than one in five (21%) said they had become less comfortable around that person since learning about AIDS” (Mccarthy). As well, “Between 43% and 44% of Americans in 1987 and 1988 believed that AIDS might be God's punishment for immoral sexual behavior” (Mccarthy). Ignorance and the unknown are tightly linked to fear and discrimination. In epidemics or pandemics, where the cause and effect of a virus can be a mystery, fear tends to

incarnate as prejudice. In the polio epidemic and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, fear of the unknown and fear of the vulnerability of the body were pushed to extremes.

As I noted in my introduction, at present, I am writing from home in self-quarantine as the world is grappling with the COVID-19 virus pandemic. While fear is warranted in a situation such as this, where lives are at risk and have been lost, the sense of public panic generated by COVID-19 has made apocalyptic images, such as empty streets, limited supplies, and a lack of government support in some countries, a reality. Empty grocery shelves and toilet paper shortages are signs of individual selfishness, where a person's fear of running out months from now takes precedence over another's immediate need. It is not surprising that Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion* has experienced a resurgence in popularity during this pandemic. It has become one of the most rented films on iTunes and has had the second highest viewership of the films in the Warner Brothers' catalogue in 2020 (Sharf). *Rolling Stone* has called the film "the single most urgent movie of the moment" (Fear). *Contagion* resonates so powerfully with viewers in 2020 because of the reality of its depiction of social collapse. Anticipating our current situation, the film depicts over-buying as people attempt to prepare for potential apocalyptic chaos, something that David Fear calls "prepare-anoia" (*Rolling Stone*). Among the reasons for the film's recent popularity, Fear suggests that the film both acts as a reflection of our current situation and prophesizes the ways in which things will get worse, and then better: "It will get bad, the movie tells us. But it will also get better. People are probably flocking to this movie to see what may be in store for us in the next month or so. That last bit of optimism it offers us couldn't have come at a better time" (*Rolling Stone*). During this particular

pandemic, fear turns into “prepare-anoia,” which looks like over-abundance, and manifests as a desire to learn what comes next through filmic representations.

In one of the Manitoba government’s daily briefings on the virus, the chief provincial public health officer, Dr. Brent Roussin, warned the public to “stock up on information, not toilet paper” (*CBC News*). Roussin views information as the answer to panic. In another briefing, Roussin observed, “Fear is contagious” (*CBC News*). This statement rings true when we consider what it is that causes a pandemic to become an apocalypse in these films. While a global contagion constitutes a pandemic, a pandemic plus public fear and frenzy equals an apocalypse. Just as a virus is contagious, so too is fear. *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* not only depict pandemics of viral disability, they also depict the fear that spreads alongside the viruses. However, unlike the viruses in the films, fear can spread beyond the screen and into the members of the audience, as these apocalyptic films intend it to. This contagious fear of disability now moves beyond the characters in the films, and situates itself in the audiences as they leave the theatre, waiting to present itself when these audience members encounter real people with real disabilities. Fear is revealed as social aversion, ignorance, stigmatization, ridicule, and cruelty. Films that use disability as the source of fear dangerously perpetuate misconceptions about disability and about the onset of disability, and, as we know, fear is contagious.

## Contagion and the Body

As contagion films, *Perfect Sense* and *Blindness* depict disability as an illness contracted through contact between human bodies. The films emphasize the vulnerable nature of our bodies when exposed to external threats, such as contagion. In her chapter “Bodily Natures,” Stacy Alaimo discusses the porous body and its connection to the human and nonhuman world around it. Alaimo writes,

By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that trans indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. (2)

Alaimo explores the notion of trans-corporeality to emphasize the ways in which the human body interacts with, consumes, inhabits, and is transformed by, the natural world. She views the human body as enmeshed in the natural world. The actions of the human body and the natural world are inextricably linked; as Alaimo argues, “‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (4). Because of this interconnectedness, Alaimo considers the cause-and-effect consequences that both the human body and the natural world have on the other: “Disability studies, in particular, may reject medical models of the enclosed body in order to trace material/social interchanges between body and place” (12). She goes on to cite Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who writes, “Disability studies reminds us that all bodies are shaped by their environments from the moment of conception. We transform constantly in response to our surroundings and register history on our bodies. The changes that occur when body encounters world are what we call disability”

(qtd. in Alaimo 12). Both *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* unintentionally, but very literally, exemplify Garland-Thomson and Alaimo's points here. While Garland-Thomson is referring to the environmental factors that cause or contribute to disability during one's lifetime, emphasizing that every person is susceptible to these changes, the films directly point out that environmental factors (such as a virus) can cause bodily changes and disability. The films note the vulnerability of the body to these environmental factors, which is the source of fear in the films for the characters and the audiences. The films attempt to reposition the subjectivity of the audience members, to make them hyper aware of their corporeality; as Alaimo argues "understanding the substance of one's self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity" (20). When people realize that they do not control their environment, and that it is in fact the other way around, they will become aware of, and fear, the vulnerability of their body to any sort of change.

In his review of *Perfect Sense*, Christopher Cokinos brings the film into conversation with Stacy Alaimo's work, stating that in the film, "The body itself is the locus of the end of the world" (411). This can also be said of *Bird Box* and *Blindness*. The apocalypse begins in the body, with the onset of disability. In *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* specifically, because there are no otherworldly antagonistic forces, such as the creatures, to threaten the population, the entirety of the dangers of the apocalypse are felt within the body. Even the virus seems to materialize from nothing in both films. It is as if it comes *from* the body of patient zero. We are never given an answer as to where the viruses originated or what had caused them. The films both feature a possible "patient zero" and then follow the progression of the virus from there. Cokinos considers the opening scene in *Perfect Sense*,

The movement is not away from but towards the corporeal. After the sentence “there is darkness and there is light”, we see Eva for the first time, walking by a dock’s water. She spits in it, a connotation not only of her anger and bitterness (of which we will see more soon enough) but also, in retrospect, that the pandemic-to-come has something to do – not-so-vaguely – with our mouths, with what we put in them and what we spit out. As with *Contagion* (Soderbergh US 2011), the notion that our bodies betray us in a globalised food economy is the film’s only extended suggestion towards an origin for the catastrophe, and it’s an imagistic connotation: immediately after she spits, there is a cut to close-ups of fish in a market. Eating is central to the film. (412-413)

Cokinos suggests that the opening scene could depict a possible chain of infection. The saliva from Susan’s body enters the water, where it becomes part of the water and everything that lives in it, including the fish being sold at the market in the following shot. These fish will be purchased and consumed by other humans, completing the cycle of infection as it begins in the body and ends up in the body. Whether or not that is the case, as the film does not identify a source of contagion, this scene demonstrates Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality, the ways in which everything is connected. Notably, fish do become important to the narrative. Michael is a chef at a restaurant who specializes in the preparation of fish. In one scene he teaches a younger cook that the way to know whether a fish is fresh is to smell it, saying “It should smell like the sea” (Mackenzie).

When the population loses the sense of smell, the film depicts the sadness that presages or accompanies the loss through a montage of shots of various people crying, where we are shown the same fish seller crying by his fish. While this is happening, Michael cooks fish for Susan, saying “fish is my thing” (Mackenzie). Shortly after eating the fish, Susan begins crying, indicating that the virus has infected her. She tells Michael not to stand too close to her and he

responds, “They say it’s not contagious” to which she says, “We don’t know. It’s just something we tell people” (Mackenzie). Susan is an epidemiologist who, throughout the film, works in her lab studying the virus and attempting to find a cure. The film does not clarify what it is that the researchers have learned or whether they have a plan moving forward. Instead, the film suggests that the virus is too mysterious and quickly moving to effectively study, portraying the predominant feeling among the researchers as confusion. While the film does not seem to imply that there is a single, widely agreed-upon scientific insight into the origins of the virus, the film’s attention to what is consumed and expelled suggests that “there is never a time in which the human can be anything but trans-corporeal” (Alaimo 12). When Susan eats the fish, viewers remember from the preceding scenes that this fish was purchased from a fish market, after being plucked from the sea that Susan had spit into earlier. The film depicts the cycle in which everything that we expel will eventually come back to us.

Both *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* are concerned with what goes into the body and what comes out of it. In *Blindness*, as previously mentioned, the film’s “patient zero” suddenly becomes blind while driving his car on a busy street. Over the next few scenes, we are shown the path of infection, as the man is taken home by an opportunistic stranger, and then taken to an ophthalmologist’s office by his wife. The next day, we learn that many of the people who were in the ophthalmologist’s office that day have also become blind. The film has taken the audience along as it depicts the chain of contact between these strangers. As well, we are shown the people who have come into contact with those who were in the office at the same time as patient zero, each of them initiating new branches of infection. In an effort to quell the spread of the virus, each of the people who have been infected at the ophthalmologist’s office,

as well as those they have come into contact with, are sent by the government to live in an abandoned mental institution.

Quickly, some markers of functionality disappear in the institution. When a young boy needs to use the washroom, he wets himself before the group can locate it together. Later, a montage depicts the main hallway in the institution as it progressively becomes dirtier over time, with every new piece of garbage that is dropped. During this montage, Julianne Moore's character is depicted cleaning up the mess that others have left behind. Because she is inexplicably immune to the contagious blindness, the film depicts the ways in which she uses her sight to help those who are "helpless," that is, according to the film, because they are unable to see. As those who cannot see begin living in squalor, some even forgoing wearing clothing, the film seems to be making very pointed, and ignorant, claims about the capabilities of those who are blind.

After the hallway montage scene we are, regrettably, shown the bathroom facilities. In the bathroom, we are shown a man showering in the sink (sitting in the sink and letting the faucet run over his head to be precise), a man who is peeing straight onto the floor (there is no toilet or urinal anywhere near him and it does not seem like he has tried to find either), and the floor, covered in wet excrement with bare feet (unwaveringly!) stepping into it without any retreat or acknowledgment, as if this person cannot feel or smell in addition to being blind. Mark Ruffalo's character addresses the newcomers to the institution and his voice can be heard over the shots of the bathroom saying, "There's another point, the toilets. They're absolutely disgusting. I'm going to need a team of people to go see what's going on in there" (Meirelles). These images of blind people living in filth are, plainly, misguided. They perpetuate harmful

notions of helplessness and ignorance. The film seems fascinated with what goes into the body and what comes out of it.

These grotesque images cause us, the audience, to be hyper-aware of our own bodies. We are shown the dirty and graphic potential of corporeality. Everything that exits the body stays. We are made aware of the body and the things it does that we do not like to think about. This attention to physicality elicits another response as well— fear. The film shows us a part of corporeality that could be frightening: what could be *wrong* with the body. *Blindness* seems to drive home these moments of vulnerability, ignorance, and dirtiness in order to demonstrate to able-bodied audiences why they should fear blindness. The film asks us to imagine a life in which our humanity is gone, in which we must live in our own filth, in which we are too helpless and ignorant to take care of ourselves, and the film uses blindness to accomplish this.

As the origins of the viruses in both films are not elucidated, the narratives are centered on the effect, the disability, rather than the cause of it. Both films lay particular emphasis on the difficulties that one may face following the onset of a disability. These images of helplessness are meant to draw on, and incite, the audience's fear of bodily change. Tobin Siebers writes,

Many disabled people do not consider their disability a flaw or personal defect-- and with good reason. They are comfortable with who they are, and they do not wish to be fixed or cured. But these same people may be ambivalent about acquiring other or additional disabilities. [...] These ambivalent attitudes spring not only from the preference for able-bodiedness, which appears as a conceptual horizon beyond which it is difficult to think, but also from the intimate and beneficial connections between human identity and embodiment. It is a good thing to feel comfortable in one's own skin, and when one does, it is not easy to imagine being different. For better or worse, disability often comes to stand for the precariousness of the human condition, for the

fact that individual human beings are susceptible to change, decline over time, and die. (4-5)

These representations of disability, shown through upsetting depictions of the onset of disability, point to anxieties of bodily precarity. We are shown the ways in which the body can suddenly be changed; something that we rely on can be instantly taken away from us. Siebers links the body to identity. A fear of disability is a fear of losing a part of one's self. As *Blindness* suggests, disability poses not only a risk of losing one's identity, but one's humanity as well. In a passage quoted in Chapter One of this thesis, Siebers explains,

The presence of disability creates a different picture of identity-- one less stable than identities associated with gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class-- and therefore presenting the opportunity to rethink how human identity works. I know as a white man that I will not wake up in the morning as a black woman, but I could wake up a quadriplegic. [...] Able-bodiedness is a temporary identity at best, while being human guarantees that all other identities will eventually come into contact with some form of disability identity. (5)

As apocalyptic films, both *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* use disability as the sudden, world-changing force. They take the individual fear of bodily vulnerability and bodily change and amplify it, so that the entire population must face the individual fears of the body at once. The films use both contagion and disability together to intensify common and already-existing fears of bodily vulnerability and precarity. In *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007), Ato Quayson writes,

The causes of impairment can never be fully anticipated or indeed prepared for. Every/body is subject to chance and contingent events. The recognition of this radical contingency produces features of a primal scene of extreme anxiety whose roots lie in barely acknowledged vertiginous fears of loss of control over the body itself. (17)

These fears of bodily change, impairment, and loss of control are fears of losing one's identity. In both films, these sudden changes leave the characters struggling to hold on to pieces of their identity and humanity.

One of the ways in which these characters attempt to maintain their personhood is through adaptations. In *Blindness*, Mark Ruffalo's character installs a guidewire to connect the various wards through the hallways. Notably, despite the presence of the guidewire, most people in the institution still seem to depend upon Julianne Moore's character, and her sight, for help. Overall, the people who are blind are shown to be helpless and unable to learn adaptations. Even Mark Ruffalo's character only makes a cane to use once he and the others have escaped from the institution and he is temporarily left alone by his wife. While the prevailing characteristic of disability in *Blindness* is helplessness, *Perfect Sense* differs significantly in that it does make a point to emphasize the many ways in which people accept and adapt to disability. Early in the film, when the world's population loses the sense of smell, Susan and Michael pass a street performer who reminds onlookers of what they have lost. The performer uses the sight and feeling of leaves, the sounds of her violin, and vocal descriptions to evoke, and simulate, the smell of a forest. In this moment, the other senses fill in the spaces left by a lost sense. Later, after the population loses the sense of taste, the narrator says, "Within a few weeks taste becomes a distant memory, and different sensations take its place. In restaurants, it's all about offering another person dinner, letting yourself be waited on, listening to the trickle of wine and the clink of glasses" (Mackenzie). The narrator goes on to utter a phrase that is repeated throughout the film: "Life goes on."

While most people in the film seem to be well-adjusted to the loss of smell and taste, the loss of hearing is depicted as a greater hurdle to surmount. During this stage of the pandemic, we begin to see government workers in hazmat suits, urging those affected to stay in their homes and to wait for food to be delivered. The signs of an apocalypse begin during this stage of the pandemic. We are shown the conventional apocalyptic image of cars abandoned in the street; the film even goes so far as to show an abandoned horse loose in the city's street.

The narrator explains,

There are two movements now. There are the people who run through the streets, grabbing all they can, people who don't believe in anything but the end of the world. Then there's the other movement... farmers going out to milk their cows... soldiers reporting for duty. Those who believe that life will go on somehow, or just don't know what else to do. (Mackenzie)

Both Michael and Susan are shown returning to work, Michael to his restaurant and Susan to her lab, where she sees a sign posted on the wall that depicts basic sign language for "Food," "Drink," "Sad," and "Happy," which may not be entirely useful in an epidemiologist's lab, but constitutes an attempt to adapt nonetheless. Interestingly, these signs are useful in regards to the film's thematic context, however. At its centre, the film is concerned with food, what we put into our bodies, and emotional reactions, how we express ourselves to the rest of the world. *Perfect Sense* depicts the ways in which these things change, for better or for worse, in light of world-changing events. At the restaurant, a chef creates dishes using bright and colourful ingredients to appeal to aesthetic values rather than taste. Michael goes to a concert where different instruments are played by performers on a stage. Audience members reach out to touch the speakers in order to feel the vibrations and Michael joins them as he puts his face

and hands against a speaker. The sound is cut in this scene except for the humming sound of the vibrations. While disability is still depicted as a loss in this film, all of these adaptations demonstrate the film's message that "life goes on."

While the characters in both films are shown to struggle with learning to adapt to their new disabilities, both films include characters who have had disabilities before the pandemic and who are well-adjusted to the changes. In *Blindness*, when Mark Ruffalo's character goes to Ward Three to exchange valuables for food, he notices that the person helping the so-called "King of Ward Three" is blind. When Ruffalo hears the faint tapping sound of a braille slate and stylus, he remarks, "You're blind. You're using a braille writer. You're a normal blind person" (Meirelles). The King of Ward Three replies, "He's not a normal blind person. He was born blind. That makes him some kind of superhero in a world like this. So you better watch out" (Meirelles). Because this man now has an advantage over those who are newly blind, and he uses this advantage with malice rather than to offer support, he inhabits a uniquely threatening position. As already noted, the film does very little to depict the ways in which those who are newly blind have learned adaptive behaviours, making ignorance and helplessness the prominent traits associated with blindness in the film. By contrast, the film suggests that the congenitally blind man has superior knowledge and ability in this pandemic of blindness. The sound of his white cane tapping across the halls becomes a menacing sound throughout the film. It implies that he has hoarded his knowledge from the others in order to manipulate and exploit them.

In *Perfect Sense*, there are glimpses of people who have had sensory disabilities prior to the pandemic. After the population has become deaf, and the world begins to show signs of an

apocalypse, one sign of normalcy is the reopening of Michael's restaurant. In his restaurant, a group of people sit at a table, all communicating in sign language. The camera focuses on each of their faces as they expressively tell stories. Michael and one of his cooks observe, noting the ways in which some lives have not been so drastically changed. The cook tries to communicate something about the kitchen to Michael using his words. After glancing back at the signing guests, he uses gestures to indicate what needs to be done in the kitchen. Through observation, Michael and his cook learn how to adapt to the absence of vocal language. There is a similar instance of learning moments later in the film. Now that three of the five senses have been lost, people begin preparing for the next potential loss: sight. In one shot, a group of people walk together in a line, each holding the shoulder of the person in front of them, all but one wearing a blindfold. The person leading the line is using a white cane and is not wearing a blindfold—we can assume that he is blind. They walk across train tracks—the reason for doing so is not clear, but it emphasizes the instability of what is to come. The narrator says, "People prepare for the worst, but hope for the best" (Mackenzie). This scene, as well as the scene in the restaurant, depict the existence of advantageous knowledge related to pre-existing disability in pandemic situations, as in *Blindness*, however these scenes promote hope rather than fear. In *Blindness*, adaptation and acceptance are not possible because of the constant vulnerability and fear of those in the institution. The only character who can teach these adaptations is one of the film's antagonists. *Perfect Sense* depicts learning rather than helplessness in its depictions of the interactions between those who are newly disabled and those who have prior experience with disability. Conversely, *Blindness* negatively portrays the early stages of

acquired disability. The film uses these depictions of helplessness and ignorance to promote the fear that it intends to generate within audience members.

### **Disability Simulations**

Both films use filmic techniques such as cut sound, a black screen, blurriness, or other visual effects to demonstrate the first stages of specific sensory disabilities to the audience, putting the film's viewer in the position of a disabled character. These moments are examples of disability simulations. As noted in Chapter One, disability simulations take many forms but involve providing people who do not have a given disability with a temporary experience of that disability, with the intent of having them experience what it is like to be disabled. Disability simulations are often used in educational settings, such as schools, in order to promote empathy towards people who have a disability. An educator could ask a student to attempt to navigate a room while blindfolded to simulate blindness, attempt to communicate with another person while wearing earplugs to simulate deafness, or attempt to travel distances while using a wheelchair to simulate a mobility disability.

Unfortunately, even well-intentioned efforts to promote empathy about disability experience can do more to instill fear than understanding. Disability simulations do not accurately demonstrate the experience of someone who has a disability and empathy is neither the only nor the dominant response that they promote. Arielle Silverman writes of a study that Michelle Nario-Redmond conducted regarding the effects of disability simulations, in which the participants attempted to read lips while wearing earplugs, to use a wheelchair, to read text

written backwards (based on a misconception about Dyslexia), and to read while wearing low-vision goggles. Nario-Redmond reported the reactions of the participants:

They were also more likely to agree with statements like “I am grateful that I don’t have such a burden” (of disability), and “I dread the thought that I could someday end up like them” (disabled people). In the second study, the students also reported feeling less comfortable interacting with disabled people in the future. Thus, the simulations not only made people feel negatively about disability but could also hurt their future interpersonal interactions. (qtd. in Silverman “Disability Simulations”)

Harmful misconceptions about disability increase feelings of fear surrounding it. Both *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* employ disability simulations, which promote feelings of fear and confusion in the audience.

*Blindness* uses bright white shots to simulate the “white blindness” of the characters. When the first man to become blind is reunited with his wife in the institution, they communicate while the screen is completely white, showing us what they see. As they attempt to find each other, her hand is shown reaching out from behind the camera into a sea of white moving particles. It is as if her hand belongs to us, and we are the ones reaching out to find a loved one who we are unable to see. The film puts us in her place, so that we can experience the emotions that she is feeling in this moment. Here, we become one of the infected. Later, there is a scene in the dining hall as people slowly move around a table and find their way out of the room. As each person passes, they fade away as the shot changes to the next person leaving. One woman passes the table and it disappears behind her as she walks past it. When a young boy gets up to leave and approaches where the table had previously been, it reappears suddenly as he walks into it, creating a loud thud. This scene is meant to demonstrate what

navigation must be like for people who cannot see, highlighting experiences of confusion and vulnerability. A scene such as this can have negative consequences, as Silverman argues: “If not done carefully, blindness simulations can give a distorted impression of blindness, reinforcing misconceptions about the capacities of blind people. These problems can occur if the simulation is focused on the first moments of blindness rather than everyday life after adjustment to blindness” (“The Perils of Playing Blind”). It is of no consequence that *Blindness* does little to show the learned behaviours and adaptations that come after prolonged experience of blindness. The film’s choice to focus on, and simulate, the initial frustrations that come with disability enhances these misconceptions of blindness as a state of vulnerability to be feared.

In *Perfect Sense*, when Michael realizes that he cannot hear, the sound is cut to mimic what he is experiencing. While this filmic technique functions to demonstrate what Michael is experiencing without having to explicitly state it, it also brings the audience into feeling his moment of panic alongside him. Michael is shown sitting on the floor, visibly distressed as intense violins play non-diegetically in the background. As soon as he opens his mouth to speak, all sound is cut. He yells at the top of his lungs and still, silence. These yells change from an attempt to create sound to screams of horror at his realization of what has occurred. We follow Michael in silence as he leaves his home to find government workers in hazmat suits holding out written instructions about food distribution. When he tries to break past them, they push him back into his home. In this moment, he becomes both a victim and a threat to the rest of the community. The silence follows Michael into the next few scenes as a constant presence. When Susan becomes deaf, the silence follows her as well. These moments connect us with the

bodies of the characters, so that we can feel as though we are experiencing what they are feeling. Unlike *Blindness*, however, *Perfect Sense* pairs these disability simulations with depictions of learned adaptations. When Michael becomes deaf, and the sound is cut, he goes to a concert, where he learns to experience music in another way. When Susan is trying to communicate with her sister, and the sound is cut, they have a conversation by writing in a notebook. These simulations move beyond fear to moments of learning.

The final simulation of disability in the film occurs at the very end. After desperately searching, Michael and Susan find each other to apologize. Their vision becomes blurry as they approach one another, depicted through the camera's lens being out of focus. The camera then depicts them walking towards each other from opposite sides of the frame, reaching out without making eye contact, signaling that they have become blind. As they embrace, the image is cut and the screen turns black. The narrator says,

It's dark now, but they feel each other's breath and they know all they need to know. They kiss and they feel each other's tears on their cheeks. And if there had been anybody left to see them, then they would look like normal lovers caressing each other's faces, bodies close together, eyes closed, oblivious to the world around them. Because that is how life goes on. Like that. (Mackenzie)

The film ends by effectively making the audience blind as well. We are shown only a black screen as the narrator provides what is essentially an audio description of the events that are occurring beyond what we may see. Although we hear the narrator, we no longer hear the characters within the film because their deafness is our deafness. Because of the film's repeated use of disability simulation, it seems as if the film cannot go on after the onset of blindness, being that film is an audio/visual medium and the film simulates both the loss of

sound and vision for us. The choice to end the film with the onset of blindness feels like a sort of death sentence. The film's "termination" leaves the audience wondering what will happen next. Will the population adapt just as those who were deaf and blind prior to the pandemic have? Will the sense of touch be the last sense that they lose, and if that is the case, what then? These unanswered questions evoke feelings of confusion and fear. However, the narrator's final message that "life goes on" is meant to provide a sense of hope.

An obvious issue with disability simulations is that they may be created by able-bodied people who do not have experience with that particular disability. This is an issue because, as Arielle Silverman and Mark Riccobono have argued, these simulations actively teach misconceptions. Riccobono writes,

Real understanding has come from interacting with and knowing people who live that experience daily and who can share all of the social bias they face. In other words, I think we need to be completely honest that any simulation activity does not impact some of the most important understandings we want the sighted to know in their heart and their head—that blindness is not the characteristic that defines us, that the misunderstandings and low expectations about blindness are our biggest obstacle, that those misunderstandings create artificial barriers that prevent us from fully participating, and those false limitations build into something that holds us back. ("Walking a Mile...")

The answer to generating understanding about disability is observing and learning from those who have one. Riccobono argues,

Understanding blindness by one who is sighted is better communicated through observation than personal experience. Ask a newly blindfolded person to travel the streets so she comes to understand the value of traffic sounds, and her predominant emotion will be fear. Without understanding how blind people travel and having the confidence that she can do so safely, the experiment will scare rather than inform. [...] The answer is for us to do the traveling and for the person we are trying to influence to observe us. ("Walking a Mile...")

Where simulations garner fear, observation garners understanding. This is one of the reasons why *Blindness* fails to depict disability accurately. In an article about the film for *The Guardian*, Dennis Seguin writes,

Fernando Meirelles is not blind. But when he closes his eyes he is. Lately, the Brazilian filmmaker has spent a lot of time with his eyes closed, thinking about how the world would work if every one of us was blind. When his eyes are open, he spends a good deal of time watching blind people, or at least actors pretending to be blind. (“Blind Faith”)

The film itself is distanced from lived experience, and misguided in its depictions, in part because Meirelles has—at least reportedly— spent time with his eyes closed, believing that this act alone will give him the experience of being blind.

Understandably, these assumptions about blindness, and the depictions on screen that they created, worried organizations such as The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the United States, which led protests at theatre screenings during the film’s run. Ben Nuckols writes of the protests prompted by *Blindness*: “The movie reinforces inaccurate stereotypes, including that the blind cannot care for themselves and are perpetually disoriented” (“Blind Activists”). He goes on to cite Christopher Danielsen, a spokesman for the NFB, who explains, “We face a 70 percent unemployment rate and other social problems because people don't think we can do anything, and this movie is not going to help—at all” (“Blind Activists”). Meirelles responded to the protests, arguing that “They totally missed the point. It's not a film about blind people; it's about human nature” (qtd. in Gilbey). Meirelles explained: “The blindness is a metaphor for our inability to see ourselves and each other. The characters in the film have perfect eyes. They

can see. They just don't. That's us" (qtd. in Gilbey). The fact that Meirelles defends his depiction of blindness as ignorance by arguing that blindness is only a metaphor for ignorance indicates that he has entirely missed the point of the protests— blindness should not equal ignorance, literally or metaphorically. Barbara Pierce argues against Meirelles' defense, writing that the protesters have not misunderstood the film, but are instead "blind people objecting to being depicted as an allegory for everything that is depraved and base in human nature" ("NFB Protests"). Rene Harrell encapsulates the issues with both *Blindness* (the novel and the film) and Meirelles' defense of it:

You cannot write about the other, using them as an object necessary to transmit your themes successfully to your readers, and then tell them they do not have a right to view your work differently from the way you do. It doesn't mean they don't get it or that they are missing the point. It is precisely by understanding your point exactly and getting it fully that they are able to deconstruct the validity of the author's literary construct, because the reality is that, if blindness were not viewed the way it is by sighted society, the metaphor of physical blindness as it relates to decivilization in this novel would fail. It would not be a deep-seated psychological thriller making sighted people aware of the animalistic nature within us all; it would be something else. If the emotional and psychological response to blindness is necessary to make this novel successful at conveying its point, then the blind have a right to enter that conversation and respond to the view of themselves that is portrayed. ("Are Protestors...")

A guiding value shared by disability activists and disability studies scholars is that people with disabilities should not be left out of depictions of, or discussions about, disability. When a cultural object has the potential to reach and influence many people, its creator has a responsibility to the people who could be negatively affected by it.

Disability has been used as a narrative device time and time again. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, quoted above, have explored disability's narrative value and have noted, among other reasons for its popularity, this reason:

The politics of this recourse to disability as a device of narrative characterization demonstrates the importance of disability to storytelling itself. Literary narratives support our appetites for the exotic by posing disability as an "alien" terrain that promises the revelation of a previously uncomprehended experience. (280)

Disability is an experience that seems alien to many people, even to those who create depictions of disability. *Blindness* and *Perfect Sense* select disability as the reason for the apocalypses their narratives present because of disability's perceived mystery. Apocalyptic narratives portray humanity and the world as transformed through global crises in order to present a new way of life, and these films view disability as the catalyst for these changes. The choice to use the onset of disability as the apocalyptic crisis presents an obvious issue, however. When disability is depicted as a world-ending crisis, fear and aversion to disability will only follow. The remedy to fear is knowledge and understanding. Through more accurate depictions of disabilities and the people who have them, through depictions of adaptations and daily life rather than a focus on the early stages of disability, and through learning from people who have disabilities, facts can replace fear.

## Conclusion

### Societies of Disability

The representation of disability in creative works carries a great responsibility. Depictions of disability that exclude people with disabilities from having creative input and depictions that promote fear, pity, ridicule, and misinformation, only create greater divides between disabled and non-disabled people. Learning about disability from people who have a disability can ameliorate the damage done by problematic representations of disability produced by ableist creators. Given that many people will only encounter disability in a significant way through media representations, and that assumptions about disability are shaped by these representations, media representations owe it to disability communities to be accurate. Far too often, representations of disability communities lie in the hands of people who are not members of those communities and who have not meaningfully interacted with disability communities. In contemporary Western media, we are consistently shown depictions of disability written by, and performed by, people who do not have a disability and/or who lack a well-developed understanding of disability. Consumers of these representations are likely to develop assumptions about disability that inaccurately reflect the experiences of those with an actual disability. How are able-bodied people to understand disability, when they have been learning about it their whole lives from other able-bodied people who do not understand it themselves?

As I noted in my discussions of *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, and *Perfect Sense*, these three filmic explorations of the mass onset of disability do not, alas, promote mass understanding or mass acceptance. The attention to the initial struggle of the onset of disability— to feelings of confusion, danger, vulnerability and to fear— paid by each of these films presents disability as something to gawk at, pity, and fear rather than as something to engage with. Disability is a plot device rather than a way of living or an identity. In each of these films, disability is the device that is meant to evoke fear in audiences, raising the stakes of danger in these apocalyptic narratives. Disability is the apocalyptic event. These films, which treat the onset of disability as a chaotic, apocalyptic event, each only briefly portray minor characters who have had that disability prior to the apocalypse, a lost opportunity for the films to meaningfully engage with how individuals can and do adapt to disability. In these films, the characters who have had prior experience with disability are more well-adjusted to these new societies of disability. In *Bird Box*, a school for the blind becomes a fortified bunker, where the sighted (previously blindfolded) characters are protected from the creatures and are free to see again. Because blind people in *Bird Box* are unaffected by the creatures who kill through being seen, their limited role in the film is to support the sighted characters. *Blindness* is the only film of the three in which a character with a disability that pre-exists the apocalyptic chaos interacts with other characters to a greater extent. The blind man, who assists the film's antagonist and is himself antagonistic, embodies the threat of advantageous knowledge in a world where the population must grapple with their new circumstances. *Perfect Sense* takes a different approach in its depictions of people who have had a sensory disability prior to the contagion of disability. In brief glimpses, the film depicts characters who are newly disabled learning from

people who have had that disability for an extended period of time. Although these disabled characters do not meaningfully interact with the able-bodied characters in the film, these moments of learning present a positive alternative to the fear and confusion otherwise associated with the onset of disability in the film.

The attention to learning and adaptation in representations of disability can help to correct the cultural impact of narratives that only focus on the initial fear that may come with the onset of disability. However, sometimes narratives that focus on adaptation rather than fear can nonetheless mishandle these depictions. The television show *See* (2019), created by Steven Knight, and H.G. Wells' story "The Country of the Blind," first published in 1904 and then re-published with significant revisions in 1939, both depict societies generations after viruses have caused their populations to become blind. In both texts, blindness is hereditary. In *See*, every generation of children after the initial virus that caused widespread blindness has been born blind, while "The Country of the Blind" describes a gradual loss of sight over generations following the virus. Over time, in both narratives, the societies have adapted to blindness, and sight has been generally forgotten. Both texts make a point to note that the societies of blindness they depict are well-adjusted and the people who live in them seem to have very little difficulty living meaningful and independent lives without sight. However, to contrast the well-functioning societies of blindness, both texts introduce sighted characters into these societies to simultaneously function as the audience-surrogate and promote debates as to whether societies of blind people are really missing anything at all.

Apple TV's big-budget television show *See* is set in a post-apocalyptic world, where the entire human population is blind. The show opens with a statement: "Following the outbreak of

a deadly virus in the twenty-first century, the Earth's human population was reduced to less than two million. The humans who survived all emerged blind. Now, centuries later, the idea of vision exists only as a myth. To even speak of it is considered heresy" (Knight). *See* takes place in a dystopian future America, generations after the mass onset of blindness. Blindness is now inherited, as are the blindness skills that have developed over time. Aside from its many faults, a possible redeeming quality of the show is its attention to adaptability. It is almost as if the show directed all of its attention to the ways in which humans can adapt to bodily changes over time, paying little attention to narrative flow or plot. The adaptive methods demonstrated by *See* include some learned behaviours and some inherited bodily adaptations. These learned and inherited adaptations include: a strengthened sense of smell that allows the characters to identify locations and people; a strengthened sense of hearing; the use of echolocation; the use of guide dogs; a written communication system that consists of knots tied into rope; and an exaggerated evolutionary trait of intuitiveness, which the show calls "presage."

These adaptations feature in the show's depiction of a capable blind society. The narrative of *See* is centred on a warrior tribe, led by a man named Baba Voss (played by Jason Momoa), and the show includes a battle scene early in the first episode to establish both the adaptive techniques of the opposing groups of blind people, as well as the strengths and capabilities of the characters. The depiction of blind characters as highly capable is undermined, however, when Jerlamarel, a man who was born with sight, enters the narrative. He is possibly the only person in the world with sight, and he believes that sight is a gift that he must share by having children in various tribes in order to begin "a new world." The various tribes in the show function as hunter/gatherer societies, living in tents and huts made from natural materials.

Little remains from the twenty-first century, and all that does remain is in ruins. Although *See* takes place centuries in the future, it seems as if the show is actually set in a pre-modern past.

Writing about *See* for the National Federation of the Blind, Chris Danielsen notes:

We wondered why the blind people of this new world, who are clearly competent and capable of organization and concerted action, are unable to build a technologically advanced civilization full of accessible gadgets. We also wondered about the purpose of introducing sighted characters into the story, whom some of the blind characters seem to view with reverence. The queen's hostility toward the sighted seems to be motivated by a belief that their godlike, or demonic, powers are a threat to her. ("Treading Carefully with New Blindness Drama, *See*")

Aspects of society that seem as if they belong in the distant past have returned: a ruthless queen who believes she was anointed by god, a legal slave trade, and government-mandated witch hunts, which seek to find and kill those who can see or who believe sight to be something other than a myth.

While the time of blindness is reminiscent of the so-called "dark" ages, Jerlamarel names his community of the sighted, significantly, "The House of Enlightenment." Despite Jerlamarel's position as one of the show's antagonists, where his desire for a new, better world of the sighted is depicted negatively, his House of Enlightenment proves to be a more developed way of living than the alternative. The House of Enlightenment, a home for sighted people built in what was formerly a jail facility, has electricity, hot water, and heat through generators, sewn clothing with buttons, cutlery, an art collection, a library, and showers with soap. Although *See* is making a progressive message about the capabilities of blind people by showing the ways in which they can battle, forage, hunt and navigate without issue, this message is complicated by the depiction of a society of the sighted, which by contrast, causes

the society of the blind to seem like it has regressed. The ways of life that the societies of the blind have adopted raise questions as to why and when all twenty-first-century societal structures were abandoned in favour of this pre-modern way of life. Why, for example, did people forego the use and maintenance of indoor plumbing when they became blind (a question that is, unfortunately, reminiscent of the bathroom scene in *Blindness*)?

In H.G. Wells' story "The Country of the Blind," the narrative takes place after generations of people who reside in a remote valley have lived with, and adapted to, blindness. The story opens with a description of past events that led to the widespread blindness of the valley population: "A strange disease had come upon them, and had made all the children born to them there—and indeed several older children also— blind. So that the whole valley seemed likely to become a valley of blind men" (Wells 2). The generations that follow are blind and have developed many adaptive behaviours: "The first generation had become purblind so gradually that they scarcely noted their loss. They guided the sightless youngsters who followed them hither and thither until they knew the whole valley marvelously, and when at last sight died out altogether among them the race lived on" (3). We are given the impression that blindness has not been a great loss, and that life goes on. Evolutionary adaptation has given the people of the Country of the Blind a heightened sense of smell and hearing. The community has developed built and cultural adaptations over time as well, including numbered walking paths throughout the village and a diurnal schedule in which people work in the cool of night and sleep in the warmth of day. Sight has been forgotten, and as with *See*, the mere mention of sight is considered heresy.

When Nunez, a sighted mountain explorer, is separated from his group and happens upon the Country of the Blind, the village encounters sight. When he discovers the mass blindness, Nunez repeats a proverb to himself: "In the Country of the Blind the One-Eyed Man is King" (8). Nunez believes that he holds a position of superiority over the village because of his sight, like Jerlamarel in *See*. However, sight is not depicted as advantageous in this story. When Nunez has upset the village with his references to sight, and those he offended begin chasing him, his sight does not protect him: "He was panic-stricken. He ran furiously to and fro, dodging when there was no need to dodge, and in his anxiety to see on every side of him at once, stumbling" (17). Nunez's sight betrays him in this moment. He dodges when there is nothing near him to dodge and stumbles because of his desire to see everything at once. To his dismay, he both sees not enough and too much.

When Nunez falls in love with a woman named Medina-Saroté from the village, he is unable to marry her because the village considers his references to sight a marker of insanity. The village doctor believes that Nunez's eyes are diseased and are affecting his brain. The doctor suggests that the only way Nunez's sanity can be secured is by the surgical removal of his eyes. Medina-Saroté's father agrees and insists that Nunez must undergo the operation before marrying his daughter. For his love of Medina-Saroté, Nunez agrees, initially, to the surgery. However, after he has had time to weigh his options, he has a change of heart and escapes the village forever. In the Country of the Blind, sight is the outlier. It is, for the blind majority, something that must be corrected and cured. The removal of the eyes is like an act of conversion, reminiscent of the disability conversion scene in *Freaks*. Although Nunez considers the surgery, it is his fear of what will be lost that convinces him to leave the village forever, and

keep his sight. Jerlamarel in *See*, a parallel character to Nunez, also believes that he is superior to the blind population because he can see. At the end of the first season of *See*, Jerlamarel fights Baba Voss in a battle of blindness versus sight. When Baba Voss gains the advantage, he opts to blind Jerlamarel rather than kill him. This conversion to blindness is Jerlamarel's punishment for his hubris. The presence of sighted characters in both texts, characters who are faced with the potential of blindness, seems to point to a moral lesson. While both texts argue that sightedness is not an advantage over blindness, they communicate this message in complicated ways.

Wells rewrote the ending of "The Country of the Blind" in 1939, 35 years after its initial publication. In the original ending, Nunez escapes the Country of the Blind, content with his decision to keep his eyes. When Wells rewrote the ending of the story, he began where the previous version of the story had left off. When Nunez climbs back up the mountain, rather than escaping the village, he gazes around, believing these sights to be his last before the surgical removal of his eyes. He notices signs of a potential avalanche of rocks that could destroy the village. He quickly returns to the village to warn everyone, but no one believes him. They consider his references to *seeing* the avalanche as proof of his madness. He manages to convince Medina-Saroté to escape with him to the mountains, where the two of them are safe from the destruction that Nunez can see occur below. The entire valley of the blind is destroyed, killing everyone who lives in it. Nunez and Medina-Saroté return to his hometown, where they have children who are born with sight. The wildly opposing conclusions in the two editions of the story, one in which the community of blind people survive and one in which

everyone from the community but one dies, raise important questions as to the depiction and perception of blindness.

It is possible that Wells' interest in eugenics may provide some insight. Wells became more passionate about eugenics in the 1930s, publishing several times on the subject in that decade. In 1932, Wells wrote in *The Work, Wealth, and Happiness of Mankind*, commenting in relation to the "sterilization and segregation of mental defectives," that "there is every reason for the temporary or permanent sterilization of those who have contracted hereditary diseases" (qtd. in Partington 76). However, in 1939, the same year in which Wells rewrote "The Country of the Blind," he attempted to distance his belief in eugenics from the Nazis by writing that no one should be subject to mutilation or sterilization without their consent (Partington). Wells' revised ending, in which the population of the Country of the Blind dies, and Medina-Saroté's blindness is not genetically passed onto her children, seems to suggest a form of negative eugenics employed in the story's depiction of the heritable disease of blindness. In eugenics studies, the term "negative eugenics" refers to the practice of preventing "undesirable" traits from being passed on through genetics (Partington). Blindness has almost been entirely wiped out of the story, with the exemption of Medina-Saroté, who was remarkable in her community for how she differed from others, having for example physical traits associated with eyes, such as eyelashes. This interpretation suggests that the community, and possibly the world, has been cleansed of this form of genetic blindness, this cleansing a result of the blind community's failure to listen to and benefit from a sighted man's visually-acquired knowledge. However, this reading of the story is complicated by the fact that Wells gives Medina-Saroté the last word. At the end of the revised story, when Nunez and Medina-

Saroté have settled in his sighted hometown, a woman asks Medina-Saroté if she will consider consulting an oculist about undergoing surgery to gain vision. Medina-Saroté responds, “I have never wanted to *see*” (30). The woman argues, “But the *beauty!*” to which Medina-Saroté says, “It may be beautiful, [...] but it must be very terrible to *see*” (30). Medina-Saroté has transitioned from living in a community of blind people, where she was a member of the majority, to living in a community of the sighted, where for the first time in her life, blindness is a minority experience and is treated as something debilitating to be fixed through medical intervention.

*See* and both versions of “The Country of the Blind,” not unlike *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, and *Perfect Sense*, explore the notion of a minority of people becoming the majority. In these works, the mass onset of disability, whether inherited or adopted, creates a disabled majority of people. Because the population must adjust to this change, *See*, “The Country of the Blind,” and *Perfect Sense* (to an extent) depict the ways in which populations adapt behaviours and cultural practices to accommodate the needs and preferences of the majority of people. Notions of norms, majorities, and minorities have contributed to the mistreatment of disabled people. Lennard J. Davis explains the way in which the idea of “the norm” contributes to the notion of “*disability*”: “An important consequence of the idea of the norm is that it divides the total population into standard and nonstandard subpopulations” (“Constructing Normalcy” 30). A statistical norm, such as the statistical majority of able-bodied populations, suggests that there are then *abnormal* populations, such as minority disabled populations, which suggests that there is something inherently wrong with these “abnormal” bodies. Davis explains that: “a symbiotic relationship exists between statistical science and eugenic concerns. Both bring into

society the concept of a norm, particularly a normal body, and thus in effect create the concept of the disabled body” (30). The very notion of *disability* is based on the concept of what a human should look like and be able to do according to statistical standards. So, when these narratives reverse majorities and minorities, swapping the minority identity of disability with the majority identity of non-disability, able-bodied people now become the outlier— the exception and minority.

Nunez and Jerlamarel are the minorities in their narratives because of their sight. Jerlamarel even goes so far as to say: “In the normal order of things the blind are the aberration, not us” (Knight). In *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (2008), a book that explores aesthetics of disability across a range of art forms, Michael Davidson refers to a commercial by Electricite de France called “Diversité.” In this commercial, the majority of the population have a disability, which means that the built and social environment has been designed to be accessible only for the majority disabled population. In effect, able-bodied people struggle to navigate this world. In the commercial, we are shown a woman struggling to walk among people who are using wheelchairs, a hearing woman who attempts to communicate with a man who is using sign language, and a sighted man who looks for a book at the library to find that it is only offered in braille. This commercial is making a pointed message about accessibility by giving the able-bodied person the perspective of a disabled person. Davidson notes that this commercial is an example of defamiliarization: “The formalists designate defamiliarization as the ethos of the aesthetic, a ‘making strange’ that recuperates a world too familiar to notice” (5). For able-bodied people, who live in a world that has been adapted to their needs, a world that is too familiar to notice, barriers to accessibility

can seem unfamiliar, and are therefore unacknowledged and unaddressed. *See* and “The Country of the Blind” put central characters, characters who are audience surrogates, in positions where their able-bodiedness is now “made strange” in worlds where they are no longer part of the majority or the norm.

*See* and “The Country of the Blind” both include moments in which the able-bodied, and now minority, characters struggle to navigate environments that were made for and by people with a visual disability. Davis explains that, “In an ableist society, the ‘normal’ people have constructed the world physically and cognitively to reward those with like abilities and handicap those with unlike abilities” (“Introduction” 10). Like Davis, many disability theorists argue that disability is not physical, but socially constructed. Tobin Siebers argues that, “While seen historically as a matter for medical intervention, disability has been described more recently in disability studies as a minority identity that must be addressed not as personal misfortune or individual defect but as the product of a disabling social and built environment” (3). When built and social environments better reflect the populations living within them, people with disabilities will have a greater advantage. As mentioned earlier, both *See* and “The Country of the Blind” provide examples of the many ways in which the social and built environments have changed to accommodate the majority blind population. Both texts also create moments to demonstrate the ways that these built environments allow the blind population to have an edge over the sighted characters. When Nunez first meets the people in the Country of the Blind, he is taken into a dark room, where he cannot see. He trips, hitting several people on his way to the floor. Nunez exclaims: “I fell down. [...] I couldn’t see in this pitchy darkness. Who could?” (10). Nunez experiences an inconvenience that no one else in the community

experiences. The darkness affects only him. In *See*, during Baba Voss' battle with Jerlamarel, Voss' son cuts the power so that his father will have the advantage in the darkness, allowing him to overpower Jerlamarel. Because the environments are more suited to those who have developed blindness skills, these moments demonstrate the ways in which environments can both enable and disable.

Communities of disability, whose environment reflects the needs of those in it, effectively demonstrate the fact that disability is socially constructed. Notably, these kinds of communities are not exclusive to the realm of fiction. The island of Martha's Vineyard, on the eastern coast of the United States, was once a community comprised of a uniquely large Deaf population. In the early eighteenth century, Deaf emigrants from Kent County, England moved to the island carrying a hereditary deafness gene, and by the nineteenth century, this hereditary deafness was shared by a significant number of the island's population. By the mid-nineteenth century, one in every 25 people in Chilmark, one of the island's towns, was born deaf (Romm). The original immigrants from Kent had brought with them their regional sign language. Cari Romm notes that, "while one in 25 people were deaf, something closer to 25 in 25 knew how to sign" ("The Life and Death of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language"). Nora Ellen Groce explains that, "Sign language was a necessary part of daily life for both the deaf and those who could hear. Many hearing islanders learned sign language in childhood and used it regularly throughout their lives to communicate with deaf individuals and sometimes with one another" ("Martha's Vineyard"). Romm states, "The language didn't belong to the deaf community; it belonged to the town" ("The Life and Death..."). What the Deaf community

currently recognizes as its greatest obstacle, the language barrier, did not exist in Martha's Vineyard. Groce explains:

The island's community experienced the positive effects of this shared skill as well:

With no communication barrier, deaf individuals were fully integrated into island life, making livings as fishermen and farmers and participating in social, civic, and religious activities. There was no "deaf" society—no activities exclusive to the deaf. Indeed, to have had a separate social network, deaf islanders would have had to exclude spouses, family, and neighbours. ("Martha's Vineyard")

A community without social or environmental barriers for minority groups will thrive. Writing of the importance of teaching American Sign Language to both Deaf and hearing individuals, Janet Coleman and Elizabeth Wolf explain in *Raising Expectations: Advanced Sign Language Vocabulary* that, "By raising vocabulary levels, expectations are raised. When expectations are raised, opportunities for growth are enabled, and new potentials are realized" (x). As demonstrated in Martha's Vineyard, communities without barriers and without low expectations for members with disabilities will provide equal opportunities for the entire population.

As the history of Martha's Vineyard demonstrates, the scenarios depicted in *See* and "The Country of the Blind" do not belong entirely to speculative fiction. The historical precedent of Martha's Vineyard signals that it is reasonable to envision a community of disability that exists without fear, confusion, or vulnerability. Notably, the idea of a community of disability seems to incite fear in able-bodied people. Davis explains:

In 1883, the same year that the term "eugenics" was coined by Galton, [Alexander Graham] Bell delivered his eugenicist speech *Memoir upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, warning of the "tendency among deaf-mutes to select deaf-

deaf as their partners in marriage” (1969, 19) with the dire consequence that a race of deaf people might be created. This echoing of Dr. Frankenstein’s fear that his monster might mate and produce a race of monsters emphasizes the terror with which the “normal” beholds the differently abled (“Constructing Normalcy” 32)

Bell’s fear of mass disability could be the very same fear explored in *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, and *Perfect Sense*. Bell, like these films, feared a race of the other outnumbering “the norm.” Bell did visit Martha’s Vineyard in the 1870s to conduct genealogical research in order to isolate the cause of the island’s genetic deafness (Romm). Incidentally, Bell spent his time there seeking the cause of deafness, presumably in an attempt to cure it or prevent its spreading, rather than noticing the functionality of the Deaf community around him.

The fear of disability and the fear of becoming disabled frame many perspectives on disability. A reason for the fear of disability, as Arielle Silverman suggests, is the impact bias: our tendency to overestimate the emotional impact that an event will have on us. Silverman states:

[...] when we think about other people's experiences, we tend to use our own experience as a reference point. When sighted people think about blindness and try to imagine how blind people feel or perform everyday activities, to what extent do they try to put themselves in the shoes of blind people? Do they imagine being blind, imagine how they would feel, even close their eyes and imagine doing something in the dark in order to make a judgment about what blindness is like? Because of the impact bias, I predicted that sighted people would overestimate how bad blindness is because they tend to think about the beginning stages and how scary it is when you first close your eyes and try to do something without blindness skills. (“The Impact of Disability Simulations”)

If one considers only the initial fear and confusion that can follow the onset of a disability rather than considering the confidence in learned adaptive behaviours that will come later, disability will be something to be feared. The impact bias can answer some questions about the differing messages between, on the one side, narratives like *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, and *Perfect Sense*, where disability is suddenly thrust upon the population, and, on the other side, narratives like *See* and “The Country of the Blind,” where communities have adapted to disability over time. It is notable that *See* and “The Country of the Blind” do little to capitalize on the fear of disability in their narratives. Disability is presented as a way of life, rather than as a hindrance, let alone as a catastrophic event. Because disability is the reason for the apocalypses in *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, and *Perfect Sense*, and the characters struggle so much to adjust to it, disability is feared. *See* and “The Country of the Blind,” although not without issues of their own, do not encourage their audiences to fear disability, but rather encourage audiences to experience the ways in which disability can mean independence, confidence, and capability.

It should not come as a surprise that each of the five narratives I have focused on in this thesis, *Bird Box*, *Blindness*, *Perfect Sense*, *See*, and “The Country of the Blind,” were not written by people with disabilities. Similarly unsurprising is the fact that, in the cases of the films and television show, people with disabilities were not cast in major roles. As noted above, representations of disability are very common in North American film and television, but it is rare that people with disabilities are involved in these representations. It is becoming common practice for films or television shows that depict disabled characters, played by able-bodied actors, to hire disability consultants. However, these consultants are not typically involved in

decision-making nor are they empowered to ensure that representations are accurate or fair. More often, the role of these consultants is to teach able-bodied actors how to “play disabled.” In an interview, Sandra Bullock spoke of her experience with a disability consultant on the set of *Bird Box*: “There’s a blind specialist and he’s blind and I asked him, ‘What is it that the community wants from this film?’ Because to me it’s very important that they feel represented. He said ‘I want people to see what we are capable of, and it’s a lot more than has been shown on the screen’” (“Sandra Bullock On Going To Her Blind Side For *Bird Box*”). Unfortunately, this consultant’s goal was not met.

It is imperative that more accurate depictions of disability become the norm. Public perceptions of disability influence individual relationships, employment, education, accessibility, and the general quality of life for people with disabilities. Tom Sullivan explains in *CinemAbility* that, “You have to change the perception before you can change legislation” (qtd. in Gold). The positive representation of disabled people has the potential to change both public perception, and in time, legislation. Because so many influential depictions of disability do not involve people who have disabilities, depictions of disability across various media feature images of incapability, fear, confusion, and loss. Disability still remains a mystery to most people. Disability must become something that is familiar, be it through accurate representation or personal interaction, in order to quell the fears surrounding disability. A fear of disability is a fear of the unknown. A way to correct this irrational fear of disability is through a sort of “exposure therapy.” Through being exposed to disability, through accurate representations created and performed by people with disabilities, through conversations and

other forms of social connection with disabled people, through learning from people with disabilities, true experience will replace irrational fear.

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