Disability in Science Fiction

Representations of Technology as Cure

Edited by Kathryn Allan
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INTRODUCTION

Reading Disability in Science Fiction

Kathryn Allan

The Sixty-Seventh World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon) in August 2009 featured a panel titled “Death, Illness and Disability in Fantasy and Science Fiction.” The session was absolutely packed with fans, many of whom identified as persons with disabilities. Throughout the too-brief hour, people shared stories of identifying with specific disabled (or bodily limited) characters and insightfully critiqued the technologies imagined within various science fiction (SF) scenarios. At the time, as a newcomer to the unique world of SF fandom, I was struck by the communal desire to discuss disability as it is represented in SF. Once the panel was finished and we were politely reminded to vacate the room, I knew that I wanted to keep the conversation going. Since then, I have repeatedly encountered a SF community—both academic and fan1—eager to engage with questions of dis/ability, as well as embodiment and identity, for people with disabilities.

From the latest 2005 evocation of BBC’s Doctor Who to the futuristic-inspired albums of Janelle Monáe, there has been a marked interest in SF over the past decade as SF-inspired television shows, movies, comics, and even pop music capture the attention of both casual fans and scholars. SF has always mirrored the present; it is a genre that criticizes the politics and ideologies of the current day, as its writers imagine the possibilities of future worlds, both utopian and dystopian. As SF narratives gain prominence in the popular culture arena, many of them feature disabled characters—think of 2011-blockbuster Source Code’s severely maimed hero, Colter Stevens (played by Jake Gyllenhaal), or the beautiful but abused genetically engineered Emiko in Paolo Bacigalupi’s Hugo and Nebula Award–winning The Windup Girl (2009). The need to address issues of disability and the disabled body as depicted in these stories about the possible futures of humanity is pressing for those of us who desire to move
forward as an inclusive human community. SF narratives involving people with disabilities inevitably also feature technology as either curing or attempting to contain their unruly bodies; in *Source Code*, for example, Colter Stevens’s body is sustained by a high-tech life-support system while his mind is hooked up to a computer, enabling him to inhabit an alternate reality. In another turn on the theme, where the disabled body cannot be contained, *Iron Man 3* (2013) pits the technologically empowered Tony Stark against a league of “cured” disabled war veterans who have been literally—and problematically—turned into weapons of destruction. As the pace of advancements in prosthetic and other computerized assisted-living technologies quickens, we find ourselves faced with new possibilities, both mundane and transformative, for disabled bodies and embodiments. This collection seeks to begin the conversation between disability studies and science fiction, and to map out the many diverse trails that we can travel—whether we walk, wheel, or transcend ourselves along those paths of inquiry—to discover not only the ways in which disability is socially constructed today but how we might approach conceiving disabled embodiments in the future.

SF has long explored deviant and disabled bodies: from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster to James Cameron’s wheelchair-bound hero, Jake Sully (played by the able-bodied Sam Worthington), in *Avatar* (2009), SF is inhabited by people (and aliens) whose embodiments are situated along the entire spectrum of ability. Considering the diverse range of the representations of persons with disabilities in SF, it is surprising that there has not been more sustained critical work in the area. While more scholars are directing their attention to SF, the number of people interested in both SF and disability remains small. *Disability in Science Fiction* seeks to address this gap by bringing together 12 interdisciplinary readings of disability in SF, with a specific focus on technology as (failed) cure. In my opinion, no other literary genre comes close to articulating the anxieties and preoccupations of the present day as clearly and critically as SF, making it a vital source for understanding advances in technology and its impact on newly emerging embodiments and subjectivities, particularly for people with disabilities.

**Whose SF Are We Talking About?**

There are many books and articles devoted to the generic definitions of SF, each with its own particular thematic or conventional distinctions. For the purpose of this collection, the parameters for what counts as SF are intentionally broad, for two reasons: first, in order to demonstrate the range of productive critiques that arise from introducing a disability studies (DS) lens into SF studies, I believe it best to provide a variety of textual examples; second, a generous take
on what constitutes SF makes the material more accessible to a larger readership by offering discussions of texts that will be familiar to a popular reading and viewing audience. Due to a necessity to impose some sort of limit on the scope of the project, the essays in this collection take up the most readily consumed SF in the form of short stories, novels, film, and television (excluding conversations about SF in comics, graphic novels, and music).

In terms of the actual definition of science fiction, I let respected scholars and writers of SF guide me. Perhaps the most oft-quoted definition of SF comes from Darko Suvin's seminal work, “Estrangement and Cognition” (in Metamorphoses of Science Fiction published in 1979): “Science fiction in general—through its long history in different contexts—can be defined as ‘a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment’” (qtd. in Bould 238). While this popular definition expresses the dominant characteristic of much SF as an alternative imaginative framework, critics such as Marleen Barr have argued that in some SF subgenres, especially those that explicitly interrogate social structures and identities (like feminist SF), the technologies and politics envisioned in the narratives do in fact “reflect existing conditions in the author’s empirical environments” (82). I suggest that this same contention applies to the ways in which disability is represented in SF narratives. While the settings and temporal framework of SF may differ dramatically from our own current reality, the way in which disability and people with disabilities are represented—as well as the technology that is used to contain or cure them—often directly reflects present-day biases and stereotypes. Considering the predilection of many SF authors to write directly out of their known environments for sociopolitical commentary, I prefer to approach the definition of SF as author Nalo Hopkinson does: “When people ask me to define science fiction and fantasy I say they are the literatures that explore the fact that we are tool-makers and users, and are always changing our environment” (144–45).

SF narratives that imagine the future possibilities of the human and human being are the central focus of this collection. Joanna Russ articulates the importance of SF’s yet-to-be-realized futures, as SF “writes about what is neither impossible nor possible; the fact is that, when the question of possibility comes up in science fiction, the author can only reply that nobody knows. We haven’t been there yet. We haven’t discovered that yet. Science fiction hasn’t happened” (22). Russ’s definition speaks to the ability of SF to act as an early warning system: what are the possible futures, both positive and negative, that can arise out of our current potentialities? In this way, SF, as a genre, performs as a uniquely productive site wherein to discuss the future ways of constructing disability. In order take an effective survey of those possibilities, this collection encompasses
Due to the negotiated exchanges between different segments of culture, Brian Attebery explains, “there are so many options: hard or soft, eco-feminist and libertarian-militaristic, North American and Everywhere Elsian, SF on the page and SF on the screen” (170). Due to this expansiveness of vision, topics, temporality, and subgenre, I agree with Paul Kincaid’s assessment that “science fiction is defined not by something intrinsic to the genre, but rather it is in the eye of the beholder” (44); in other words, we know it when we see it. SF, in the context of this collection then, is a genre that performs the critical work of imagining a future that is yet to come and, as James Gunn notes, a genre that when we read it, “we recognize that it applies to the real world, and we ask it real questions” (9).

Defining Disability

Before I delve deeper into the connections between SF and disability that this book seeks to address, I need to first define disability. Disability studies (DS) scholars are careful to distinguish the difference between physical impairment and the social construction of disability. In *Bending Over Backwards*, Lennard Davis explains that “[i]mpairment is the physical fact of lacking an arm or leg. Disability is the social process that turns an impairment into a negative by creating barriers to access” (12). This distinction between impairment and social process is central to DS because, as a field of inquiry, it seeks to expose the ways in which disabled bodies are construed as other, deviant, and nonnormative, when, in fact, human bodies exist along a spectrum of difference. Tobin Siebers articulates this key focus of DS scholarship as such:

> Unlike the medical approach, the emerging field of disability studies defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment. Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being. (3–4)

The field of DS is also inherently advocative, as Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell state that “disability draws the attentions of fields that seek to cure, fix, repair, or deny its existence. Disability is a difference that exists only to be undone” (190; emphasis in original). Since the disabled body has been long an object primarily defined and studied by the medical and therapeutic fields, DS strives to articulate disability as a social ideology of a particular form of human
embodyment. By contesting the medical frame in which disability has historical
been placed, DS seeks to remove the socially constructed aura of deficiency and
deviancy from the disabled body. Margrit Shildrick notes that, all too often,
“[i]nstead of triumphant transcendence, the compromised body may invite the
assumption of intellectual insufficiency . . . or alternatively the outward
appearance of an ailing body may be taken as the sign of an inner deficiency of
will, or prior moral dereliction” (72). DS seeks to remove this veil of dereliction
from disability, insisting on the natural variation of human bodies and exposing
the illusions of inviolability and self-mastery over the body.

Through the reframing—or, perhaps more accurately, the deframing—of
disability, there are two key modes of engagement within disability studies: the
first is to expose and rewrite existing narratives of disability, using the lens of
disability to produce new ways of thinking of the body; the second is to use DS
as a site of advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities. As Jean Moore and
Mary Kosut observe in their introduction to The Body Reader, “Even though
15 percent of the population is made up of people with disabilities, these bodies
are rendered invisible in social spaces, political arenas, and intellectual endeav-
ors” (5). DS aims to raise disability from the level of the individual to the level
of the community (which, as my experience at the sixty-seventh WorldCon
demonstrates, is a welcomed shift in discourse). This political project resonates
throughout this collection: not only are negative images of disability unpacked,
but the writers suggest ways in which their readings of disability in SF can be
productive in forming an inclusive community of human belonging.

Also relevant to the focus of this book, DS seeks to undo the moral impera-
tive able-bodied people claim when containing and attempting to “cure” or
“rehabilitate” the disabled body to normative standards: “Regardless of ethi-
cal intent, those on the receiving end of (limited) beneficence are never able
to claim equal agency while their vulnerability remains. Vulnerability is posi-
tioned, then, as that which impairs agency in the ‘damaged’ other while inspir-
ing moral action on the part of the secure self to make good the perceived
lack” (Shildrick 77). By reclaiming a central, active position for the disabled
body, DS dramatically shifts the way in which we conceive of the body and its
attending social constructions and debates, such as abortion, assisted suicide,
and genetic research (Siebers 4). This framework reflects the long-standing tra-
dition of SF as a genre that explores the future potentialities of human bodies
from a variety of perspectives (some ableist and some not) and, in turn, makes
SF narratives particularly productive sites of critical interrogation of the dis/
abled body. Whether the body in question is human or alien, a DS approach
has the potential to reframe long-reproduced SF narratives about physical dif-
ference, body modification, environmental adaptations, medical research, and
technological transcendence.
Reading Disability in SF

In many ways, SF has been patiently waiting for disability scholars to notice it. The language of futurity is evident throughout DS’s central theoretical canon, as it situates the disabled body in its various temporal locations through the historical treatment of disability, and in the “radical promise” (Snyder and Mitchell 203) DS offers in terms of awareness and advocacy for the rights of disabled peoples. Snyder and Mitchell argue the discourse around disability is one that simultaneously looks backward and forward: “In a culture that endlessly reassures itself that it is on the verge of conquering Nature once and for all, along with its own ‘primitive’ instincts and the persistent domain of the have-nots, disability is referenced with respect to these idealized visions. As a vector of human variability, disabled bodies both represent a throwback to a human prehistory and serve as the barometer of a future without ‘deviancy’” (32).

Siebers also evokes the future when he articulates the care that must be taken in ensuring that the body is not reduced to mere a tool that we wield without reservation: “It is easier to imagine the body as a garment, vehicle, or burden than as a complex system that defines our humanity, any knowledge that we might possess, and our individual and collective futures” (26). In addition to serving as a bodily barometer of future perfection, as Susan Wendell explores, the suffering body experiences a different temporal embodiment. With persistent sensations of suffering (such as pain, nausea, and exhaustion), time ceases to be experienced in a constant linear fashion. For those who suffer, time does not fly, but “the difficulty of living moment to moment with unpredictable, debilitating symptoms can be alleviated by having a strong sense of self that negotiates its ability to carry out its projects with the sick body” (176). The disabled body, in SF narrative representations of disability, can be a powerful site of reimagining the temporal possibilities of embodiment and even transcendence from the body.

Writing from outside of the field, Elaine Graham recognizes the natural affinity between SF and the kind of ontological investigation (i.e., the study of the nature of being or existence) present in DS: “Fantastic, utopian and speculative forms of fiction—epitomized by science fiction—shock our assumptions and incite our critical faculties. As refractions of the same, as evidence for the ascribed and not essential nature of human nature, monsters, aliens and others provide clues for the moral economy or ‘ontological hygiene’ by which future categories of the human/posthuman/non-human might be decided” (13). Along the human spectrum—extended even further here by Graham’s evocation of both the posthuman and the nonhuman—there are infinite variations of embodiment. Because of SF’s unique ability to refract both “the ascribed and not essential” natures of bodies, it is a particularly productive genre for
critiquing disability. While it is not fair to say that existing DS scholarship has completely left SF in the corner, the field’s engagement with the genre is still in its introductory stages. Taking up Hollywood film, Snyder and Mitchell identify a shared disability script across many genres where “bodies are subjugated to their worst fears of vulnerability, and/or the already disabled is scripted out of control” (163) but only briefly engage with SF titles. When they do, however, it is worth noting that they praise the genre for its “counter discursive forays” into the presentation of disability in such SF films as *Gattaca*, *Unbreakable*, *X-Men*, and *X2* (167). Unlike the typical non-SF flick, where viewers watch a set of freak encounters being played out, Snyder and Mitchell argue that in SF, disability is often central to the plot.3

While engagement with disability in SF film is limited, there has been greater attention paid to representations of disability within literature. Addressing the various “frames”4 of disability in literature, Ato Quayson in *Aesthetic Nervousness* argues, “It is important to bear in mind that attitudes to people with disabilities at any historical conjuncture are often multifarious, even in contexts that appear more enlightened and progressive. It is literature more than anything else that helps refract these multivalent attitudes towards disability” (36). While I appreciate Quayson’s attention to literature, his focus on “high culture” literature (all the texts in his analysis are Nobel prize winners), I believe that is through the genre of SF, regardless of its media form, where popular audiences most widely encounter representations of disability, both positive and negative. Since the genre’s inception, disabled characters have been visible in SF: in short stories, such as Robert A. Heinlein’s “Waldo” (published 1942), where the “crippled” lead is both misanthropic and brilliant; and in long-running and award-winning series like Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Vorkosigan* saga (started in 1986, with the latest work, *Cyroburn*, published in 2010), which features Miles Vorkosigan, a man with brittle bones. While SF writers have not always created fair or positive depictions of people with disabilities, SF is nevertheless a genre rife with deviant and impaired bodies.

Despite his omission of SF texts in his study, Quayson nevertheless importantly reminds us that “[t]o say that the literary model [of disability] provides an analogue to reality does not mean that it is the same as that reality” (30). Disability in early literary texts, like Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, is often equated with monstrosity, of both the physical and cultural kind. SF has been home to these “monsters” since the inception of the genre, and often the disabled body stood in for a whole of host of socially constructed and marginalized otherness—sexual deviance, criminality, moral and intellectual deficiency, ethnic and racial difference, and so on.5 As SF stories kept pace with technological and social progress, however, disability began to be represented as a modifiable condition that offers opportunity for the enhancement of the human body through SF
figures such as the cyborg (depicted in smash-hit films like *Robocop* and *Terminator*). Disability is now often characterized as a physical or mental impairment that is supplanted through the application of technology, transforming the disabled body into a figure of prosthetic awe and medicalized prowess (e.g., Marvel’s Professor X, leader of the X-Men, uses a specialized wheelchair and other high-tech devices to both “overcome” his disability and enhance his mutation). With DS emphasizing the importance for people with disabilities to be included in public forums, SF offers a unique site to seek out and reframe these excessive representations of disabled bodies. As Attebery notes, “By using images of the future to describe the present, the popular media invite us to use futuristic scenarios as tests of viability. Any group that cannot negotiate a place for itself in the imagined future is already obsolete” (192). Given that the disabled body has historically been seen as inherently monstrous and is still undergoing attempts of containment and erasure, establishing a strong and positive presence of people with disabilities in SF scenarios can be one way to ensure their collective, and ideally better, future.

Regardless of ability, DS reminds us that all bodies are transforming bodies. Whether it is through genetics, accident, or the inevitable change from able-bodied to disabled through the process of aging, the human body is not a static one. The human body is always changing, sometimes in surprising and unfamiliar ways, and this causes anxiety for those who wish to enforce a normative definition of embodiment (i.e., “this is what a normal human looks/acts like”). As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, “Medical science’s influential preference for normality and prejudice against abnormality can render novelty in human form repugnant to us” (32). SF, however, often takes the abnormal body, the novel form, and reimagines its usefulness. Instead of viewing bodily variation as deviancy, many SF texts reframe the disabled body as not only monstrous but also adaptive and subversive. “When bodies begin to malfunction or look unexpected, we become aware of them,” continues Garland-Thomson, “they expose themselves by becoming bodies rather than tools of our intentionality” (37). Since much SF takes up issues of technology, the notion of the body as tool becomes repositioned or reframed through the lens of disability studies. While SF undoubtedly recuperates stereotypical and biased views of the disabled body, the potential for reading—and imagining—alternative human bodies as transformative in the genre is worthy of sustained critical attention.

“Curing” the Disabled Body

Throughout both fictional and lived experiences of disability, the disabled body is treated as contaminated or unruly and therefore in need of control by others (Shildrick 73). And more often than not, whenever there is disability in a SF
narrative, there is the parallel trope of “cure.” So dominant is the concept of curing any instance of perceived disability, DS theorists return to it repeatedly, giving cure a twofold meaning. The first evocation of cure is the most obvious, common in both medical discourse and fiction, as in “curing” or “fixing” the disabled body of its perceived lack of normality and health. The second use of cure reframes the discussion of disability in SF texts by moving away from a simple determination of whether a disability is being represented as in need of cure to a more expansive and critical consideration of how the cure narrative is performing in that text. In other words, what does it mean to cure the disabled body, what are the cure’s outcomes, and are they desirable?

The medical characterization of the disabled body as requiring cure—in order to become “normal”—has become part of our larger cultural construction of disability. There is a great deal of pressure to rehabilitate, or to “make normal,” the disabled person or otherwise risk condemnation from both the medical and social communities. The ideology of the perfect body—and our ability to make imperfect bodies perfect through medical intervention—is woven throughout our various social discourses, and the onus to be a perfect body rests on both the abled and disabled alike. Quite simply, as Moore and Kosut state, “The larger message conveyed in the media is clear. If you have the means and the desire, your body can be potentially made more perfect than its natural or embryonic state” (6). Of course, the perfect body is an illusion that no one is capable of maintaining (as all bodies inevitably become ill and die at some point). Nevertheless, the idea of curing the body of its infirmities is a powerful trope repeated throughout the entire history of the SF genre. From utopian SF that sees an end to disability (like the alternative feminist future world in Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time) to dystopian SF scenarios of failed cures (seen in Rupert Wyatt’s recent Rise of the Planet of the Apes) or cures that are only available to the wealthy few (a la Andrew Niccol’s Gattaca), SF is quite an experienced practitioner in reflecting the ideology of the “perfect body.”

We can see an evolution of the representations of “cures” or “fixes” for disability on the SF screen, for instance, with the example of Star Trek’s Captain Pike. In the Star Trek: The Original Series episode “The Menagerie” (1966), Pike (played by Jeffery Hunter) is severely injured during battle, leaving him confined and dependent on a wheelchair unit (operated by his brain waves) that encases his body, leaving only his badly burn-scarred face visible. To communicate, Pike’s chair is equipped with one large light that blinks once for yes and twice for no. This Original Series Captain Pike is pitiable, and Captain Kirk—the very embodiment of masculine health and vitality as played by William Shattner—struggles to gaze on Spock’s old mentor. Fast forward to 2009, when director J. J. Abram’s glinting reboot of the Star Trek franchise hit the screens and reimagined the iconic disabled figure of Pike (now played by Bruce
Greenwood). While still injured in battle, Pike clearly earns his wounds as a hero and is shown in the final scenes of the movie in a simple wheelchair, smiling, and fully functioning aside from his inability to walk. The 2009 Captain Pike is a far cry from the 1966 version—the representation of his character’s disability demonstrates the change in cultural attitudes toward people with disabilities (i.e., less monstrous, more heroic), as well as highlighting the advancement of the technological “fixes” for disability to be less visible. Despite the gains we see through the figure of Captain Pike, the desire to cure his injuries and return him to—or get him closest to—the idealized vision of the perfect/normal body remains (and, it should be noted, in Star Trek: Into Darkness [2013], Pike has traded his wheelchair for a simple cane and has no visible disabling injuries).

From reproductive technologies that further eradicate and limit the reproduction of disabled people to prosthetics that replace missing limbs and extend the function of the body, technology is an essential component in cure narratives. As the Captain Pike example illustrates, technology is often the “fix-all” for whatever ails or deforms the body (whether it be a visible absence of an arm or the hidden vagaries of an “errant” gene). In utopian visions, when integrated into the able body, technology makes the human body better—an idealized version of itself. When technology is applied to the disabled body, however, all too often it is in an attempt to cure or normalize what is deemed “wrong” with the body. Take the technology away and the disabled body’s supposed lack remains.

Prosthesis and the Posthuman

Disability in Science Fiction is particularly interested in unpacking the ways in which prosthesis and the posthuman figure in SF representations of disability. In terms of its technology and function, prosthesis has significant resonance for both DS and SF studies. A prosthetic is most often a visible marker, filling in something that is “supposed” to be there, a tool that corrects an impairment. Siebers points out that while no one questions able-bodied people using tools, such as lawn mowers, stairs, and so forth, to make their physical lives easier, “[t]he moment that individuals are marked as disabled or diseased, however, the expectation is that they will maintain the maximum standard of physical performance at every moment, and the technologies designed to make their life easier are viewed as expensive additions, unnecessary accommodations, and a burden on society” (30). Prosthetics, then, are heavily weighted with social meanings that go beyond their mere function as tools; they can represent the beneficence—as well as the distaste—of the able-bodied to make the disabled less deficient and more “normal.” When analyzing prosthesis in SF, it is important to go beyond what it visible—the prosthetic—to interrogate the relationship that exists between prosthesis, the (dis)abled user, environment,
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