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Arthur Blaser

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**Review of: Murray, Stuart F. *Disability and the Posthuman: Bodies, Technology, and Cultural Futures*. Liverpool University Press, 2020.**

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**Reviewed by Arthur Blaser, Chapman University, Email: [blaser@chapman.edu](mailto:blaser@chapman.edu)**

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Stuart Fletcher Murray's *Disability and the Posthuman: Bodies, Technology, and Cultural Futures* is a thought-provoking book. It challenges readers to perceive disability broadly by making connections to film and literature. I tend to be eclectic and a technoskeptic but was interested in each of the terms in Murray's title and subtitle, all of which are significant in disability studies.

Murray makes a strong case that to understand modern film, literature, and contemporary society, people who have not thought much about disability studies should do so. He argues for a posthumanist "strand" in critical disability studies, relevant to thinking about disability studies approaches, models, corollaries, and research programs.

Murray's preface and introduction offer insightful "tools" for the following chapters. After describing each chapter, I will conclude with observations on groups less likely to be persuaded by Murray's argument. The chapters stand on their own and will interest subgroups of readers; Murray adapted sections from articles he published in *Parallax* and *Disability Studies Quarterly*.

Murray explains that he finds it more useful to conceive of disability as difference rather than deficit. He acknowledges "overlapping, intersecting fluidities" that aid scholars writing about contemporary culture. Murray offers "an engaged criticism to attempt to tease out the variants and consequences of disabled posthumanism/posthumanist disability" (18). In so doing, Murray addresses "the subjects in which I found the most sophisticated narratives of disability in a posthumanist present" (19).

Murray challenges the logic of humanism with its emphasis on control and capability as inadequate for description and counterproductive in prescription. He directly confronts popular and sometimes scholarly confusion between posthumanist and transhumanist perspectives. (He supports the former, but not the latter, which as he acknowledges, underestimates the negative consequences of technology.) Indeed, "Disability futures are almost never thought to be desirable and appear rather as fraught spaces of struggle" (40 emphasis Murray's). Murray analyzes several movies (*X-Men*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and others), as well as several examples from nonfiction (Pramod Nayar's *Posthumanism*, Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of*

*the Biotechnology Revolution*, Anders Sandberg's essay in More and Vita-More's *The Transhumanist Reader*, and others).

In his second chapter, "Design, Engineering and Gendering the Disabled Body," Murray begins with examples from robotics. He writes: "When robots become emotional or subservient in any way, it appears that they 'become' female" (78). Murray notes that although males dominate public debate over the rise of technology (Hugh Herr, Ray Kurzweil, Francis Fukuyama, Hans Moravec), the most incisive criticisms of possibilities for alternative social futures have come from women (Margaret Atwood, Rosa Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Margrit Shildrick).

Murray offers poignant analyses of several films (*Ex Machina*, *Robocop*, *Her*, *Metropolis*, and others) several examples from literature (mostly speculative fiction authored by Mary Shelley, Margaret Atwood, Thomas Berger, Becky Chambers' Wayfarer trilogy and others), as well as several examples from writings of nonfiction (from Mariela Rossini, Lars Schmeink, Alison Kafer, and others).

In the chapter, Murray writes: "... 'messy', 'blurred' 'impurities' are central to the working of fiction's aesthetics. The fit here, between disabled bodies, gendered selves, imagined engineering, posthuman landscape and the worlds of science fiction, is exciting in its potential" (104). It is intrinsically exciting to Murray and will be to some readers; Murray's accompanying analysis will help other readers to share the excitement (it did for me).

Murray's third chapter is "Visualising and Re-Membering Disability Body Politics in Filmic Representations of the 'War on Terror.'" Murray analyzes several movies (*Green Zone*, *Hurt Locker*, *American Sniper*, and others). Describing *Hurt Locker*, Murray comments on the not coincidental name of the character William James, also the name of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century American pragmatist philosopher. Murray notes James' association with "functional psychology."

Murray supports his analysis of cinema with several ideas and arguments from nonfiction (for example from Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* and from Susan Merrill Squier's *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*). Murray includes descriptions of two films made outside North America and Europe, *Ahlaam* and *Turtles Can Fly*.

In his fourth chapter, "Reading Disability in a Time of Posthuman Work: Speed, Sleep and Embodiment," Murray focuses on several examples from literature (Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed* (2010), Michael Faber's *Under the Skin*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, as well as Haruki Murakami's short story *Sleep*). He supports his analysis by drawing on leading disability studies scholars including Susan Wendell, Alison Kafer, Robert McRuer, and Margaret Price.

As in earlier chapters, Murray refers to "the messy embodied nature of disability" (203). In a passage from this chapter's end, Murray writes: "...a certain posthumanist idea of work threatens to eclipse difference and extend the boundaries that limit employment for many people with disabilities" (218). This is one of the alternative futures that confronts readers of *Disability and the Posthuman*.

Murray's conclusion, "On Not Wanting to End," returns readers to the present but with alternative futures. Murray provides more examples from literature (e.g. Dom DeLillo's *Zero K*) and nonfiction (e.g. Mark O'Connell's *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death*). (The wealth of intriguing examples from literature and film is among the greatest virtues of the book.)

Two statements from the conclusion are poignant: "Given transhumanism's vision of the future, it might appear counterintuitive to suggest that fundamentally it lacks imagination. But this is the case" (230). Later Murray opines, "One [hope] is that an understanding of the interaction between disability and posthumanism can become more global" (235).

Murray shows unusual awareness of possible flaws and seeks to preempt counterarguments. Nevertheless, his analysis is likely to leave three overlapping groups only partially satisfied. A first group emphasizes lived experience, the reality of poverty, the urgency of disability justice, and the necessity of participatory action. Outstanding examples include Frances Ryan's book *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonisation of Disabled People* (in Murray's detailed bibliography), and other analyses focusing on law and policy, hate crimes, and austerity.

A second group emphasizes urgency of global disability studies, articulated well by people like Shaun Grech, Karen Soldatic, and Helen Meekosha (also in Murray's bibliography). Examples of films from outside the United States and Europe, *Turtles Can Fly* and *Ahlaam*, are exceptions to the rule of "global" entertainment dominated by North American and European corporations.

A third group emphasizes keeping it simple and asks: how would you teach this to lower division undergraduates? Despite pleas for messiness, some readers will insist on parsimony and justification of selection of examples. In relation to films, sometimes superficial but financially successful films served Murray's purposes well; in other cases, grounds for selection were unclear. Even though they inevitably oversimplify, tables or figures might be useful to readers hoping to "cut to the chase."

Murray's subtitles and analysis refer to "cultural futures" rather than to a single path. Although we can and should think about utopias and dystopias, we are confronted with mixed possibilities and probabilities. Film, literature, and critical analysis help us explore alternative futures; Murray's book provides many helpful ideas for this exploration.

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