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GAINING ACCESS TO DISABILITY: INTRODUCTION TO and REFLECTION UPON JENNIE HARVIE'S LECTURES

Do people with disabilities have access to the contests of meaning in words and language and how these are deployed in culture and therefore everyday life and legislation? It is a crucial, if not pivotal question effecting access for both the disabled and abled. Disability operates within a hidden, largely uncontested cultural arena defined by "normality". There is a well signed process of control via the cultural over the experiences of being disabled apparent in Jennie Harvie's lectures in this edition. The 'abled' also is a construction ie a word given meaning within the influence of power of those who have the most cultural capital (media, politicians, employers, doctors). Is it possible to show how the dominant film culture operates on the borders of ability and disability quite indiscriminately? It is interesting to explore how we can and should reconstruct the abled from film illusion to the more mundane reality of parenting. I wonder if it is the abled who need access to the disabled for they already inhabit their (the disabled) reality both through fear of it but also, I think, in fact. I hope I can clarify this apparent anomaly.

Jennie Harvie lectured at the Sunshine Coast University (USC) on disability for ten years. She has worked as a Social Worker, Health Administrator and is a mother of four children, one of whom had a disability. Jennie's lectures are in 'PowerPoint' form, so they are necessarily, very abbreviated. Yet they are full of prompts about what disability means personally, culturally and socially.

Jennie's lectures effectively canvass the activities of practical hope within the disability movement which reflects Craft's focus and concern. It is this focus on reimagining a society that inspires hope in us - us all - that I emphasise in extracting from her course of 13 lectures. As Jennie spells out the cold, coal face of disability, she seeks to pursue another end. This end is to analyse the obstacles of access to a society for the disabled, where mutual recognition of difference requires noting the power of language to include and exclude.

My own interpretation which I hope is not too glib takes up Jennie's challenge by taking it in another direction. I think it valuable to think about her material in your own way. This is mine. I take responsibility for it. I think the abled should seek access to the disabled. In this I take on board I hope, the CRIP theory possibility as developed by Robert McRuer and discussed in Jennie's second lecture. He develops a theory in which the abled –bodied can temporarily enter at least to small degree the realities of different others in ability and sexuality. This is due to modern fluidity in identity, and so some inclusion of the hitherto excluded because a normalisation but one without adequately recognising differences. I understand from Jennie's lectures, CRIP theory is about subverting language or deeper cultural understanding in the face of this keeping both difference and inclusion. I think that is certainly the goal.

While mine is essentially a reflection on what the words mean and I think that is important, in the end our society needs to address differing needs, with real programs of a practical type. I am not canvassing this here. Nor do I have the more obvious forms of disability despite a cerebral haemorrhage some years ago which changed me nevertheless.

Let's start from the place Jennie also did in her course of lectures. Disability is a word with a meaning that changes over time, especially with medical discoveries, cures and new impairments to human lives. However many words are like that. Within the legislative frameworks of those governments that are democracies laws passed about people's rights and duties include the disabled. In so doing their bureaucracies had to define exactly what is a disability. For example, defined implicitly with a building code is what are the normal needs and physical/mental attributes of people without ever using these words. Normal is a dangerous word, yet it is deployed everywhere somewhat unconsciously and rarely with diligence, where there is regulation. Regulations conceive of averages, or normals every time they appear. This is why for instance lawyers disapprove of mandated sentences. These same mandates are everywhere in our regulations.

We are a very regulated society in this regard. Some say this is our greatest oppression. Therefore the hidden frame of disability is normality, and both are defined time and time again in our society. All this seems better than defining disability by the royal family, or some other person given legislative rights - the Oracle of Delphi perhaps. Yet this regulated, democratic-bureaucratic society adds a layer of conflict in society which we all feel when it impinges on us. People with disability and their loved ones live with this everyday. We are writing about access and disability in this issue. Yet everywhere normality is deployed in this discussion but rarely mentioned. *Access and disability are about culture in this sense but culture with profound implication.* This is not to ignore, commercial images, as well as fears of the others, senses of frustration and denial, and our own deep fears shape our reaction to ability/ disability. We are evidently, given the degree of discrimination in access, not very able to cross the abled – disabled difference.

Let's reflect further on our culture as it pertains to ability and disability. I have singled out a strong foundation of our culture – the film industry. I admit to some overgeneralisation- not a lot. In paroxysms of fantasy, Hollywood makes our male bodies inviolate and our emotions ever recharged by love - symbolised, realised and found within the beautiful woman's body and her scarcely controllable emotions. These are some of our greatest myths and fantasies. They are both based on real and central experiences and untrue in their narrowness and twisting of desires. If one agreed intent of a film is getting us to the edge of our (wheel)chairs, this seems achievable only by flattening out the characters; trading excitement for the realism of understanding and trading heroes/ines for the ordinary and everyday. That's even if the next Hollywood blockbuster is called "Everyday".

Such entertainment and our discussions in general in the media and elsewhere are so often silent on the varieties of physical, emotional and intellectual difference /disability. Rarely do we see the touting of a theme that imagines that our heroes are all not so fantastically abled and satisfactorily satiated by the end as we might expect them to be. Thankfully the French in particular have made several of these recently but let's examine this argument further in terms of resolution.

With all films of course a degree of humanity is set as 'bait' for our emotions. Our heroes may have a quirky failing (like adoring cheese burgers) but truthfully, of course, often more substantial ones are portrayed. Yet we are rarely led to reflect on life without resolution or one with necessary acceptance just or more common and residual scaring which is usually not explored certainly *The Butler* did that if it was understated and led Margaret and David (Australian film critics generally well liked) to complain of "wooden acting". (I must say to be sarcastic most traumatised people I have meet remind me of Mary Poppins if no doubt that is the symptomatic reaction of a very few).

At very best these scars are left to our imagination. Celebrity is given attributes of some kind of resolution, abled bodies, handsomeness or beauty, daring and boldness or if anti-hero, often unexplained wickedness and unkindness. Resolved outcomes are pre-signalled not just by determination but by physical attribute. The categories are limited, the complexity absent.

We watch apparently in awe of the abled on the screen, we, all of us, the temporarily disabled audience. However this is an acceptable disabled: one for the moment and hardly acknowledged. Something we are engrossed in - then forget. And so a Clayton's disability is all we permit if we consider ourselves abled, as if some protection against deep limitation by inoculation.

Hollywood here is our Dreaming yet dreaming where we are already asleep in the bed of cultural power that as Jennie shows is pervasive. This dreaming is of strongly socially conditioned images of embodiment which meet with our unruly bodies and re-occurring fantasies. The social conditioning sits as a layer of us: it is as well, us. Us and our dreams, waking and asleep, often enough, are cleverly reconstructed as lies and fantasies. These suited only to Saturday nights where solid fact, or our personal histories, or pain are transformed by forgetting through fantasy. It is possible the disabled might know the celluloid world *only* as a dream, if theirs too. Is it the abled that are most dumbed down by the emblems of resolution, celebrity, ability and fantasy, believing they have touched a celluloid superiority which for 10 bucks will rub off or at least permit the fantasy, for 120 minutes.

Temporarily we accept this world of theatre/media but it is much less likely that we accept the disabled experience with a lack of mutual misunderstanding, without fantasising myself about the realities of experienced hardship of those with the conventional categories of disability. We, the abled, need to take stock of our own usually less obvious disabilities. If we owned the word and therefore look seriously at its implications, we could thereby gain access in words at least to the disabled.

That the culture divides and builds on difference is one thing. However the flip side of it is the lack of exploration of the abled stereotype itself. Rather the film industry goal is celebrity and a little resolution, if I here am betraying the depth of still many, quite varying films. These deeper ones, in generalising I am unfairly dismissing. For example, I doubt that the resolution of *Calvary*, the film I most recently saw, offers any false hope or celebrity nor simplification of tensions although all 'the common folk' in it were angry and dangerously adrift and unresolved evidently through their rejection of religion, for which child abuse was an excuse as we know.

However what we call tragedy offers a genre of strewn, even lost hope. I think this is rarely the desired ending by film producers demanding an 'up' to walk out of and smiling about, so you will spread the cheery word. You are sent off to advertise. Advertising is the role of the ordinary - your smile and joy are the billboard money can't buy. You are awash with that joyous feeling as you walk out the cinema door throwing your coffee and chip packets nonchalantly into the overflowing bins. The now-perked-up-you, warmly 'afterglowing' with your brush with celebrity, their loves and escapades.

Films we might describe as tragic which I think *Calvary* could exemplify, with the limitations of it as previously mentioned, are potentially constructed in a quest for understanding. With tragedy, you might feel "There is a lot in that. I want to think about it" and with comedy, thought is circumvented

often enough - a role for this of course as much as there must be for enchantment. Hope nonetheless, but practical and real is what we all need as well. Comedy and tragedy and enchantment are required balance. Enchantment by celebrity renders us disabled –temporarily and superficially speaking. Tragedy raises the spectre of disability as if it is present and real.

Films then relieve us but they often fail to deepen our understanding of ourselves or society as they sacrifice realism and insight into enchantment. It is only really in our participation of this enchantment and hyper exaggerated worlds that we offer ourselves - as audience – a role in it. We are present as disempowered, mesmerised observers, disqualified by ordinariness to be enabled. Like disabled people for a moment in terms of powers of access, suspending not just our disbelief but our body shapes, foibles, differences and problems and potentials to the enchantment of celluloid superpersons who can make it right and potentially wrong in the flick of an eyelid. Fantasy is good especially when the escape is maximised and when reality isn't so good. Fantasy becomes our only access.

What are the limitations of understanding and depth hidden behind the abled image? If we explore this, it is not a disability we explore. Surely not! Why not? Resolution in films and parenting of children are key foci of this discussion of disability. I might add some of these thoughts gelled further by reading Judy Singer's account of parenting in an opinion piece in *The Australian* recently <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/a-hard-road-for-kids-of-autistic-parents/story-e6frg6zo-1226946305121>.

Can we imagine our limitations without gushing out the latest programme to overcome them? There is much in our lives we can't overcome including stature, intelligence of a certain form, emotional capacity and parenting. Parenting scars us all. Parenting is inevitably more or less inadequate. Driven by immaturity, their own scaring, fears and anxieties, parents turn these into rules of the home and lifesaving limitations on children. There is usually love through this I still believe. It is not beyond the fail to imagine those parts that are misconceived rules as ending in something for children we should describe as disability or scaring. Impositions and permissions form our childish psyches. If we reflected more on such things we might all be wiser and find the disability divide less unsettling as less dividing, if still significantly and inevitably different within itself.

Is this too glib? It is an argument about how we see ourselves not about the differences in disability that exist. We all in our social lives show various fears in the face of difference, if disability is one focus, so are many others for which our multiple incapacities for understanding, empathy, tolerance and the like are sharply compromised by personality and early conditioning. Are these not disabilities too, if they do not constitute a physically defined impairment? Shouldn't these have their own recognition and strategies for equity for all? These psychological dispositions, learnt early, prove often enough far more serious and long term denials of access, as well as propensities to over reach access to rights- other peoples. It would mean a more introspective society.

Many 'abled disabilities' seem essential to promotion, power, success and dominance in the abled world. My point is the block to our understanding if we are labelled as able/disabled is that we cannot see ourselves clearly. However this would include recognising the variations of disability without the glib "oh well we are all disabled". The abled in my view need access to the disabled in this sense.

Our bodies and minds are fragile even as we naturally try to strengthen, enliven, and accept them. We realise they both impart knowledge to us as sensations and give a meaning to us as conjured by tags like overweight, tall, weak, powerful, dumb, weird and disabled. These emotionally charged phrases filter through our social discourse even if the words are not aimed directly at us. They usually are. They remain present to us. They cross paths with key elements of our identity and roles. They affect our individuality, society, culture and economy in vastly different ways no doubt. It might be added these tags are more telling apparently than; dishonest, fatherly neglect, selfishness or egocentricity. These have an ambivalent status. "Who could complain too much about that?" (When acceptance and conformity to the usual is our usual mode).

Can the distinction between those disabled and those of able body and mind better rest on the recognition of a mutual unsettling? From here there may be a flight from unsettling, if without a gushing inclusiveness. There must be room to recognise in the world of individualism rather an individuality (Habermas) that is shaped through an almost inevitable process of limitation and restriction as well as flourishing. We need to include disability in our culture or change it to 'difference' but most importantly reflect deeply on its meaning through our education, culture and media, society and individual reflection. The recognition of real limiting material difference and a zeal to free ourselves from our limits are not incompatible. It is rampant individualism that separates them, for all limits should be left behind or disowned in individualism. In the concept of individuality our limits need reflection, action, acceptance and celebration, since they are part of all our humanities.

Jennie's lectures suggest the importance of the abled reflecting their feelings of awkwardness and fear that can arise in the face of difference described as disability. What if many of us included a notion of disability into our own self-descriptions? We should do this without ignoring its implications which are and may remain even in such an about-face, a critically missing deep understanding in the 'abled' consciousness. A hopeful outcome is then to imagine both 'sides' trading up to solidarity as a social practice - practical hope that is shared in the 'able community' through their understanding of variations including their own disability. An outcome should principally be evident in inroads into the restrictions of access that the disabled face and as necessary a reflective abled community that saw disability as a type of difference we all have but in significantly varying degrees. Obviously if the word becomes infinitely diluted it ceases to mean anything but it should not remain meaningless if 'difference' is more widely endorsed and disability remains a subset of difference.

Jennie's lectures provoked those thoughts for me and I hope I have done justice to them. Yours will be different. Hopefully it will still be a newer journey of thinking and acting about disability and in respect and empathy thereof, as discussed above, as it is for me.