To be disabled at the movies is often a strange experience. Disabled spectators in the contemporary moment bear witness to a long cinematic history of demeaning representations of disability and disabled bodies, ascribed as such by a normative culture that unfailingly imagines disability as an undesirable problem in urgent need of a solution (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012). For disabled spectators, the cinema becomes a site which foregrounds what Titchkosky and Michalko (2012) call the “double consciousness regarding disability experience and the experience of disability” (p. 135); it is where our rich, complex embodied experiences as disabled people rub up against hegemonic social understandings of disability dominating onscreen narratives that often conceive of us and our lives as undesirable and unviable, and thus worthless and disposable. Hence our confrontations with these texts compel us to constantly “negotiat[e] a cultural repertoire of images that threaten to mire us in debilitating narratives of dysfunction and pathology” that encourage discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards disabled people (Snyder & Mitchell, 2010, p. 193).

In their varied manifestations, cinematic representations of disabled people throughout history tend to fit into dichotomized categories of victims or villains, pariahs or paragons, and in general disabled characters are consistently “demonized, sainted, infantilized, or sexually neutered” (Code of the Freaks, 2013.) The disabled body –
denoting a deviation from its imagined ‘normative’ counterpart--also notably exists as a representational device, a “narrative prosthesis” that attempts to make sense of disabled characters and disability itself symbolically, but seldom addresses disability as a material, social and political experience (Mitchell, 2002). Indeed, as Snyder & Mitchell (2010) argue, disabled bodies are dominant features of body genres such as the melodrama and horror film which use onscreen bodies marked by difference as “delivery vehicles in the transfer of extreme sensation to audiences,” either as “threatening producer[s] of trauma” or as “threat[s] toward the integrity of the able body” (p. 186). As such, disabled bodies become not only sensation-eliciting visual spectacle for viewers, but also “visual shorthand” imbued with a finite set of largely negative meanings signifying deviation, unruliness and pathology which are shown as problems in need of narrative resolutions or containment (p. 189). These common characterizations of disabled bodies as “overdetermined symbolic surface[s]” speak to normative society's fears and anxieties about ‘difference’ and the negative (primarily social) consequences of that difference, which filmic narratives arguably themselves reproduce and perpetuate (Mitchell, 2002, p. 28). In Code of the Freaks (2013), Riva Lehrer comments that disability narratives ultimately center on a “relief of anxiety” in which disabled characters and their circumstances are presented as “worst case scenarios” and thus resolve narratives as such to ensure the “termination of anxiety” for non-disabled spectators in an ableist society. These common cure-or-kill narrative resolutions, in which disabled characters are either subsumed into normative society via cure or eliminated via death (or symbolically through institutionalization), once again parallel larger societal attitudes that mark disability as undesirable, unviable (and occasionally dangerous) and thus ripe for narrative erasure, disposal or containment. In doing so, disability and/or disabled people are sacrificed to uphold the fantasies of normative societal utopias in which disability cannot or does not exist as a viable, desirable alternative to normalcy and normative bodies.
Historically from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, film’s visual capacity has enabled a dual desire: “the desire to witness body-based spectacles and a desire to know an object empirically as an after-effect of viewing”, the latter inheriting the tendencies of the scientific gaze (Snyder & Mitchell, 2010, p. 180). The insertion of disability and the presence of disabled bodies marked by their ‘extraordinary’ differences onscreen perpetuate the practice performed by medical and scientific institutions towards these bodies which inform our cultural understandings of them: “bodies marked as anomalous are offered for consumptions as objects of necessary scrutiny – even downright prurient curiosity” (p. 180). The encouragement of this voyeuristic visual scrutiny of disabled bodies is furthermore enhanced through film because we are granted an “uninterrupted visual access” that typically negates any potential counter-gaze from the disabled person(s) objectified onscreen (p. 181). Thus stakes are high in the visual representation of disabled people in a medium where the mere act of looking at difference simultaneously conjures up ostensibly ‘evident’ connotations about that difference; and thus, these cinematic framings of disability and disabled bodies, manifested in their varied ways throughout the history of cinema, have had the power to “violently shape our ‘knowledge’ of disability”, though this is not to say that they necessarily determine this knowing (Fudge Schormans, 2014, p. 700). However, visual mediums, among them film, also allow for a powerful possibility of “troubl[ing] disabling images and non-disabled knowing”, consequently enabling the disruption of ideas pertaining to disability (p. 700). Hence, a few oft-unanswered questions arise regarding these onscreen portrayals of disability that seemingly appear, for the most part, for the consumption of imagined non-disabled spectators that inhabit an ableist society. How do disabled spectators identify with (or against) disabled characters on screen, particularly when these onscreen subjectivities are fragmented and denigrating? Do disabled (and non-disabled) spectators ever perform resistant readings of these texts and if so, what may enable them to do so? Additionally, do
film texts that take up disability in alternative ways exist, and consequently, how do they function for these spectatorships?

One site in which the power of film to interrupt, resist and speak back to its “degrading visual inheritance” is in what Snyder and Mitchell (2010) term the “new disability documentary cinema” (hereafter referred to as NDDC) (p. 193, 195.) Although not a formal movement, the emergence of NDDC constitutes an innovative way to examine disability as it functions as a “site of resistance and political revision to the body genres” and in which “competing disability subjectivities can be forged and explored” (p. 193). Drawing upon their articulations, I will perform an analysis of what I deem an exemplary NDDC text, Bonnie Sherr Klein’s 2006 documentary Shameless: The ART of Disability. Shameless follows Klein and a group of disabled artist friends in an intimate exploration of their lives and of the artistic and personal power harnessed from disability culture and disabled existence. Shameless serves as an apt starting point to tease out the questions about disabled spectatorship and subjectivity posed above through its complex address of past representations of disability in the media in general and in cinema in particular, as well as through its own representations of disability that attempt to dismantle notions of disability as undesirable and of disabled life as not worth living.

**New Disability Documentary and Alternative Subjectivities and Spectatorship**

“Welcome to Saturday night at the movies,” says Catherine Frazee, one of the artists/social subjects of Shameless, “…we’re going to encounter a few stereotypes.” In this sequence, Klein and her artist friends play a game of disability stereotype Bingo while viewing a select few films about disability. It depicts what is a common experience for people in the contemporary moment - a communal home viewing of films; however, for this collective of disabled artists, this movie
night has a powerful political function which seeks to summon a few famous examples of disability in the cinema – Heidi (1937), Whatever Happened to Baby Jane (1962), and The Elephant Man (1980) – and vocally assert and articulate an experience hitherto uncommon in mainstream discourses – that of the disabled spectator. Specifically, it foregrounds disabled spectatorship as resistant spectatorship. The film clips shown are met with varying reactions ranging from laughter to sombre disappointment. They are moments which foreground how these demeaning representations of disability affect disabled spectators and crucially, how these spectators negotiate the meanings of these texts. Persimmon Blackridge reacts to a sadistic prank pulled by Bette Davis in Baby Jane by asking “Is she crazy? Or a jealous sister?”, moments later supporting the latter idea, quipping, “I decided she couldn't be my people.” It suggests what seems to be a common sentiment in the sequence – that the onscreen representations do not reflect very accurately, or speak to, the way in which these disabled individuals experience themselves and their lives.

In a later moment, David Roche, who has a facial disfigurement, watches a clip from David Lynch's The Elephant Man about the real-life Joseph Merrick, a man with a prominent facial disfigurement; the camera fixes on a close-up of David's face with a solemn expression as he watches. Klein denies us the visuals of the film here; we merely overhear the film’s famous lines “I am not an animal! I am a human being!” as David watches, powerfully registering for the film’s audience the painful impact of the film’s portrayal to a (similarly) disabled spectator watching his disabled visual counterpart on screen. David’s follow-up reaction is pity; he says that Merrick’s naive sincerity at being kindly treated at a later moment is a mere coping mechanism for someone in his predicament. Here, this moment illustrates how these demeaning narratives and visual representations of disability and disabled bodies impact their real-life counterparts on the other side of the screen; the privileging of these spectators’ reactions and
their subsequent discussions and responses to these film texts evince the fact that these stereotypical representations, often drawing on ‘symbolic’ meanings of disability, have affective power over disabled spectators and a cultural currency that works to uphold and perpetuate ideas that negatively influence real disabled people's social identities and existence (Snyder & Mitchell, 2010, p. 195). Therefore here, Shameless successfully executes what Snyder & Mitchell (2010) deem a tenet of NDDC – the “privileging of disabled persons' voices not simply as a voice added…but also the explicit foregrounding of a cultural perspective informed by, and within, the phenomenology of bodily difference.” (p. 194). Their perspectives speak to not merely their own subjectivities as disabled individuals, but in this instance specifically, how these subjectivities interact with societal understandings of disability. Klein accomplishes this through a reflexive moment, in which she uses the medium of film to (visually) demonstrate disabled spectatorship in action, thereby inserting it into cinematic discourses of disability and interrupting the silencing of past representations by asserting not only the existence of the disabled spectator, but their agency at work.

The film also explicitly foregrounds disabled voices by virtue of the fact that Klein, the filmmaker and also narrator of the documentary, reflexively shapes the film and its project to speak back to cultural (and as shown above, specifically cinematic) notions about disability and additionally to highlight the enriching value of belonging to a disability community. The introductory narration foregrounds her intent for the film: “[it]...grows right out of that impulse to correct the images and have people tell their own stories, because people with disabilities have not been represented in the media in anything like the truth I’ve discovered of our lives” (Shameless, 2006). Shameless also functions in the vein of what Bill Nichols (2010) calls the “personal portrait documentary” which give “political voice” to filmmakers from marginalized communities who take on the “task of
retrieving histories and proclaiming identities that myths, or ideologies of national unity denied” and whose films “embod[y] the perspectives and visions of communities that share a history of exclusion and a goal of social transformation” (p. 229, 237). Klein weaves in her personal story of coming to identify with disability after an initial unwillingness to do so, and in particular her struggle to reconcile her newly disabled self with her identity as a (previously able-bodied) filmmaker/artist. However, Klein also gives equal weight to the individual stories of her friends/the subjects of her film. She respectfully enters their homes and art studios – their intimate personal spaces – to reveal not only their unique stories, achievements and vulnerabilities, but also to grant access to the daily routine of their lives. She frequently employs long takes and close-ups to center her subjects and to respectfully foreground their voices and onscreen presence. For example, she shows a moment in which David’s wife recounts the story of their loving relationship as she gives him a facial massage; the camera pans between the two, crucially fixing its gaze upon David’s face in a context which reconfigures his disfigurement as an accepted part of his identity that does not connote monstrosity or undesirability, or even objectifying spectacle, as in traditional cinematic narratives. Additionally, this intimacy with disabled subjects and willingness to show the ordinary minutiae of their lives works against the common cinematic tendency to sensationalize and exoticize the disabled experience; furthermore, as Snyder & Mitchell (2010) argue, “[t]he day-to-day details are the point because it is at this most basic level of modern existence that bureaucracies have doubted the ability of people with disabilities to handle their own affairs” (p. 196). This speaks to not only non-disabled spectators whose historical access to disabled people has been limited or distorted, but also to larger institutions that deny agency to disabled people. This latter tendency is a part of the overall project of NDDC to address society via authoritative institutions that are responsible for the oppression of disabled people; as opposed to locating disabled people as problems in need of
fixing, NDDC “seeks to target the rightful site of meaningful intervention, namely, a lethal and brutal social context” (p. 202). In Shameless, it is not merely the film itself that speaks to these contexts, but these tensions are also often teased out in the artistic work of Klein’s subjects, which work to emphasize her support for the value of disabled artistic communities.

“I discovered how disability, instead of just being a loss, could be an inspiration for creativity”, Klein states, calling it a “reawakened sense of the power of art.” (Shameless, 2010). Klein’s statement reflects a notion about disability community and art that is present throughout the film; namely, that disability communities and disabled experience become fertile ground for artistic production while art itself also brings community together. Here, Eliza Chandler’s (2012) notion of crip community as “any time that community is enacted through mutual motivation or desire to dwell with disability, a desire which is antagonistic to the normative desire to cure or kill disability” (para. 2) is useful; it also echoes NDDC’s belief in the portrayal of “disability ensembles... that turn disability into a chorus of perspectives that deepen and multiply narrow cultural labels” (Snyder & Mitchell, 2010, p. 198). Chandler (2012) argues that the existence of crip community enable us to question ideas of community and disability and their commonly related notions of belonging and not belonging, and to reconfigure disability as “communally binding and desirable” (para. 2). The film oscillates between intimate moments of the group of friends coming together and Klein’s individual follow-ups with them; however, what comes across in the documentary and in Klein’s project is that the film is in many ways intended to be a collaborative work. For example, in the beginning, Klein films a reflexive discussion with her friends about finding an apt name for the documentary. Additionally, as these artists are working to prepare for the KickstART festival, Klein shows collaborations between them in their endeavours. Persimmon asks each of the group members for a few personal
items to use in her installations based on the group, incorporating and infusing their identities into her work as exemplary of what emerges from crip (artistic) communities. As she says to Geoff McMurchy, “[I am] working partly out of my vision and partly out of your vision.” This is emphasized further by how both Klein’s film (and her camera) become part of the larger artistic project that emerges out of this particular crip (artistic) community. (As an aside, as per Chandler’s (2012) articulation of crip community, the film demonstrates this community as involving not only the disabled artists/friends featured, but also their non-disabled loved ones who co-exist with them in desire.) Lastly, the crip community enacted in Shameless also works to “crip” the artistic project of both Klein’s film and the individual work done by the artists; first by asserting their unique disabled experience as a desirable and instrumental part of the production of their work, but also by using the platform of the film/their work to speak against normative cultural understandings of disability. Klein ends the film with an interesting reflection in which she takes pride in her achievement of decisively being able to reconcile her identity as a filmmaker and disabled person to emerge proudly as a disabled filmmaker. It is a moment which pronounces a transformative possibility of disability art and film for not only speaking back to degrading past representations of disability, but also for enriching disabled and non-disabled individuals and communities who are invited to experience these inclusive crip communities that “can open us up to new ways of understanding what it is to be crip and what it is to be in community” (Chandler, 2012, para. 10).

As an exemplary work of new disability documentary cinema, Shameless captures a vibrant and pleasurable experience of disabled existence, community, and disability art that deliberately works to counter a shameful inherited cinematic history that has continuously exoticized, objectified, demeaned disabled people and destroyed the radical possibilities and potential that can come from giving voice to
disabled subjectivities and communities, all the while privileging the previously diminished experiences of disabled spectators. Klein's film functions as a “visceral rewriting of the way that we understand disability” which figures that disability – as an individual and collective experience--itself is, and can be, a site of strength and creativity, both in art and in lived communities. I end with Catherine Frazee’s astute remarks about the power of disability art and arguably of Shameless itself: “Do not underestimate the power of what has happened here. Disabled artists and creators have pushed back the demons of shame and humiliation…. It may look like fun and games, it may feel like fun and games but that is what’s so deliciously subversive about our cultural revolution” (Shameless, 2010).

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