

BOOK REVIEW

Disability aesthetics, by Tobin Siebers, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2010, 167 pp, \$70.00 (hbk) ISBN 978-0-472-07100-5

Tobin Siebers, Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, is a key figure in US disability studies. His title is a strong indicator of the orientation of the American research tradition towards literary and cultural topics; to a much greater extent than in Europe, where the field tends towards the social sciences rather than the humanities. Much like David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, on whom he has exerted considerable influence, Siebers tends to employ narratives and visual images as material even when the subject under discussion is socio-politically inflected to a great extent. His heavily theoretical stance occasionally lends his writings a somewhat contorted rhetorical expression – there are many *interventions*, in the post-structuralist mold – but his examples are consistently striking and his analyses rigorous.

Siebers' previous book, *Disability theory*, was an attempt to make disability an inevitable and subversive category in the framework of critical and cultural theory. The volume currently under review, *Disability aesthetics*, is in much the same vein. Siebers' overarching argument is not only that the *representation* of disability is absolutely essential to modern art and visual culture, but also that disability is central to the formation of modern aesthetics itself. The book defends that position through studies of particular works and traditions, but also of public discourse about disability in art, and, more peripherally, of art vandalism. The project is similar to what the late Paul Longmore described as the mission of disability history: To tell the unacknowledged stories.

To argue that disability has a rich but hidden role in the history of art is not to say that disability has been excluded. It is rather the case that disability is rarely recognized as such, even though it often serves as the very factor that establishes works as superior examples of aesthetic beauty. (4)

Many of the chapters in *Disability aesthetics* have been previously published as independent essays. There is, consequently, a certain amount of thematic overlap between the chapters, and the defence of the book's main thesis comes about by way of inductive rather than deductive reasoning. This is not problematic in and of itself, given that aesthetics is an area in which a single masterpiece can disprove thousands of pages of theory. Nevertheless, there is a problem at the heart of *Disability aesthetics*, a problem that may be elicited directly from the book's title.

On the evidence of *Disability theory* and *Disability aesthetics*, Siebers' reasoning can be paraphrased as follows: Disability is a category that is fundamental to the

chief intellectual endeavours of our time. It is also a highly subversive category, which, should it be openly discussed, would destabilize the other categories that are dependent upon it. Sex/gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity all draw some of their strength as social and political categories of oppression because they are informed by the idea of bodily and mental inferiority, i.e. disability. However, still according to Siebers, disability is no more a marker of inferiority than skin colour – it is merely an expression of human variation, of *difference*.

There are two main problems with this stance. One is that it leads to an impasse: How can disability be such a basic category, so crucial to other categories of oppression, and yet be just as socially constructed as the rest? Isn't it equally valid to argue that disability is socially constructed as a distinct gender by means of separate bathrooms, complete with non-male, non-female iconography? Or that various impairments have, historically, been perceived as markers of separate peoples or races?

The second and perhaps more serious problem is the willed refusal in Siebers' work to acknowledge that disability, as a category, can meaningfully encompass only the kind of variation that implies the lack of certain faculties or functions: Disability is disadvantage. It has to be, or disability studies would lose most of its relevance as a source of information for governments, organizations, and activists – and all of its urgency as an academic endeavour.

We might well conceive of 'difference studies', the study of every aspect of humanity that diverges from the statistical average. But that isn't half as interesting, rewarding, or relevant as disability studies. Siebers acknowledge this implicitly. His examples are not primarily interesting to him because they diverge from the norm, but because they diverge from his two *bêtes noires*: Classical Greek and Nazi aesthetic ideals:

The Nazis waged war against modern art because they interpreted the modern in art as disability, and they were essentially right in their interpretation, for modern art might indeed be named as the movement that finds its greatest aesthetic resource in bodies previously considered to be broken, diseased, wounded or disabled. (35)

The two historical ideals are by no means historical curiosities, and the 'aesthetic resource' is not wholly accepted as such. Siebers reminds us of the vituperative reactions to Marc Quinn's statue *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, of the strikingly condescending attitudes of both conservative art reviewers and of presumably progressive writers on the political left. He discusses the prevailing legitimacy of disability stereotypes and presents a considerable range of examples of how different impairments – different embodiments – inform visual representation. One of Siebers' theses, that representations of the perfect human body are much less aesthetically interesting than imperfect representations or imperfect bodies, is strongly defended.

As a theory-building work, *Disability aesthetics* suffers from its essayistic origins. It is nevertheless a fascinating book, not least because of Siebers' enduring concern with the political aspect of aesthetics. In this, the American humanities and the European social sciences are at least partly reconciled in their approaches to disability.

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