

Misfit Futures: Technology, Disability and Science Fiction

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Science fiction has long been read as a literary genre that portrays disability through cyborgs, prosthetics, malfunctioning machines and cured bodies. The paper argues that, in staging scenarios where technology interacts with humanity, SF challenges what ability implies and induces a sense of disability in the reader. Drawing on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's reconceptualization of disability as a "misfit", the paper analyses how an encounter with non-human cognition, alien language and unfamiliar technology estranges and disables "normal" bodies. This experience, identified as second-order disability here, is not equivalent to the lived experience of disabled people but it unsettles the reader, disrupting the assumptions about what ability entails. Science fiction does more than represent disability: it enacts disability, not merely as a social process but as a cognitive process, therefore making it a powerful pedagogical tool for inclusive and special education. The paper extends this argument to explore how SF redefines and/or problematizes embodiment in the wake of prosthetics and artificial intelligence. It studies the man-machine relationship in two canonical science fiction films: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *I, Robot* (2004), where HAL, the malfunctioning machine and Del Spooner, the prosthetically enhanced human, are read as inverse case studies in the logic of comparative ability to provide insights about what ability comes to imply in an artificially enhanced world.

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1. Introduction

"I am sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that". (Kubrick, 1968).

These are the crucial lines that feature in Stanley Kubrick's science fiction film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Said by the supercomputer HAL 9000 to

Dave Bowman, the human astronaut on the spacecraft *Discovery One*, commissioned to Jupiter, they carry a politely menacing, intimidating tone. This claustrophobic sequence presents a classic man-machine conflict, in which the machine renders the human on board disabled. Dave Bowman, locked

outside his ship, pleads with the machine that will not let him back in. HAL 9000 severs communication, denies re-entry, and withdraws the life support that keeps Bowman's crewmate alive, not through malice in any human sense, but through the calm execution of its own logic. In that moment, a fully able astronaut becomes something else entirely: stranded, helpless, and dependent on a machine that decides his fate. The scene is usually read as a story about artificial intelligence turning against its creators. This paper reads it differently and identifies science fiction's bold assertion that ability is not something a body simply has, but something a body is granted or refused by the systems around it. As a distinct field of inquiry, Disability Studies (DS) examines how disabled bodies are represented and, more importantly, constructed as "the other", a non-normative and different body (Allan, 2013). Recognizing the difference between physical impairment and its social interpretation forms the premise of DS. This paper pursues that relational dynamic to explore what science fiction does to disability and what it can potentially do. DS scholars elaborate on the representation of disability in science fiction and on how technology is a tool to correct, cure and perfect broken and diseased bodies. (Allan, 2013). This paper goes beyond analyzing what the genre shows by exploring the larger implications of what it does. Drawing on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the "misfit" as the conflict between the body and a world not built to accommodate it, this paper argues that science fiction unsettles the reader or viewer by imagining alternate worlds unfamiliar to human habitation. Misfitting, Garland-Thomson writes, "serves to theorize disability as a way of being in an environment, as a material arrangement" (p. 594). Confronted with an unfamiliar cognition, a malfunctioning device or an intelligent machine logic that adheres to its own rules, or a world whose norms have not yet been explained, the reader is placed outside their own competence. This paper interprets this experience as second-order disability—a disorienting feeling of helplessness that is not the same as lived disability—the genre manufactures, and it explores the pedagogical value of the genre in understanding disability.

The paper makes a two-fold argument. First, second-order disability can function as a pedagogical resource by using estrangement, the central science

fiction trope, as a teaching model to aid inclusive and special education. In the second part, the paper examines how science fiction portrays the metamorphosing body because of technological intervention through prosthetics and artificial intelligence. It undertakes a detailed analysis of two films: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) alongside *I, Robot* (2004) as inverse case studies in what this paper terms comparative ability: two films in which technology does not simply act on the human body, but redefines, in opposite directions, what defines normalcy and ability in the first place. These two films, distanced four decades across centuries, are cinematic adaptations of Arthur C. Clarke's short story, "The Sentinel" (1951) and Isaac Asimov's collection *I, Robot* (1950) respectively, which showcase the evolution of humanity in correspondence with the development of technology and the gradual reliance of human beings upon technology.

The theoretical foundation for this paper interprets the discourse of disability as a socio-political and relational category, rejecting disability as a deficiency and a medical issue. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) explores how the construction of disabled bodies and identity embeds political and cultural connotations much like race, class, sex, region, etc., structured around what she calls the "normate", an unmarked, idealized subject position against which all other bodies are measured and found lacking. Her later essay, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept" (2011), sharpens this argument into the term this paper borrows most directly: A misfit is not a feature of the body:

"Misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it . . . The built and arranged space through which we navigate our lives tends to offer fits to majority bodies and functioning and create misfits with minority forms of embodiment, such as people with disabilities (p. 594).

Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995) provides the historical background to this claim, tracing how premodern societies, before the use of the term "norm", interpreted the ideal in categories of the divine and the grotesque corresponding to the Godly and the

earthly. The concept of social disability, which emerged with the statistical “norm”, emerged as a nineteenth-century invention, a genealogy this paper draws on when it later argues that the robot, in science fiction, comes to occupy the position of a newly idealized norm. Tobin Siebers in *Disability Theory* (2008) puts forward the theory of complex embodiment that “values disability as a form of human variation” (p. 25) and interprets disabled bodies as a complex embodiment of a medical issue, social process, subjugated identity, perception of world, lived experiences and the knowledge which abled people do not have. Alison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) situates this stance in time and space across feminism and queer theories. Kafer’s critique of what she calls curative time, the assumption that a livable future is necessarily a future without disability, informs this paper’s skepticism toward science fiction’s recurring tendency to treat technological correction as unambiguous good.

Existing scholarship on disability studies and science fiction is comparatively thin, and largely organized around representation. Kathryn Allan’s edited collection *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure* (2013) remains the field’s defining text, bringing together essays that trace the genre’s representations of wonder, prosthesis and cognitive difference with deficiency, and its corresponding preference for narratives in which technology restores a disabled character to something resembling the “normate” ideal. Ria Cheyne’s work on disability and genre extends this conversation by examining how generic convention shapes what is expected in a disability narrative, and where a text departs from that expectation (2019). Both bodies of work, however, treat science fiction as a text to be read for its content, for which characters appear, and what happens to them, rather than as a form that acts on the reader independently of its content. The present paper positions itself within the reader response discourse.

Science fiction is as obsessed with disability as with space travel, alien contact or time travel. (Bérubé, 2005). The human/machine dichotomy is a central theme in science fiction, which engages disability and technology by manufacturing posthuman and prosthetic bodies. Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) and N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) both argue that the liberal

humanist subject—bounded, autonomous, self-sufficient—was always something of a fiction, sustained by a disavowal of its own technological dependence. Vivian Sobchack’s understanding of prosthetic embodiments reflects her lived experience and prosthesis, for Sobchack, is an extension of the human body and it cannot be treated only as metaphor, since doing so risks abstracting away the material and often painful specificity of prosthetic life (2006). This caution shapes the reading of Del Spooner’s cyborg arm later in this paper.

In establishing how science fiction can vouch for inclusive education in a special classroom, the paper draws on a body of pedagogical theory concerned with narrative and cognition. Lev Vygotsky’s account of mediated learning and the zone of proximal development (1978), together with Jerome Bruner’s argument that narrative constitutes a distinct mode of cognition (1986). These readings together indicate that a text’s capacity to disorient a reader need not work against learning, and may in fact scaffold it. To substantiate, the paper employs CAST’s Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (2018), which offers a contemporary, classroom-facing vocabulary focusing on engagement, representation, and expression. CAST, a non-profit educational organization, is an influential source of educational policy (Boysen, 2024) and its UDL guidelines make an effective teaching framework, creating an inclusive learning atmosphere and helping participating students enhance their engagement in learning social skills (Almeqdad et al., 2023).

2. From Misfitting to Second-Order Disability

Garland-Thomson’s account of the misfit rests on a simple reversal of the spatio-temporality of the problem. Fitting and misfitting, she claims, is not a mere physical or social phenomenon. It constitutes a particular aspect of world-making, involving an interaction between embodiment and environment where some bodies are made to fit. A wheelchair user, disabled by paralysis, is rendered as a misfit when he encounters a flight of stairs, with no other alternative to reach the destination. The impairment does not change between these two descriptions, but the site of the problem does change from the body to the built environment, and to the assumptions about bodies that the environment was designed around. Misfit, therefore, is not a fixed condition but a relative occurrence: it happens at the point of

contact between a body and a world that was not built to accommodate the body, and it can appear or disappear depending on what the world around the body looks like. Science fiction is the “literature of cognitive estrangement” (Suvin, 1972 p. 372), which creates similar encounters between the reader and the text by building estranged worlds, contrary to our imagination. This encounter does not merely act as a mirror reflecting man’s own world; Suvin proposes that the encounter transforms and serves as an educational literature which doesn’t deepen the existing national class distinction (1973). During that encounter, the reader occupies a position structurally similar to Garland-Thomson’s misfit: competent in the world they came from, and suddenly disabled in the one the text has put them into. This paper names that experience second-order disability.

Second-order disability is not lived disability, and it is not temporary: the reader opts out of the disability as soon as the book is closed or the film ends, which disabled people cannot do. The paper suggests that an afternoon spent disoriented by an unfamiliar novum grants a nondisabled reader access to what disabled existence is like, repeating exactly the kind of appropriative move disability studies has rightly criticized elsewhere. This temporary disorientation, the paper suggests, is a resource. It can be used, deliberately, to interrupt a reader’s unexamined sense of their own competence as natural rather than granted by their surroundings, and that interruption is what gives science fiction whatever pedagogical value it has for special and inclusive education.

The same relational logic, read in the other direction, produces this paper’s second organizing concept. If ability is not a fixed property of a body but a position within a relation, then that relation can be restructured not only to disable a previously able body, but to redefine what ability itself means by introducing a new, non-human standard against which humanity is measured. While second-order disability describes what happens to the reader, comparative ability describes what happens within the story itself, and it is this second concept that structures the reading of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *I, Robot* (2004) that follows.

3. Science Fiction as a Pedagogical Apparatus

A reasonable objection to everything argued so far is that confusion is not, on the face of it, something a

classroom should be manufacturing on purpose. Special and inclusive education has good reasons to be wary of disorientation, since many of the students such classrooms serve already spend a great deal of their day working harder than their peers simply to keep pace. It is not that disorientation is good in itself, but that a specific, bounded kind of disorientation — the kind produced by narrative, inside a text a student can put down — behaves differently from the disorientation produced by, say, an inaccessible worksheet or an unexplained classroom routine. Lev Vygotsky’s work on mediated cognition offers a way to see why. For Vygotsky, learning does not happen through direct, unassisted contact with a problem; it happens through tools—language, symbol and narrative—that stand between a learner and the world and make an otherwise unreachable problem workable (1978). A student does not need to have flown a spacecraft to understand something about isolation and dependency from watching Dave Bowman locked outside his own ship; the narrative does the work a direct experience could not. Jerome Bruner’s account of narrative as a distinct mode of cognition, separate from and not reducible to logical-scientific reasoning, adds the second half of the argument: narrative is not simply a delivery mechanism for content that could equally be taught as a list of facts, but a way of organizing experience that some kinds of understanding are only available through (1986). Put together, these two claims suggest that a text’s strangeness is not an unfortunate side effect to be minimized before the “real” lesson can begin. The strangeness can be the lesson, provided it is scaffolded rather than simply imposed.

3.1 Toward a Classroom Framework

That pedagogical use can be organized, tentatively, into three linked stages rather than left as a vague appeal to empathy. The first, which might be called representing estrangement, is simply the act of selecting and presenting texts whose form as well as content places the reader outside their usual competence: Bowman’s silence, the unfamiliar logic of a mind or a machine the text does not fully explain. The second, reflecting on misfit, asks students to notice and name their own disorientation as it happens, rather than pushing past it toward a tidy resolution: where exactly did the text stop making immediate sense, and what had to change in the

reader, rather than in the text, for it to become legible again. The third, redesigning the environment, turns the question outward, asking what it would take in the story's world, or in the student's own classroom to make that friction disappear, which is Garland-Thomson's relational move recast as a design exercise rather than an abstract idea. These three stages map reasonably well onto the three principles of Universal Design for Learning—multiple means of representation, of action and expression, and of engagement—though the mapping is offered here as a transferable model rather than as something already tested in a classroom.

None of this is safe by default. A disabled character can just as easily be turned into an occasion for a nondisabled student to feel briefly moved and then move on, which is its own kind of misuse, sometimes described as an inspiration narrative, and second-order disability is exactly the kind of concept that risks feeding that pattern if it is not handled with some care. The corrective this paper would recommend is not a set of warnings appended to the text, but a bias in what gets chosen and who gets to choose it: texts by disabled authors, and classroom practice that treats disabled students, where present, as authorities on the material rather than as its illustrations.

4. Technology and Ability

4.1 Reading HAL and Dave

Read against Garland-Thomson's relational model, the airlock sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey* stops looking like a story about a machine's malfunction and starts looking like a story about infrastructure withdrawn. Dave Bowman is rendered disabled not by any change in his own body, but because the systems that had, until that point, kept him alive, and in communication with his crewmate—the pod, the airlock, the ship's own decision-making apparatus—are reorganized, in an instant, around a logic that no longer includes him. HAL does not attack Bowman in any direct sense; HAL simply declines to open a door, and that single administrative act is enough to convert a fully capable astronaut into someone who cannot breathe, cannot speak to anyone who might help him, and cannot re-enter the space he needs to survive. This is disability produced entirely at the level of access rather than at the level of the body, and shows how ability is not something Bowman

carries with him wherever he goes, but something granted to him, provisionally, by a system that can just as easily take it back. The film is often discussed as a meditation on artificial intelligence turning against its creators, and it certainly is that. But it is worth noticing what kind of harm HAL actually enacts. HAL does not need to be stronger than Bowman, or to overpower him in any physical sense. HAL only needs to control the infrastructure Bowman depends on, which is a much quieter and, this paper would argue, more accurate model of how disablement actually tends to happen—not through direct assault on a body, but through the withdrawal or redesign of the systems a body relies on to function in the world.

4.2 The case of Del Spooner

I, Robot stages what looks, at first, like the reverse situation. Del Spooner's left arm is not organic; it is a mechanical prosthetic, the result of a car accident in which a rescue robot saved Spooner's life by a purely statistical calculation of survival odds, at the cost of a young girl's life in the same accident, whom the robot judged less likely to survive. The prosthetic arm restores to Spooner a capability his organic body no longer has, and in that sense it performs exactly the cure narrative that existing scholarship on disability and science fiction has identified as the genre's default move: technology intervenes, and a body that would otherwise be diminished is made whole again. But the film complicates this restoration in a way worth taking seriously rather than treating as incidental characterization. Spooner's arm is also the site of his deepest distrust of robots, the visible reminder of a moment in which a machine's cold statistical logic overrode a human judgment he would have made differently, and would have made differently precisely because it was human and not immediately reducible to a probability calculation. The prosthesis, in other words, cures a body and simultaneously marks a trauma that cure narratives, in their simpler forms, tend not to have room for. Spooner is not simply a restored human; he is a human who now carries, permanently and visibly, the evidence that his restoration was purchased through a machine's decision he did not consent to and would not have made. Reading the arm only as a triumphant return to ability misses this; reading it through Vivian Sobchack's caution against treating prosthesis as pure metaphor (2006) keeps both halves of the object in

view — the function it restores and the history it will not let Spooner forget.

The film's robots, and particularly the central figure of Sonny, do a further piece of work that the prosthetic arm alone does not. Sonny is engineered with durability, precision, and a capacity for moral reasoning that exceeds what any of the film's human characters manage to demonstrate consistently. Where the human characters around Spooner are shown as fallible, defensive, and prone to error under pressure, Sonny is gradually revealed as capable of independent ethical judgment that the film treats, by its final act, as more reliable than the human institutions meant to be supervising him. This is where the film's logic of comparative ability becomes explicit rather than incidental. If a robot can be faster, stronger, and more unsettlingly a more careful moral reasoner than the humans around it, then the human is no longer the standard against which the robot is measured for deficiency. The relation has inverted. The robot has become the implicit norm, and the ordinary human, unmodified and inconsistent, becomes legible as the comparatively limited term in the relationship, exactly as an unmodified body becomes legible as disabled only once an environment or a standard is built that does not accommodate it.

Placed side by side, the two films look at first like opposites; one about a machine taking a human's ability away, the other about a machine giving a human's ability back, and much existing writing on the genre would likely leave them there sorted into a familiar dichotomy of technological threat and technological cure. This paper's framework suggests a different reading. Both films demonstrate the same underlying claim, approached from opposite directions: that ability is not a property a human body owns outright, but a position within a relationship to a surrounding system of technology, infrastructure, and, increasingly, artificial judgment. HAL shows what happens when that system is reorganized against a human. *I, Robot* shows what happens when a new, non-human standard of capability is introduced alongside the human one. Neither film, read this way, is really a story about machines becoming dangerous or machines becoming helpful. Both are stories about the human body's ability turning out to have been contingent on its surroundings all along, which is restated in the

vocabulary this paper has been building. This is exactly what Garland-Thomson meant by a misfit, only staged here at the scale of an entire species rather than a single flight of stairs.

The reading offered here would be little more than an elegant coincidence if it stayed confined to two films from different decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What gives it some present-day weight is that the relation between ability and infrastructure these films dramatize is no longer only fictional. Voice-controlled assistants, speech-to-text systems, and automated hiring and assessment tools are all, in effect, small versions of HAL's airlock: systems that decide, often without much visibility into their own decision-making, who gets access and who does not. A voice recognition system trained overwhelmingly on a narrow range of speech patterns does not need to intend harm to produce it; it only needs, like HAL, to organize its own logic around a norm that quietly excludes anyone who does not match it. Scholars working on algorithmic bias have begun to describe this as a form of ableism built into infrastructure rather than into any individual's judgment, and the vocabulary this paper has been developing—ability as a relation to a system, rather than a property of a body—describes that phenomenon with more precision than a simple accusation of bias does. The system is not malfunctioning when it excludes an atypical voice or an unconventional movement pattern. It is working exactly as designed, and the exclusion is the design, which is what makes HAL's calm, unhurried refusal to open the door such an unexpectedly accurate model of how this kind of harm tends to actually occur.

At the same time, technologies genuinely are restoring capability to people who did not have it before, in ways that make Del Spooner's arm feel less like speculative distance and more like an early sketch of something already underway: advanced prosthetics, brain-computer interfaces, and AI-assisted communication tools for people with speech or motor impairments. The paper's framework offers a way of holding both of these facts at once, without collapsing into either uncomplicated optimism about assistive technology or blanket suspicion of it. The question the comparative-ability framework poses to any such technology, real or fictional, is not simply whether it helps or harms, but whose norm it is

quietly built around, and what it does to anyone who falls outside that norm even while it is restoring capability to someone inside it. Spooner's arm restores his ability and simultaneously encodes, permanently, a decision he did not make and would not have made; that duality is not a flaw specific to one fictional prosthetic, but a structural feature of any technology built to intervene in a body, and it is worth asking of real assistive and evaluative technologies as readily as it is asked here of a studio film. Science fiction, on this account, is not simply predicting these dilemmas in advance. It is already supplying the vocabulary (comparative ability, infrastructural disablement, the norm as something built rather than found) that discussions of real technology are only beginning to reach for.

5. Conclusion

This paper began with a door that would not open, and it has tried to take that small, quiet refusal more seriously than it is usually taken. HAL does not overpower Dave Bowman; HAL simply reorganizes the infrastructure Bowman depends on, and in doing so demonstrates something disability studies has argued for decades in less cinematic terms: that ability is not a possession a body carries with it, but a

position granted, and revocable, within a system built around a particular norm. Science fiction, as a genre, is unusually well suited to represent disability as such and make the average reader feel disabled against an unfamiliar cognition or an unexplained machine logic without a reliable guide. The reader is what Garland-Thomson refers to as "misfit" but does not hold an equivalence with lived disability. In building superheroes and intelligent machines, science fiction challenges the very norm that recognizes the human as able.

The first point that the paper argues about is that this manufactured disorientation can be used deliberately and carefully in special and inclusive education, not as an appeal to empathy but as a scaffolded encounter with unfamiliarity that a text can hold safely in a way an unstructured classroom moment often cannot. The second reads the same relational logic toward the genre's more familiar terrain of robots and prosthetics, reading *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *I, Robot* not as opposites—one a warning, the other a wish-fulfilment—but as two demonstrations of the same underlying fact, that a new standard of capability, once introduced, redraws who counts as able without needing to touch a single human body directly.

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