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Warning: This piece contains mild spoilers for the film *Glass*.

Difference is the bread and butter of the superhero genre. And to a degree, so is disability. Think *X-Men*'s paraplegic Professor X; the blindness and depression of Marvel's *Daredevil*; the facial scarring that catalyzes Harvey Dent's murderous mental illness; Iron Man's super-powered pacemaker; Deadpool's chronic pain. For better and for worse, comic books and the films they've inspired have never been the exclusive province of the able-bodied or mentally unimpaired. In many an origin story, physical or mental impairment is key to the powers and persuasions of heroes, anti-heroes and villains alike.

In this sense there is nothing distinctive about the inclusion of disability in *Glass*, a superhero thriller that oozes over-confidence in its own originality. The final installment in M. Night Shyamalan's *Eastrail 177 Trilogy* sees Samuel L. Jackson reprising his performance as wheelchair-bound terrorist "mastermind" Mr. Glass, a character created for the film *Unbreakable* in 2000. Alongside Mr. Glass, who has Type I osteogenesis imperfecta, *Glass* also features James McAvoy in his role from *Split* (2016) as Kevin Wendell Crumb, aka "The Horde": a man made threatening by virtue of his multiple personalities. Teaming up against Bruce Willis's hyper-able-bodied *Unbreakable* hero David Dunn, the two form a supervillain duo who call themselves "The Broken," plotting a mass murder whereby they might force the world to "kneel" before their kind (*Glass*).

What makes the film itself threatening is its reductive and regressive characterization of disability. If *Glass* does in fact manage to set itself apart, it is in Shyamalan's spectacular failure to thoughtfully interrogate the dehumanizing narratives that his film reinscribes. The narratives themselves, of course, are nothing new. Despite the writer/director's self-professed commitment to creative difference—"[I] don't fit easily into a system," he insists—his films propagate the same

stale stigmas surrounding physical and mental impairment that have dogged social and medical discourses for centuries (Deb).

Chronic disease and psychological disorders recur as plot devices across Shyamalan's career: from the asthma that inadvertently saves a child's life in *Signs* (2002) and the mass suicides triggered by mysterious brain damage in *The Happening* (2008), to the unspecified mental illness that prompts two asylum patients to murder and impersonate their attendants in *The Visit* (2015). In the latter film especially, as in the *Eastrail 177 Trilogy*, Shyamalan plays on common and inaccurate perceptions that people with psychological disorders are "dangerous and untreatable menaces who require psychiatric or forensic institutionalization," without which they are sure to perpetrate random acts of violence in their wider communities (Webermann and Brand).

McAvoy's show-stealing performances in *Split* and *Glass* bring these stereotypes to particularly vivid life. Key to his character's Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is the dominance of his 24th personality, "The Beast," whose superhuman strength lends itself to serial murders and cannibalistic brutality. "The Beast" embodies an entrenched belief that to be mentally ill is to be not only violent but less than human, a perceptual link traceable at least to classical philosophy. Aristotle, for one, rejected any form of mental aberration as *thēriotēs*, or "animality": evidence that a person's nature was "beyond" the pale of normative humanity (Ahonen 4).

Views of the mentally ill as bestial persisted across millennia. In the seventeenth century William Salmon, an English doctor and medical writer, characterized persons with insanity as "mad as wild beasts" endowed with "prodigious Herculean strength," which enabled them to "endure the greatest hunger, cold, and stripes without any sensible harm" (Salmon 56). As Mary de Young points out, in both the 17th and 18th centuries, ubiquitous representations of "the insane" as "wild beasts" directly influenced the treatment of asylum patients:

Whippings and beatings, seclusion in cold and dark cells, mockery and harassment by physicians, attendants and gawking visitors alike were endured by insane patients who were imagined to have neither the sense nor the sentience to be very much inconvenienced by any of it. (141)

Despite the asylum reforms which began in the United States around the 1840s, traces of these earlier treatments and their motivating logics haunt today's psychiatric institutions, many of which still use seclusion and mechanical restraint. For patients, such practices are both dehumanizing and dangerous; according to de Young, "one to three patients in asylums or other psychiatric facilities die each week from aspirating vomit, strangulation, heart attack or stroke while confined in straitjackets, wrist or leg straps, or other devices" (211).

So, too, do modern legal institutions depend on this disturbing history for their recognition and sentencing of defendants with mental disorders. What we know as the "insanity defense," whereby someone can claim lack of responsibility for their actions, has evolved out of the "wild beast test" used for centuries in courts of law (Meynen 13). As summarized by an English justice in 1724, this

test determined that a defendant “is totally deprived of his understanding and memory, and doth not know what he is doing, no more than an infant, than a brute, or a wild beast” (qtd. in Meynen 13).

The wildness of Shyamalan’s “Beast” reproduces this cultural rhetoric regarding mental illness as a generalized category. Moreover, the character also reinforces specific myths about DID. Critics of *Split* were quick to raise this issue following the film’s release. For one, DID doesn’t tend to manifest in “obvious and extreme” shifts between alternative identities; dissociation into different “alters,” as Tanya Peisley puts it, isn’t typically identifiable by a non-expert.

For another, in a 2017 review for *The Guardian*, Steve Rose cited the serious misgivings of neuroscientist Simone Reinders, who argues that films like *Split* wrongly characterize people with DID as “extremely violent and prone to doing bad things.” According to Reinders and other experts on the disorder,¹ “Individuals with DID definitely do not have a tendency to be violent; more a tendency to hide their mental health problems” (qtd. in Rose).

The host of Hollywood movies that sensationalize and mischaracterize DID (*Psycho*, *Fight Club*, *Me Myself and Irene*...) have only contributed to the ongoing alienation of people with the disorder. Put another way, the films themselves have disabling effects. As Rachel Adams has explained in her work on disability studies, “disability” is not the impairment itself—which she defines as “an acquired or innate bodily condition”—but rather the cluster of “social and environmental factors that exclude people with physical and intellectual impairments from full participation in the social world” (1-2). When popular media perpetuate unsubstantiated clichés, they further disable the groups whose experiences are appropriated, exploited and misconstrued.

Shortly before *Glass* saw its official release, Shyamalan was asked to comment in an interview with *The New York Times* on the concerns that mental health professionals had previously raised about *Split*. “That was a very minor thing,” Shyamalan retorted:

In fact, this would be the biggest mention of it in its history. It was like 1 percent of 1 percent of people even had that [criticism]. And there was a huge positive reaction to it. Obviously, when you see “Glass,” you will see the incredibly positive portrayal of the character and the core character and the things that they suffer from. (qtd. in Deb)

Breathtaking in their flippant dismissiveness, Shyamalan’s remarks also stagger in their suggestion that *Glass* is a “positive” step forward for representations of social difference. Sure, both *Split* and *Glass* pay some lip service to the (mostly accepted) theory that protracted childhood trauma is often a factor in the development of DID. It’s worth noting, however, that Crumb’s physically abusive mother—as we learned in *Split*—tortured Crumb in part because of her obsessive-compulsive disorder. Disability is the bad guy, once again.

More to the point, a traumatic origin story does not necessarily a “positive” representation make. As we see in the violent embodiments of both “The Beast” and Mr. Glass, these narratives risk

reducing trauma victims to cartoon characters: disabled men made monstrous by the fact of their suffering. “You don’t know what it’s like, Daryl,” Mr. Glass tells an asylum attendant whose throat he has just cut. “To be so different you don’t know where you fit.” Possibly this trite bit of dialogue is a genuine play for audience sympathy. Claiming “being different” as a cause for committing homicide, however, does little for the cause of reducing the stigmas surrounding difference.

What does serve the cause is the kind of generic deconstruction that *Glass* tries but fails to fully carry out. Shyamalan’s obsession with origin stories points to a broader set of problems in the superhero franchise; too often these tales turn to disability as trope—as a means of motivating action and moving plots forward—of making characters more complex, interesting and real. One way for moviemakers to resist this tendency, as cultural critic Chelsea Jackson has pointed out, is to hire disabled actors, writers and directors who can “craft more healthy representation for disabled characters.” Another is to recognize that “individual disabilities are just as diverse as the disabled community itself,” and that labels inevitably flatten out complexity rather than bringing it to life (Jackson).

As for moviegoers, we might also take the time to do some deconstructive work of our own. When we recognize that our cultural consumption is funding ableist narratives, we make possible the myth-unmaking that empowers marginalized people to reclaim their stories as their own.

¹In their 2017 study, Webermann and Brand demonstrate that “it is a myth that individuals with DID are the most likely patients in the mental health system to be violent.”

Image Source: “Glass’ Official Trailer #2” (YouTube)

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