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ABSTRACT

Josh Malerman's 2014 apocalyptic horror novel, *Bird Box*, reverses Gothic depictions of disability as monstrous or metaphor for ignorance or weakness by presenting disability as protection. Creatures roam the earth, the mere sight of which causes immediate insanity, violence, and suicide. This unexplained event introduces blindness as a necessary choice, complicating the dichotomy between blindness and sight by making sight a fatal disability. I argue that this novel pushes the boundaries of ocularcentric thought through both a version of horror independent of visual spectacle and a depiction of a community that thrives by revising attitudes towards visual impairment. Despite the significant exposure and punishment of ocularcentrism that the novel presents, its main character struggles to surpass her old, societal judgment of blindness when outside the community that helps her relearn new ways to navigate the world. The nonlinear narrative highlights a tension between blindness as life-saving and blindness as monstrous. The novel closes with the dread-filled reminder that true revision of ableist attitudes requires more than horror—even inclusive horror—to overcome fear-inspired stigma.

KEYWORDS:

Blindness, disability, *Bird Box*, Josh Malerman, horror, terror, ableism, apocalypse.

Apocalyptic fiction, particularly within the horror field, depicts dismantled social structures and institutions, as well as the constructs they perpetuate. It presents opportunities to rethink the strengths and weaknesses of human abilities and disabilities, while clinging to obsolete definitions and ideals. Sensory disabilities, at their core, challenge conventional methods of accessing knowledge and understanding the world. When the world shifts beyond understanding, however, previously-labeled disabilities offer new types of abilities.

In this article, I explore alternative ways of thinking about the role of sight within apocalyptic horror and its implications for literary engagements with disability. Josh Malerman's horror novel, *Bird Box* (2014), features characters without visual impairments who adopt such impairments voluntarily in order to protect themselves from something too dangerous to see. In the novel, unknown creatures roam the earth, and the sight of these creatures is so overpowering and unbearable that the human brain cannot survive it. Those who see the creatures fall into certain madness¹ and commit suicide in horrific ways. The only way to avoid this fate is to avoid seeing the creatures. And, the only way to avoid seeing the creatures is to avoid seeing anything.

Malerman's novel complicates the dichotomy between visual impairment and sight by reconfiguring sight as a fatal disability.

Bird Box demonstrates not necessarily how the blind are treated by the able-bodied—though there are instances that illustrate this—but instead how those who can see deal with the sudden and repeated experience of choosing to blindfold themselves. Characters relinquish sight while burdened with a pervading ocularcentric—or sight-centered—attitude, one that becomes constantly reversed by sight's new associations with horror, insanity, and death. As such, circumstances call for a revision of ableist attitudes toward visual impairment. While those who embrace temporary disability for protection acknowledge the danger of sight, at times they also cling to their old system of ableist values, prizing sight above all other senses and avoiding more expansive reevaluations of disability and the disabled. The text vacillates between promising reconfigurations of dis/ability and conservative returns to the destructive, ableist norm, or “ocularnorm.” By focusing on the shifting attitudes of the main character, Malorie, I identify a positive—though erratic—reversal of attitudes towards visual disability facilitated by Malerman's two significant contributions to disability within the horror genre: the expansion of traditional

¹ A broader study of disability within the novel would certainly include this concept of mental illness as threat. Characters within the narrative do briefly speculate about the effect of these creatures on those who already experience mental illness but draw no conclusions.

Articles

horror methods to prioritize other senses over sight, and the depiction of a community seeking to survive as visually impaired and its long-term effects through the language of fear. I will speak first about Malerman's unique creative strategies for rethinking the experience of horror by drawing on theory from the Gothic tradition before looking at the role and potential of community in the face of this new horror, a potential presented perhaps most effectively once the community ceases to exist.

The nonlinear narrative follows the survival of Malorie, a young woman who, in the present, has two children and, in the past, has just learned of her pregnancy as news of the threat breaks. In the present, she lives in a house that shows visible signs of violence, trauma, and death, and she anxiously readies her two young children for a blindfolded journey down the river to join a safer community. This present narrative is interrupted by chapters from her past. Early on, she and her sister strive to protect themselves, shielding their eyes outside the house and keeping the windows covered. But, though her sister takes the reports more seriously than Malorie does, she did not embrace visual impairment with enough care. Malorie becomes a true believer when she finds the window uncovered and her sister in a pool of her own blood. Shielding her eyes as much as possible, she drives to a house advertised as a safe space and, typical of apocalyptic narratives, she and another pregnant woman, Olympia, are welcomed into a group that becomes progressively more reluctant to trust newcomers as the old social structures deteriorate. However, the group fares better than most by developing systems for survival, scouting for food, and drawing water from the well: rather than finding ways to see, they adapt to their new sightlessness.

Adopting visual impairment on a voluntary basis is not equivalent to involuntary—as is typical—visual impairment, but it does expose the dangerous effects of an “ocularcentric” view of the world, “a perspective—and, by extension, a subject position—that is dominated by vision...” and that produces, as David Bolt terms it, the “ocularnormative,” that “visual perception is necessarily the normal way of gathering knowledge” (17-18). Many Disability Studies scholars carefully choose the term “visual impairment” to avoid the negative connotations in which blindness is steeped, as well as to differentiate those with visual impairments as positive and those without visual impairments as negative: having and not having. As Bolt and Beth Omansky describe, visual impairment comes in many shades and severities, but often not total blackness or darkness, whereas “blindness” suggests a state of totality, without flexibility or vacillation in experience. It is an ocularnormative ideology that informs such an oversimplification: if vision is impaired, it might as well be completely absent (Bolt 18). In this article, I will be using both the terms “visual impairment” and

“blind.” “Blind” is the term Malerman chooses to use in the novel, whereas “visual impairment” does not appear; thus, I will be using “blind” when speaking directly about instances in the text. However, I will also use the terms “blind folded,” “protected,” and “unprotected,” which more accurately describe the nuances of the situation in which characters voluntarily protect their lives by impairing their vision. These terms build on Bolt's positive diction: while they do prioritize seeing, they also reconfigure vision from a source of knowledge, participation, and beauty to one reduced to danger.

TERROR TO HORROR: GOTHIC SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

The Gothic tradition has played with visual effects in literature since its origins in the eighteenth century. Horror and the Gothic have typically been read as modes that vacillate between striking visuals and dark shadows: characters caught between hiding their eyes from a horrible sight and needing to see in order to navigate the threats around them. Visual description can have a powerful physical effect on the reader/viewer, but what is unseen has the ability to affect the body and mind in other ways. In both providing and withholding dangerous visuals, the Gothic manipulates the reader by taking advantage of the reader's desire to see, which, in desperation, is transferred to the mind's eye. In this way, the Gothic both rewards and punishes ocularcentrism, heightening fear within the safe bounds of the text. *Bird Box's* premise is invested in the Gothic tradition of terror and horror as theorized by Ann Radcliffe in her essay, “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (c.1811-1815). Radcliffe's work is characterized by the “explained supernatural,” the suggestion of supernatural elements, events, or beings that are later proven natural through rational explanation. Scholars contrast her novels to the work of Matthew Lewis, whose texts embrace the supernatural as it is and often combine it with excessive gore and violence. Partially to distinguish her techniques from Lewis's, Radcliffe lays out definitions that distinguish between terror and horror. Terror, she explains, relies on “obscurity, or indistinctness... which leaves the imagination to act upon the few hints that truth reveals to it.... Obscurity leaves something for the imagination to exaggerate” (315-316). In other words, terror leaves the threat unseen, allowing it to dwell within the imagination and sharpening other senses of alertness in the process. Terror creates suspense, the senses poised to the minutest indication of danger.

In seeking blindness, the characters in *Bird Box* choose obscurity and, therefore, terror. Though they do not see the creatures, they become aware of their other senses, which make them alert to their surroundings, an effect that, in many ways, reinforces the often-exaggerated perception that those with visual im-

Articles

pairments have impossibly keen hearing, smell, or touch. Heightened hearing and unguarded, unexpected touch are both born out of and add to terror in the novel. As she rows the boat with her children in it, Malorie notes her body's response to trying to navigate what she can't see: "There is her own breathing and her heart pounding, too. And beyond all this noise, from somewhere inside it, comes a sound she immediately fears. Something is in the water with them" (45). A harmless, unexpected noise—because it remains unseen and, therefore, unknown—is amplified. As Susan Crutchfield notes, "Blind characters are deployed for their capacity to be shocked masochistically by an unexpected touch": lack of sight leads to lack of awareness of the surrounding environment, according to the ocular norm, and heightened senses caused by terror make them all the more vulnerable (282). Blindfolded, Malorie cannot anticipate sudden sounds or touches by observing the actions that cause them, transferring the shock she feels to the reader, who also becomes blindfolded. She has no way of knowing what the something in the water is, intensifying her attention: both Malorie and the reader imagine that it may be one of the creatures, though neither has the ability to confirm this suspicion.

Malorie herself defines Radcliffe's concept of the terror when she thinks, "It's your idea of what they look like, and details are added to a body and a shape that you have no concept of. To a face that might have no face at all. The creatures of her mind walk horizonless, open fields" (317). Malorie's image of these creatures combines parts of the imagination that are not themselves bound to the visual. Even without hearing, smell, and touch, the sensation of terror calls on the imagination to sense other things. Soon after the children are born, Malorie goes alone to search for supplies. She suddenly "felt the true scorching sensation of fear... the sort of fear that hits her when she's wearing a blindfold and suddenly knows there is someone else in the room" (262). She "knows" because, in her terror, her heightened imagination and senses tell her, leaving open the possibility for Radcliffe's explained supernatural: that this speculation based on other senses may turn out to be false or misguided. Protected, Malorie appears to be bound to terror. But Malerman challenges Radcliffe's use of terror, as every instance of suspected threat turns out to be real, gore finding its way to Malorie's senses—despite the blindfold—to verify this reality. This invasion of gore—typically visual—into other senses turns terror into Radcliffe's other defined term, horror, while challenging the visual privilege included in that definition.

What the blindfolded and protected characters seek to avoid by repeatedly choosing terror is a full confrontation of horror, a full *visual* confrontation with the threat before them. Radcliffe describes the difference between terror and horror as "so far opposite, that the first [terror] expands the soul, and awak-

ens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other [horror] contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them" (315). Whereas terror heightens the senses and awareness, horror dulls them, inhibiting a proper, sometimes life-saving, reaction by overwhelming it with excess. Traditionally, horror is most accessible through visual interaction with gore and the grotesque, a Romantic-era concept adopted and perpetuated by the modern horror film. As Crutchfield explains, the horror film, particularly the slasher film, is grounded in multiple layers of visual narrative to such an extent that "the killer/monster takes advantage of vision's embodied vulnerability in his physical attack," which becomes "part and product of the genre's attempts to maintain for vision a privileged, powerful status within culture" (276-277). Malerman demonstrates the role of visual privilege in Radcliffe's description of extreme horror through visual encounters with the creatures: viewers' senses are not just dulled, they are obliterated in a total loss of the self. While Radcliffe claims that terror depends on obscurity—the prevention of seeing clearly—horror depends on confusion—*excessive seeing* beyond comprehension or rational thinking. She says that confusion "may, by mingling and confounding one image with another, absolutely counteract the imagination, instead of exciting it.... confusion, by blurring one image into another, leaves only a chaos in which the mind can find nothing to be magnificent, nothing to nourish its fears or doubts, or to act upon in any way..." (316). The overwhelming confusion of seeing, thus, becomes more threatening to the individual as he or she sees that the threat is real, rather than merely suspecting that it is.

In protecting themselves from seeing the creatures and experiencing self-obliterating horror, the characters in *Bird Box* also avoid seeing many other things, particularly past and present deaths. The few times members of the house community go exploring, they do not see the decaying corpses they pass in the street. They do not see those around them violently committing suicide. But, they do hear, smell, and feel them. Malorie hears the change in a friend's voice as she begins to lose sanity, and she hears her housemates going mad from behind the safety of a locked door. Later, in one of the most horrific scenes in the novel, Malorie takes a dog with her when she ventures outside the house. Convinced that dogs and other animals are immune to madness, she does not blindfold the dog, expecting him to lead her to safety. However, this trip makes clear that animals are in fact just as susceptible to fatal sight as humans. The dog begins breathing too hard, then making strange and angry noises, then swinging his body about violently. She hears every step of his insanity's progression. Without seeing any of it, she loses herself in that moment, the kind of loss Radcliffe describes as the effect of horror: confusion, immobilization, and chaos. Rather than motivating

Articles

her forward as terror might have done, these sounds obstruct her, shutting down the mind as the body feels too much. Thus, horror is achieved without its typical reliance on sight.

Sounds like these form a vital part of the horror film tradition. Malerman admits that he used to cover his eyes during horror films before he realized that “if you cover your ears all these scary images lose 90% of their power” (Cude). In fact, when asked in an interview about whether he would like to see his novel translated into film, he replied, “It’s hard not to want the movie to be pitch black, a blindfolded audience, crazy sounds and soundtrack.... What self-respecting horror fan wouldn’t want to be blindfolded, sitting in a movie theater, while all this crazy shit is going on around him?” (Picker).² Malerman suggests that what film can do with sound is similar to what he does with it in his novel: create a way to access horror that expands Radcliffe’s ocularcentric definition. As Peter Hutchings says in his survey of horror film, “The established conventions of sound in mainstream cinema dictate that sounds be appropriate to their source. [The horror genre’s] departure from this in certain circumstances...enables films to signify the monster as an entity not fully bound by the ‘natural’ order.... that bestow[s] a supernatural quality upon particular images of monstrosity and deviance” (132). I would argue that what Malerman is doing with sound and horror in *Bird Box* is more innovative than this because it involves simultaneous sounds: unsettlingly appropriate to their sources and more horrifying because of it. The sound of a leaf crunched underfoot becomes more terrifying than an unfamiliar, otherworldly sound because the source of such a common sound cannot be identified. The sounds of gore and madness in the novel certainly align with their sources in a way that hearers wish they did not. Thus, Malerman turns terror into horror, reimagining horror as auditory in ways that create debilitating effects, while sidestepping the essential element of sight. The emphasis on sound without the accompanying visuals in this text creates new, more expansive ways to experience the type of horror that Radcliffe describes, ways without privileging sight.

NAVIGATING VISUAL IMPAIRMENT WITH AND WITHOUT COMMUNITY

While a common reaction to sudden visual impairment or even the thought of becoming visually impaired is fear, *Bird Box* flips this fear to sight and what can be seen. Individuals with visual impairments commonly experience a denial of their subjectivity, as those with vision speak about them as if they were

not there, patronize them, or ignore them altogether (Bolt 9). In Malerman’s novel, however, *sight* destroys subjectivity, individuals who see the creatures losing a sense of self before destroying themselves. Barriers to sight that create an artificial impairment are, therefore, repeatedly referred to as protection throughout the novel: blindfolds for individuals, blankets covering windows for groups. Those who choose visual protection must re-acclimate themselves to a new way of navigating and understanding the world. Once so reliant on sight, they still inhabit a world constructed for those who can see. Thus, the novel presents the intricacies of an ocularcentric world that must be dismantled by those who suddenly find visual impairment necessary.

The community in the house seeks to navigate this world. It survives in part because there is a well in the backyard, and they devise techniques to make their regular trips to draw water, such as leaving markers like broken chair legs along the path to guide them. They use each other’s voices for assurance and proximity, one member of the house standing at the door, talking, while the other keeps track of how far he or she has gone by following the voice. Both are blindfolded. Yet, these extra protective measures do little to alleviate the vulnerability they feel being outside and blindfolded, unaware of who or what might be in their midst, and it is here that fear asserts itself into their measures of security. During one trip to the well, the housemate Felix detects something in the water, then footsteps on the grass; convinced he is the presence of a creature, he bolts for the house, even though he remains blindfolded. There is no evidence that the creatures can cause any damage unless they are seen. Yet, to allow one into the house would negate the only relatively safe space for free sight: something they still hold dear during this time of transition. The others inside the house immediately blindfold themselves and conduct a thorough search through hearing and touch to ensure that nothing followed Felix. Even for this, they have devised a system: “One by one the housemates sit upon the living room’s carpeted floor. They are shoulder to shoulder, back to back. In the centre of the room, the couch against one window, the kitchen chairs stacked against the other, they sit in silence. They listen” (116). This collective learning objective—to find new ways to understand and navigate the world—chips away at the old socially-instilled, ocularcentric attitudes as they discover alternatives *together*, providing the reinforcement that such revised beliefs require. The chapter breaks here, leaving the group employing other senses in order to fortify their stronghold. The next chapter picks up with Malorie using these same skills in the present day.

² At the time of writing this article, there is a film version of *Bird Box* in production. It’s unclear how important visuals will be to the film at this time, but promotional materials suggest that it will not be pitch black.

Articles

Yet, what these systems cannot always confirm or alleviate is the sensation that they are being watched, on the receiving end of the victimizing gaze. While the characters in *Bird Box* are disallowed from the traditional powers of the gaze against the creatures, there is nothing to stop the creatures from directing the gaze at them. What's worse, there is no way to verify whether or not they are being watched and, thus, the tendency is to assume that they are. Nothing about the creatures seems to be dangerous except their visibility, and Malorie must remind herself of this as she notes the presence of the creatures through stray sounds, including the sounds of people and animals going mad around her. She imagines that "They stand outside the windows of former homes and gaze curiously at the glass. They study. They examine. They observe. They do the one thing Malorie isn't allowed to do. They look" (317). The objectification felt by these characters mimics that felt by many individuals with disabilities, particularly visible impairments, who are so often on the receiving end of the gaze or the stare. After all, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes in "The Politics of Staring," "The history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased" ("Politics" 56). The stare establishes a relationship of difference between the starrer and the staree, one within the bounds of acceptable embodiment and one without ("Politics" 60). The stare and the gaze—familiar concepts within the Gothic through which a subject, usually female, is objectified by a male character—are variations of the same type of control. However, as Garland-Thomson claims, the stare may also hold a genuine attempt to understand non-normative bodies, whereas the gaze is primarily about power, even if it is hidden behind admiration, protection, or assessment. Both Bolt and Garland-Thomson place the unseen stare in the context of the male gaze, defined by "privilege, entitlement, and objectification" (Bolt 96). Bolt explicitly states that "the unseen stare constitutes a comparable position of privilege that certainly seems to entitle some people to look at and objectify those of us who have visual impairments. If the male gaze is men doing something to women, then the unseen stare involves those of us who do not have visual impairments doing something to those of us who do" (96). Looking at those who cannot look back is, therefore, a demonstration of power, regardless of the motivation.

Despite the discomfort and terror they may cause, whether or not the creatures are watching does not, essentially,

matter. In a general sense, power resides in visibility and looking, but this is not the power of those who look; it is, instead, the power of those who are seen, a complete reversal of the Gothic use of the gaze and the role of the stare within Disability Studies. A traditional tool of objectification and abuse, the gaze, the stare, the look, has now become one that destroys the viewer, one that, though it traditionally rewards ocularcentrism, in this case, punishes it. The only way to avoid this punishment is not just to blindfold oneself but to repeatedly choose this type of protection, a choice and a condition counter to the ocularnorm that, with the help of a supportive community, revises that norm. Without the ability to relearn norms in groups, however, those forced into protective blindness do so with the old socially-constructed destructive attitudes towards visual impairment.

When the trouble first begins, those with strong investments in the visual world resist the reports. Despite growing danger, Malorie disparages those who protect themselves from sight, harboring an aggressive insistence that those who *can see should see*. Criticizing protective measures as paranoia, she calls this behavior—opting not to see—"insane" rather than considering the sacrifice as logical and protective. She points to a man on the street performing blindness—closing his eyes and walking with a white cane—and says, "And look at that guy!" mocking the voluntary relinquishment of sight even further by directing her sister to do what she fears: to look (28-29). Shannon, in turn, insists that "nobody's ashamed to act like this," acknowledging and dismissing familiar stigmas against disability: that it becomes a source of shame for both those with impairments and those without who don't know how to treat them (29). While Malorie clearly feels discomfort at this behavior, she appears to be the only one, as "People were advised to lock their doors, cover their windows, and, above all, not to look outside.... A blackout, Malorie thinks. The world, the outdoors, is being shut down," or, more accurately, shut out, a loaded metaphorical description for readers experiencing increasing willful ignorance or fear-motivated prejudice on a national, even international level (37).

Literary interpretations of blindness as metaphor are common and, as many Disability Studies scholars³ acknowledge, can offer fruitful conclusions and applications, but they often ignore disability as a legitimate experience in its own right (Davis xi). Malerman himself says, "Sure, the blindness is a metaphor.... You can't even look outside because everything's so crazy, espe-

³ Amy Vidali, for example, explores a great number of approaches to metaphor in her article, "Seeing What We Know: Disability and Theories of Metaphor" in a 2010 volume of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*. Through her research, she admits, "there is no possibility of breaking the links between metaphor and disability," but there may be ways of considering them differently (47).

Articles

cially in America.... And I live in Detroit! There's the economy, and the fact you can't even open your door any more without going nuts" (Braun). The novel may certainly be read this way, and even one of its characters brings this to attention. Gary, the newest member of the house community, maintains skepticism of the situation and argues:

"What kind of man cowers when the end of the world comes? When his brothers are killing themselves, when the streets of suburban America are infested with murder... what kind of man hides behind blankets and blindfolds? The answer is MOST men. They were told they would go mad. So they go mad.... We do it to ourselves we do it to ourselves we DO IT to OURSELVES. In other words (make note of this!): MAN IS THE CREATURE HE FEARS." (273)

This is, perhaps, the most literary interpretation of the novel, and it is certainly a viable way to read it. Yet, as Amy Vidali and Tanya Titchkosky outline in their works on disability and metaphor, Gary accuses those characters who choose visual impairment of avoiding what they don't want to acknowledge, at the same time that he himself fails to acknowledge visual impairment as not only a legitimate experience but a positive one: a life of survival and adaptation. As Titchkosky says, he "dehumanizes" at the same time that he points out "dehumanization" (6). At the same moment that Gary pronounces his literary interpretation of their situation, the creatures arrive to challenge it, re-legitimizing the necessity for visual impairment. Malorie, her eyes closed, witnesses the madness and suicide of Olympia as Gary, his eyes open, narrates it, describing the death with unsettling excitement that signals his own loss of sanity: in a characteristically Gothic birth scene, Olympia hangs herself with her umbilical cord. Her sight of the creatures is real, and the destruction that results is real, at least as viewed from within the world of the text when the suggestion of metaphor is presented. We can and should look at the disability in this novel—and in all literary representations—beyond its potential for metaphor.

In writing about the role of metaphor in José Saramago's 1995 novel, *Blindness*, Liat Ben-Moshe articulates a common portrayal of visual impairment as metaphor: "Blindness, like all disabilities, is also normatively viewed as a personal tragedy, something inflicted on the individual, a condition that a person suffers from. This narrative is closely related to a medical narrative claiming treatment and cure. *Blindness* should not be embraced and experienced as an identity, equal to any other, but should be pitied and/or treated." In other words, visual impairment, in *Blindness*, represents not only ideas that sidestep the experience of being blind but do so in such a way that makes blindness overwhelmingly Other and negative. Gary's criticism of people who

sacrifice sight to save themselves from the creatures implies that there is also something selfish about visual impairment: they do it to themselves, and they have the power to stop it. The house community stands in stark contrast to this attitude in its pursuit of adaptation, cooperation, and survival. They do not focus on finding ways to see—to "cure" themselves or the world of these creatures—but to navigate the world successfully as visually impaired.

That sight of the creatures causes immanent suicide—referred to at first as "the problem"—speaks to the sobering real-life and literary correlation between disability and suicide bolstered by a societal ableist view that life in a body that does not fully function is not worth living and is, even worse, a burden to others (36). Outside metaphor, this is the most common literary engagements with disability—the other being inspirational—and seems geared towards an ablest audience: be glad you're not disabled (Kleege 3-4). Bolt discusses the relationship between suicide and disability as a result of such attitudes (124-125). Malorie, maintaining ocularnormative values, articulates this attitude when she makes the startling statement about raising children who will never see the sky, "You are saving their lives for a life not worth living" (6). The children themselves, though young, show no sign that they agree, and Malerman's depiction of sight, rather than blindness, as the catalyst for suicide flips this conventional association between disability and feelings of worthlessness: protective blindness *prevents* suicide. The children, of course, seem perfectly happy as they are.

Even Malorie, struggling with a reemerging dangerous ocularcentric worldview, finds herself acclimating to visual impairment. Near the end of the novel, years after she has begun wearing a blindfold everywhere except her darkened house, she leaves the safety of the house to row down the river towards a safer community. At a fork in the river, she will hear a motion-activated recording and must *open her eyes* to choose the way. As she struggles to reorient herself to where she is, who she is, and what she's trying to do, this loss of focus makes the reader wonder if she may be starting to lose sanity as the others have: "At first, she has to squint. Not from the sunlight, but from the colors.... In the old world, she could have looked at a world twice as bright and not had to squint. But now, the beauty hurts her.... She must close her eyes again. She must cut herself off from all this wonder, this world. She closes her eyes. She returns to the darkness she knows so well now" (366-367). Constantly negotiating her persistent ocularcentric values and her new adaptation to protective blindness, Malorie experiences sight as disabling in this moment. Only when she returns to the protection of blindness can she reevaluate her position and respond accordingly, choosing the right river path. In this moment of sight, she briefly acknowledges the acceptance

Articles

and independence that are possible without vision, remnants of the positivity her community had started to develop.

MONSTROSITY: SIGHT AND SIGHTLESS

The monster has been one of the most visual elements of the Gothic tradition, but *Bird Box* shifts the focus from visible to visionless. In present day, Malorie turns the accusation of “monster” away from the creatures and towards what she can see: her children and even herself. While the house community worked proactively to expand their senses to reduce feelings of disability, Malorie loses her ability to rethink blindness when she’s no longer in a group. If the house community represents ways of thinking that challenge ocularcentrism by embracing new ways to navigate the world, Malorie reverts to her old judgment of the man with the white cane; she retains the ableist view of disability as pitiful, distasteful, and oppressive. And, in this judgment, she calls up the traditional gothic figures of monstrous mothers and monstrous children: her children for the superhuman ability to hear and she as their creator, for training them to have it.

For the house community, wearing a blindfold quickly becomes a compulsion, to the point that they feel naked and exposed without one. Unprotected, the *choice* to close your eyes in moments of horror—moments that overwhelm and cloud the mind—is a significant risk, one that kills many within the house who, frantic to save each other and themselves, forget what it is that can destroy them. Malorie, restricted in the locked attic, thinks, “Who has their eyes closed down there? Who has the presence of mind? Would Malorie? Would Malorie have been able to close her eyes as her housemates went mad?” (343). The answer to her first question is, of course, no one. And, because of the choice and the presence of mind required to make that decision—countering years of ableist thinking—when one of the housemates earlier suggests that Malorie and Olympia physically blind their babies the moment they’re born, Olympia finds it cruel, but Malorie is almost convinced. To remove the choice not to see the creatures would be the ultimate protection: permanent blindfolding. The way that she describes this idea, however, shows her rational fear of physical impairment but also betrays her continued dedication to ocularnormativity: it “opened the door to a realm of harrowing possibilities, things that might need to be done, actions she might have to take that nobody from the old world could ever be fully prepared to endure. And the suggestion, dark as it was, never entirely vanished from her mind’s eye” (162). She almost blinds the children with paint thinner, until she spills some on her hand, which she claims, “made it real” (165). She may not physically maim or deform them to protect their lives, but she does train them to the same ends, resulting in an outcome she constantly

judges with disdain, just as she judged the man with the white cane.

Malorie’s silent Othering of her children as they prepare for their journey to safety focuses on their reprioritization of sound over sight, their complete unreliance on seeing to function, all of which Malorie taught them. She describes the different training sessions in which she blindfolded them in the house, making noises that she challenges them to identify. When they accurately identify noises that she did not even realize she was making, she begins to feel alienated from them. She thinks with a mixture of defensiveness and resentment, “she was raised on sight” (24). Her sentiments portray the reemergence of ocularcentrism, even though she must continue to wear the blindfold, a reemergence that I suggest is caused by the loss of the community she had begun to associate with her ability to survive in a sightless world, a community that was learning alongside her, not surpassing her to become Other. Though she has heightened her abilities, there is no doubt that self-hatred has merged with these changes, which she projects onto her children.

In fact, Malorie often seems to hate and distrust the children, even fear them. As she silently prepares for the journey, she remarks, “the children sleep soundly, covered by a black cloth, hidden from light and sight. They do not stir. They show no signs of being awake. Yet, they could be listening to her. Sometimes... Malorie believes they can hear her think” (4). To reestablish authority, she attempts to gaze at them unseen but suspects that they know, negating this authority. Because they do not rely on sight, she has imagined their trained ears to have supernatural, invasive hearing beyond human abilities: they can “pluck sounds from the silence” (189). Several times, she refers to them as becoming machines and monsters, showing little affection for them but going to great lengths to protect them all the same.

How many times did she question her duty as a mother as she trained the children into becoming listening machines? For Malorie, watching them develop was sometimes horrific. Like she was left to care for two mutant children. Small monsters. Creatures in their own right capable of learning how to hear a smile. Able to tell her if she was scared before she knew herself. (191)

Though she displays fear and resentment towards the children, she blames herself for what they have become. In perhaps her most ocularcentric comment, she criticizes her fitness as a mother when she speculates about what so many years of not seeing the sky will do to them, forgetting that such is the case for many individuals with visual impairments. Without the support of the house community to help her redefine her relationship to the world without sight, she devolves into ocularcentric judgment of

Articles

both herself and the children she has raised, unable to stop these protective practices but hating herself for them. In doing so, in a reaction against blindfolded children whose ability makes her feel disabled, Malorie makes monstrous what is merely a different and more suitable kind of norm in this environment.

Malorie struggles with something that disability activists have sought to articulate and express to policy makers struggling to define disability. As Garland-Thomson explains, the Americans with Disabilities Act, “acknowledges that disability depends upon perception and subjective judgment rather than on objective bodily states: after identifying disability as an ‘impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities,’ the law concedes that being legally disabled is also a matter of ‘being regarded as having such an impairment’” (*Extraordinary* 6, emphasis added). The act places emphasis on perception rather than self-perception, giving others the power to define one as disabled or not. On the river, Malorie encounters a man claiming that he wears no blindfold because he doesn’t need one, and neither does she. He attempts to convince her to remove it, criticizing her and calling her “insane” for limiting her senses without cause. He mirrors the ocularnormative thoughts she has had about her parenting when he says, “There’s no need to live like this, miss. Consider these children. Would you rob them of the chance to view a brisk, beautiful day like this?” (77). But, with another person to resituate her, Malorie regains the footing she had achieved with the house community, maintaining her position of protected blindness. Whereas incidents like this occur for those with disabilities with some frequency, being told what they can and cannot do, Malorie in this moment recovers the new way of existing in the world that the house community helped her to achieve, resisting ocularnorms and an ocularcentric view of herself and others.

This perspective disappears, however, when she finally reaches the settlement that promises them protection. Rick, the person in charge, brings us back to the man with the cane, except that, whereas the first man merely closed his eyes, Malorie is horrified to find that Rick has permanently blinded himself, the scars visible on his face and that of many others who live there. Rick and these others introduce for the first time individuals with actual, physical visual impairments, and Malorie treats them as more terrifying than the creatures that threaten them all. She, in this moment of terror, maintains the hierarchies of acceptable bodies promoted by the ableist norm. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, “one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others” (*Extraordinary* 7). Despite the new dangers of sight and the benefits of blindness, Malorie continues to value

bodily wholeness, in spite of Rick’s claims that their community was blinded only because it was the safest option and that this is no longer true.

When she realizes that Rick is blind, Malorie fixates on the label: when she meets him, “‘Rick,’ she says, pulling the children close behind her, ‘you’re blind’” (372). Bolt calls this reduction of individuals to their label, “normate reductionism,” and it transforms safety to just another space of fear: these people cannot know how to protect those with sight if they themselves are blind—though there are people among them who must still rely on blindfolds (46-48). The text, reflecting Malorie’s interpretation of the world, depicts Rick as just as monstrous as her children. But, whereas the children become monstrous because superhuman, the blind characters become monstrous because subhuman, degenerated forms of what they once were.

His eyes are open but they do not focus on any one thing. They loll in his head, glassy and grey, and lost their glimmer years ago. His full head of brown hair hangs long and shaggy over his ears but does not hide a deep and faded scar near his left eye. He touches it apprehensively, as if feeling Malorie’s gaze. She notices his wooden walking stick, worn and awkward, bent from some broken tree limb. (372)

Thus, the label of blindness affects the way that Malorie sees not just his eyes but also his entire body, including the way that he moves. Derogatory descriptions, such as eyes that loll, disheveled hair, and especially an awkwardness in movement—which, describing his walking stick, extend to his walk—are part of what Bolt describes as the “metanarrative of blindness,” the typical tropes into which blind characters fall rather than elements of realism that depict disability as it is experienced by those with impairments (11-13). Malorie, despite all that she has seen and done herself, despite her previous attempt to blind her children, projects this “metanarrative of blindness” onto Rick, incapable of seeing beyond it. Having associated him with safety for so many years of planning to leave the house, Malorie now revises that association in an instant, replacing it with suspicion, danger, and fear.

When a group of blind women enter the room, the effect is one of horror in the Radcliffean sense, the monstrosity of what Malorie sees before her preventing her from thinking clearly. She describes them as they “tap walking sticks, their hands waving in front of them. The women move quietly, ghostly, past Malorie, and she can feel her stomach sink as she sees their cavernous, hollow eyes. She feels light-headed, sick, like she might throw up” (374). She sees—a word I use intentionally—these women as helpless, deformed, a mass rather than individuals, and she fears that, rather than choosing this, they must have had it thrust upon them. Instead of simply describing their entrance, she turns their actions

Articles

into what Bolt calls “a grotesque representation of independence,” turning them and their ability to function without sight into something completely Other (79). Rick, sensing her fear, explains that they felt they had to do it, suffering an invasion just like Malorie’s house had, which claimed the lives of most of their community. To prevent future loss, they took away the choice of fatal looking. Having fortified their compound, they no longer blind themselves, and many new occupants can see just as Malorie can. This appears to dispel her immediate fears, but there is little sense of relief, the text ending abruptly here. In this new world of protective blindness, her own attitudes prevent her from fully embracing either her children (as superhuman) or this community (as subhuman), despite the welcome that both groups extend.

Despite the exposure and frequent punishment of Malorie’s ocularcentrism, the text ends with a conservative return to the ocularnorm. In the context of the new community’s prevalent blindness, the instructions for reaching the community present evidence that even Rick’s group, despite its suggestion of equanimity for those with and without permanent impairments, privileges sight for new members. The most daunting step in the process is not navigating the river but choosing the right path. Malorie *must* open her eyes to see which branch of the river to follow. Without this crucial step, guidance towards safety ends there. In other words, an individual with physical visual impairment—who cannot make the frightening choice to see—could not reach this sanctuary.

Bird Box importantly presents an optimistic glimpse of revised attitudes towards disability in the house community and the frequent punishment of Malorie’s ocularcentrism as she works to feel safe in this new world in which her greatest ability has become her greatest disability. Malerman poses complex reconfigurations of blindness as positive and protective in the context of the current threat, depicting along the way the struggles to rewrite the ocularnormative narrative the characters have followed their entire lives. The text, thus, maintains an ocularnormative view of disability as inherently negative, while also—and more importantly—showing the dangers of this restrictive view. Malorie finds the sanctuary she sought, but, though she seems convinced that the new community does not pose a threat, Malorie’s adherence to ocularcentric values lingers, leaving the reader with strong feelings of uncertainty and unease for a future in which these values are productively and justly revised. The text ends with this conservative return to the ocularnorm. With Malorie reluctant to assimilate herself into a community that she sees as traditionally disabled and, therefore, Other, the novel closes with the dread-filled reminder that true revision of such attitudes requires more than horror to overcome fear-inspired, ableist stigma.

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