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Making autism through *Ocean Heaven* (海洋天堂, *Haiyang tiantang*) and the possibilities of realizing disability differently

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a filmic portrayal of issues relating to autism in a Chinese context, using this as a prism through which to consider how meanings associated with disability in general, and the autistic spectrum in particular, are produced. Instead of perpetuating a reductive positive/negative approach to representation, the article focuses on the fluid and dynamic ways in which author and audience co-produce texts relating to disability in ways which are invariably influenced by, and reproducing of, specific socio-cultural and discursive circumstances. Meaning-making in relation to disability is, however, ongoing and there is potential to realize disability differently.

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Points of interest

- This article analyses a filmic portrayal of issues relating to autism in a Chinese context, highlighting the complicated, and seemingly unintended, ways in which a 'well-meaning' representation is made into a text by virtue of being read within specific socio-cultural and discursive circumstances.
- This article reveals how, through engagement with the film, author and readers reproduce and, albeit to a lesser extent, negotiate with cultural codes and discourses relating to, and problematic assumptions about, autism.
- This article reflects on the challenges to, and possibilities of, realizing disability differently.
- This article claims that questioning, and perhaps even deconstructing, mediated constructions of disability, and the socio-cultural and discursive contexts in which they are produced, provides possibilities for reading and writing disability differently.

Introduction

In contrast to the Maoist past when there was a paucity of filmic representations of disability, images of impairment have become increasingly prominent in Chinese cinema (Dauncey 2007, 482).¹ This article focuses on one such depiction, namely *Ocean Heaven* (海洋天堂,

Haiyang tiantang),² a film in which Xincheng, a widower diagnosed with terminal cancer, seeks to secure residential arrangements for Dafu, his 21-year-old, low-functioning autistic son, after his death as well as instil in him rudimentary skills necessary for independent living. Despite containing instances of human suffering, Xue Xiaolu, the writer-director, intended *Ocean Heaven* would highlight autistic people's 'simple, invincible optimism', sentiments elaborated upon by Jet Li, the celebrity-actor playing Dafu's father.³ While recognizing such good intentions, this article highlights not only how, as Mitchell and Snyder put it, even "'well-meaning' representations [can] ... result in violent justifications' (2001, 212) but also how texts form in ways which exceed, and perhaps even subvert, their author's objectives. This is because meaning-making relies upon the interplay between authors and readers in socio-cultural and discursive contexts. 'Things don't *mean*', Stuart Hall claims, instead 'we *construct* meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs' (1997, 25; emphasis added). Although analysis of a programme can, as Fiske observes, 'identify the main discourses out of which it is structured', it cannot *of itself* identify the discourses that the viewer will bring to bear upon it to make it into a text that bears meanings for him or her' (1987, 15; emphasis added). Barthes asserts even more emphatically that the meaning of a work – its essential message – lies 'not in its origins', or author, 'but in its destination', or audience (1977, 148), a fact which led him, famously, to proclaim the death of the author.

Such ways of thinking about representation give specific connotations to terms permeating this article, namely author, reader, text and discourse. Although the term author is used to refer to the writer-director of *Ocean Heaven*, this should not imply a monopoly over meaning-making. Because reading and talking about media are, as Fiske argues, 'part of the process of making a text out of it' (1987, 15), text is used in an inclusive sense to refer to that which emerges through the interplay of author and reader. The term text is also used to denote that sense in which they, as is indicated by the Latin *texere*, 'weave, join together, plait or braid; and therefore ... construct, fabricate, build or compose' (Barber 2007, 1). Such meaning-making invariably occurs within certain socio-cultural and discursive circumstances in ways which illustrate the oft-said, albeit somewhat enigmatic, assertion that persons do not speak discourse, but 'discourses speak us' (see, for example, Fiske 1987, 15). As Stuart Hall explains:

it is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produce knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the *discursive formation*, the *regime of truth*, of a particular period and culture. (1997, 55; emphasis added)

It is, therefore, as Titchkosky explains, necessary to address texts 'in their full sociality': 'Texts are more than mere mediators of pre-existing messages ... How people put disability into text ... can thus be examined so as to reveal the organized enactment of disability' (2007, 27). Nevertheless, neither author nor reader is a prisoner of these discourses. Instead, persons actively take them up and, as Davies notes, speak them 'as if they were their own' (1993, 14).

More specifically, this article first explores the structure, architecture, intrinsic form and 'play of ... internal relationships' (Foucault 1984, 103) in *Ocean Heaven* by trying, as far as possible, to present an impartial discussion rather than my own reading.⁴ While recognizing the manifest content – much of which seems to relate to the author's intention to construct a 'positive representation' – the film contains latent content which appears contrary to such purported intentions. Because, as Barthes claims, the 'birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (1977, 148), the second part of this article explores how readers make meanings out of the film. My presentation of readers' responses is drawn from two

sources, namely my own reading and analysis of comments placed on Douban, a website enabling approximately 53 million registered users (according to Wikipedia) to create content relating to film, books and music and social issues. Given that on 1 December 2015 there were over 24,000 *duanping*, or 'brief comments', relating to *Ocean Heaven*, I refer to a fraction of the material. It is nevertheless contended that commentary on Douban reveals how meaning-making relating to disability is an ongoing, sometimes violent, process which not only reinforces but also, albeit to a lesser extent, questions what Hughes evocatively terms the 'building blocks of the emotional infrastructure of ableism' (2012, 68). Finally, this article seeks to further understand such understandings of disability as they unfold through engagement with *Ocean Heaven*, arguing that by reading our readings, or interpreting our interpretations, 'reflexive space' can be opened up in which it might be possible to conceive 'alternate (plural) interpretations' (Titchkosky 2007, 102–103) thereby, as Mitchell and Snyder note generally of the contemplation of representations of disability, affording insights into the 'dynamic interchange between culture, author, text, and audience' (2001, 203).

Manifest and latent, or Utopian and Dystopian, content

The following paragraphs explore the levels of realism, or figurative layers, in *Ocean Heaven*. While the first may be compared with the rippling surface of a river, the latter are more like its underlying currents. The first, which contains the manifest, or intended, conscious and anticipated content can, echoing Jameson's first reading of Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes*, be seen as a utopian gesture, namely one in which the raw materials of reality are reworked and transformed into 'a hallucinatory *surface* of colour ... as an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses' (Jameson 1984, 58–59; emphasis added). The second layer, meanwhile, which contains the latent, or unintended, unconscious and unanticipated content and consequences, is more dystopian. Although these levels of realism, or figurative layers, are presented separately, they are blurred, with manifest and latent – utopian and dystopian – blending together, like watercolours on a wet page. Such co-existing layers, namely the author's purported aim of constructing a 'positive representation' and the inclusion of dystopian elements that seem thwarting to these ends, can be resolved by conceptualizing the film as a figurative battleground between three approaches to representation. The first is an intentional model whereby 'the author ... imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language' and words 'mean what the author intends they should mean' (Hall 1997, 25). The second is a 'reflective approach' in which language and media reflect the 'true meaning as it already exists in the world' (1997, 24). More than 10 years working with autistic persons might, for example, have created tensions between what the author wants to say – namely create a 'positive representation' – and how society 'really is'. However, because language, as Derrida has argued, is 'always threatening to outrun and escape the sense which tries to contain it' (Eagleton [1983] 2008, 116) it can produce 'meanings that proliferate beyond an author's *conscious* control' (Crowley 1989, 7–8; emphasis added), thereby giving rise to a third way of thinking about representation. In this regard the text might be viewed as realistic, albeit 'not because it reproduces reality ... but because it reproduces the dominant sense of reality' (Fiske 1987, 21), as defined by discourses and communicated through cultural codes which, as Cuff, Sharrock, and Francis note generally, serve to 'anchor' or 'secure' a story's 'conviction' ([1979] 2006, 192). Thus, in this third sense, the text becomes a 'complex contrivance' – an 'elaborate construction'

(Cuff, Sharrock, and Francis [1979] 2006, 192) – with the author speaking, while being spoken by, discourses while reproducing them, rather than a neutral medium through which reality is portrayed mimetically.

Manifest content

The characters in *Ocean Heaven* confront situations of huge personal crisis. The film begins by thrusting the audience into the middle of a failed suicide attempt, arranged by Xincheng for both himself and Dafu because, as we later discover, he has a terminal illness and recognizes that Dafu will not be able to look after himself after he dies. Although the presence of such elements endorses Michalko's claim that disability and suffering 'have been paired throughout history and remain inseparable companions' (2002, 1), the portrayal of suicide and the despair and hopelessness which presumably precipitated such an act is encoded in such a way that it is difficult to feel melancholy. The cinematography and score, for example, in conjunction with the inept implementation of the suicide reduce the sense we should be genuinely fearful for Xincheng and his son. As the film unfolds many other predicaments become plot devices within a narrative which resembles those overcoming stories that Titchkosky notes are 'common, repetitive, and frequent and which provide opportunities for 'special people', in this case Xincheng, to 'show their spirit' (2007, 181). As Murray explains, such narratives proceed from 'the representation of an impairment to the overcoming of the difficulties that are seen to come from it', a trajectory which 'provides all manner of resolutions: individuals prove their integrity ... communities learn from the dignity of the afflicted; humanity as a whole triumphs and we are all rewarded' (2008, xvi). Even their suicide attempt inspires, by virtue of being unsuccessful, Xincheng to believe that maybe he can, albeit against the odds, find a 'place on earth for him [his son] to live', endeavours which culminate in the discovery of an institution for persons with mental impairments. Because Dafu cannot cope with being left there alone, his father teaches him to be more independent so as to be able to manage after his death and, drawing upon swimming – Dafu's favourite activity – Xincheng explains to his son that he will be reincarnated as a sea turtle. After his death it appears Dafu has succeeded in making this connection as the film ends with him swimming with a sea turtle, holding onto, and appearing to gain support from, its back. Such 'ordinary underwater scenes' are transformed, according to Lin (2010) in a review in *The China Post*, by virtue of the cinematography into 'majestic liquid worlds'. The film ends with Dafu shown living within an institutional context, filled with caring staff while having developed the skills necessary to manage some aspects of his everyday life independently and, significantly, enter into public spaces without assistance. Such manifest content leads O'Neal to claim that '*Ocean Heaven* provides a ... positive perspective', demonstrating that 'with patience, love, and understanding, even an autistic person on the lower end of the spectrum can learn to be independent and can live a good life' (2013, 43).

Engaging with Dafu and his father are members of a caring, kind and generous supporting cast, the most prominent of whom is a female neighbour who is identified as Xincheng's love interest although it seems he is too preoccupied to notice such matters. So moved is she by Xincheng's situation – as well as perhaps being besotted by him – that she later proposes, offering to adopt a maternal role to Dafu, although this is refused by Xincheng who is unwilling to allow her to sacrifice her future in this way. Also appearing in the text are a retired teacher, a temporary circus performer with whom Dafu strikes up a friendship

with romantic implications, and a caring employer who permits Dafu to accompany his father to work at a local aquarium. Such persons seem devoid of instrumental reason and they resemble Goffman's description of 'the wise', namely persons who are 'normal' but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it' (1963, 28; emphasis added). However, emerging as the central protagonist in what I initially, but erroneously, interpreted as being his (i.e. Dafu's) narrative is Xincheng. Dafu is, echoing points made by Titchkosky elsewhere regarding the defining features of the 'overcoming story', 'made into a kind of ablest opportunity' (2007, 184) or plot device through which Xincheng can display his value as a parent. The on-screen message at the end of the film stating that *Ocean Heaven* is 'dedicated to all the ordinary heroes among our parents' and the decision to release it in cinemas on Father's Day makes explicit that this content is intended rather than latent.

Latent content

Despite the author's intention of creating an optimistic message, despondency and anguish infiltrate the film. Although this is partly a consequence of techniques deployed by the author, the author is not wholly in control of the ways this insinuates itself into the film. Disconsolation emerges as a consequence of the nature of the material difficulties of Dafu's impairment, the circumstances of Xincheng's impending death and the situations in which they become embroiled. If we re-examine the fictional suicide we cannot, for example, escape from the fact that, even though it is encoded in such a way as to make it unchallenging for readers, this violent act is the best and presumably only outcome Xincheng can conceive of in a context which displays symptoms of what Beck (1992) has termed a 'risk society', namely one in which, as Inglis and Thorpe explain, 'radical uncertainty rules' and where 'desperate attempts are made to try to control what may be uncontrollable' (2012, 272). A sense of emptiness also permeates the text. Aside from their intermittent contact with the previously mentioned supporting cast – 'the wise' – the protagonists move through desolate urban streetscapes, frequenting empty shops and swimming pools, all of which signify other absences; namely not only Dafu's mother, whose death is implied to have been a result of suicide – perhaps an imaginative, implicit, re-rendering of the 'refrigerator mother' theory of autism associated with Bettelheim (1967) – but also the extended family and a society which, implicitly, they are dislocated from. After their failed suicide attempt, for example, and a momentary glimpse of an urban intersection at dusk, we enter the micro-world in which Xincheng's and Dafu's lives are framed. All is quiet, static and so unlike Chinese urban spaces that they possess dream-like, phantasmagoric, qualities. This silence, and stillness, resonates with Hogan's insight, made in relation to deafened people, that 'silence overshadows the experience of disability when it is construed within notions of stigma and shame' (1999, 82). This silence, as Hogan explains, 'skips over the difficulty of surviving a marginalizing process. It is a silence ... people have to endure and from which they seek to escape' (1999, 82). The fact that Dafu and his father can hear arguably makes these silences even more menacing. As they pass by people, it seems like a stage set. Dafu and Xincheng do not even seem to be, as other persons cut adrift in neoliberal China, fighting against what Simmel terms the blasé outlook characteristic of mental life in metropolitan spaces (see, for example, Ta 2013, 83). Instead they simply seem invisible, almost ghost-like presences which, of course, they will be, whether actually, symbolically or socially, once the narrative has run its course.

Discourses

Ocean Heaven has two levels, and although one is manifest, the other, deeper, level is rigorously dependent upon discourse which, as Stuart Hall explains, provides ‘a language for talking about – a way of representing ... – a particular topic at a particular historical moment’ (see, for example, 1992, 291). One discourse produces Xincheng as a ‘self-enterprising citizen-subject who is *obligated* to become an ‘entrepreneur of himself or herself’ (Ong 2006, 14; emphasis added). Such neoliberal logic constructs Xincheng as only reliant upon social structures in death, which not only shifts accountability away from the state or communities, implicitly working as a rationale for divestment in care, but also propagates the notion that autism can be fought ‘through perseverance and love’ (Murray 2008, 15). By depicting disability as an individual problem, the film reproduces a medical model of disability, reflecting, as Keith puts it, cultural assumptions about ‘individuality, personal autonomy and self-determination within a society in which great value is placed on “standing on your own two feet”, “staying one step ahead”, “standing up for yourself”, “walking tall”, and so on (1994, 57 as quoted in Swain, French, and Cameron 2003, 22). Such elements normalize and naturalize the autistic adult’s exclusion from quotidian community life, showing Dafu as largely institutionalized and only a fleeting, ghost-like, presence in the ordinary life of society. As he sits on buses at the end of the film, for example, he passes unnoticed. In this regard, Dafu is included on the surface of the film but his exclusion is preserved in the depths of the film. The film therefore implies this is the way it must be, masking how there are, and have been (see, for example, Foucault [1965] 1988), other ways of coping with persons like Dafu, in life and in death and with or without parental presence. The fantastical resolution of the film acts as a medium through which, as Rice et al. note generally, we are ‘taught that disabled people live unliveable lives’, at least inside ‘ordinary’ society (2015, 524). Such resolution, moreover, not only normalizes Dafu (by showing him as having found ways to ‘overcome’ his impairments) but also smoothes over the very real anxieties experienced by ageing parents of dependent adult sons and daughters in ways which, according to my reading, seem likely to increase rather than decrease such worries, so far is the filmic ending from the likely or imagined outcome. This, as Nichols notes regarding another depiction of disability, misrepresents disabled experience, allowing the reader to think ‘all things are possible *if you just try hard enough*’ which, as a consequence, ‘lets the reader and society off the hook’ (2016, 115; original emphasis). Thus while the film avoids perpetuating many of the recurring stereotypes ascribed to disabled persons in the media, namely as being either sinister and evil or having special powers, *Ocean Heaven* propagates the notion that disabled persons are incapable of participating in community life (Barnes 1992).⁵

Such properties make *Ocean Heaven* display features ascribed to myths which, as Barthes explains, establish ‘a blissful clarity’ (1973, 143), making that which is contingent appear as if they could not be any other way than how they are. Seen as myth, the film contributes to what Bogard provocatively terms a society of ‘smoothing machines’ (2000, 269), glossing over, as Shakespeare puts it in another context, ‘the political issues regarding their predicaments (1999, 168). This ableist discourse reminds Dafu and his father that it is not – as Baudrillard notes in another context – ‘enough to die’, they ‘must learn to disappear’ (1995, cited in Bogard 2000, 284), for Xincheng literally and for Dafu socially and symbolically. The film, therefore, clarifies through representation what is possible in life, and by portraying their predicaments as resolved by already existing social structures the text removes the

need for 'audiences to take a moral stance vis-a-vis what they see on the screen and act in the present', as Kyriakidou notes generally of media witnessing (2015, 217), while also reflecting a medical model framework which regards the 'surrounding environment and culture within which impaired individuals are situated ... as unproblematic' (Swain, French, and Cameron 2003, 23). More specifically, although Dafu's personal narrative reflects a public narrative that 'out of sight is out of mind', it is rendered in such a way that the interplay between the individual and wider society is denied, instead depicting the situations Dafu and his father confront as what Wright Mills terms 'personal troubles' rather than 'public issues' (1970, 14), in a manner which works toward ideological containment.

Ways of reading

As Fiske notes, while a programme 'proffers some meanings more vigorously than others ... other meanings may be made' (Fiske 1987, 16; emphasis added). De Certeau, meanwhile, observes that 'once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analyzed, it remains to be asked what the consumer *makes* of these images ... What do they do with it?' (1984, 31). The following paragraphs address such matters, exploring how readers make meaning out *Ocean Heaven*, drawing not only upon 'talk' on Douban but also my own reading of the film. These conversations, as Fiske explains, constitute 'part of the process of making a text out of it' (1987, 15), thereby contributing to the production of autism. Specifically, it is argued that as discourses 'speak' and 'write' authors, so they shape readers' responses to the film. In addition to persons who orientate to the smoothed, aesthetic qualities of the film, readers display two emotions, namely pity and fear, which, according to Hughes, are 'the major – though not the exclusive – building blocks of the emotional infrastructure of ableism' (2012, 68). While much reading seems intent, whether consciously or unconsciously, upon stabilizing, consolidating and perhaps even fortifying boundaries between 'abled' and 'disabled', commentary on Douban indicates that these categories bleed into each other. Because of the amount and variety of commentary on Douban, the fact I have no knowledge of the interpretive frameworks which, as audience studies specialists note, invariably impact upon specific viewing positions or attitudes, as well as the tone, or mood, in which such posts were written, the viewing positions identified in the following should be read cautiously and as neither exhaustive nor self-contained.

Aesthetic qualities/detached observers

Much commentary refers solely to the aesthetic qualities of the film. The following remark exemplifies these tendencies, a post which attracted 266 'useful' comments:

Jet Li attracted big-names to the cast, Hisaishi as the composer, Jay sang the theme song, William Chang edited, and Christopher Doyle was the cameraman ... The cast did not make the film fade colour, Jet Li's acting is really good ... and his performance as an ordinary but great father is very genuine ... He deserves to win best actor.

As a consequence of casting a non-autistic actor to play Dafu, many responses centred on the ability of the actor 'to mimic the supposed behavioural characteristics' of persons with impairments, as Shakespeare has observed generally of instances when non-disabled persons play disabled roles (1999, 165). By orientating to aesthetic qualities, more generally, readers' stances resemble what Kyriakidou terms 'detached witnessing', namely when the

suffering of others is experienced as 'something remote or ultimately irrelevant to the viewers' everyday life' (2015, 226). Characteristic of this position is an 'absence of affective language' which maintains, and perhaps enlarges, 'distance between the viewer and the scene of suffering ... in a way that renders their witnessing a story devoid of any moral imperative' (2015, 226). As Peters notes of drama, by releasing readers from moral obligation, audiences experience 'terror without danger, pity without duty' (2001, 721).

Such readings are shaped by the author's 'readerly' rather than 'writerly' style, a contrast Barthes (1975) makes in *S/Z*. While the former is 'written to be easy to read', making the reader into a 'mere recipient of the message the text delivers', the latter 'demands a contribution of the reader, making the reader into an active participant' (Cuff, Sharrock, and Francis [1979] 2006, 192). Readerly features are evident in the author's deployment of all elements of Baker's autistic formula (2008, 231–234). Dafu is, for example, immediately made to signify his autistic difference by his name which would, as persons on Douban pointed out, unlikely be given to a 'normal' person, his repetitive usage of language and his endearing, innocent, quirky and vulnerable qualities. Meanwhile, during the film *Dafu*, like filmic representations of autists in general, is endangered and then rescued in a manner which, as Osteen explains, can reassure audiences that 'the neurotypical are truly able, truly valuable' (2008, 31). While such readerly features enabled most readers to recognize Dafu as autistic, this also led readers to criticize the film on the basis that it was aesthetically inferior to other representations:

As a film about autism, it is not in the same league as *Rain Man*, *Temple Grandin* or *Mary and Max*.⁶

Other readerly elements – for example, the celebrity of the actor playing Xincheng, the beautiful, smoothed and sculpted torso of Dafu as he swims, the stunning cinematography and score, the extraordinarily resilient parental love, the 'overcoming story' and, significantly, the fact that the actor playing Dafu is not autistic – render autistic symptoms in non-threatening ways. Although my notes written both during and subsequent to viewing the film made cynical references to readerly elements, especially the over-determined depiction of autism, they also indicated that (even though I did not realize this at the time) readerly elements provided psychological protection from the realities portrayed. This not only indicates readerly ambivalence but also the double-bind faced by persons seeking to represent autism:

On a Saturday night in July 2015, I finally watch *Ocean Heaven*, after several years of not being able to face watching it. Watching films with autistic characters typically leaves me feeling bad either because the characters are so heavily-signposted or because they focus upon persons occupying the purportedly higher-functioning part of the figurative autistic spectrum. However, when portrayals focus upon the lower end of, or 'challenging behaviour' associated with, the spectrum, I feel even worse because of the harrowing nature of the rendition. I remember watching *The Black Balloon*⁷ – whether my memory is accurate I'm not certain – especially the penetrating sun, windows with light reflected in them and the muscularity of the autistic boy who, as I recall, had faeces smudged upon it at one stage. This powerfully resonated with my own memories and experiences, both past and present, of the autistic spectrum, through my brother whose body, even now, retains that intense muscularity and robust rigidity, or even brittle, hunched, terseness, despite bearing the marks of middle-age. Despite feeling sharp, powerful and sometimes painful senses of recognition when watching *Ocean Heaven* (largely because my family and I were, and continue to be, experiencing similar situations to those depicted albeit, thankfully, without the impending immediacy of a terminal diagnosis but merely the gradual, yet nonetheless painful, effects of age upon my brother's two primary carers) I felt strangely buffered from issues depicted in the film.

Such readerly features conspire to produce a hyper-real version of autism by virtue of the representation being liberated from that to which it purportedly refers. In contrast to denaturalization when, as Couldry notes, a media map of 'what is', in this case constructions of autism, can conflict with other powerful maps (2012, 85), the relative invisibility of autistic persons means there is nothing for these representations to attach themselves to. Instead Dafu exists only intertextually, being comparable with previous renditions of the autistic spectrum which he is compelled to express, lest audiences fail to recognize him as autistic. Because media maps of the autistic spectrum coincide with other signifiers (e.g. they too apply the 'autistic formula'), this results in what Couldry terms an '*intensified* naturalization, or a "hard-wiring", of certain values, distinctions and exclusions into cultural, social and political discourse' (2012, 85; original emphasis). As a consequence, the autistic spectrum comes, as Foucault notes of renditions of madness, to display 'a kind of absurd unity', forming fragments which isolate audiences from themselves 'but above all from reality; fragments which, by detaching themselves, form 'the unreal unity of a hallucination, and by very virtue of this autonomy impose it upon truth' (1965, 93).

Ableist emotional infrastructure

Hughes argues that 'circulating constellations of emotion both inform the non-disabled imaginary and invalidate disabled bodies', exploring how 'emotions are lived and experienced through bodies, how cultural politics implicate the affects in the stratification of society, and how the process of othering and invalidation rest upon a psychic bedrock made from moral divisiveness, intolerance and ... prejudice' (2012, 68). Specifically, Hughes identifies fear, pity and disgust as being the major, although not exclusive, 'building blocks of the emotional infrastructure of ableism' (2012, 68). On *Douban* there is not so much evidence of what might be termed disgust, perhaps because Dafu is so smoothed as to remove those behaviours which might, probably, generate such emotions. Thus many autistic practices such as playing with saliva or excrement and drooling are erased, so as to neither cause offence nor be polluting to abled readers, in the sense elaborated upon by Mary Douglas (1966). The film did, however, still seem to engender fear in readers, as I explore under the subheading below. When readers used a language suggestive of pity and compassion, it seems they were engaging with the film in the way the author 'wanted', endorsing Shakespeare's observation that disabled characters are often 'a vehicle through which the film-maker can *enable* viewers to discharge emotion' (1999, 164; emphasis added). However, such sensibilities were often articulated in conjunction with criticisms regarding the aesthetic qualities of the film and irritation regarding the fact readers saw these emotions as being manufactured, factors which seemed to prevent viewers becoming 'involved in the story' (1999, 164).

It is jerking tears for the sake of jerking tears.

Very light film, very heavy life. The social meaning this film is trying to convey is bigger than the quality of the film.

This film's meaning is bigger than its artistic quality. The content and the actors are not any better than other emotional dramas ... But this film can encourage awareness of the social welfare system and inspire care and love of disabled people. Because of this it is not just another tear-jerking film.

While pity is sometimes taken to be a positive emotion, it is important to note that pity is something both disabled individuals and organizations are intent upon overcoming (see, for example, Titchkosky 2007, 195). Rousseau argues, for example, that pity is transformed in the real world from a 'characteristic that tempers and moralizes the instinct of self-preservation' into a 'base symptom of social inequality' by virtue of the fact that 'people are driven to compare themselves ... and ... to seek domination over others' (Hughes 2012, 70–71). Pity is, therefore, 'accompanied by a certain kind of contempt' (Miller 1997, 25 as quoted in Hughes 2012, 71) and is, as Hughes argues, 'a hierarchizing emotion in which superiority is at work in those who feel it and inferiority the projected status of those who are its target' (2012, 71). Such insights suggest that when persons on Douban respond to the film, and the persons and issues depicted therein, with pity, they are, whether consciously or otherwise, finding means of assuaging fears generated by the film by 'putting clear emotional, physical and social distance between themselves and the source of this kind of visceral identity shock' (2012, 69). In this regard, pity is, as Hughes claims, 'a mechanism for disengagement' (2012, 67), a factor which might explain why readers appeared resentful, and perhaps even angry, when they were denied the opportunity to read the film in this way by those previously discussed deficiencies in the aesthetic qualities of the film.

Abled/disabled dualism and fear on Douban

Bronwyn Davies explains how current understandings of what it means to be a person require individuals 'to *take themselves up* as distinctively male or female persons, these terms being meaningful only in relation to each other and understood as essentially oppositional terms' (1989, 234; emphasis added). Davies proceeds to argue that so:

deeply is the linguistic division assumed to be reflective of a 'real' state of affairs that the idea that a person could be other than male or female is almost unthinkable, though each of us has probably experienced ... moments in which we were aware of not correctly achieving ourselves as an appropriately gendered person. (1989, 234)

Such important insights are as true of abled and disabled identities, and can inform how we understand, and come to terms with, language that seems derogatory and perhaps offensive, even to persons reading this article:

Jet Li [Dafu's father] is acting more like a retard than Wen [Dafu].

The filmmaker is a retard.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome should be as clever as normal children. Some even have special abilities. So why does the actor give us the impression he is behaving like a retard?

While words like 'retard' are, as Wiley notes, extremely problematic (2013, 28), they must be engaged with since they provide insights into the identities of persons deploying these words and the socio-cultural and discursive contexts in which they are produced. Words, as Bakhtin notes, taste of the contexts in which they live socially charged lives (1981, 293). Such insights suggest it might have been better not to translate the term *ruozhi*, or 'retard', into English since the term in English has, like 'cripple' and 'spastic', not only lost its original meanings but also become a term of abuse (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999, 6). Nevertheless, given that '*ruo*' is translated as weak, feeble, or young and '*zhi*' denotes wisdom, wit and resourcefulness, with the characters combining to denote deficiencies in these aforementioned qualities it might be seen, structurally at least, as equivalent to, and perhaps even

imported from, other English clinical diagnostic terms which are now, but only in relatively recent years, considered to be blatant and crude terms of abuse (Corbett 1996, 4), such as 'cretin', 'idiot', 'imbecile', 'moron' and, most closely, 'feeble-minded'. Because Stone notes that since the 1980s there have been official attempts 'to challenge disabling language and re-define disability' (1999, 137), it is important to ask why *ruozhi* is deployed when words like *canji*, or 'disabled', 'an apparently new and neutral term' (Stone 1999, 136), have been officially promoted as preferred terms.

Although the appearance of *ruozhi* might indicate the ineffectiveness of such rhetoric, it can also be seen as an instance 'in which short phrases and even single words carry ideological significance' (Priestley 1999, 93). Specifically, these words could be illustrative of 'bad-mouthing', namely 'the means by which the dominant discourse is maintained by the established elite', through processes like labelling (Bidder 1996, ix). Words on Douban forge sharp hierarchic distinctions between 'disabled' and 'abled' persons, and therefore constitute attempts to impose labels upon 'others' in ways which increase social distance and therefore consolidate positive abled-person identities, with negative disabled-person identities a crucial means through which these are achieved. 'The body beautiful', as Hughes poignantly explains, 'creates its eugenic opposite and proceeds to tyrannize the forms of physical and mental difference that are products of its own existential insecurity' (2012, 69). As Hogan observes with regard to Davies' work, persons posting and reading commentary on Douban might, to some degree, learn to recognize discursive categories that include some people and exclude others and then 'participate in various discursive practices that give meaning to these categories', as a consequence not only beginning to 'position themselves imaginatively in relation to such categories' but also coming 'to recognize themselves as having an identity within them' (1999, 101). In this regard, Douban might be seen as an ableist community given that, as Titchkosky notes, community can refer not only to specific locales but also imagined spaces 'where some set of values and assumptions are called upon to organize community borders, and to establish, loosely or rigidly, who belongs and who does not' (2007, 64). Words like *ruozhi* might, accordingly, be read as uncomfortable examples of those "'flourishes and decorations", "aesthetic frills" and so forth' which, as Cohen notes, are deployed when community borders become threatened ([1985] 2007, 44), therefore being defensive.

Bakhtin's claims that words lie 'on the borderline between oneself and the other' and that the 'word in language is half someone else's' (1981, 293) compel words like *ruozhi* to be seen in the context of what he terms 'addressivity' and 'answerability', namely as being addressed to someone and anticipating a response (1986, 95). As Davies points out, 'language cannot be understood simply in terms of a structure. It is primarily a process': 'There is a speaker and a listener, a writer and a reader' (1989, 238). When words like *ruozhi* appear, they often receive no comments. Such silence speaks, and might be complicit, and even violent, in ways which evoke that chance conversation on the train to which Adorno refers when, to avoid dispute, 'one consents to a few statements that one knows ultimately to implicate murder' ([1951] 2005, 25). While keeping silent can be associated with social situations in which 'participants perceive their relationship vis-à-vis one another to be ambiguous and/or unpredictable' (Basso 1970, 224), this should not obscure how by being silent – something we undoubtedly do ourselves – we, as much as the persons who use these words, become accomplices in the 'carceral network', or 'carceral archipelago' to which Foucault refers that 'reaches all the disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society' (1977, 298). To the 'society of the

teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, [and] the “socialworker”-judge, to whom Foucault refers, upon whose ‘universal reign ... the normative is based’ (1977, 304) we should, accordingly, add ourselves: the audience, reader, or spectator, judge who perpetuates ‘modes of ordering’, or classifying principles. Because these are ‘applied consistently and pervasively’ they can become universal reference points, as well as ‘licensing other generalizations and constructions without effective resistance or contradiction’, thereby resulting in ‘a “reality” that ... seems consistent, orderly, unchallengeable and yet whose consistencies are based on a series of discriminations and exclusions that are largely hidden from view’, as Coudry puts it in another context (2012, 88). These are the worlds we make when, as Titchkosky puts it, ‘we *do* typical and expected disability talk in ordinary daily life’ (2007, 7; original emphasis). This reveals the violence with which normality is policed in everyday life as persons grapple with alterity, especially in circumstances when persons push at the ‘walls of the architecture of ableism’ (Hughes 2012, 69).

Even though Dafu conforms to the ‘politics of looking good’ (Dauncey 2007) and therefore does not display elements of autistic behaviour that might challenge audiences and is, crucially, devoid of imagery of ‘our visceral, animal, messy selves’ which, as Hughes notes, impairment reminds us of (2012, 73), Dafu can still be interpreted as unsettling readers in ways which indicate the narrowness and fragility of normality, as it is defined in contemporary societies. It is, in short, possible to interpret posts on Douban such as ‘Wen Zhang has big eyes and he looks too clever to be autistic’ as indicating fear, with words like *ruozhi* deployed to shore up ableist identities which are threatened by evidence in Dafu – and therefore by implication ourselves – of what Freud terms the primordial lurking in everyone ([1941] 2002).⁸

Conversations on Douban, and the texts they contribute to, might therefore be read as being intent upon making that which is fluid, indeterminate, contingent and incommensurable adopt a fixed, determinate and coherent form, thereby generating security for the persons who produce, consume and circulate them. Giving names to things in flux serves to stabilize, excluding other configurational organizations of the data tending in different directions (Mannheim 1952, 20). Words and the texts they contribute to might, as Dyer notes of the role of stereotypes, ‘make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality [more] fluid ... than the dominant value system cares to admit’ (1993, 16). Because stereotypes are, as Lippmann notes, ‘the fortresses of *our* tradition, and behind its defenses *we* can continue to feel *ourselves* safe in the position *we* occupy’ (1956, 96 as quoted in Dyer 1993, 11; emphasis added), so texts contribute to what Nelson Goodman terms worldmaking, a process which involves ‘taking apart and putting together’ and ‘dividing wholes into parts and partitioning kinds into subspecies’ (1978, 7). As Goodman explains, any order they generate is achieved only ‘by painstaking fabrication’ (1984, 21). Such conversations should, therefore, be seen as reflecting, while serving to reproduce, disability discourse which, as Swain and Cameron note, might be seen as a means through which ‘the social identities of those *who consider themselves to be normal* ... are *secured*’;⁹ a process which ‘involves the systematic social exclusion and marginalization of *others* ... who are identified in terms of their deviance from an imagined ideal’ (1999, 75; emphasis added). It seems, however, according to my reading that fears and doubts persist, despite such manoeuvres, with Dafu’s autistic presence disturbing these boundaries: as the previously cited person put it, the protagonist ‘looks too clever to be autistic’.

Struggles surrounding language

Some readers on Douban seem uncomfortable using words like *ruozhi*, not only recognizing bias in language but also rebuking persons who perpetuate ‘disabling’ language. In response to a post that used the term *zhizhang*, or intelligent deficient (or ‘retarded’), to refer to autism (or ‘*guduzheng*’), for example, one person incited them to learn more about autism, highlighted the derogatory connotations attached to the words being used and explained a bit about the autistic spectrum:

A: Why does a person with autism [in the film] look like he is handicapped?

B (reply to A): Actually you should try to become familiar with autism yourself. The way you’re asking is a bit insulting (*wuru kouyi*, translated as ‘insulting tone’). Autistic people live in their own world. He doesn’t want to and can’t understand his surroundings.

C (reply to B): Autistic people also have some intelligence damage [*zhili sunshang*].

D (to B): Some autistic people have high intelligence. There are people with Asperger’s and high-functioning autism. Children with Asperger’s normally have a high IQ.

E (to B): Your saying is insulting to handicapped people. What’s wrong with [the word] handicapped?

B (to E): Yes, you are right, I am sorry!

Such a conversation can be regarded as relating not only to semantics, as Oliver notes of struggles regarding language in general (1996, 44), but as questioning ableism, thereby revealing how disability can be constructed within different discourses. Because such posts challenge conventional thinking regarding disability and the language with which it is described, they might indicate how meaning-making relating to disability, and autism in particular, is both negotiated and ongoing, and constituted and reconstituted through various discursive practices. Although person B, cited earlier, already seemed sensitive to disabling language, there might nevertheless be epiphanic qualities in the way ‘yes, you are right’ was uttered; as if the person had entered into the ‘uncomfortable region’ to which Foucault refers by renouncing ‘the convenience of terminal truths’ (1965, ix) such as those relating to ‘ability’ and ‘disability’. It is tempting to read such commentary through a ‘cyber-utopian’ lens although perhaps this might say more about deficiencies in the cultural mapping of disability offline than it does about the positive properties of online communications. Like Don Quixote, person B’s madness might have ‘grown conscious of itself’ although, as Foucault asks, ‘is this sudden wisdom of ... folly anything but “a new madness that had just come into his head”?’ (1965, 31–32). Even though words for autism are used (e.g. *guduzheng* and *zibizheng*) instead of dis-preferred terms like *ruozhi*, it is important not to forget that language, as Heidegger notes, ‘always conceals within itself a developed mode of ideation, an already shaped way of seeing’ (1962, 157). Thus, although terms like autism, and the equivalents in Chinese, seem improvements upon previously deployed terms, they too possess not only an inbuilt lack but also a pattern of exclusion by virtue of meaning apart, solitary, isolated, alone, shut and closed. As Foucault notes of disease (or *zheng* in Chinese), these words connote deviation from a ‘normal’, unmarked and ordered form (1973, 119), thereby reflecting ableist assumptions. It is also important not to exaggerate either the epiphanic or enlightened qualities of readers’ commentary. Although fear and doubt can be read in readers’ commentary, so views are expressed confidently by persons who, most likely, will

have little or no contact with autistic persons. These construct autists as having fixed habits, not getting on with people and possessing special skills, views which, as Huws and Jones note in their study of lay perceptions of autism, seem likely to be influenced by media's portrayal (2010, 338) and, therefore, not necessarily accurate. It must not be forgotten, moreover, that these utterances are figurative drops in an ocean of words that not only tend to engage with the film as a predominantly aesthetic product but also largely consolidate, rather than challenge, the 'emotional infrastructure of ableism' (Hughes 2012, 68).

Concluding thoughts

This article has analysed a filmic representation of the autistic spectrum in a Chinese context, highlighting the complicated, and seemingly unintended, ways in which a 'well-meaning' representation is made into a text by virtue of being read within specific socio-cultural and discursive circumstances. The article has, however, sought to avoid perpetuating a positive/negative approach but instead to explore the fluid and dynamic relationship between authors and audiences who collaborate in the production of texts in ways which are invariably impacted upon by specific socio-cultural and discursive circumstances which they then reproduce. While much of this meaning-making seems to reproduce ableist emotional infrastructures, there is potential for readers to realize disability differently. In order to understand how readers on Douban realize disability through *Ocean Heaven*, it is useful to refer to Deleuze's distinction between two ways of encountering the world in the 'Thirteenth Series of the Schizophrenic and the Little Girl', a chapter in *The Logic of Sense*. While the little girl 'skirts the surface of the water, like Alice in the pool of her own tears' (1990, 105), for the schizophrenic 'there is no longer, any surface': 'the surface has split open ... bodies have no surface ... the entire body is *no longer anything but depth* – it carries along and snaps up everything into this gaping depth' (1990, 99; emphasis added). Unlike the girl, the schizophrenic explores 'depths', rejecting the surface even though this 'collapse of the surface' threatens to make the entire world lose its meaning, thereby necessitating 'the schizophrenic manner of living the contradiction' (1990, 100). In contrast to Alice who might enjoy the stunning cinematography and 'overcoming story' in *Ocean Heaven*, the schizophrenic would not only perceive the existence of a reality outside the film but also question the capacity of the film to render this 'reality'. Schizophrenic readers would also perceive problems with existing systems of classification, becoming troubled by how the meaning of disability is, as Titchkosky puts it, 'composed of conflicts of inclusion and exclusion' (2007, 6), in contrast to Alice who would probably be unable, and perhaps even refuse, whether consciously or unconsciously and most likely a combination of both, to see cultural classifications relating to 'ability' and 'disability' as a continuum, viewing them instead as crisp, separate and discrete categories. While such neat and tidy, yet insidious, binary oppositions affirm pure differences, in the double sense communicated by Derrida, namely as difference and deference, and appear to reflect the seemingly universal tendency to classify – what Mary Douglas calls 'the human yearning for rigidity'; a longing for 'hard lines and clear concepts' ([1966] 1984, 163) – schizophrenic viewing recognizes depth, forcing persons to confront otherness and difference. Fear, as Corbett notes, relates to the unfamiliar and this leads persons to block out uncomfortable feelings (1996, 4). As Jenny Morris poignantly notes:

Our disability frightens people. *They* don't want to think that this is something which could happen to *them*. So *we* become separated from common humanity, treated as fundamentally

different and alien. Having put up clear barriers between us and them, non-disabled people further hide *their* fear and discomfort by turning *us* into objects of pity, comforting *themselves* by *their* own kindness and generosity. (1991, 192; emphasis added)

Classificatory systems are, however, cognitive accomplishments. They reflect the perspectives of persons who deploy them rather more than the groups they purport to represent. Crucially, continuing to make firm and separate that which is more interconnected, thereby perpetuating unworkable contradictions might make 'us' rather more 'mad' than the schizophrenic who, as Deleuze (1990) notes, can live the contradiction. The madman, as Foucault notes, 'is not so much the victim of an illusion ... he [*sic*] *deceives himself*' (1965, 104; original emphasis). It is not, moreover, as Dostoyevsky notes, 'by confining one's neighbor that one is convinced of one's own sanity' (Foucault [1965] 1988, ix). Unlike pity, which as Hughes observes tends to increase rather than decrease social distance (2012, 71), a schizophrenic way of reading compels readers to confront the possibility that classifications of ability and disability are porous rather than hermetically sealed and that, as Shakespeare and Watson put it, 'everyone is impaired, in varying degrees' (2001, 24). Such ways of thinking invite the frightening realization that 'identity is never closed or exhaustive; it is never metaphysically guaranteed because it constantly must be constructed and reconstructed' (Warren 1988, 201 as quoted in Hogan 1999, 88) – all of which reveal 'a certain fragility of self' (Davies 1989, 238), as Davies puts it with regard to exposure to different discourses and the resulting 'opportunities' of seeing ourselves differently. Reading the film as something more than merely an aesthetic experience, meanwhile, places moral obligation upon readers making them become not only innocent bystanders as Dafu and his father confront their own segregation in institutionalized contexts and death. Instead, readers become implicated within this, in a manner which evokes Foucault's description of the 'confused horror' spreading 'from the scaffold' at the start of *Discipline and Punish* (1977, 9). Deconstructing films, our readings of them, the socio-cultural and discursive contexts in which these take place and the texts these produce, nevertheless, provides possibilities for reading and writing disability differently (Titchkosky 2007, 7), as 'something more complex than an undesired ... difference' (2007, 17). As Mitchell and Snyder put it, representations 'allow us viscerally to encounter disability in a way that we could not otherwise' and that the discontent produced by representation can provide 'a fulcrum for identifying the culture that *should be* rather than that which *is*' (2001, 215; original emphasis). As Jameson puts it with regard to Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes*, works of art such as *Ocean Heaven* should be viewed as symbolic acts, 'as *praxis* and as *production*', otherwise they become 'inert objects, and reified end-products' (1984, 58; emphasis added).

Notes

1. Chinese cinema is used in a broad sense to refer to 'Greater China', namely Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao.
2. This film is a Mainland Chinese-Hong Kong drama, written and directed by a Mainland Chinese author who teaches at the Beijing Film Academy and starring a Hong Kong martial arts star and a Taiwanese actor. The film is set in Qingdao, Shandong Province, Mainland China. The film is 96 minutes in duration, and was released on 24 June 2010.
3. Xue stated this during an interview on the DVD of the film, as did Li who said: 'I hope society will better understand that there is this group of parents and children. We, as members of this big "family" that is humankind, if we can help more, care more, encourage these parents and

their children, they won't feel detached or as though no one understands what they are going through. If everyone expresses a little bit more love and care, then they will have more courage to continue down this path'.

4. I am, however, aware – especially after re-reading my claims regarding the film in preparation for the publication of this article – that my reading is dystopian. This has prevented me from reading the fact that Dafu does seem to venture, temporarily, into 'society' at the end of the film after seeming to have grasped skills necessary to, for example, use public transport independently as a form of meaningful inclusion.
5. To fight this, Nichols notes that we must 'remind writers that protagonists with a disability might *remain* disabled at the end of the story' (2016, 115; original emphasis).
6. *Rain Man* 1988, directed by Barry Levinson; *Temple Grandin* 2010, directed by Mick Jackson; and *Mary and Max* 2009, directed by Adam Eliot.
7. 2008, directed by Elissa Down.
8. Autistic difference is, whether evident in spaces of everyday life or mediated representations, challenging because, as Murray explains, even 'the most pronounced cases of autistic behavioural difference do not involve a continual visual signification of disability' (2008, 104).
9. Mintz, meanwhile, suggests that social discourses about disability are not about disability at all. Rather, they relate to the need to guarantee the privileged status of the non-disabled citizen: 'a need that, in turn, emerges from fears about the fragility and unpredictability of embodied identities' (2002, 162 as quoted in Goodley 2012, 314).

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