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RESISTANCE AND REINFORCEMENT OF THE DIS-ABLED BINARY IN *SPECIAL* AND  
*JEREMY THE DUD*.

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**Abstract:** Although people with disabilities constitute one of the world’s largest minorities, Hollywood portrayals leave the question of inclusivity unanswered. This paper explores the ability of Netflix Original Series, *Special*, and the short film, *Jeremy the Dud* to fill the gaps of marginalization, oversimplification, and underrepresentation of disability. Both entertainment media display a focus on the lives of characters with physical disabilities performed by disabled actors. In doing so, they allow viewers insight into the world from the perspectives of people who live amongst us, but who are not considered equal because they are deemed to lack some essential characteristic/s.

However, as much as each film is successful in giving visibility to historically underrepresented groups, the treatment of disability retains an element of marketability for the sake of entertainment and therefore suffer the same pitfalls common to most Hollywood-type portrayals. This paper analyses the visual, ethical, and narrative implications of representing disability in *Special* and *Jeremy the Dud*. I locate the successes and shortcomings of each series within the general problem of film representation. Through consideration of disability studies, film analysis, and studies in humanism, I explore the partial accommodation given to marginalized groups who – despite their increasing visibility on-screen - continue to be underrepresented and oversimplified.

**Keywords:** Disability, Film, Disability Studies, Underrepresentation; *Special*; *Jeremy the Dud*

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Having a disability has been historically and ideologically linked to being outside the established “paradigm of humanity” (Wendell 40). Films, particularly those produced in Hollywood, tend toward emphasizing disability as ‘other’. Disability scholars such as Georgina Kleege who specifically focus on Hollywood representations of blindness argue that although Hollywood

may not have invented stereotypes of disability as ‘other’, the “repetition and intricacy of those images” (4) nonetheless reveal how disability is viewed by filmmakers and how audiences in turn are forced to regard disability on the silver screen. To the extent where entertainment media plays a significant discursive role in the formation of cultural attitudes toward disability, as discussed for example by the likes of Michael T. Hayes and Rhonda S. Black (2003), the projection of disability as encased in a “logic of pity” (114) perpetuates a hegemonic view of disability by non-disabled creators, producers, and actors. This view of disabled people as either something other than human or something nonhuman altogether places them on the margins of existence.

Independent films provide avenues that depart from the popular portrayal of disabled people as non-normative human beings. As Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell argue, independent disability film “challenges normative, ableist representations of disability” (12) by critiquing “normalcy as a false standard of human value” (28). Independent films such as *Jeremy the Dud (JtD)* and the Netflix Original Series *Special* are engaged in forms of media activism that target mainstream representations of disability. To some extent, Netflix original programming, despite its early limitations of accessibility to disabled audiences,<sup>1</sup> has reoriented disability away from the margins by engaging in a form of media activism which “facilitates a ‘third space’ of activism [...] whereby personal narratives can be shared in such a way that enables the participation of disenfranchised citizens” (358). This activism, however, is limited particularly where profitability is considered. Netflix has cancelled *Special* after two seasons possibly due to increased expense of producing scripted originals with each passing year (Goldberg). Nonetheless, the effort to provide spaces for conversations about disability as

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellcessor for a discussion of the lack of closed captioning available on Netflix’s online streaming platforms. According to Ellcessor, Netflix’s “inaccessible technology” revealed “disability prejudice” (15).

dehumanized existence deserves scholarly attention for the ways in which they signal an activist move toward re-presenting disability away from a marginalized status. Where the narrative of disabled persons as physically, mentally, emotionally, and sexually deficient in comparison to the able-bodied ideal is reproduced in filmic portrayals of disability, *Special* and *JtD* allow viewers to think differently about disability by emphasizing the ideological, political, and institutional underpinnings of ableism which enact subtle micro-aggressions as well as overt discriminatory practices that relegate disabled people to inferior, nonhuman positions. However, each film is limited in their portrayal of disability as always contingent on one group, that is persons with disabilities, being marginalized.

The creators of *Special* and *JtD*, Ryan O'Connell and Ryan Chamley respectively, write disabled protagonists who are active participants in the stories of adjustment, overcoming, and fulfillment. They differ however in the extent of accommodation given to adequately and accurately representing the ontological banality that litters Hollywood-type portrayals of disability. Although both films allow greater visibility for people with disabilities, they fall short in validating disability as deserving of its own identity and something not appended to able-bodiedness. *Special*, particularly the first season, draws attention to the various challenges Ryan must confront to fit in with the ableist world. Having cerebral palsy makes him feel insecure and compels him to hide his disability out of fear of being judged, losing job opportunities, and having relationships. In *JtD*, the challenges faced by persons with disabilities is represented through an inversion of the ableism by the film's focus on the main character, a non-disabled person or "dud", trying to navigate his adulthood in a society that privileges those whom audiences would classify as disabled but whom neither consider themselves nor are considered 'other'. The successes and shortcomings of each film in representing disability correspond to

studies in disability that struggle with theorizing marginalization, otherness, and nonhumanness. Analyzing these films as contemporary reflections – whether real or imagined – of societal attitudes toward disability brings us closer to the role of entertainment media in both rectifying or perpetuating the ontological experience of disability as weak, incomplete, and abnormal. My study therefore analyzes the representations of disability as otherness in the two media texts, one a Netflix original series and the other an independently produced film, to assess the extent to which they challenge and reinforce dominant cultural discourses of disability.

In *Special*, the creator Ryan O’Connell, a gay man with cerebral palsy (CP), acts as Ryan – an unpaid intern at a web-based blog. Largely through satire, the autobiographical series which was motivated by O’Connell’s own experience as a writer for Thought Catalog, explores the layered marginalization of Ryan as a disabled, gay man – a “gimp”.<sup>2</sup> Unlike *Special* which focuses on one disabled protagonist’s experience in an able-bodied world, *Jeremy the Dud* does the inverse. The 20-minute production was written and directed by Ryan Chamley who does not identify as being disabled but nonetheless developed the short film in partnership with genU, an Australian not-profit organization attempting to build inclusive communities through disability and aged care support. The film, although focusing on one able-bodied man, Jeremy (Nicholas Boshier), explores a community of disabled people – actors with real life disabilities. *JtD* flips the script on disability as marginal by having the main able-bodied character experience what it means to be marginalized due to physical differences. Unlike *Special*, *JtD* imagines and is set in a world that is different from the reality we inhabit. During the film, Jeremy tries to get a ‘normal’ job, such as a bartender or salesperson type. However, he soon finds that his identity as someone ‘without specialty’ only qualifies him for ‘helper’ jobs such as pushing wheelchairs,

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘gimp’ is used by Ryan throughout the series. For the purposes of my media analysis of disability, I focus less on Ryan’s gay identity and more on the film’s representation of his disability.

reaching for objects, or wiping people after they use the toilet (13:46). To emphasize his marginal existence the film portrays Jeremy as always required to wear a tag around his neck with an illustrated image of a bipedal man and text that reads ‘without specialty’. Although this world is speculative, the discrimination Jeremy experiences because of his physical differences serves as a metaphor for the social exclusion experienced by persons with disabilities. My comparative study of both media texts focuses on the representation of the embodied experience and the cultural status of disability. Such representations I argue are determined largely by the different perspectives from which the stories are told: one, a person with a disability and the other, a person without a disability who has partnered with a disability support group. In addition to the difference in perspectives, I consider how both media texts are similar in their limitations to representing people with disabilities in ways that do not rely on setting up binaries of disabled and non-disabled.

While both films are successful in challenging the marginalization of persons with disability not in the least through on-screen presence, they fail in their own distinct ways to divest disability from being viewed through an ableist lens. In *Special*, the social pressures of being an outsider force Ryan to conceal his disability while *JtD* emphasizes the agency of people with disabilities, only to reinstate a new category of marginalized people. As a result, viewers are left with different manifestations of able-bodied exceptionalism. Although I consider *Special* and *JtD* as challenging the dominance of mainstream Hollywood-produced films, they nonetheless reproduce some mainstream Hollywood representations of disabled persons. These representations often portray disabled characters as pathetic and non-sexual (Hunt 45); damaged (Marks 10), and angry because of their limitations (Enns 137). While *Special* and *JtD* in many ways rewrite these mainstream portrayals by giving agency to disabled characters, revealing the

disabled characters as functioning members of society, and depicting the society as abnormal – not the disabled person, the films often retreat into stereotypical portrayals of their disabled cast.

Both films portray different forms of internalized ableism. When Ryan takes up the unpaid job at the blog magazine, his CP – which at first goes unnoticed – makes the editor, Olivia (Marla Mindelle), uneasy. In keeping with the satirical style of the tv show, Olivia represents an extreme form of ableism.<sup>3</sup> Ryan passes off his CP limp as an accident-related injury. As it concerns his intersectional identity as a gay and disabled man, Ryan is out as a gay but closeted as a person with a disability. His insecurity with being singled out as disabled in a majority ableist environment compels him to hide his CP. In this scene, Ryan's internalized ableism rejects his identity as a disabled person which adds to his symbolic othering set in place by the ableist work culture. In episode seven, season one, Olivia calls out Ryan for his internalized ableism when he turns down a second date with her cousin Michael (Andrew Daly) because he [Ryan] believes that he “can still do better than a deaf guy [Michael]” (10:05-0:07). Olivia explains that “getting set up with someone who is deaf forced you [Ryan] to look in the mirror” due to Ryan's “internalized ableism” (10:44). This exchange produces two key points for discussion that are significant for my study of disability representations by entertainment media.

The first involves the hierarchy of disability in which “one type and/or severity of disability is perceived as “better” or “worse” than others” (Snow). Unlike Snow, a non-disabled mother who conceived of the disability hierarchy after her son was diagnosed with moderate CP, *Special* represents a disability hierarchy from the position of the disabled person, in this case Ryan. As much as this scene critiques Ryan's stratification of better kinds of disabilities, Olivia's

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<sup>3</sup> At the end of the series, however, viewers learn that Olivia marries the woman whom she knocked down with her car. During the exchange of vows, Olivia's partner is seen with a leg brace and walks with a limp. While I do not intend to conflate.

belief that Ryan and Michael would be romantically compatible primarily on the basis of their both having disabilities draws attention to the overarching ableist culture that Ryan has to confront during his character arc. Whether from Ryan's perspective that some disabilities are better to have than others or Olivia's perspective that sharing a disability makes people romantically compatible, the series considers ableism as a socio-culturally constructed binary that considers people with disabilities, or people with different kinds of disabilities as romantically other-to-human.

The socio-cultural binary satirized in the exchange involving Ryan and Olivia produces the second significant point of analysis: Ryan's internalized ableism, as a person with a disability, creates dichotomies within disabled communities. In the first episode of season one, Ryan, laments to his physio-therapist, "I'm not able-bodied enough to be hanging in the mainstream world but I'm not disabled enough to hang out with the cool PT crowd" (2:08-2:15). While Ryan's autobiographical account of his life as a person with "mild" CP allows for a unique way of considering the ways in which people with differing severity of disabilities experience different degrees of alienation even within their circle of communities, his remark comes off as inconsiderate and self-centered, as well as to use the physio-therapist's words, "lucky" and "privileged" (2:23-2:25). Ryan's feelings of being unable to belong to the "mainstream world" or "cool PT crowd" self-creates his estrangement. In other words, he creates his own feeling of being isolated because of his internalized ableism as a person with a disability. Furthermore, Ryan's designation of his 'mild' CP as 'in-between' able-bodiedness and disability reflects Snow's discussion of the disability hierarchy as perpetuating different degrees of pity for disabled persons. According to Snow, "this stratification may reinforce pity, and the *level* of pity is equivalent to where a particular disability sits" (1). The early episodes of *Special* which

correspond to Ryan's early, and flawed, ideas of internalized ableism use PT disabled characters such as Bob (uncredited) to highlight the ways in which certain kinds of disabilities are left on the margins, even when other characters with disabilities are mentioned. Although the series could be credited for debunking the ableist presumption of disability as an umbrella term for all kinds of disability, the socio-cultural commentary it provides on this presumption is overshadowed by Ryan's point-of-view. As the series' speaking subject, Ryan interpellates the audience, both emotionally and ideologically, into considering specifically *his* identity as a disabled, gay man. As a result, the potential for critiquing hierarchies of disability, or even the internalized ableism by persons with disabilities, is left underexplored.

The autobiographical lens of *Special* although focusing on one disabled man's experience with mild CP, nonetheless allows a broader criticism of Netflix original programming that does not give representation to a wider spectrum of total disability. Not including *Special*, of the eighteen Netflix original series that contains characters with permanent disabilities, only three have characters with a form of total disability.<sup>4</sup> The relative dearth of on-screen total disability in Netflix's original programming reflects the lack of cultural visibility experienced by people with disabilities. One of the PT characters in *Special*, Bob, is only briefly mentioned in the first episode and, even then, his total disability functions a barometer against which Ryan can emphasize his [Ryan's] lack of belonging. Ryan tells his physiotherapist: "It must be freeing to be so disabled. Sometimes I feel like having a mild case is like being biracial" (1:40-2:02). While *Special*, like the majority of Netflix original programming, focuses less on representations of

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<sup>4</sup> I use the definition of 'total disability' as any disability which makes the person unable to work due to injuries. Of the eighteen Netflix original series I refer to, the three containing characters with total disability are *The Healing Powers of Dude*, *The Fundamentals of Caring*, and *Sex Education*. The other fifteen series that have characters with permanent disability are *The Society*, *Atypical*, *Stranger things*, *Raising Dion*, *Feel the Beat*, *The Politician*, *3%*, *Squid Game*, *AJ and the Queen*, *Daredevil*, and *Ozark*.

total disability, Ryan's point of view provides glimpses of underexplored PT disability through his fallible persona. The tv show's humorous attempt at representing Ryan's feeling of social estrangement draws attention to a cliché of disability portrayals in entertainment media. This cliché perpetuates the "pity syndrome" through "simplistic versions of people with disabilities" (Riley 76). *Special* represents the cliché of disability with one key difference. Ryan's attempt at evoking pity through lamenting that his mild CP is not as "freeing" as PT not only has the opposite effect of disregarding his 'lack of freedom' but also provides the audience with limited insight of the varied severities of disabilities and from the perspective of a disabled actor. Intended or not, the episode's critique of Ryan's 'luck' or 'privilege', to use his physiotherapist's words, reveals how a person's internalized ableism of their mild disability creates binaries when set against the experiences of total disabilities.

Ryan's initial estrangement from communities of disabled persons in the early stages of season one gradually transforms into strong feelings of identification with people who have a wide range of disabilities in season two. The shift in Ryan's season one denial of his disability to his season two acceptance highlights the importance of self-assertion for the disabled person. In *Special*, Ryan's self-assertion follows the sense of community he experiences upon joining the 'crips'. In addition to the second season widening the visibility of people with different kinds of disabilities including neurodiversity, the fifth episode, titled 'Ryan Joins the Crips', is a turning point for Ryan's journey toward self-acceptance. For the rest of season two Ryan becomes involved with helping plan 'crip prom' – a prom night organized by the 'crips'. Ryan's character arc over the two seasons begins with feelings of isolation from people with PT disability and gradually moves through camaraderie with a group of people living with a diverse range of disabilities, including PT. The lack of community building seen in the first season, illustrated by

him comparing himself to other disabled persons, such as Bob or Michael, gives way to the forging of a community in season 2. Where at the end of season one Ryan feels isolated from everyone, including his mother, at the end of season two he feels empowered enough to assert his disability. In the final episode of the second season, Ryan's character arc is complete when he decides to quit working for Olivia. He gives an impassioned speech at Olivia's wedding in a moment that recalls Olivia's advice to him, in episode seven of season one, to look in the mirror. He says at the wedding, "I've never asked myself for one moment, am I comfortable? How do I feel?" (19:07-19:13). The moment of introspection releases him from trying to fit in an ableist environment by expanding his initially limited conceptions of which disabilities are 'better' than others. To emphasize the tv show's cultural critique of people with disability as not dependent on able-bodied persons, Ryan resigns from working for Olivia. He later refuses to work alongside Kim's venture as a self-employed website owner and instead chooses to contribute to her blog. The confidence Ryan gains from acknowledging, not concealing his disability, empowers him to resist forms of ableism that stifle his creativity as a writer with, and of, disability. In accordance with the autobiographical lens of the series, *Special* offers a dimension of cultural discourse that foregrounds self-acceptance of one's disability and criticizes internalized/ableism on the way to being free of restrictive, ableist dichotomies.

Through a focus on sexual intimacy *Special* allows for a further critique of ableist dichotomies involving Ryan's intersectionality as a disabled and gay man. The second season stands out for a critical portrayal of able-bodied gazing and related fetishization of the disabled body involve the sexual encounters between Ryan and Marc (Jeremy Glazer). In the second episode, Ryan meets Marc at a bar. The two eventually have sex during which Marc tells Ryan: "I think it's so sexy you used to wear leg braces. And I know it's weird but I'm just really into

disabled guys. (22:24-22.36). The blatantly outrageous fetishization of disability in this scene is an extension of the tv show's satirical representation of ableist perceptions of disability specifically when it concerns intimacy. Marc's objectification of Ryan's disabled body highlights the notion of the "ableist gaze" discussed by Krystal Cleary which builds on Laura Mulvey's feminist theory of the male gaze in cinema. *Special*, however, applies the ableist gaze to male same-sex desire of disability. Similar to the male gaze, discussed by Mulvey as that which "projects its fantasy onto the female figure" whereby the "[w]oman [is] displayed as [a] sexual object" (19), *Special* portrays Ryan in a passive, objectified way. However, unlike Mulvey who describes voyeurism as bearing "a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face the human body, the relationships between the human forms and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world" (17), the kind of voyeurism enacted in the sex-scene involving Marc reveals a fascination with Ryan's other-human, disabled body. The ableist gaze in *Special* reduces Ryan and his body to only its sexual value. Because the series is focalized through Ryan, audiences are also positioned to experience the dehumanizing ableist gaze. *Special* therefore allows us to consider the ways in which "disability is a specular moment" (Davis 12) that reinforces notions of the passive, other(ed) body that is outside the normative, able body. Where Davis draws attention to the "violence of the response" which usually includes "horror, fear, pity, compassion, and avoidance" (12), Marc's response is a heightened libido towards not Ryan's personality but his disability which is equally violent because it objectifies Ryan's CP. In the same scene, Marc tells Ryan: "You all are so hot to me. Your scars, your limp, it just gets me so f- hard" (22:48-22.54). Marc's insensitive lumping together of all disabled people whose deformities satisfy his narcissistic pleasure manifest his ableist gaze as a form of micro-aggression that distinguishes the able-bodied from the disabled.

In *Jeremy the Dud*, two disabled characters in particular – who, like Ryan, are played by disabled people – are portrayed as having ‘normal’ sexual desires and urges. Where Dikaïos Sakellariou and Salvador Simó Algado argue that “sexuality is an integral part of the human experience” (69), *JtD* depicts characters such as Jeremy’s cousin, Kyle (Adam Bowes), and Kyle’s friend, Jai (Sam Humphrey), as not coy about sex. The film’s attempt at disability activism departs from what Sakellariou and Algado refer to as “centuries of oppression” which have treated sexuality “not always as an integral part of human experience but, rather as a trait that some people, including disabled individuals, do not or should not possess” (69). Early in the film, Kyle – a bilateral leg amputee, is first introduced as waking up visibly hungover and stealthily getting out of bed to escape his sleeping, overnight female guest. However, she wakes up and, after shouting “I can see you, I’m only partially blind, jerk” (4:13-4:18), storms out the room and house. Later in the film, Jai tells Kyle that they could use Jeremy as a “dud wingman” to pick up ladies (8:48-8:50), and near the end of the film, when Kyle, Jai, and Heidi (Chloe Hayden), Jeremy’s other cousin, take Jeremy to find a ‘helper’ job at the clothing store, Kyle flirts with the owner. The emphasis on Kyle’s and Jai’s libido, like Ryan’s, functions to humanize the disabled characters by portraying them as not lacking sexual desire and urges and therefore not lacking an experience of being human.

Where *Special* focuses on one character’s disability to critique the dichotomies caused by able-bodiedness, *Jeremy the Dud* (*JtD*) focalizes discrimination of physical differences through Jeremy whom we classify as able-bodied, but whom the characters in the film label as a ‘dud’ because he is different. The difference in focalization as well as the creative production of each film achieves different levels of socio-cultural commentary of able-bodied privilege. As already discussed, the autobiographical lens of *Special* and its creation by someone with a

disability positions authors to sympathize with one disabled man's experiences. On the other hand, the motivation and funding for *JtD* by a disability activist NGO as well as its creation by a non-disabled person targets a non-disabled audience through the perspective of a non-disabled character. Through the focalization on a non-disabled character who experiences discrimination, *JtD* attempts to encourage empathy for the everyday struggles that people with disabilities have to endure. The not-for-profit organization, genU, which worked in partnership with Ryan Chamley to produce the film, embeds a cultural discourse of empathy that is needed to build inclusive communities particularly for people with disabilities. Each form of entertainment media brings different perspectives to the depiction of systemic marginalization of persons with disabilities (Mitchell and Snyder 2008) either through a realist representation in the case of *Special* or a speculative world in the case of *JtD*. If the lack of representation of disability in film is linked to a systemic form of marginalization as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have argued (20), then *JtD* confronts the marginalization of people with disabilities by emphasizing the inclusion of actors with real-life disabilities who are depicted with agency to act and the freedom to speak. Furthermore, both films try to de-marginalize the disabled individual by writing them into public spaces and unsettling notions of disability as dysfunctional in the workplace.

The speculative world of *JtD* inverts the normative reality faced by persons with disabilities. Being able-bodied is seen as being abnormal and inferior while having a disability is regarded as the bodily norm and allows for both participation and visibility within the public domain. Actors with real-life disabilities dominate the world set in *JtD*. In so doing the film enters into the "seemingly unimaginable or uninhabitable universe" described by Mitchell and Snyder who argue for a confrontation of the "constructed cultural estrangement from disabled

people's perspectives that have been shrouded in mystery" (175). The film attempts to highlight the cultural estrangement of persons with disabilities by portraying an inverted world where the people who would otherwise be considered disabled have access to more jobs, parking spots, and relationships as the able-bodied do in the real world. The film opens with Jeremy being 'released' from "twenty-one years of assistant care" and allowed into public spaces to search for a job. Immediately, questions of inequity are raised as the film invites us to think that not only do persons outside of the bodily norm have less job opportunities, but they are also disadvantaged by ideological notions of who is capable of work. This critique of able-bodied privilege by *JtD* is in line with Jane Myers's (1980) view that "[t]he mass media orients us to the young, vibrant, physically perfect "pepsi generation" as the ultimate group. Persons who are old and handicapped do not fit this national image, and they are relegated to second-class status, or worse" (39). Although usage of the term 'handicapped' to refer to persons with disabilities is now outdated at the time of Myers's writing, the physically perfect bodily norm still applies in today's context – even in the alternate world imagined by *JtD*. The speculative world encourages able-bodied viewers to confront their privileged access to more opportunities on the basis of fitting an ideological bodily norm.

To stimulate a deeper understanding of disability, *JtD* emphasizes the social construct of ability and the ways in which it perpetuates ongoing systems of marginalization. After being turned down for a job by the restaurant manager because the restaurant isn't a "dud employment agency" (12:22-12:25), Jeremy is taken to a retail store inside the mall. He also gets turned away because the store owner is offended by Heidi's insinuation that Jeremy could do the owner's job just as well (16:08-16:11). A further microaggression dealt to Jeremy occurs when the store owner speaks to Kyle instead of Jeremy saying, "Tell him [Jeremy] that we don't hire people

without specialty to this job” (15:11-15:56). Treating Jeremy as if he isn’t standing in front of her reinforces the abnormal body as not equal in some way. As with the restaurant scene, Heidi has to speak for Jeremy. His experience of being treated unequally is a reflection of how members of the disabled community are treated. At the end of the film, during Jeremy’s impassioned speech to be recognized as someone human who wants to have a “normal job”, he goes on to tell his aunt and Kyle that “you don’t even know me you just see the thing hanging around my neck” (17:38-17:46). Together with the literal label that ‘tags’ Jeremy, the film reinforces the permanence of disability as an identifier of one’s position in life.

As Jeremy leaves the house of assistant care he is reminded by the automated voice-over to “always wear your tag in public to let people know you’re not special” (1:07-1:10). This sentiment is re-emphasized later in one of the film’s cut-aways where the automated voice says, “be sure to display your tag at times so people know to treat you accordingly” (1:44-1:49). The tag, designed with an image of a bipedal man, has ‘without specialty’ written on it. As a mark of identification, the tag determines how people in society are judged and on what criteria they are deemed different. The disabled characters condemn Jeremy for being a ‘dud’ and frequently infantilize him because of the “very, very harsh hand” he was dealt, as Jeremy’s aunt puts it. The infantilization of the ‘dud’ is emphasized when Kyle and Jai are forced to babysit Jeremy. Jai talks to Jeremy as if he were a child, much in the same way that the taxi driver (Dean Nash) wiggles the tin of mints at Jeremy to entice him. In each of these situations, being a ‘dud’ is equated to being a helpless infant. As if the twenty-one-year assistant care wasn’t degrading enough, the film makes the point that to be ‘without specialty’ is to be perpetually stigmatized. Jeremy’s impassioned speech near the end of the film is casually cast aside when his aunt asks if he needs to “poo”. *JtD* consolidates the view by Colin Barnes that the “institutional

discrimination against disabled people” is “little more than a social creation” (20). The film criticizes the socially created world of ableism by challenging its majority claim to accessibility and opportunities. Although being of adult age, Jeremy’s identification as a ‘dud’ results in him being still treated as a child. The manager of the restaurant to which Jeremy applies refuses to employ him because he “can’t babysit” another dud. Although *JtD* is successful in demarginalizing people with disabilities, it is only allowed to do so based on the marginalization of the nondisabled character, Jeremy.

As much as the film inverts the social reality of persons with disabilities existing as marginalized, the speculative reimagining of a world where nondisabled persons are the ones facing discrimination remains rooted in a binary classification that requires one side of the binary be socially dominant and the other be socially marginalized. The film is therefore caught in a zero-sum representational schema by which socio-economic power and visibility can only ever be divided along the axis of bodily ability. Jeremy is forced to accept his reality that people like him will never have a normal life. This ultimately leaves him hopeless and helpless. Unlike Ryan of *Special* who has to learn to adapt to a predominantly able-bodied lifestyle, Jeremy is forced to adapt to a predominantly disabled environment. *JtD* traces Jeremy’s experience as a ‘dud’ – a derogatory term for the politically correct classification of someone who is ‘without specialty’ – that is, a non-disabled person. The film deliberately steers away from using the terms abled and disabled in the same way that *Special* does. Similar to the use of the term ‘special’ which is suggestive of a patronizing attempt to assuage Ryan’s difference, *JtD* uses the term ‘without specialty’ to refer to those who are not disabled. Rather than remove labels altogether, both films instead substitute the categories of dis/able for terms associated with ‘special needs’. In keeping with the zero-sum representational schema, *JtD* although trying to avoid the able-bodied

language of ‘special needs’ nonetheless reproduces such language through the terms ‘without speciality’ and ‘dud’. As a more overt discrimination of the non-disabled person’s status, the derogatory term ‘dud’ is used to designate Jeremy’s inferior position. Like the term ‘without speciality’, *JtD* uses the term ‘dud’ in order to emphasize a process of segregation. However, as Heidi, Jeremy’s other cousin, points out, “saying “without speciality” sounds just as mean as calling someone a “dud”” (6:09-6:12). Like *Special*, *JtD* reveals that a reason for the continued marginalization of people with disabilities is because of a shared language of discrimination through infantilizing the perceived lack of ability of those such as Jeremy and Ryan.

The labels ‘dud’ and ‘special’ mark the body as something other than human. Although they denote two different things; ‘dud’ – faulty and ‘special’ – uniqueness, in the context of disability as it is represented on screen the labels are deployed as a means of social exclusion. Both films reveal usage of ableist language that reinforces the dis/abled divide. *JtD* emphasizes this division by requiring duds such as Jeremy to be branded with a tag that easily identifies them. The branding of disability is similar to the language of dehumanization which Taylor explains is “built upon, among other things, ableist paradigms of language and cognitive capacity” (34). Although *JtD* inverts the hierarchy of able-bodiedness, the dehumanizing language remains, directing attention to an almost inevitable marginalization of certain groups based on bodily form. As Jeremy says: “There’s a lot people out here that don’t like me because of the way I am. They call people like me duds” (1:18-1:22). Unlike *Special* which names Ryan’s disability, *JtD* leaves the nature of Jeremy’s ‘dud’ status unspecified. The film’s unspecified disability which classifies Jeremy as a dud implies that any manifestation of a disability marks the body as nonhuman. This implication bears upon Simon Brisenden’s argument that “‘disability’ is used as a blanket term to cover a large number of people who have

nothing in common with each other, except that they do not function in exactly the same way as those people who are called ‘normal’” (175). Although the connotations of normal and abnormal are redefined during *JtD*, the designation of abnormality remains based on able-bodiedness, or the lack thereof. The film’s simplistic approach of inverting the binary does not allow for a different way of conceptualizing disability.

Jeremy’s ‘dud’ designation conveys the “hidden ideological overtones” (175) discussed by Brisenden which during the film manifest in such ways as being helpless, pathetic, and unintelligible individuals. Brisenden’s claim that labels related to disability “teaches us a conditioned useless” (175) is seen early on in *JtD* when Jeremy’s voice assistant alludes to him being in “assisted care” (0:15-0:16) for twenty-one years. In the opening scenes we hear Jeremy’s voice assistant telling him; what to do – such as wake up and have breakfast (0:06-0:08), when he is ready to live in the outside world (0:13), and how to do certain things – such as brush his teeth (0:56-1:03). On his twenty-first birthday Jeremy is free to enter the “real world” (1:14) as he calls it, where he hopes to “find a job, maybe even get a place of my own” (1:14-1:17). Before leaving however, he recognizes that this freedom is severely restricted to roles afforded by his designation as a dud. He says: “when we are old enough, we become helpers. Helper’s roles include pushing wheelchairs, getting things down from the shelves or reaching, and wiping bottoms” (0:34-0:53). Although Jeremy looks forward to exploring the opportunities associated with being free of assisted care, the outside world is no less constricting than his previously confined space. Jeremy’s movement from equally confining spaces be it private or public is theorized by Rob Kitchin as a form of spatial oppression whereby “[s]paces are currently organized to keep disabled people ‘in their place’ and places written to convey to disabled people that they are ‘out of place’” (223). Not only is Jeremy conditioned to keep out of

certain spaces, he is also conditioned to be able to function in exclusively “helper” roles. The kinds of jobs in the film serve as both a metaphor for and a critique of the low-wage and menial jobs that people with disabilities have been historically limited to in Australia. The helper jobs that Jeremy can only qualify for are consistent with Australia’s “sheltered workshops” which attempted to safeguard jobs for persons with disabilities but through a segregated system in which persons with disabilities were isolated and exploited. The segregation experienced by duds like Jeremy is reinforced during the film in order to draw greater attention to the continued form of exploitation. The film’s critique of this system of employment is in accordance with the mission of genU, which in partnership with the director Ryan Chamley, aims to foster inclusivity particularly for persons with disabilities. Despite such good intentions however, the film’s method of advocacy for greater inclusivity for persons with disabilities actually reinforces the reality of segregation. The narrow metaphorical parameters within which the film operates, that is the inversion of bodily ability, does not allow for an in-depth critique of the systemic segregation of persons with disabilities. As a result, Jeremy remains confined to certain spaces where only duds like him can be employed in menial, low-wage positions.

The portrayal of disability as “conditioned uselessness” in *JtD* extends to Jeremy as living in conditioned dependency. Throughout the film Jeremy struggles to assert his independence after twenty-one years during which time he was forced to be dependent. The experience of being conditioned into dependency is reinforced by Jai, one of Kyle’s friends, who laments having to “babysit some dud” (8:04-8:06). The idea of duds requiring extra attention is repeated during the restaurant scene when Jeremy decides to find a “normal” job. When Jeremy goes to the restaurant to apply for a job, the voice-over reminds the ‘normal’ people that they “don’t leave individuals without specialty unaccompanied” (12:01-12:03). The restaurant

manager, already in charge of a “dud” employee, says “I can’t babysit two duds” (12:33-12:35). Although Jeremy has been declassified as needing assisted care by his voice assistant, he remains an object in need of constant monitoring by the human characters. This conditioned dependence is reiterated for viewers during the film as Jeremy’s previous voice assistant now guides viewers through a few principles that instruct how duds should behave in public. The first rule is “Don’t speak unless spoken to; or better yet, have someone speak for you.” Throughout the film, Jeremy has to rely on others to ask questions on his behalf, clarify what he means to say, and to stand up for his rights as a human being. The implications of labeling Jeremy as a dud result in him being without a voice. To emphasize Jeremy’s conditioned dependence, he has to rely on Heidi to speak up for him. The portrayal of Jeremy’s dependence is reflected in Peter Coleridge’s examination of economic systems such as those determined by the World Bank and the IMF. Coleridge argues that “disabled people tend to be trapped in a vicious cycle of voicelessness” (179) owing to the perpetual treatment of disabled people as “not participants in development” but “objects of welfare and charity” (179). The socioeconomic status quo of normal people versus duds binds Jeremy into a perception of him always requiring special care.

The external reinforcements of Jeremy’s status as a dud create an internalized inadequacy that he recites in order to show that he understands his place in society. Like Ryan who acknowledges that he “should embrace” his disability because it is what makes him special, Jeremy is forced to accept his place in society. He tells Heidi that he has to wear the tag so that “people can know I’m not special” and “mainly to avoid embarrassing situations”. Everyone who interacts with Jeremy; the taxi-driver, his aunt, Kyle, Jai, the restaurant manager, and the salesclerk, treats him as an invalid. Even Heidi, the only character who questions the absurd system of discrimination, is put in the film to speak for Jeremy because he is not allowed to have

a voice and express how he feels. When Heidi asks him if he feels offended at being called a ‘dud’, Jeremy responds with a reluctant ‘no’. This belief that people with disabilities are not human are therefore not expected to have feelings is seen near the end of the film when Jeremy reveals his aspirations which “transcend wiping bums and getting ice cream” (17:48-17:57). However, they dismiss his plea for being “cranky” and urge him to sleep it off.

The idea of knowing one’s place as a non-abled person has the effect of being placed in specific employment positions based on being either ‘special’ or ‘without specialty’. Both films focus on people whose different physical abilities precede their merit. Both Ryan and Jeremy have aspirations to be recognized as equally deserving of access to certain jobs yet they are denied as such because of their difference. *Special* and *JtD* direct attention to the systemic forms of marginalization enacted through able-bodied privilege. In *Special*, Ryan is relegated to being responsible for opening mail: a task he struggles with because of his lack of muscle coordination. Pointing to his disabled inability to complete even the menial tasks, Ryan laments his feeling of helplessness because he is unable to “do basic shit like open mail” (10:06-10:08). He isn’t considered able enough to keep up with the more demanding tasks – which, because of his disability, he is initially disqualified. The irony of Ryan’s eventual rise in popularity at the company is that his article on being hit by a car is actually a veiled celebration of the effects of his disability. To recall Davis’s point of disability as “specular”, *Special* draws attention to Ryan’s disability as appropriate entertainment to be read in a blog magazine but not to be entertained seriously as a matter of equality, especially when it comes to specific kinds of jobs. Similarly, *JtD* invites viewers to consider the stigma of disability as dire by illustrating that the only jobs available for people ‘without specialty’ are wheel-chair pusher and bottom-wiper. Jeremy’s attempts to find a ‘normal job’, that is one outside of these imposed barriers is met with

ridicule for wanting to step outside of his designation. Although Ryan is eventually able to make upward progress by being allowed as a freelance writer – although this ‘progress’ is contingent on him sensationalizing his disability – Jeremy is unable to find a job outside of what he is allowed to have. The ending of *JtD* therefore sees Jeremy returning to the care of his aunt and cousin – a different form of being under assistant care which started the film. The first season of *Special* ends differently – with Ryan leaving his mother’s house and declaring his independence from her. The beginning of the season finale sees Ryan trading his slip-on shoes for shoes with laces; the former being a symbol of his lack of ability to complete a ‘basic’ physical act that even a child can do.

Both films imply that their protagonists need to deconstruct this internalization of difference in order to reconstruct new forms of identification. Near the end of the film, when Jeremy returns home, he begins practicing how to introduce himself for a job interview in front of a mirror. He finally realizes that the tag he has been wearing is what has decided his identity. The film concludes with Jeremy taking off the tag and saying “I am more than just your label” (19:58-20:00). At this point Jeremy gives up on trying to change the perception of how others view him and instead works on how to change the way he views himself. The film’s suggestion is that what matters most is the successful attempt to first challenge the projection of inability on persons of different abilities. Therefore, while Jeremy may have been unsuccessful at securing a ‘normal’ job, he is able to shake off the label of being ‘without specialty’. It is an assertion of his difference, similar to that expressed by Ryan when he comes out to everyone about his disability.

Another way the film attempts to challenge the marginalization of people with difference is through a reversal of the gaze. *JtD* defies filmic conventions of the way disability is represented as well as the way it is allowed to be perceived by viewers. One of the main ways

this occurs is through a reversal of the gaze, reflected on the able-bodied Jeremy. Immediately after leaving the assisted care home, Jeremy is heckled by a couple of non-abled characters who repeatedly say “Look at him! Look at the dud!” as he walks by. The film establishes ability, or ‘without specialty’, as a spectacle in the same way that mainstream film often depicts disability as being subjected to a gaze. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states in the opening to her essay, “The history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display” (56). The idea of being on display takes on added meaning in film where an embedded staring takes place; first from the perspective of able-bodied characters and then from the perspective of viewers. *JtD* invites us to return the gaze on the non-disabled characters by first having these characters be the object of scrutiny by the disabled characters.

Although *JtD* brings people with disability from the margins and into the spotlight of film representation, it also suggests that, like *Special*, disability is diametrically opposed to ability. Thus, there will always be a group that is marginalized and dehumanized because what qualifies as ‘human’ stratifies society based on the possession of ‘normal’, ‘human’ characteristics. In *Special*, Ryan’s disability is always foregrounded as a deficiency. Apart from his friends and family, he is always treated as incomplete. Furthermore, Ryan is found guilty of discriminating against persons with Permanent and Total (PT) disability in the same way that he is marginalized by the able-bodied in society. Although *Special* challenges the marginalization of disabled persons by allowing for greater representation, there remains a hierarchy of whose disability gets primary focus and whose gets left out. The tv show’s inequitable distribution of screen time for the characters with PT disability suggest that there will always be someone with a disability who gets left out. While the ending to *JtD* signals an act of assertion that Jeremy is not his label, the film is time-constrained in exploring what he actually *is*. *JtD* therefore leaves the experience of

marginalization unresolved and contingent on bodily ability. This undermines the attempt by both films to effectively challenging the privileging of able-bodiedness over disability. To effectively de-marginalize disability, films need to dissolve the privilege that is inherent in the binarism and thereby recreate different ability as self-constituted, not constituted in relation to anything else.

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