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Blind Warriors, Supercrips, and Techno-Marvels: Challenging Depictions of Disability in Star Wars

JOSEFINE WÄLIVAARA

Few, if any, franchises have been as popular and influential as George Lucas’s Star Wars. Considering depictions of disability in the fictional universe of Star Wars can offer insights into cultural understandings of disability and how characters with disabilities can be analyzed in genre storytelling. The Star Wars universe features two prominent characters with disabilities—Darth Vader and Chirrut Îmwe (Donnie Yen)—who offer reflections on cinematic stereotypes of disability. In conversation with the work of disability and science fiction scholars, these depictions reveal both stereotypical assumptions about people with disabilities in cinema as well as how those assumptions have changed over time.

Indeed, no matter how distant the depicted future or how remote the fictional world, science fiction has often been considered as social commentary (Kuhn 15-18; Nama 5; Telotte 95-97; Johnson 28-30). Scholars of science fiction have developed ways to understand the genre from the perspectives of gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Wendy Pearson suggests that critics ask, “How ... does sf allow us to develop alternative notions of subjectivity? What practices of representation have developed within the genre to allow for the expression of a subject who is not male, white, middle-class, and...
heterosexual?” (17). Similar questions may be asked regarding persons who are not able-bodied or able-minded.

Science fiction has portrayed people with disabilities ever since its inception as a genre. In fact, Michael Bérubé questions whether “science fiction is as obsessed with disability as it is with space travel and alien contact” (“Disability” 568). Kathryn Allan suggests that “SF has long explored deviant and disabled bodies: from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster to James Cameron’s wheelchair-bound hero … in Avatar (2009), SF is inhabited by people (and aliens) whose embodiments are situated along the entire spectrum of ability” (2). Depictions of people with disabilities have been present in science fiction throughout its history as a film and television genre—from Star Trek: The Original Series (1966–69) and The Bionic Woman (1976–78) to more contemporary examples such as Avatar (2009), Daredevil (2015), the X-Men film series (2000–), and Mad Max: Fury Road (2015).

Research on science fiction and disability constitutes a small yet growing field of study (Allan; Ellis; Cheyne; Bérubé; Cheu; Weinstock; Kanar; Moody; Schalk, Bodyminds). In 2012, Ria Cheyne stated that “there has been little engagement with disability in the critical work [on science fiction]” (118). In 2013, Allan made clear that “while more scholars [were] directing their attention to SF, the number of people interested in both SF and disability remains small” (2). Three years later, Katie Ellis noted that “disability film criticism, which has historically focused on social-realist genres, has recently turned its attention towards science fiction cinema” (58). While specific films such as Avatar (2009), Gattaca (1997), X-Men (2000), and X2 (2003) have been analyzed in terms of disability (Ellis; McReynolds; Chemers; Bérubé; Kuppers; Bergen-Aurand), there is still much to be examined at the intersection between science fiction and disability studies.

The widespread appeal of science fiction cinema, in general, and Star Wars, in particular, provides a rich terrain for an analysis of both the franchise and its genre from the perspective of disability studies. Contrasting the character of Darth Vader (from the late 1970s to the early 1980s) and Chirrut Îmwe (from 2016) shows the extent of change, as well as how the recent Star Wars story, Rogue One, provides a challenging alternative to the depictions of disabilities previously seen in the Star Wars universe, especially as related to the Force. The
progression toward a more diversified cast in the *Star Wars* movies calls for a re-examination of how disability can be understood in that storyworld,\(^1\) and focusing on depictions of physical disabilities in *Rogue One* (2016) (in which Chirrut plays a role) and in the earlier films featuring Darth Vader, *A New Hope* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983) reveals how the recent diversification of the cast of the *Star Wars* franchise invites viewers to question preconceived notions of normativity, especially preconceptions about disability.\(^2\)

Critically engaging with disability narratives and stereotypes in popular culture helps us confront preconceived notions of disability and its uses in storytelling. Not only do preconceptions have an impact on the ways in which narratives are constructed, they are also instrumental in forming normative discourses which place limits on people with disabilities. For example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that “the available, received cultural narratives of disability—similar to those of the gender and race systems—are prejudicial, oppressive, and disempowering” (1567). Ria Cheyne likewise argues that “narratives circulating in popular culture play a significant role in shaping wider understandings of disability” (117). Richard Dyer questions the use of stereotypes and suggests that “the stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype” (14). However, stereotypes express and construct a particular worldview. They codify distinct notions about a group that should not be taken for granted (Dyer 14). The investigation of narratives and stereotypes of disability in popular culture is inevitably connected to discourses of disability in society. One prominent stereotype of people with disabilities is that of the “supercrip” which describes people with disabilities as extraordinary. By focusing on individual achievements, either mundane tasks or extreme feats such as climbing a mountain, the supercrip implies that effort and willpower of the individual is all that is needed for people with disabilities to overcome obstacles in life (Kama).

In discussing the “supercrip” stereotype, Sami Schalk contends that critics in the field of disability studies have overlooked certain texts. This neglect has had a particular impact on the interaction between disability studies and popular culture. Schalk argues that “to dismiss outright all representations of supercrips as ‘bad’ is to disregard
potentially entire genres of popular culture productions, ones which tend to have very large audiences” (“Reevaluating” 84). She continues: “critical engagement with supercrip narrative mechanisms and types within their genre and medium contexts will increase our understanding of how these representations are produced” (“Reevaluating” 84). Taking the specifics of genre into account might also change how we understand stereotypes and narratives of disability. To simply ignore or discount fictional narratives on the basis of their fantastic or speculative elements by inserting them into paradigms of realism does not do justice to the complexities inherent in narrative fiction. Instead, as Schalk points out, these narratives must be subjected to multilayered analysis. A multilayered analysis of disability in the Star Wars universe reveals that contexts such as genre and fictional universe must be taken into account when analyzed from the perspective of disability studies.

Darth Vader, Technological Cures, and Disability

There has been a notable shift in the casting of Star Wars films since the production of A New Hope in the 1970s. The protagonists have gone from being almost exclusively white and male to a more diverse set of heroes in terms of gender and ethnicity. The Force Awakens (2015) features a white woman and a man of color as the heroes, and Rogue One has a female protagonist and a relatively diverse cast. In addition to being homogeneous in terms of gender and ethnicity, until recently most protagonists in the franchise have been able-bodied. However, the shift toward a more diverse cast of characters also extends to people with disabilities, at least within the cast of characters. While the Star Wars film series has featured major characters with physical disabilities (most notably the evil and cybernetically enhanced Darth Vader and General Grievous), it is not until the 2016 film Rogue One that one of the heroes, Chirrut Îmwe, is depicted as a character with disabilities, although played by able-bodied actor Donnie Yen. Because the binary division of good and evil in Star Wars plays an important role in the plot and structure of the films, the question of which bodies are coded as “good” or “evil” is crucial. The franchise’s shift toward a more diverse cast of characters invites the viewing public to question preconceived notions of
normativity within the Star Wars universe. This change highlights a need to re-examine how disability can be understood within the storyworld.

The original trilogy emphasized the possibilities of technological cures for disability, a trope commonly employed in science fiction (Allen). For example, when Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) loses his hand in The Empire Strikes Back, it is surgically replaced by a cybernetic prosthesis. The severing of limbs in the Star Wars universe is not equivalent to becoming disabled, and thus the storyworld is in fact “disability-free” (Covino 110). Luke can feel “secure in the knowledge that his life is not irrevocably altered by the maiming .... With a quick fix-up, Luke receives his prosthetic limb and goes on to fight another day” (Covino 110). Indeed, the cure seems to be both readily available and so advanced that no one will notice the difference between a prosthetic or nonprosthetic hand. Moreover, before becoming Darth Vader, Anakin Skywalker suffers near-fatal injuries: several of his limbs are severed and his body is badly burnt. Rescued at the very last moment, he is subjected to extensive surgery and technological alterations that finalize his transformation into the evil Darth Vader. While the cybernetics of Vader leave his organic parts more intact than General Grievous before him (in the prequel Revenge of the Sith), all of his organic body parts are concealed, and by no means can he pass as fully organic. Instead, he becomes a hybrid between man and machine—a cyborg. Regardless of the end results, both Luke and Vader have effectively been cured of their physical impairments.

At the very least, the technological cures enable characters to return to an able-bodied functionality, or even to gain an enhanced functionality and become stronger, faster, or more responsive. Tobin Siebers argues that “prostheses always increase the cyborg’s abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. The cyborg is always more than human—and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled” (63). Although Vader generally passes as able-bodied due to his cybernetics, it is clear that he cannot survive without his suit. Technology does not increase his abilities; it simply keeps him alive. While he is cured of his physical injuries, he remains disabled. It is not the technological alterations to his form that makes him strong—rather, it is his use of the Force.

Curing people with disabilities has constituted a recurrent trope throughout the history of cinema, which took on a new form in
science fiction narratives. Martin F. Norden argues that “several movies informed by the science fiction, fantasy, and horror traditions include the images of people aided by scientific and technological advancements, particularly high-tech prostheses” (292–93). In contrast to the historical uses of the trope, in which curing disability often entailed medical or divine intervention, the science fiction films of the 1970s and 1980s presented cures facilitated by technology and science (Norden 295). While early cinema restricted the curing trope to well-deserving, good-natured characters, according to Norden, the technological cure is available to both protagonists and antagonists (295). However, the narrative logic that motivates the cure and the effect it has on the character are decidedly different. Protagonists can be deserving of being cured and made whole again, whereas antagonists tend to become monstrous. As a hero, Luke has his severed hand replaced without any complications or consequences, but Vader is transformed into someone scarcely human.

The curing narratives found in science fiction effectively eradicate people with disabilities from the stories. They perpetuate the prevalent notion that disability is something that requires a cure and that curing disabilities will be an obvious development in the future. The prevalence of the medical model in which disability is primarily understood as a medical condition connected to the individual (Goodley 6) is clearly visible in the use of curing narratives, which play a part in constructing able-bodiedness as a societal and cultural norm. This ableist normativity is evident in curing narratives that perpetuate able-bodiedness as a state of normality; thus, stories of disability inevitably focus on overcoming one’s disability and returning to “normality.” Robert McRuer argues that there exists a compulsory able-bodiedness that leads to the conclusion that “nearly everyone, it would seem, wants to be normal in the able-bodied sense” (7). Fiona Kumari Campbell proposes that attention should be paid to “how the able, able-bodied, non-disabled identity is maintained. The direction is to examine elements of what is presented as ‘normal’ or aspirational” (215). In the context of narratives in which characters are cured, the characters (and by extension, the audience) aspire to avoid disability and return to an able-bodied functionality. This, in turn, perpetuates an ableist view of disability as something that not only can but should be cured.
Unmasking Signs of Evil

Anakin Skywalker’s journey from a good to an evil life as Darth Vader makes visible the dualism associated with the good/light side and the evil/dark side of the Star Wars universe. The dramaturgy of Anakin’s transformation into Darth Vader and his turn toward evil are mirrored by his transformation from white to black, from man to machine, and from able-bodied to disabled. Through intersections of different kinds of Otherness, Vader is constructed as the ultimate evil and becomes one of the most iconic villains of science fiction and popular culture. The characters of Star Wars are ascribed signifiers and traits that clearly connote where they belong within the good/evil dichotomy that is a central theme of the films. Which side the characters belong to is broadcast throughout the mise en scène: from the most basic visual levels of costumes and colors to soundtrack and lighting. The films rely on a strict binary division of good and evil, and certain elements are primarily associated with each side. In the original trilogy, dichotomies of black/white; machine/man; and technology/nature are prominent.

In considering Vader as an antagonist marked specifically by race, Adilifu Nama declares that “Star Wars carries on the tradition [of] using masks and exaggerated physical mannerisms to create the illusion of alien life-forms that signify people of color” (30). In addition to the uses of black costume and mask, the iconic voice of Vader is portrayed by black actor James Earl Jones. Nama explains, “The off-screen voice of Jones plays a significant part in inviting the viewing audience to experience blackness aurally, as the intergalactic voice of doom ... Star Wars recuperates the early SF film tradition of structured black absence; blackness is absent but simultaneously present as a signifier of danger” (31). The association between blackness and evil in Star Wars becomes even more prominent in the transitional moments in which Vader transforms from evil to good and vice versa. In Return of the Jedi, Vader rejects the dark side when he kills the Emperor and thus sacrifices himself to save Luke’s life. In his last moments, he finds his way back to the good side and is stripped of his blackness, his inhumaness, and his evilness in both a symbolical and literal way. Underneath the hard, black, mechanical shell, a white, fragile body is revealed, and the iconic voice of Jones is
replaced by the voice of white actor Sebastian Shaw. The unmasking of the white body underneath the black surface visually enhances the transformation from evil to good.

Considering the fact that most characters in *Star Wars* are seemingly able-bodied, the disability underlining the origin story of Vader is notable. Anakin Skywalker (who is transformed into Darth Vader) is a white, able-bodied Jedi aligned with the good side of the Force. The reconstruction of Anakin’s mutilated body turns him into the archetype of what Norden calls a “Techno-Marvel,” a disabled character who has been cured of his disability through technology (292–95). This embodiment of technological prosthesis symbolizes Anakin’s final transformation into an evil character. Through the use of this narrative structure, Vader’s physical disabilities play a part in his becoming evil. Several scholars have pointed out that in fiction, disability has commonly been used as a metaphor for evil (Goodley 15; Norden 52). For example, Paul Longmore argues that in stories, “deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil” (133). In the narrative of Anakin/Vader, the deformity of the character’s soul is indeed mirrored by the deformity of his body. Although Vader generally passes as able-bodied, attention is drawn to his physical disabilities throughout the trilogy. The voice of Vader, as well as the sound of his assisted breathing, which has become a hallmark of evil, is ever-present, and offers constant reminders of his disabilities. In Vader’s final moments, the camera focuses on his physical disabilities. His failing body is also in focus in the scenes in which he is shown without his helmet. Of particular note are the scenes in his meditation chamber, which is actually a life support pod that allows him to remove parts of the technological equipment that sustains him.

Norden famously argued that characters with disabilities are isolated in cinema:

most movies have tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other. This phenomenon . . . is reflected not only in the typical storylines of the films but also to a large extent in the ways that filmmakers have visualized the characters interacting in their environments; they have often used . . . framing, editing, sound, lighting, set design elements (e.g., fences, windows, staircase banisters)—to suggest a physical or symbolic
separation of disabled characters from the rest of society.

In many ways, this is true for Vader—an isolated character visually set aside from the rest of the Empire (e.g., Stormtroopers and military commanders) through his costume and his ability to wield the Force. In terms of how shots are framed, he is constantly separated and isolated from other characters, in particular when in his chamber. This isolation, which is commonly associated with depictions of disability in cinema, does not end until Vader turns away from the dark side and his corporeality. As he is dying, he pleads to Luke: “Help me take this mask off . . . Just for once . . . let me look on you with my own eyes” (Return of the Jedi). The scene shows how Luke physically interacts with Vader, holds him, helps him, comforts him, and removes the mask, thus revealing the disfigured face of Anakin. When Vader dies and leaves his corporeal existence behind, he is reunited with Yoda and Obi-Wan as an incorporeal being. He returns as the good, fair-skinned Anakin Skywalker, manifested as a spiritual being. His body, shown in the death scene with Luke as weak and in need of assistance, appears to be healed and without injuries or technological adaptations. He is good, white, and able-bodied once more, and the isolation caused by his disability has ended.

The narrative suggests that the dramaturgy of disability and the turn toward the dark side are connected but are not necessarily a consequence of one another. However problematic this narrative use of disability may be in the case of the character of Vader, it is not isolated from other issues such as race/ethnicity and the man/machine dichotomy. Contrary to Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg, which “suggest[s] a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies” (178), Vader instead reinforces these dualisms as they are presented in the storyworld. The storyline of Vader/Anakin closely mirrors the dichotomies of good and evil in the films. As he transitions from one to the other, the character’s body (or spiritual manifestation) conforms to the appropriate physical form, thus underlining the transition.
Rogue One: New Perspectives on Disability in the Star Wars Universe

Rogue One is the eighth feature film in the Star Wars universe and the second film to be produced since Disney Studios bought Lucasfilm in 2012. Chronologically, the film takes place before A New Hope and depicts how the rebels acquired the blueprints for the infamous Death Star. A group of rebels with the call sign “Rogue One” sacrifice their lives to infiltrate one of the Empire’s archives in order to secure these blueprints. Two members of the rebel group are Chirrut Îmwe and Baze Malbus (Wen Jiang). Both characters are played by Chinese actors, and this augments the ethnic diversity of the movie’s cast. Moreover, Chirrut is also portrayed as being blind.

In terms of how his disability is depicted, there are three major factors that distinguish Chirrut from Vader. Firstly, although Chirrut is unmistakably a character with disabilities, he is not depicted as an isolated person. On the contrary (and unlike Vader), he seldom appears alone in the frame. The storyline of Chirrut situates him as a character bound to a collective (the Guardians of the Whills), and although there is nothing left to protect, they do not abandon their calling. Throughout the film, Chirrut and Baze are portrayed as a couple that stick together through thick and thin, and they do so until the very end. The pair’s connection is emphasized in the characters’ respective death scenes. In the moments prior to their deaths, although they are physically separated, they are visually connected through the use of shot reverse shots. The relationship between Chirrut and Baze is interdependent. This becomes evident through this exchange of gazes. The scenes do not use any form of blurred point-of-view shots to juxtapose the able-bodied character’s point of view and the deviating blind gaze. Johnson Cheu considers “gazes exchanged between sighted and blind characters as a way of understanding how the blind are stereotyped as inferior” (“Seeing” 484). Cheu claims that “the intradiegetic gaze of the disabled character at the able-bodied characters within the film . . . shows how mainstream filmmakers use the Blind gaze to perpetuate stereotypes of Blind people, such as dependency” (“Seeing” 485). Because the two scenes mirror each other, the gazes of Chirrut and Baze are characterized by
similarities rather than differences. While Chirrut may depend on Baze, Baze is likewise dependent on Chirrut.

Secondly, Chirrut is not enhanced (or cured) by cybernetics or technology. In fact, there are no curing narratives associated with the character. This is quite uncommon for a blind cinematic character, who throughout the history of cinema have usually been framed within narratives of curing blindness (Norden 59). Like the rebels and Force users of past films, Chirrut relies not on firepower, blasters, or technology but on the Force. Moreover, his blindness is never explained in the narrative. With reference to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s assertion that “in stories about characters with disabilities, an underlying issue is always whether their disability is the foundation of the character itself” (6), Bérubé argues that “disability . . . demands a story” (“Disability” 570). If a character with disabilities is part of a story, it is usually because of his/her disability. However, Chirrut’s blindness is not what makes him an essential part of the story. The question of why Chirrut is blind is left unasked as well as unanswered, and so is the issue of a possible technological cure. Given the level of technological advancement portrayed in the film, it seems that restoring Chirrut’s eyesight would be a realistic possibility. Therefore, one might speculate that Chirrut actively chose to remain blind rather than become able-bodied.

Finally, in contrast to Vader, Chirrut fights on the side of the rebel alliance, undoubtedly the “good” side in the fictional universe of Star Wars. While the film does not rely as heavily on color distinctions as the original trilogy, Chirrut is nonetheless portrayed as unmistakably good. Although marked as “other” by both ability and ethnicity, unlike Vader he is not necessarily evil. In comparison to the original trilogy (in which the cast was predominantly white and able-bodied), the diversity of the cast in Rogue One does not single Chirrut out as the sole nonwhite or disabled character.

While the inclusion of a character with physical disability who fights against evil contributes to a diversified idea of who can be portrayed as a hero in popular culture, this does not mean that the character is free from stereotypes, nor that the progression toward a more diverse cast has completely removed all of the problems related to previous representations of people with disabilities in cinema. Like Vader before him, Chirrut is portrayed by an actor who is not disabled himself. This contributes to the
Hollywood tradition of casting able-bodied/minded actors as disabled characters. Norden extends his criticism of this type of casting and argues it to be both comparable to the use of blackface and equally misrepresentative (17). He asserts that actors who have a disability are seldom considered “for roles that don’t specify disabilities” and that the roles that do specify a certain type of disability are routinely cast with able-bodied actors (311). Similarly, the other character, with visible physical disabilities in _Rogue One_, Saw Gerrera (Forest Whitaker), is also played by a nondisabled actor.

To some extent, both Vader and Chirrut perpetuate stereotypes commonly used in cinema to depict people with disabilities: Vader as a techno-marvel and Chirrut as a supercrip. Chirrut is depicted as a powerful fighter. He defeats no less than six Stormtroopers single-handedly, using only his staff and his commitment to the Force. Endowed with extraordinary fighting skills and senses that go beyond mere sight, Chirrut appears to have superpowers. In addition to being a gifted fighter, he becomes something of a wise counselor to protagonist Jyn (Felicity Jones)—what Norden would call a “Saintly Sage,” a pious older person with a disability (almost always blindness) who serves as a voice of reason and conscience in a chaotic world . . . . the Saintly Sage is sensible, charitable, and above all wise” (131). Although not old per se, he is older than Jyn and is above all a deeply spiritual character. Chirrut’s ability to sense the Force makes him appear to have the gift of foresight. The depiction of blind characters as prophets or seers has been commonly used in depictions of people with blindness in cinema (Richardson 177) and in cultural representations of blindness for several hundred years (Barasch 28–33). While aligned to other blind fighters in science fiction (such as Daredevil), Chirrut can also be associated with films in the martial arts tradition; blind, Asian martial arts masters, exemplified by Zatoichi. The depiction of Chirrut as a blind warrior monk could be regarded as a supercrip stereotype. However, while the portrayal of Chirrut does perpetuate stereotypes in some respects, not only disability but also of ethnicity, put into a genre context can provide a more complex image of how to understand the character.

The supercrip is understood to be a potentially harmful stereotype, and as such it is overwhelmingly criticized in disability studies. Amit Kama argues that the supercrip represents two distinct stereotypes,
“the ‘regular’ supercrip” and the “glorified supercrip” (450). The first is typical of narratives that describe a “disabled person who can accomplish mundane, taken-for-granted tasks as if they were great accomplishments” (450). The latter is represented in stories of people with disabilities that “performs highly extraordinary deeds—climbing a mountain, sailing the ocean, etc.” (450). According to Kama, both are problematic because they primarily focus on individual achievements—thus implying that those who do not achieve these superhuman actions lack self-discipline and willpower. Correspondingly, both tropes suggest that “disability is not socially constructed, but is equivalent to a physical impairment which can and must be overcome by resolute dedication” (Kama 450). However, the supercrip that commonly appears in science fiction (here represented by Chirrut) differs from Kama’s typification.

Schalk argues that the supercrip should be considered as a “narrative produced through specific mechanisms” (“Reevaluating” 79) that must be more precisely defined in order to better serve disability studies. From this perspective, the supercrip is not an understanding of what or who someone is, but rather of “how a person or character and their accomplishments are being constructed and represented . . . . In short, the focus should be less on what a supercrip is and more on how supercrip narratives are created and sustained” (“Reevaluating” 78). Schalk re-evaluates the uses of the supercrip stereotype in disability studies and adds a third type of supercrip narrative to Kama’s previous typification, which she calls the “superpowered supercrip narrative,” which she links to characters that have “abilities or ‘powers’ that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability” (81). In contrast to the other two types of supercrip narratives, the superpowered supercrip’s “powers and abilities . . . are not the result of effort, but merely accident or luck” (“Reevaluating” 81). The shifting focus in this narrative from individual to circumstantial may present the possibility of understanding the supercrip differently in science fiction narratives.

In the context of the science fiction genre, the depiction of Chirrut as a superpowered supercrip can be understood as a potentially empowering portrayal of people with disabilities. In contrast to the aforementioned supercrip narratives in realist fiction, which emphasize individual achievements, Chirrut’s extraordinary skills are attributed to the Force. In cinema, blind characters are often depicted as
helpless and vulnerable. Cheu explains that “It is only when viewers are supposed to remember that the blind are helpless that passing as sighted . . . [is] forgotten in favor of the close-up shot that displays the co-opted Blind gaze as the gaze of unfocused zombie-like eyes staring into nothingness” (“Seeing” 492). In stark contrast to Cheu’s description of this common depiction, the blind gaze in Rogue One is used as a way to further Chirrut’s agency. In close-ups on Chirrut prior to and during fight scenes, he is depicted as anything but dependent and helpless. These close-ups are used to demonstrate his mental and physical strength and ability. According to Cheu, “The construction of blind women, indeed of disabled persons generally, as both helpless and dependent shows ableist fears about disability, about being disabled, about the possibility of becoming disabled, and about the loss of power such acquired disability supposedly brings” (“Seeing” 493). In the case of Chirrut, however, the character proposes an alternative to these ableist fears by showing that disability does not necessarily make one neither weak nor dependent.

The depictions of Chirrut’s blindness make it evident that one’s physical ability is not what dictates whether or not one will be a powerful Force user within the Star Wars universe. The relationship between eyesight and the manner in which one wields the Force has indeed been a theme of the previous films. When Luke trains to be a Jedi in A New Hope, Obi-Wan makes him practice without his vision and explains: “Your eyes can deceive you. Don’t trust them!” The Force is a mental sensation, not a visual one. In Rogue One, Chirrut explains that it is by feeling the way the Force moves that he can sense intentions: “The Force moves darkly near a creature that’s about to kill,” he states. This suggests that he is able to physically sense the movements and shades of the Force. Regardless of Chirrut’s actual status as a Force user or as Force sensitive, he undoubtedly feels the Force. For example, at the end of the film he walks through the line of fire repeating his mantra: “I am one with the Force and the Force is with me.” This allows him to avoid enemy fire until his mission is completed. Such an accomplishment should remind the audience of the second part of this mantra. In its entirety, it reads: “The Force is with me. And I am with the Force. And I fear nothing. For all is as the Force wills it.” Chirrut relies on the Force to guide him through the line of fire; he has no need for eyesight. To make it across the battlefield, he need only sense the Force.
The inclusion of a blind character in Rogue One reveals how the Force can be understood in terms of corporeality. Physical disability/ability is apparently irrelevant to the Force. For example, the two most powerful Force users in the films do not have physically strong bodies. The Emperor is old and seems physically weak, but he is still one of the most powerful Sith Lords. Yoda is likewise depicted as an old and tired creature. The fact that the great Jedi master is not a white, able-bodied human male, but an aging, physically fragile nonhuman of small stature underlines how corporeality is constructed in the storyworld. Yoda proclaims “Judge me by my size, do you? . . . And well you should not, for my ally is the Force. And a powerful ally it is . . . Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter” (The Empire Strikes Back). Yoda evidences the fact that corporeality and physical ability are irrelevant for those who are aligned with the Force. While having a corporeal body creates limitations, growing old and dying of old age does not mean the end for Yoda. He lives on after death as an incorporeal being. In A New Hope, Obi-Wan likewise chooses to end his corporeal existence, and by virtue of this sacrifice he is able to remain at Luke’s side as an adviser. However, in the films it is unclear whether these luminous beings can wield the Force or are merely capable of advising those who still have a physical body and thus able to use the Force.

There are physical limitations to using the Force, although being disabled does not exclude one from wielding it per se. For example, no mechanical being (such as droids) can use the Force in the films. While technology (such as Luke’s X-wing on Dagobah) is connected to the Force, it seems that wielding it requires an organic body. Because he is only part machine, Vader still has the ability to use the Force, whereas no droid ever indicates that it can even feel it. The ability to sense the Force distinguishes organic and technological constructs, and it also distinguishes those organic bodies who can or cannot feel the Force. Not being able to sense the Force becomes a disability in the Star Wars universe, equivalent to the lack of other senses such as sight or hearing. Those who have the ability to not only sense the Force (as Chirrut can) but also use it (like Vader or Luke) have a great advantage in this fictional universe. In Star Wars, being blind or having a non-normative body is not as disabling as lacking the ability to sense the Force. If the ability to feel the Force constitutes an additional sense, then the characters who cannot do so are the ones who become disabled.
Those who not only lack the ability to feel the Force but are also susceptible to its control showcase the most blatant example of ableism in Star Wars. In this examination of Star Wars in relation to disability, it becomes evident that while physical disabilities do not seem to hinder a character from becoming one with the Force, strong mental abilities are perceived as crucial to wielding it. In terms of ableism, in Star Wars it is the able-minded who are idealized. For example, Obi-Wan explains that Jedi mind tricks only work on the “weak-minded” (A New Hope). The path to the dark side is likewise characterized by uncontrolled emotions of fear and anger. The ability of a strong mind to control these emotional weaknesses is paramount if one is to remain on the side of good. Cheu argues that disability as a dominant societal and cultural construction is present in science fiction films such as Blade Runner (1982), The Matrix (1999), andGattaca, even though disability seems to be eradicated in these stories (“De-gene-erates” 200). Likewise, even though physical disabilities appear to be of no consequence in Star Wars, when it comes to wielding the Force, normative structures of ableism resurface with a generic twist, in the form of Force users or non-Force users.

Conclusion

The differences between Vader and Chirrut signal a progression in the ways in which disability is conceptualized in Star Wars. These changes may be due to corresponding societal cultural shifts, such as the increased visibility of marginalized groups. While the evil Vader is isolated and subjected to technological curing narratives, Chirrut is part of a collective that fights on the side of the “good guys,” the rebels. He needs to be neither cured of his blindness nor be technologically enhanced. The inclusion of Chirrut in Rogue One invites one to reconsider the nature of the Force and its relationship with corporeality and disability/ability. However, while Rogue One challenges previous depictions of disability in the Star Wars universe, it still adheres to and perpetuates certain common cinematic stereotypes employed in the depiction of people with disabilities.

The diversification of the cast of characters in the Star Wars franchise invites viewers to question preconceived notions of normativity. The portrayal of Chirrut in the latest installment of the series
demands that we expand our understanding of dis/ability and that the concept be re-evaluated within the *Star Wars* universe. While both Darth Vader and Chirrut partly adhere to stereotypes commonly used in cinema (stereotypes not only of disability but also of ethnicity), the contexts in which these stereotypes appear cannot be disregarded. Popular narratives may be subjected to multilayered analysis, taking into account not only the history of the representation of people with disabilities in cinema but also the contexts of their genre and their fictional universes. In the study of disabilities, it is useful to critically engage with stereotypes in their appropriate contexts. As has been argued by previous scholars (Cheyne; Schalk), the genre contexts in which stories takes place need to be considered. From this perspective, the specificity of genre conventions and narrative practices in certain genres can be taken into account in tandem with the perspective of disability. More research is needed to further understand ableism in popular culture, because these narratives play a significant role in perpetuating or challenging stereotypes. Stereotypes affect people’s lives and can either reinforce normative ableism or challenge the way in which we regard ability and disability, in popular culture as well as in society.

Notes

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1. Throughout this article, the definition of disability is multilayered: First of all, for the sake of analysis disability is used as a way of defining characters within the films as physically disabled, that is, drawing attention to Darth Vader’s physicality as disabled and Chirrut’s blindness. Second, and more importantly, disability is understood from the perspective of ableism studies, as suggested by Fiona Kumari Campbell. Ableism from this perspective is produced by the notion of normalcy and a "constitutional divide" (Campbell 215). Disability can only be understood in relation to ability and normality, and is upheld through “a division enforced between the ‘normal’ = human and the aberrant... = subhuman” (Campbell 215).

2. Henceforth referred to as the original trilogy. The analysis only takes into account the eight feature films produced between 1977 and 2016 in the *Star Wars* franchise.
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Josefine Wålivaara, is a postdoctoral researcher at Umeå University, Sweden. She has published in Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association and her thesis Dreams of a Subversive Future: Sexuality, (Hetero) normativity, and Queer Potential in Science Fiction Film and Television was published in 2016. Her research interests include popular culture, cinema, normativity, disability, sexuality, and gender.