

Cinematic Inclusiveness: Horror Cinema's Portrayal of Mental and Physical Disabilities

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The relationship between disability and horror cinema has been complicated. The majority of horror films have associated disability with monstrosity, and represented it as a phenomenon to fear or destroy. Paul Longmore, a leading academic scholar in disability studies, states that according to Hollywood, “the presence of individuals with visible handicaps would alienate consumers from their products,” and is the leading force behind the lack of minority representation in cinema (14). However, changes in the genre are taking place as horror films have begun representing a range of mental and physical disabilities with compassion and sensitivity. Angela Smith, a disabilities and film studies academic scholar, explains that horror cinema frequently “locate[s] horror less in singular and deformed bodies and more in dominant social structures, including the family and American culture,” because disabilities are a literary device to inform the audience about an underlying issue (“Introduction” 24). Moreover, they purposely “force viewers to confront spectacles of impairment as projections of their own socially, scientifically, and cinematically shaped prejudices” (Smith, “Chapter 3” 133). As the presence of disabilities becomes more prominent in horror cinema, so does the audience’s understanding and awareness about mental health issues and physical impairments. Disabilities are identified as a mental or physical condition that makes it difficult for an individual to interact with society the same way a non-disabled person can. This paper analyzes deafness, blindness, schizophrenia, and depression in films that were released over the last decade. The four recent horror films I base my discussion on are John Krasinski’s *A Quiet Place* (2018), Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (2014), Peary Reginald Teo’s *The Assent* (2019), and Fede Alvarez’s *Don’t Breathe* (2016). My goal is to show how in aligning the audience with the character’s struggles, they are normalizing and making the audience consciously aware of disabilities in horror films.

John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* (2018) follows the Abbott family as they adapt to a new normal and survive the after effects of an alien invasion. The aliens are eyeless monsters who have an overdeveloped hearing system that allows them to hear small sounds from far distances. There is no explanation as to why these aliens landed, but they are presented as predatory monsters that will kill anything making noise. Evelyn (Emily Blunt) and Lee (John Krasinski) live silently with their three children Regan (Millicent Simmonds), Marcus (Noah Jupe) and Beau (Cade Woodward) on an isolated farm. Thankfully, their fluency in American Sign Language that they learned because of Regan's disability, is a major key to their survival. As the family faces various challenges, including mourning the death of Beau, they learn that being as quiet as humanly possible is not quiet enough.

Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) presents single mother Amelia (Essie Davis) who lives a seemingly mundane life raising her problematic child Samuel (Noah Wiseman). Amelia's husband died in a car crash while on the way to the hospital to have Samuel seven years prior. This loss slowly develops into major depression as she continually refuses to talk about her late husband and closes herself off from everyone in her life. She does not want the pity or help from anyone, even distancing from Samuel and hiding all of her husband's belongings in the basement, never able to move on or seek support. Her depression manifests into a monster called the Babadook who terrorizes the family, putting both Amelia and Samuel's life in danger. As she tries to ignore this threat, the Babadook gradually begins possessing her until she only has the option of confronting it or succumbing to it.

Peary Reginald Teo's *The Assent* (2019) traces how single father Joel (Robert Kazinsky) raises his son Mason (Caden Dragomer) while dealing with schizophrenia. Joel has to prove he is a capable father to his therapist Dr. Maya (Florence Faivre) who offers only the bare minimum

amount of support for him. Unfortunately, Mason becomes presumably possessed by a demonic entity that is related to Joel's schizophrenia. Two exorcists intervene, using exorcism techniques to cast the demon out before it is too late. Camera work and sneaky dialogue reveals that Joel was the one possessed and undergoing the exorcism the whole time, not Mason. Unfortunately, Joel does not realize this until it is too late, and he succumbs to the temptation of the possessing demon.

Fede Alvarez's *Don't Breathe* (2016) explores how the Blind Man's (Stephen Lang)¹ warped application of justice causes him to restrain his daughter's presumed murderer and contort his sense of retribution. His revenge plan for his daughter's murderer is interrupted by Rocky (Jane Levy), Alex (Dylan Minnette), and Money (Daniel Zovatto), who aim to break in and steal thousands of dollars hidden somewhere in the Blind Man's house. Initially, the Blind Man throws these three thieves off guard by appearing helpless, but quickly utilizes his lack of sight and ex-military skills to find and kill them. As the three characters try to find a way out of the Blind Man's heavily fortified house, they realize that they can't reason with his inhumanity and will have to fight to survive.

Jeffrey Cohen claims that every monster horror film contains "two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves" (13). Though he makes no direct mention of these four films, his generalized theories apply to them because they include a monstrous antagonist. The monster, in each, is a product of the character's attempt to repress the entirety or an aspect of their disability to appear

¹ Stephen Lang's character is only referred to as 'The Blind Man' throughout the film and in the credits.

normal. The disabled character must confront the physical manifestation of their disability in order to accept themselves and reconnect with others. Additionally, Robin Wood, an acclaimed scholar in film studies, describes how there are “five recurrent motifs” that explains what the cinematic monster stems from: “a. *The monster as human psychotic or schizophrenic*...b. *The revenge of nature*...c. *Satanism, diabolic possession, the Antichrist*...d. *The terrible child*...[and] e. *Cannibalism*” (89). The majority of horror films include at least one of Wood’s five motifs to parallel the monster with the anxiety that a film is centered around. Based on Wood’s analysis, *A Quiet Place*’s monsters are based on the revenge of nature because survival requires the Abbott family to rely on a near complete removal of modern technology and physically live with nature. *The Babadook* and *Don’t Breathe*’s monstrous figures are a reflection of the human psychotic because they are a direct projection of the disabled character’s inner turmoil. *The Assent*’s monster falls primarily under Satanism and diabolic possession that is directly connected to schizophrenia. Wood’s list of recurrent motifs offers a starting point to understand the monster’s origins, but these four films apply a new motif category that claims the monster as an extension of a character’s disability.

This paper is organized in three major sections: Repression, Ostracization, and The Monstrous Double. Each section will touch on the deafness in *A Quiet Place*, blindness in *Don’t Breathe*, depression in *The Babadook*, and/or schizophrenia in *The Assent*, when relevant. These three sections collectively discuss the relationship between the disabled character and the society around them, while illustrating the respective disability as a monstrous being. The section titled Repression discusses how the disabled character chooses to repress a part of themselves, hiding behind a façade as a mechanism for fitting in. The section titled Ostracization explores how the character’s may also choose self-isolation away from others who in turn don’t offer any support

or try to understand what the respective character is going through. The section on The Monstrous Double delves deeper into the physical manifestation of the respective character's disability. This sections' examination includes whether the disabled character successfully manages their repressed tendency or succumbs to it. Together these three sections will explore how horror films treatment of mental and/or physical disabilities changes the way the non-disabled audience responds to and interacts with the disabled character.

REPRESSION

These horror film's plot typically centers around confrontation between the disabled character and their impairment that has caused their interactions with others to change for better or worse. Amelia from *The Babadook* is one example where the character shows an innate desire to fit in or be labelled as 'normal' that stems from the disabled person being completely surrounded by a non-disabled cast of characters. Amelia considers herself abnormal, and "deny impairment as...a part of the human condition" that is necessary to her existence (Smith, "Chapter 3" 151). Regan from *A Quiet Place* and Joel from *The Assent* also share a similar mindset of wanting to be seen as independent and as an equal to their non-disabled counterparts. The non-disabled characters verbally separate and isolate the disabled character due to a lack of understanding and prejudice. Unfortunately, the non-disabled characters restriction on what is socially acceptable and normal causes the disabled character to hide their inner turmoil in the intimate spaces of their own home, such as the basement. Horror films typically present basements as a terrifying location that can relate to abuse, but in these films, the setting encourages the disabled character to confront their disability. *A Quiet Place* and *The Babadook* use the basement as a space of retreat and a place to repress the character's disability. The

intimate nature of the basement – in terms of what this space means for the character and the fact that it is located in the house they are living in – and its appearance allow the disabled person to prevent ‘outsiders’ or those who are not disabled from entering. Repression is illustrated through the combination of the basement and the, typically, negative reactions the disabled character has towards those who don’t understand the disability but try to ineffectively help anyway.

The Babadook exposes how Amelia’s grief and major depression arises after her husband’s death and her inability to cope with this loss. In the film, Amelia develops signs of bipolar disorder after her grief begins to literally take control over her actions by manifesting into a monster called the Babadook. Amelia shifts between depression and extreme irritability/mania after a serious depressive episode where she snaps at Samuel. The audience gains insight into her major depression when she receives a mysterious book called ‘The Babadook’ where the entity claims to Amelia “the more you deny the stronger I get” (Kent 00:36:51-55). This statement reveals how Amelia’s refusal to confront her husband’s death will fuel the entity who feeds off of her despair. While the statement comes off as a threat, it is also a motivational push for Amelia to face her grief before it takes over her life. The book also claims that “The BABADOOK [is] growing right under your skin,” suggesting that it can completely take over her mentality and physique if she continues to do nothing (Kent 00:37:07-09). Wood states that “what is repressed...must always return as a threat, perceived by the consciousness as ugly, terrible, [and] obscene,” which aligns with Amelia’s discovery about her relationship with the Babadook (102). The book visually verifies the Babadook as an entity born from her depression that has been growing since her husband’s car crash. When talking about her husband’s death, Amelia claims: “I have moved on. I don’t mention him. [And] I don’t talk about him,” but she is choosing to ignore the source of her grief rather than confront it (Kent

00:29:37-41). She locks away all her late husband's personal belongings and photos in the basement, convinced that by doing this she can forget about him. But this action further deepens her grief, which affects her son Samuel, who understands what she is going through, but can't offer any helpful assistance because he is just a child. As the entity's presence gains a stronger hold over her, threatening her and Samuel's life, she is forced to make a decision: either give in to depression or finally confront her grief and move on.

The Assent explores Joel's struggle with schizophrenia as he tries to manage his mental disability with medication, therapy sessions, and constructing "weird sculptures" (Teo 00:33:09). Like Amelia, "Joel [has] never really moved on" from the death of his wife and deliberately isolates from everyone in the town except for his therapist Dr. Maya and his son's babysitter, Cassie (Hannah Ward) (Teo 00:32:56-33:00). Though the film suggests Joel has been dealing with schizophrenia since before his wife's death, he lives day to day with minimal human interaction. This lack of human contact backfires when he is left to rely on two random exorcists who claim to be able to save Mason. The introduction of the demonic possession is eventually explained as a manifestation of Joel's schizophrenia, which is visualized through peculiar cinematic techniques. Teo illustrates for the audience what a schizophrenic episode looks like from Joel's perspective by layering indistinctive noises called cacophony – a harsh mixture of distorted sounds – and a stereoscopic camera effect over the scene. Joel's medication successfully represses the auditory and visual hallucinations but prevents him from realizing that this symptom is a by-product of his future demonic possession. While the director does base Joel's disability on the collective experience of a handful of schizophrenics ("The Assent"), the film makes the claim that "illnesses known to us, like Parkinson's or dyslexia... [can be] mistaken for possession" (Teo 00:44:12-19). This "association of disability with malevolence"

suggests Joel's schizophrenia is a direct symptom of possession, that can disappear after an exorcism (Longmore 2). Joel's eventual possession is not solely based on the disappearance of his medication and institutional support networks, but also his emotional instability after losing his wife. Schizophrenia is rarely seen in horror films, but Teo's decision to develop it through a religious/possession perspective undermines its relevance as a medical disability.

Unlike *The Babadook* and *The Assent*'s disabled character repressing their disability, *Don't Breathe*'s antagonist referred to as 'The Blind Man,' does not repress his blindness, but rather uses it to overpower his non-disabled robbers. Rocky, Alex, and Money repress their voices, breathing, and any other potential sound they can make in order to hide from the Blind Man. The normal, seeing assailants repress all form of noise while the Blind Man capitalizes on his lack of vision by paying close attention to unfamiliar sounds in the room. He does not hide the fact that he is blind, but he carefully tries to prevent anyone from discovering the secret hidden in the basement of his house. Typically, "blindness... often figures an absolute helplessness or dependency" that prevents the disabled character from living independently or overpowering 'normal' assailants (Smith, "Chapter 3" 119). Alvarez, however, depicts disability as a characteristic that can be advantageous over someone without any impairment. For instance, Rocky and Alex enter the basement where the Blind Man has restrained his daughters' assumed killer as payback for her past actions. He claims that his motivations for kidnapping her are justified, continually refusing to accept the weight of this situation. His, presumably, honourable military background draws his character as altruistic, but, according to Money, "just 'cause he's blind don't mean he's a fucking saint" (Alvarez 00:12:46-48). While *The Babadook* and *The Assent* depict the struggle to manage a disability, here the Blind Man takes advantage of his blindness by paying close attention to sounds, altered placement of household items, and light.

One scene in particular has Rocky and Alex trying to navigate through the dark labyrinth of the basement, relying on touch and repressing as much sound as humanly possible to prevent giving away their location. Unbeknownst to these two characters, “labyrinthine complexity ultimately discloses secrets and evokes the horror that expels the object of fear” (Botting 181). The absence of background music intensifies the horror and fear in this scene because small sounds like the rustling of fabric, steps, and breath are accentuated. Alvarez’s decision to directly expose the audience to Rocky and Alex’s situation happens when the Blind Man turns off the house’s electricity. The camera, like the audience’s eyes, adjust to the darkness after a few seconds, but far away objects are now impossible to see. The audience becomes a character in the scene, trying to navigate through the darkness alongside Alex and Rocky without accidentally running into the Blind Man. Carol Clover describes this cinematic technique as a “standard moment in horror...[where] a person is caught by surprise – her vision assaulted – by the sight of things she does not want to see” (192). The audience is left to rely on Rocky and Alex’s discretion, unable to regain their sight and left to deal with the increasingly intense tension as the characters blindly navigate in the dark. *Don’t Breathe* flips the narrative seen in *The Babadook* and *The Assent* by having Rocky, Alex, and Money repress any sounds they make, while the Blind Man’s disability works against the three assailants as they fight to escape.

OSTRACIZATION

All four films include prejudice against the disabled character, who in turn, becomes isolated from their community and internalizes a need to be seen as normal in the eyes of others. Christopher Smit and Anthony Enns describe how the “horror genre’s use of disabled bodies as a threat to the spectator’s notion of normalcy and ‘health’” draws disabilities as an anxiety that

society needs to remove in order to return to normal (xiii). The perception a disabled person might have of themselves as ‘other’ is reinforced by the community’s decision to ostracize that person. The disabled characters’ ostracization and isolation from others is commonly represented through the location of the physical house/main setting or through other characters’ distancing from the disabled individual. Longmore claims that “we harbour unspoken anxieties about the possibility of disablement” that causes us to unconsciously exclude those who are different than us, aligning with the visual ostracization in these films (2). For instance, *Don’t Breathe* represents the Blind Man as a villain, because of his temperament, for defending his home against three teenage assailants far before we find out his perverse basement secret. This compares to *A Quiet Place* where “the camera enables the viewer to see from the perspective of one who has a disability,” allowing us, as a ‘normal’ audience to relate and empathize with Regan (Hoeksema and Smit 41). The camera puts the audience in the character’s shoes, allowing us to experience a movement away from what we are used to. However, the camera can also act as a tool of ostracization that separates and isolates the disabled character from us. *Don’t Breathe* is a perfect example of this because we never take the Blind Man’s perspective, preventing the audience from aligning with him. The camera holds power over “the viewer [who] is [an] unannounced spectator” and can adjust how the audience perceives the disabled character through first-person shots (Hoeksema and Smit 40).

All four films center around a single house that is physically isolated from the neighbourhood because of its rural setting or estranged neighbours. In *The Babadook*, Amelia’s decision to drive away any source of help by refusing to acknowledge her husband’s death, pushes her into a corner. Her conscious isolation away from her sister Claire (Hayley McElhinney) and her 80-year-old neighbour Mrs. Roach (Barbara West) is accentuated by the

location of her house. Though Mrs. Roach has a reappearing role, the camera never reveals any other nearby homes, suggesting that Amelia's house is physically semi-isolated from the neighbourhood. The dark colours inside and outside the home create a mysterious tension that only changes in the final scene of the film where Amelia finally gives Samuel his own birthday party. Longmore's discussion aligns with how the house's dismal appearance amplifies Amelia's "bitter and self-pitying" tone since she has "never adjusted to [her] handicap" and, "consequently...[treats] nondisabled family and friends angrily and manipulatively" (7). Though Amelia distances herself, every character with the exception of Samuel and Mrs. Roach make no effort to invade her isolated world and support. Even when Amelia expresses her frustration about what she's going through to Claire, she is ignored and considered selfish because she cannot move on by herself.

While *The Babadook* does not reveal anything outside of Amelia and Mrs. Roach's house, *Don't Breathe* shows the entire neighbourhood the Blind Man lives in. However, "the whole neighbourhood is fucking empty" with abandoned and heavily run-down houses bordering the street (Alvarez 00:14:18-20). When first introducing the Blind Man's house, the camera slowly pans forward in a medium long shot with two abandoned houses framing the sides of the shot. This shot fixates on the well-kept appearance of his house in comparison to the overrun, desolate buildings around it, further isolating it from the area. Clover mentions how "horror movies are obsessively interested in the thought that the simple act of staring can terrify, maim, or kill its object" (182). The camera, and audience in return, are staring, captivated, at his house, but in an obtrusive way because we are still hiding in the alley between two run-down homes across the street. Ironically, the Blind Man's stares also become invasive whether he is facing the

camera or turning towards a sound. The camera does not hesitate to capture how the power of looking can be increasingly uncomfortable even with the antagonist's blindness.

Physical isolation contributes to and can even be a by-product of ostracization from family, friends, neighbours, and society as a whole. According to Longmore, "the disabled person is excluded because of fear and contempt of the nondisabled majority" (5). *A Quiet Place* acts as an exception to this because of the close-knit familial relationship and Regan's specific circumstance. Regan blames herself for her younger brother's death because she couldn't hear his spaceship toy turn on behind her, catching the alien's attention. Though she was the closest to him, she didn't realize what was happening until Lee ran past her, not making it in time to save Beau. Regan interprets Lee's constant push to construct a working implant as a form of redemption where Regan can have a working tool to prevent a similar situation from happening again. During a one-on-one fishing trip Marcus asks Lee, "do you blame her for what happened," understanding Regan's guilt (Krasinski 00:39:45-47). Regan's frustration over her disability, the reason she couldn't save Beau, prevents her from facing Lee and understanding his pursue to help her hear. Her misunderstanding about how her family has never once blamed her for Beau's death, aligns with how "nondisabled main characters have no trouble accepting the individuals with disabilities" (Longmore 7). During Lee's final scene, he makes one last sign to Regan saying "I have always loved you" before drawing the alien's full attention and dying (Krasinski 01:14:54-15:00). Though this phrase is simple, Regan's misunderstood ostracization from her family, particularly her father, is gone after his proclamation.

While Regan assumes her family ostracizes her, Amelia, Samuel (*The Babadook*), and Joel (*The Assent*) face direct ostracization from others. Amelia unsuccessfully hides behind an invisible barrier that makes her seem as if she's moved on and can live her daily life. Claire does

not talk about Amelia's grief, suggesting she is either self-centered or has a "prejudice towards people with disabilities" (Smit and Enns x). While at Claire's daughter's birthday party, Amelia faces the opinion of the attending adults who are aware of her grief and feel the need to comment on it. One parent says, "I do some volunteer work for disadvantaged women and a few of them have lost their husbands," generalizing Amelia's situation and making it seem insignificant (Kent 00:28:15-24). Amelia has no desire to ask for support from others, but people like Claire's friends project their unwanted advice and opinions on her without fully understanding the situation. Their inconsideration and weak attempt to align Amelia's situation with other "disadvantaged women" further segregates Amelia from the adults (Kent 00:28:16). However, it's not just Amelia who feels out of place, Samuel also faces the criticism of others because of his strange behaviour. Though he does not share the same level of grief as Amelia, he is described as having "significant behavioural problems," potentially a second-hand consequence of Amelia's depression (Kent 00:06:08-10). He is labelled as an outcast for speaking his mind, which does not help when Claire catches him "talking to this bloody Babadook thing...just talking to the air" (Kent 00:19:51-54). Samuel's unusual disposition and Amelia's reluctance to acknowledge her depression, ostracizes them from others who aren't willing to understand their situation. Mrs. Roach is the only character who is willing to listen to Amelia and "compels the disabled individual...to confront themselves" (Longmore 8). During the midst of Amelia's possession, Mrs. Roach goes to check on them stating: "I know this time of year is terribly hard for you and I know you don't want me to go on about it, so I won't. I just wanted you to know that I'd do anything for you and Sam" (Kent 01:10:46-58). Mrs. Roach offers support to them that does not force Amelia to confront her depression until she is ready.

Unlike Amelia whose refusal to accept her depression negatively affects her relationship with Samuel and Claire, Joel needs to prove that he is mentally capable of raising his son, Mason, by himself. Joel attends a weekly therapy session with Dr. Maya who does not offer long-term helpful support and criticizes him for miniscule things out of his control. Even when he phones Dr. Maya, asking if “people who are schizophrenic see the same things,” she initially refuses to answer the question until their next session (Teo 00:26:24-25). Joel does not interact with any known friends or other family members aside from his son, causing him to rely primarily on Dr. Maya. Teo depends on “sentimentality and melodrama, claiming that such portrayals foster and uphold the pity approach to society’s disabled members” (Hoeksema and Smit 39). Dr. Maya’s actions suggest that mainstream society offers a surface level approach to mental disabilities, as we see in the case of Joel’s schizophrenia. The disabled character becomes deterred from seeking support networks because of the prejudice and ignorance family members and friends have projected onto their disability.

THE MONSTROUS DOUBLE

Usually in horror films, the antagonizing monster is a “figure of almost universal loathing who haunts the community and represents its worst fears” (Halberstam 18). In these films the monster does not represent generalized issues within society like sexual identity, invading ideologies, or religion. Instead the monster is a physical representation of a specific disability that takes form and threatens the character’s lives. It is a visual way for the audience to understand how the disability affects the respective person and their interactions with the world. The monster can also never completely separate from the character with a physical or mental disability – particularly deafness, blindness, schizophrenia, and depression as discussed in this

paper – because they are one and the same being; annihilating the monster causes the character to die too. Halberstam states that the monster “will find you in the intimacy of your own home; indeed, it will make your home its home (or you its home) and alter forever the comfort of domestic privacy” (15). This quote is reflected through Amelia’s final confrontation with her embodiment of depression that allows her to manage her mental disability without eradicating it. Longmore argues that defeating this monstrous adversary is a “matter of individuals overcoming not only the physical impairments of their own bodies, but more importantly, the emotional consequences of such impairments” (9). Gaining control or managing a disability means that the disabled character better understands their mental or physical disability, acknowledged it, and learned to take care of themselves. However, Longmore’s language about “overcoming” a disability claims that a disability can be completely eradicated or cured, granting the disabled individual normality. Firstly, disabilities are not something that needs to be fixed because there is nothing wrong with them unless it becomes harmful to the disabled individual or others. Managing a disability is a better phrase to use in disability studies because it promotes a normalization of disabilities. The disabled character is the only person who can confront and defeat the monster because it’s a visualization of themselves. By defeating the monster, they aren’t eradicating it, but rather gaining control and managing their disability.

A Quiet Place, The Babadook, The Assent, and Don’t Breathe present the monster as a distorted inhuman being that reflects the negative perception the disabled character has about their physical or mental disability. However, the monster does have human-like attributes, though they may be distorted. The aliens in *A Quiet Place* have a human-like skeletal structure with teeth; an overdeveloped cochlea; and long appendages for hands and legs. They are also seen standing on their hind legs during the final confrontation with Regan and Evelyn. While

they do share a human-like silhouette their bodies are covered in a rocky armor and come from another planet as revealed in newspaper clippings with headlines stating, “Global Landing Sites” and “Meteors Hit Denver” (Krasinski 00:11:52). In *The Babadook*, the monster also has the silhouette of a human, specifically of a man dressed in a top hat and long trench coat, with strange transformative abilities and unnerving body language. His hands appear to have long straight blades attached to each finger and a relatively unseen face that we get previews of in the book illustrations. His form changes during the final showdown with Amelia where his arms extend at an angle to look like featherless wings. As our “vision of an entity that stalks a house” changes from tense to malicious, the Babadook’s form also changes into something more inhuman in shape and sound (Clover 185). *The Assent* gives Joel’s schizophrenia two forms: Dr. Maya and a deformed demon who is capable of possessing others. Dr. Maya is recognizably human with no distinct features until she completely takes over Joel and talks to his consciousness with a glazed over right eye. According to Mason, the demon form of Dr. Maya is a “man that looks like a goat and walks like a dog” (Teo 00:17:36-40). This description does not quite capture the unusual appearance of the monster who has insect-like appendages for legs and a human-like torso made up of multiple heads clumped together. The concept of multiple heads aligns with Joel’s schizophrenia where he hears multiple voices talking to him in a muffled murmur. While schizophrenia affects people differently, Teo interprets Joel’s mental disability with a finesse that appeals to the audience, but also generalizes the symptoms and reactions of schizophrenia.

The Babadook’s gradual possession of Amelia is reflected as a warning in the picture book she receives on her doorstep. This book foreshadows the climax of the film, showing Amelia strangling her dog, killing Samuel, and slitting her own throat. It also implies that the

Babadook originates from Amelia by claiming “you can’t get rid of the Babadook...a friend of you and me...You’ll see him if you look” (Kent 00:10:44-11:20). The book, before she burned it, labels the Babadook as a friend because it acts as the force pushing her to discuss her grief about her husband’s death and move on. When she chooses to forget the past and ignore her inner turmoil, she is allowing the Babadook’s presence to grow within her until it starts to take over her life. The book informs Amelia that she will “see him in [her] room at night. And [she] won’t sleep a wink” (Kent 00:11:42-45). This hints at the moment when Amelia will get possessed by the monster, who scampers on the ceiling while she lays paralyzed in bed, briefly making ‘eye contact’ with the camera before it falls into her open mouth. Once the monster enters her, it slowly begins to take over her actions, causing her to fall further into a depressive episode. Amelia sleeps all day, snapping at Samuel when he complains about being hungry, showing an emotional response we hadn’t seen from Amelia before. She and the monster continue to align and become one after she yells “why do you have to keep talk talk talking” at Samuel (Kent 00:50:04-07). This dialogue parallels a sentence in the book: “3 sharp knocks ba BA-ba DOOK! DOOK! DOOK!” (Kent 00:11:09-13). Amelia and Joel’s possessions in *The Babadook* and *The Assent*, respectfully, are based on the “spread effect...the idea that disability results in [a] loss of self-control” (Longmore 5). Amelia successfully removes the Babadook’s hold on her with the newly understood support of Samuel who states: “I know you don’t love me. The Babadook won’t let you. But I love you mom. And I always will” (Kent 01:13:32-43). Their familial relationship, which seemed strained at the beginning, becomes the reason why Amelia decides to acknowledge her grief and release her hold on the past.

Don’t Breathe’s human monster embodies the Blind Man’s disability and utilizes his lack of vision against Rocky, Alex, and Money. A human monster can be more dangerous than any

separate entity in the previous three films because it exposes the idea that anyone can become a monster. The background soundtrack intensifies the Blind Man's antagonistic tendencies as he maneuvers through the house with military precision. Considering he is a "retired Army vet who fought for [America] in Iraq and lost his sight as a result of a grenade splinter," there is a possibility he is dealing with PTSD or mental instability (Alvarez 01:22:15-21). The decision to make his daughter's murderer pay for her crime by unwillingly giving birth to his child without any remorse or understanding that his action is wrong, suggests a detachment from reality and is a symptom of insanity or an extreme mental health issue. The Blind Man either chooses to repress how wrong his decision for payback is or can't fathom that his actions are unlawful and perverse.

Horror films typically fade to silent before a jump scare because "it is very often sound rather than sight that produces tension" for viewers (Halberstam 127). Foley sounds – everyday sounds such as rain hitting cement, walking, and fabric movement that are added in post-production – are used in replacement of background music because they make the audience hyperaware of every creak or breath. Before everything goes south with the attempted robbery, Money goes upstairs to the Blind Man's bed, using a pen to poke a hole in a chlorine-filled water bottle. This is a small foley sound that overpowers the noise of a family video playing on the bedroom tv because the camera had been drawing our attention to the bottle in the shots leading up to this moment. The camera cuts to the Blind Man sitting up in his bed, a meter or two away from Money, clearly awoken because of the sound. Alvarez renders the Blind Man's attuned hearing as a characteristic that has developed to the point where he can recognize an unfamiliar sound in the room and immediately wake up. Another unique feature of the film is its use of light. Horror films tend to hide the monster/antagonist in a shadowy corner or partially hidden

behind a wall as we've seen in *The Assent* and *The Babadook*. *Don't Breathe* reveals how terrifying it is to have an assailant that does not depend on vision to find you, reducing the significance of a physical hiding spot. "Lights off does not mean anything" to the Blind Man who eventually cuts off the power to the entire house, leaving Rocky and Alex blind in the dark (Alvarez 00:14:30-32). The camera is also a victim to this blindness and takes a few seconds to adjust to the darkness just enough that the audience can see a grey scale of the setting and characters. Alvarez's camera work in this grey-scale basement scene, reflects on how "the art of horror lies in catching the spectatorial eye unawares – penetrating it before it has a chance to close its lid" (Clover 203). The camera and audience become disabled with Rocky and Alex, putting everyone on the same playing field as the Blind Man.

The Assent signals when the monster is nearby or coming to invade Joel's space through a schizophrenic episode. Teo uses cacophony overtop an anaglyph 3D lens effect that outlines everything in the frame with red and blue. The camera switches from a third person perspective to Joel's, allowing the audience to visualize what he is experiencing. This switch breaks the barrier between observing a disability from a 'normal' point-of-view to experiencing the schizophrenic episode in first person perspective. The overwhelming noise and purposely shaky camera movements align with Clover's claim that "if jerky vision signals a force ready to be unleashed, it also signals its own imminent demolition; the gaze is unstable because the bearer is doomed" (189). The shaky camera in first person exposes the mental instability of the character who is being overwhelmed by emotions or a sensation. It implicitly informs the audience that something is trying to take over or the repressed issue is trying to break away from its mental confines. Breaking the third person perspective for climatic moments involving the monster helps align the audience with the disabled character. First person perspective switches the

audience from a distant onlooker to being in the character's shoes, constructing an intimate connection between the two. Joel does not trust the hallucinations he sees and states "when I see something I'm not sure is real... [taking a] picture helps me tell the difference" (Teo 00:14:01-06). Joel's camera separates the boundary between what's real and what he is hallucinating, though this defense reaction does not help defeat the demon. However, "the act of photography is an act of power, aggression, predatoriness, and sexual voyeurism" that gives Joel the illusion that he is in complete control of his schizophrenia (Clover 177).

A Quiet Place, *The Babadook*, and *Don't Breathe* shows how disability and the resulting monstrous being affects the mental and/or physical state of characters. There is no extensive medical focus on disabilities with the exception of Lee Abbott's research about hearing,² but each disability in these three movies is treated without any religious beliefs. Compared to *The Assent* which depicts schizophrenia as a "psychosomatic condition that's historically been confused with demonic possession," suggesting that Joel has been slowly possessed since he was diagnosed with the condition (Teo 01:02:12-16). By positioning schizophrenia as a symptom of possession, Teo's visualization of this disability becomes less believable, despite the fact that he took inspiration from real-life references. The monster switches into a completely separate entity that can exist without Joel because it was the cause for his disability and is not a by-product of it. The demon is a "foreign body that retains a certain familiarity and that therefore confuses the boundary between self and other" (Halberstam 18). Joel thought he had schizophrenia and was assumingly diagnosed with it, but it was the gradual demonic possession that invaded his mentality and caused him to have this mental condition.

² Lee repeatedly rebuilds hearing aids for Regan who is deaf and uses a cochlear implant.

The climactic confrontation between the disabled character and their monstrous Other results in the character either accepting their disability or succumbing to it. In *A Quiet Place*, Regan discovers the aliens' weakness from notes on the basement wall and her own knowledge. She realizes that the headache-inducing ringing her cochlear implant initiates when the alien is close by has the capability to overwhelm the alien's cochlea. She intensifies its frequency by pushing her malfunctioning implant onto a speaker, causing the alien to writhe in pain. Though Evelyn makes the final gunshot to the monster's head, killing it, Regan incapacitated it by using the same implant she previously considered a burden. Krasinski utilizes this scene with Lee's death to show Regan's acknowledgment that her disability is a huge asset and not a burden to surviving this post-apocalyptic world. Since the monster was hypothetically born out of Beau's passing, it is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment" (Cohen 4). Yes, the aliens landed on earth before Beau's death, but Krasinski parallels the aftereffects of the invasion to Regan's struggle with herself and her family. Her malfunctioning implant killed the alien, and her family's knowledge in American Sign Language gave them an advantage to communicate without sound.

Don't Breathe and *The Babadook* temporarily defeat or subdue their monstrous double because the monster is too closely connected to its human counterpart to be eradicated without killing the respective character. Rocky incapacitates the Blind Man with force, choosing to run away rather than take revenge for the death of her two friends. The Blind Man's character becomes less horrifying after the labyrinth chase because the audience can anticipate his actions after seeing him repeatedly. According to Smith, "disability and deformity require a certain narrative framing to render them constantly horrifying," which does not succeed here because the audience becomes accustomed to the Blind Man due to his unchanging and consistent presence

on screen (“Chapter 3” 127). The unorthodox methods to evade the Blind Man in combination with the music, or lack thereof, made him appear nearly undefeatable. However, he can be defeated because he is still a mortal human, whereas the Babadook is a projection of Amelia’s inner turmoil and does not have a stable physical form. Rocky chooses to escape, withholding the final blow because murdering him would in turn make her a human monster, though not to the same extent as him.

The Babadook is incapable of being completely defeated because of its intimate relationship with Amelia. Kent illustrates how Amelia needs to confront the Babadook in order to move on with her life and acknowledge the fact that she is not mentally okay. Cohen makes a comment about how “monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return” (20). Amelia continued to repress her grief, ignoring her deteriorating mental health that causes the Babadook to take form and wreak havoc on her relationships with family and friends. The Babadook continues to threaten taking over her mind if she is not careful, as revealed at the end of the film, during her mini confrontations with it when she brings it an offering of earthworms. Amelia temporarily defeats it by asserting dominance over it and finally learning to acknowledge her husband’s death. The Babadook’s subdued presence shows how much she has grown as a character because by confronting the monster, she learned to live in the present and strengthen her bonds with Samuel and Mrs. Roach.

While Amelia manages her disability, Joel is left to whims of a unreliable support network that fails him, causing his death. *The Assent* exposes Joel’s vulnerability when Mason is presumably in an extremely difficult stage of the exorcism, causing Joel to depend on Dr. Maya

who tries to comfort him. He proclaims a dependence on her, giving into the temptation to regain control over Mason's situation, but placing a death sentence on Joel. The film tricks the audience into thinking that Mason was the one possessed when it was Joel instead; using key phrases stated by the exorcists that hint at this truth. Dr. Maya's attitude and appearance shift revealing "the shocking sight... of a deformed or ugly face" (Smith, "Chapter 3" 122). Though Dr. Maya's face is not horrifically disfigured, everything she represents turns her from a trustworthy mental health supporter to a parasitic self-absorbed demon. Joel ends up being defeated by the possessing demon/Dr. Maya trapping his unconsciousness in an imaginary double of the house. Overall, *The Assent* shows how Joel's schizophrenia starts to take over his life after abusing medication and dealing with a lack of a healthy support network, resulting in a severe, life-threatening situation where he eventually succumbs to the damaging effects of his disability. While there may have been a way to avoid Joel's death, "there is nothing [that could have been] ...done but strive to keep [the demon] repressed" (Wood 103). This means that because Joel's schizophrenia was directly connected and embedded with demonic possession, there is no way to completely remove it without killing him. Joel's only option was to take his medication properly and find support outlets, but his lack of regularity, complete disappearance from society, and the fact that he was possessed, lead him past the point of no return.

CONCLUSION

A Quiet Place, *The Babadook*, *The Assent*, and *Don't Breathe* visualize how a mental or physical disability can construct a unique style of tension that preys on an audience's sympathy, while also bringing inclusivity to the silver screen. While films attempt to be more inclusive, there are many times where the depiction of a disability further dehumanizes the disabled

character. “Representations of disabled bodies as monstrous and grotesque has changed since the age of classical Hollywood cinema” and continue to evolve (Smit and Enns xiv). In these four films, the monster as a reflection of a disability is portrayed as malevolent, but it can be a visual way to interpret and understand how a disability is viewed by characters and us, the audience. Marginalized groups are becoming frequently included in films now that there is more active awareness about their lack of representation in the horror genre. Historically, horror films constructed disabled characters as a vulnerable, dependent plot point that rarely takes the primary role in the film. The films analyzed here construct a narrative where “disabled characters coded as ‘good’ are often rewarded with a miracle cure and thus reabsorbed into the mainstream...’Bad’ disabled characters...are usually dead by the end of the film...or have been removed from the narrative in some way” (Norden 25-26). Regardless of the portrayal, the audience can have difficulties relating or understanding the disabled character without proper cinematic techniques like camera movement, direction, dialogue, and music. What makes the four films discussed in this paper successful is how they are able to overcome that barrier and introduce disabilities to an audience who has seen relatively few horror films with this minority group. Arguably, horror films aren’t the ideal resource for learning about a particular disability, but they do initiate curiosity by starting the conversation about cinematic inclusiveness.

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