

Graphic illustration of impairment: science fiction, *Transmetropolitan* and the social model of disability

Richard Gibson 

Correspondence to

Richard Gibson, Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9QQ, UK; richard.gibson-2@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

The following paper examines the cyberpunk transhumanist graphic novel *Transmetropolitan* through the theoretical lens of disability studies to demonstrate how science fiction, and in particular this series, illustrate and can influence how we think about disability, impairment and difference. While *Transmetropolitan* is most often read as a scathing political and social satire about abuse of power and the danger of political apathy, the comic series also provides readers with representations of impairment and the source of disability as understood by the Social Model of Disability (SMD). Focusing on the setting and fictional world in which *Transmetropolitan* takes place, as well as key events and illustration styling, this paper demonstrates that the narrative in this work encompasses many of the same theoretical underpinnings and criticisms of society's ignorance of the cause of disability as the SMD does. This paper aims, by demonstrating how *Transmetropolitan* can be read as an allegory for the disabling potential of society as experienced by individuals with impairments, to prompt readers into thinking more creatively about how narratives, seemingly unconcerned with disability, are informed and can be understood via disability theory.

INTRODUCTION

Science fiction is a forward-thinking genre. It looks to anticipate developments, be they technological, social, scientific, biological or even metaphysical. While this has been done time and time again over countless narratives, it is the stories that explore contemporary issues within a science fiction setting that have always been the most popular and heralded by critics, awards committees, fan communities, academics and even social rights activists¹ as fiction worthy of being read, listened and watched. Be it *Star Trek* and its message of inclusivity and equality during the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, or the anti-Thatcherite and antiauthoritarian warnings of the 1970's *Judge Dredd* comic series, the majority of influential narratives and stories highlight the uncomfortably familiar through a framing in unfamiliarity. The influential science

fiction critic, academic and poet Darko Suvin's very definition of science fiction centred on the relationship between the familiar and unfamiliar contents of a narrative. He defines it as 'a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment' (Suvin, 20, emphasis in original).¹ What Suvin means by this is that science fiction presents us with a potential world, one which is both alien to us in some way (estrangement) and yet also familiar in its scientific and logical possibility (cognition). Brett Williams also noted this, observing that 'good science fiction always mirrors the modern world. Despite being couched in the future, the best science fiction has always used that future to highlight the issues of the present' (Williams, 2).² For both Williams and Suvin, science fiction is a genre through which we can better understand and critique our world and the issues within it via the representation and embodiment of others.

One such issue that has a prominent history within the realm of science fiction is how we as a society relate to the concepts of health and disability. Be it the negative and prejudiced way in which characters respond to the atypical body construction of Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's 1818 science fiction/horror *Frankenstein*,³ or H.G. Wells's interrogation of the interplay between environment, politics and the concept of the normal in 1904's *The Country of the Blind*,⁴ to modern classics like Charles Burns' graphic novel *Black Hole*⁵ and its exploration of the alienation and isolation experienced by those affected by the 1970s HIV/AIDS epidemic; health and disability have long been staples of science fiction narratives.

One reason for this long-standing presence within the genre comes courtesy of the exceptional ability of science fiction to articulate concerns and ideas as they relate to the topic of disability, embodiment and the ideal. This ability is the result of the fertile settings and environments that the genre can provide in which to frame these discussions. When writers are able to create settings in which 'real world' practical limitations that would effectively stop characters from making certain decisions are no longer present—such as resource constraints or technological limitations—they create imagined realities in which cultural norms regarding what the body 'should' be like and the way it 'should' function are no longer applicable. In her book *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*, Sherryl Vint captures this concept when discussing the applicability of science

¹Martin Luther King Jr was a self-confessed fan of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. In an interview, Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Nyota Uhura on the series, said that on meeting King, he confessed 'Yes, Ms. Nichols, I am that fan. I am your best, greatest fan, and my family are your greatest fans. As a matter of fact, this is the only show that my wife Corretta and I will allow our little children to watch, to stay up late to watch because it's past their bedtime'.



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fiction as a method for exploring the topic of the posthuman when she writes that science fiction is ‘a discourse that allows us to concretely imagine bodies and selves otherwise, a discourse defined by its ability to estrange our commonplace perceptions of reality’ (Vint, 19).⁶ By using science fiction as a tool to imagine a world in which such practical and resource limitations no longer apply, the writer is able to bring forward and challenge social, ethical and political norms on which concepts of health and disability are founded. As identified by the science fiction scholar Patrick Parrinder, ‘by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective’ (Parrinder, 4).⁷ Indeed science fiction allows us to subvert assumptions about how things are, including our own bodies, by presenting a possible alternative. While the imagining of strange worlds can be done in a variety of ways, two of the most common avenues in which it is done in science fiction is the alternative environment—a narrative in which a character finds themselves somewhere that is unmistakably different from our own, such as an alien planet or an alternative time period, and the technological, scientific or biological alteration of the body, both of which will be explored in this paper.

These two avenues of thinking are important because they are common within science fiction and provide excellent narrative settings to explore the concepts of health and disability, and because the interaction between the environment, technology and embodiment is pivotal to one of the most influential models of disability—the Social Model of Disability (SMD). The tenets of the SMD, that disability originates not from the individual themselves but from the inability of their environment to accommodate their atypical requirements, can be found throughout science fiction narratives, even when these narratives do not set out to explore concepts related to disability. This is because, as Kathryn Allan remarks in her pivotal book *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, the shifting of values related to the body, from the individual to the societal, be it abled or disabled, ‘reflects the long-standing tradition of SF [science fiction] as a genre that explores the future potentialities of human bodies from a variety of perspectives (some abled and some not) and, in turn, makes SF narratives particularly productive sites of critical interrogation of the dis/abled body’ (Allan, 5).⁸ Indeed as many science fiction narratives include altered environments, be those in space, a different time period or an alternative dimension, questions of how both the statistically common and uncommon body relate to their environment are all but guaranteed to be invoked. Yet, just because narratives do not have the aim of commenting on health, disability and illness do not mean that their commentary is not of value. Highly persuasive perspectives on disability can be found in the most unlikely of places, such as this paper’s target narrative, *Transmetropolitan*.

Transmetropolitan is an Eisner Award-nominated 60-issue,ⁱⁱ 1300-page cyberpunkⁱⁱⁱ transhumanist comic from the late 1990s/early 2000s. Written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by Darick Robertson, it is a Vertigo publication of DC Comics that follows the story of journalist of the 23rd century Spider Jerusalem in his fight to gain the truth, both political and social,

in a society permeated by governmental disinterest, political corruption and a general disregard for the human experience by authority figures. This paper examines *Transmetropolitan* through the theoretical lens of disability studies to demonstrate that, while it is most often considered a scathing political and social satire about abuse of power and the danger of political apathy,^{9 10} it can also provide a compelling concrete illustration of the theoretical underpinnings of the SMD. By focusing on the fictional world, its social institutions, key narrative events as well as visual contents, this paper demonstrates how *Transmetropolitan* highlights many of the same key theoretical underpinnings as the SMD. It also contains many of the criticisms for societies that remain ignorant of the cause of disability as understood by the SMD.

This paper will first provide an account of the presence of disability within the genre of science fiction and the graphic novel form in order to provide important context and framing for the analysis to come. Second, a brief introduction to the SMD will be given in order to clarify both what it is and how disability is understood and defined according to it. Third, the paper will give a fuller introduction to *Transmetropolitan*, as well as how it has already been used as social commentary on issues beyond those of its original targets. After this will be the analysis of how the SMD is captured within *Transmetropolitan*, examining both its narrative and its illustrative approach. This paper will then conclude with an account of why such a reading of *Transmetropolitan* matters and what impact a disability studies reading of science fiction narratives can have.

DISABILITY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Cases of science fiction narratives intersecting with disability go beyond the examples already given of Shelley, Wells and Burns. Science fiction has long been a genre that has featured and explored the statistically uncommon and ‘deviant’ body, and as a narrative group is dense with characters that could be called impaired. Yet despite disabilities long-standing presence within the genre, a critical engagement that examines the intersection of the two has been historically absent. It has not been until relatively recently that critical academic interest in the way in which disability is featured and commented on in science fiction has emerged as a distinct area of research within the medical humanities. Notable additions to this area include *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*,¹¹ *Accessing the Future*¹² and *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*.¹³ However, as Allan notes despite this emergence, while ‘more scholars are directing their attention to SF, the number of people interested in both SF and disability remains small’ (Allan, 2).⁸ While each of these works focused on various aspects of disability within science fiction and used different approaches, what they all have in common is the advancement of the interdisciplinary study of the topic and the value of the commentary that it can provide. As argued by Allan, ‘no other literary genre comes close to articulating the anxieties and preoccupations of the present day as clearly and critically as SF, making it a vital source for understanding advances in technology and its impact on newly emerging embodiments and subjectivities, particularly for people with disabilities’ (Allan, 2).⁸ As a result of science fiction’s inclusion of ‘estrangement and cognition’, and the subsequent subversion of commonly held assumptions through the employment of a tension between the reader’s world and the world of the narrative, it stands above other genres in its ability to inform and explore what it is to be impaired and disabled and why these concepts are defined as they are, even in cases where this is not the piece’s original intention.

ⁱⁱIn 2009, these 60 issues were collected into a set of 10 graphic novels that have been what I have been working with for the purposes of this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱCyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction, most commonly in a futuristic setting with a focus on a combination of low life and high tech. Notable cyberpunk writers include Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, George Alec Effinger and Rudy Rucker.

To fully explore why it is that the genre has a propensity to interact with the subjects of health and disability without intention goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, one convincing explanation comes from Elaine Graham, Grosvenor Research Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Chester who, when discussing Marleen Barr's concept of 'fabulation', writes 'fantastic, utopian and speculative forms of fiction—epitomized by science fiction—shock our assumptions and incite our critical faculties. As refractions of the same, as evidence for the ascribed and not essential nature of human nature, monsters, aliens and others provide clues for the moral economy or "ontological hygiene" by which future categories of the human/posthuman/non-human might be decided' (Graham, 6).¹⁴ Indeed, the science fiction genre has the distinct potential to challenge our assumptions about what is normal and desirable about physical embodiment and mental capacities through the questioning of the 'ascribed and not essential' nature of human existence and embodiment. Allan also touches on this point when she writes that science fiction can 'map out the many diverse trails that we can travel—whether we walk, wheel, or transcend ourselves along those paths of inquiry—to discover not only the ways in which disability is socially constructed today but how we might approach conceiving disabled embodiments in the future' (Allan, 2).⁸ For Allan, science fiction can act as a guide to the present concept of disability and as a signpost for how it can, and perhaps whether it even should, be defined and understood in the future.

However, in order to carry out this mapping of the construct of disability and challenge commonly held assumptions regarding the body to the genres full potential, as well as identify themes and commentary relating to disability outside of the explicitly obvious, it is necessary to shed previously held assumptions about what narratives are necessarily trying to convey. As Gavin Miller and Anna McFarlane write in their introduction to a special edition of *Medical Humanities* that focused on science fiction, 'research on science fiction within the medical humanities should articulate interpretative frameworks that do justice to medical themes within the genre. This means challenging modes of reading that encourage unduly narrow accounts of science fiction' (Miller, 213).¹⁵ Literature theorists Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger touched on this very point when they presented the term 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss, 18)¹⁶ to describe the social context and expected aesthetic framework against which a given group of individuals will interpret and understand a piece of work. Having a rigid and unreflective horizon of expectation reduces the potential interpretations of a piece of work, the example given by Jauss and Benzinger being that of a fixation on realistic representations within art at the expense of a fully informed appreciation of medieval aesthetic works (Whalen, 22).¹⁶ Concordantly by adhering to an unreflective horizon of expectation, one which firmly restricts a disabilities studies reading to those texts that have as their goal commentary on health and disability, valuable critiques and insights within other pieces of work can be overlooked and potentially lost. However, by expanding the horizon and seeking out commentary where it would otherwise be missed, valuable illustrations that highlight features common within disability studies can be discovered and insights gleaned.

An example of this horizon expansion can be seen with Daniel Preston's *Crippling the Bat: Troubling Images of Batman*¹⁷ in which he examines the narratives of *Batman: Knightfall* and *Batman-Vampire* through a disability studies lens. It is with the latter narrative that he demonstrates his ability to broaden his horizon of expectation as *Batman-Vampire* (in which Batman becomes a vampire) can easily be read as a narrative relating to the effects of

substance abuse and addiction, much in the same manner as many other vampire-centric narratives^{18–21} and not one of disability.^{iv} Yet Preston provides a compelling account of how it can be understood as a commentary on the social construction of disability and of its problematic use of outdated representations and employment of freak show discourse. Indeed, what Preston's paper demonstrates is that just because a narrative, in his case a superhero one, does not have the explicit aim of commenting on the concepts of health and disability does not mean that such commentary is not there, nor that it is not of value.

In addition to their commentary on disability, *Transmetropolitan*, *Batman: Knightfall* and *Batman-Vampire* have another thing in common in that they are all graphic novels. Much like the genre of science fiction, there is a long history of the graphic novel form intersecting and examining the concepts of health, medicine and disability, as well as a growing consensus from various groups, both within and outside of academia, that the form itself can provide illuminative critiques and explorations around the subject of disability. As argued by Zach Whalen, Chris Foss and Jonathan Gray in their introduction to the book *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*, 'given that disability continues to be a major trope within so many graphic narratives, it is crucial to begin to apply disability studies approaches to a wide variety of comic forms and then to theorize multiple potential paradigms for how we can initiate a generative critical articulation of disability and sequential art' (Whalen, 1–2).²² For Whalen, Foss and Gray, to exclude graphic narratives from the realm of disability studies is to neglect a substantial resource from which insights can be gained. This attitude reflects the call for greater disability studies readings of science fiction narratives.

Yet it is not only disabilities' continued presence within the form that generates such interest but also its effectiveness at the communication of complex ideas and emotions. As Michael Green, Professor of Humanities and Medicine at Penn State University, argues, 'comics can give a voice to the unsettling worries and concerns that may be difficult to articulate through words alone' (Green, 775)²³ and arguably as impairment and disability, while being an almost universal experience, are highly complex and difficult subjects, the graphic novel form is highly suited to examine them. This is a result of the forms marriage of text and image, story, as well as visual and panel structure. All of which come together to give the comic form an edge over strictly textual or artistic forms in the communication of disability experiences and theories. This is because the visual quality of the form, what is depicted on the page and equally importantly what occurs 'between the panels', provides the reader with an on-page embodiment of characters, environments, thoughts, ideas and emotions of the characters and of the writer and illustrator. These embodiments are excluded from the strictly textual narrative form. This is used in conjunction with the sequential narrative aspects of the form to provide context to these individual images and embodiments, and this is what makes the form particularly adept at exploring disability, the interplay between context and embodiment, and the role that the reader plays in imparting and drawing meaning to and from both of them.

It would seem then that a science fiction narrative, one that makes use of the graphic novel form, being interpreted by an individual

^{iv}While it could be possible to posit that addiction is a form of disability, I would argue that this is not a commonly held viewpoint. Indeed, in the UK, guidance on The Equality Act 2010 includes a section that explicitly excludes addiction from its definition of impairment.

conscious of maintaining an expansive ‘horizon of expectation’, would be the optimum method of communicating and critiquing ideas as they relate to disability and impairment. It is in the same line of thought along which this paper wishes to move. By employing a broad and reflexive ‘horizon of expectation’, it will look towards the representation of disability and disability theory within the narrative and illustration styling of *Transmetropolitan*, a science fiction graphic novel. However, disability is a complex and contested topic and the even the definition of what a disability is and what causes it is debated. As such before carrying out any analysis, we first need to clarify what it is we are looking for.

THE SMD

The SMD was born as a response to the criticism and concerns of those with impairments and their allies regarding the historical oppression as well as physical and social exclusion of impaired individuals. Historically, up until the mid-to-late 19th century, disability had been commonly been understood as a result of a religious or spiritual event or force.^v This could take the form of a punishment for transgressions that individual had committed in a previous life, or as a punishment on those close to the impaired for a moral, religious or spiritual failing (Braddock, 14–23).²⁴ It may have also been the case, as was theorised by Chomba Wa Munyi, that during the 16th century, disability, which resulted from congenital conditions, was considered the result of demonic possession and that carrying out an exorcism would banish the evil spirit and could address the disability itself.²⁵

With the emergence of the 18th century Enlightenment movement came a shift in the attitudes towards individuals with impairments. This shift refocused attention on the cause of disability from that of existential reasons to more empirical, observable and grounded factors.²⁶ Consequentially, disability began to be understood in medical and scientific terms in keeping with the emerging mechanistic understanding of the body and the universe. Disability was, and is still sometimes, understood as a failure of biological functioning in line with this model of thinking. According to such mechanistic/medical models, such as Christopher Boorse’s Bio-Statistical Theory, health is to be seen as ‘the absence of disease, and diseases are *deviations from the functional organization of a typical member of a species*’ (Amundson, 105).²⁷ Therefore, by removing the disease, or in this case impairment, one would be able to restore an individual to perfect health. As such this understanding of ‘failure’ of biological functioning should be addressed through medical or technological means in order to restore as close to possible the ideal functioning of that person.^{vi}

^vToday, while the majority of individuals who engage with disability theory do so in a manner in keeping with medical/mechanistic and sociopolitical models, examples of groups who still grant value to the concept that impairment is imposed on an individual by an existential being or force do still exist. For a brief introduction, see Chomba Wa Munyi (2012).

^{vi}An example of this traditional understanding of disability is the Boorse’s Bio-Statistical Theory. According to this theory, the definition of health is obtained through the employment of biological normality. This concept states that the condition that is statistically common throughout a species is what it is to be healthy. This point of commonality is referred to as normal species functioning (NSF). ‘Acceptable’ deviation from the NSF (eg, being a male in a species where it is more common to be female) is taken into account via a reference class. For example, Brad Pitt is healthy if the anatomical and physiological processes that constitute him are statically common for a 54-year-old Caucasian human male, his reference class.

The SMD attempted to shift focus from these individualistic and medicalised concepts of disability and redirected attention to social oppression, cultural discourse, discriminative prejudices and physical barriers as experienced by individuals. As identified by the prominent disability studies researcher Thomas Shakespeare, the goal of the SMD is to provide ‘the structural analysis of disabled people’s social exclusion’ (Shakespeare, 226),²⁸ with the eventual aim of removing barriers altogether. The influence and persuasive power of this model stemmed from its redefinition of the term of disability. It was this redefinition that set the model apart from other sociopolitical models, such as the Minority Group Theory which, while similar, had a subtle difference in that it focused on raising the status and social prominence of an identified group of disabled people, while the SMD focuses on removing barriers and making changes to society on a wider scale with top-down approach through the redefinition of disability.

The SMD argues that disabilities do not result from the ‘deficits’ of individuals, be they cognitive, physical, mental or functional; their true origin is located within the inabilities and deficiencies of that individuals’ sociopolitical and physical environment to cater for their specific needs. According to the SMD, ‘it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society’ (UPIAS, 4).²⁹ Disability is defined not in terms of the functional levels of an individual measured against an ideal, as is the case with medical models, but as ‘the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities’ (UPIAS, 20).²⁹ The SMD places pressure on society as a whole to adjust the built, social and political environments and structures in which we all live to be more accommodating to the needs of those with impairments as the presence or absence of appropriate resources in the environment is a critical factor in the production or reduction of disabilities.

One of the key strengths of the SMD over the medical models of disability that preceded it is that, as a result of its outwards look at environmental factors that cause disability, it has proven to be of great instrumental importance in identifying and removing barriers including physical, social or class barriers that restrict the movement of those with impairments. This idea of a high level of utility for change was noted by disability theorist and advocate Michael Oliver when he commented that the SMD is a ‘practical tool, not a theory, an idea or concept’ (Oliver, 30).³⁰ This utility and sense of the SMD as a tool for social change was demonstrated when the SMD was employed by disability rights advocates to identify the various forms of discrimination that disabled people with impairments, and this evidence was then used as part of the case for the formation in the UK of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act.²⁸ While the Act used a medical definition of disability, stating that ‘a person has a disability for the purposes of this Act if he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ s1(1),³¹ its requirement that employers and service providers make reasonable adjustments to the physical aspects of their premises and their policies and practices follows a social model approach. As a result of the creation of this Act, the needs of those with impairments have to be taken into account, under the law, in regards to the accessibility to buildings, services, public transport, education and employment.

While this active and goal-orientated model can be considered a strength, it also, in theory, presents a weakness. That weakness

takes the form of the viability of what would be considered a utopian society according to the SMD; a society in which all barriers have been removed and those with impairments experience no more restrictions in choice and mobility than those considered unimpaired. Disability is a broad umbrella term encompassing a huge range of impairments, from those with partial sight to those with no sight, those who are quadriplegic to others who are missing limbs. Consequentially, the needs of each individual form of impairment, and indeed each individual person, are different and can clash with each other. Those with visual impairments prefer steps and defined pavements, whereas wheelchair users will prefer ramps and slopping pavements (Shakespeare, 221).²⁸ This is not to mention the increased difficulty in creating a barrier-free society for those with cognitive or personality impairments. Creating an environment in which none are impaired would be extremely difficult given the conflicting nature of some aids for impairments with others.

The difficulty in creating a barrier-free utopia emanates not just from conflicts in requirements, however, but also from much more common issues, such as resource limitations. As with practically any facet of life, what we are able to achieve is limited by the availability of resources required to reach a goal, most commonly, but not exclusively, financial, and this is the same with reducing and eliminating barriers. To alter every building in the country for the purpose of making it wheelchair accessible would require huge financial and material investment. Listed buildings would provide a particular challenge in adapting as altering them while at the same time preserving their cultural and historical presence would be almost certainly impossible. If the resources or investment required to carry out these alterations are not forthcoming, then such alterations cannot be made. Those with impairments will continue to experience exclusion. However, in a world in which we need not be concerned with these practicalities, in which there was no limitation on resources, in which it was possible to cater for individual needs, even when they appear to conflict, would this necessarily lead to a barrier-free utopia and the elimination of disability? According to a disabilities studies reading of *Transmetropolitan*, not even close.

TRANSMETROPOLITAN AND SOCIAL OBSERVATION

Transmetropolitan tells the story of Spider Jerusalem, a gonzo style journalist^{vii} of the future^{viii} with a distinctly hyperag-

^{vii}Hunter S Thompson is considered by most to be the originator of gonzo journalism, a term coined by his close friend Bill Cardoso in the 1970s. It is a journalistic approach that does not aim for objectivity; rather it involves an energetic first-person active writing style in which the author inserts themselves into the story as the protagonist. Pieces written in this style draw their power from a combination of social-critique and self-satire, and often make use of sarcasm, obscenity, humour and exaggeration. It strives for a personalised approach and the personality of the piece is as important as the events, people or subjects of the piece itself. While it is less concerned with facts and more concerned with what happened, both literally and in regards to the feeling and tone of events, it can prove to be a highly informative style. Indeed, during the 1972 presidential campaign Pat Mankiewicz, campaign manager for George McGovern, said that Thompson's *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, one of the most famous pieces of gonzo journalism, was the 'least factual: most accurate' account of the campaign.

^{viii}No exact date is ever given for the time period in which *Transmetropolitan* takes place; however, Spider estimates it to be around the 23rd century.

gressive style and an ability to write highly engaging public commentary on politics and social affairs. Spider is forced out of retirement at the start of the 60-issue comic run in order to fulfil an outstanding publishing contract. To fulfil this contract, Spider moves away from his self-imposed mountain seclusion and descends back down into 'The City,' a huge multicultural metropolis and centre of political and social power within a future version of the USA. The City plays a crucial role in the US presidential elections as a result of its curious voting patterns. As Spider remarks, 'They say the city goes the way the country does. But that's not quite right. It chooses and punishes presidents. It's got a weird pattern of voting against second-term presidents... and it's a rule of thumb that if the city goes against a president going for his second term, the fucker'll get in anyway' (Ellis, 18).³² The City is a place where human inhibition appears to have almost completely dissolved; it is a temple for the indulgence of an individual's wishes and desires, from cannibalism to child prostitution, body modification to human cloning. The City is a place where multiplicity is the accepted norm, even when it could be considered damaging to both the individual and those around them. While Spider's ideological and journalistic confrontations with consecutive antagonistic US presidents 'The Beast' and Gary 'The Smiler' Callahan constitute the main overarching story arcs of *Transmetropolitan*, throughout its 60 issues, smaller events and story arcs take place. Some of these develop the overall narrative and drive the story forward, while others act as character and world building. It is within these smaller world building arcs and events that much of the nuanced and subtle commentary on social issues and representation, such as that of the SMD, can be found.

However, the potential *Transmetropolitan* has to illustrate observations and provide social critiques on subjects that would appear to fall outside its intended targets of the abuse of power and the danger of political apathy has been recognised previously.^{ix} Christian Mortensen's *Beyond the Heroics of Gonzo Journalism in Transmetropolitan*³³ argues that *Transmetropolitan* acts as a commentary on the media culture at the turn of the century through its anachronistic presentation of ambient but omnipresent technologies, which seem both futuristic and dated, such as video-call phone booths. He goes onto provide an account of the way in which *Transmetropolitan* is able to do this is through its creation of the 'anti-environment', 'a counter-situation that can provide the means of direct attention' (Mortensen, 6),³³ in the case of *Transmetropolitan* that attention is drawn to the process of mediatization.^x He concludes that through its deployment of the anti-environment, which is created by the simultaneous presentation of the media-futuristic and anachronistic, '*Transmetropolitan* exposes trends in millennial media environment in order to provoke the readers to resist the allure of this glittering environment and engage critically with the worldviews presented to them by the media' (Zieger, 19, emphases in original).³³ It is along a train of thought similar to that of Mortensen that this paper will now move, but rather

^{ix}A good place to turn to for a brief introduction to this potential, as well other aspects of the series including the influence of Hunter S Thompson's character, the unusual publication structure and its relationship to the utopian and dystopian, is the collection of essays contained within the 2013 book *Shot in the Face: A Savage Journey to the Heart of Transmetropolitan*, edited by Chad Nevett.

^xA term used in media studies that refers to the long-term 'meta-process' through which media content has influenced other forms of social fields in our modern society.

than explore *Transmetropolitan's* commentary on media culture, it will explore its embodiment of the SMD and commentary of disability and impairment.

TRANSMETROPOLITAN AND THE SMD

As we follow Spider and his exploits through the course of *Transmetropolitan*, we explore many areas of the City and interact with a multitude of its inhabitants. While the City is one large entity, its interior is a vastly diverse environment that permits such a deviation from established norms that these norms no longer exist. It is 'an overstimulating world pulled in a million different directions by factions preaching opposing doctrines, resulting in extremes of political, religious, and other idealistic nature'.³⁴ Spider describes the City as a place that 'never allowed itself to decay or degrade. It's wildly, intensely growing. It's a loud bright stinking mess. It takes strength from its thousands of cultures, and the thousands more that grow anew each day. It isn't perfect. It lies and cheats. It's no utopia and it ain't the mountain by a long shot – but it's alive. I can't argue that' (Ellis, 18).³⁵ The very panels from which this quote comes from supports Spiders observation. The panels on the page employ a bleed effect, 'when a panel runs off the edge of a page' (McCloud, 103),³⁶ to give the scene an enlarged sense of scope and boundless distance. The pavement parallel to which Spider walks is packed with a diverse ensemble of individuals including Tuvan throat-singers, Chinese culture reservation dissenters, cyberpunks, cyborgs, werewolves, people simply carrying their food shopping home and individuals buying/selling what appears to be radioactive material. This constant diversity of background characters continues throughout *Transmetropolitan* and gives the whole world a fleshed out feeling. Spider, and by proxy the reader, is aware of the constant 'organically' shifting nature of the City. This acceptance of constant change means that differences are not measured against any form of norm as the norm no longer remains; both the constitution of the environment and those living within it are in a constant state of plasticity. If one was to try and employ a medical model of disability to evaluate those within the city, they would have no scale or reference point against which to interpret their data, not even a meaningful point of species statistical commonality exists. However, the abandonment of the 'normal' as a point against which disability should be measured or defined is one of the central tenets of the SMD. For the SMD, adherence or deviation from the statistically common is simply that, a demographic fact. It does not mean that one is healthy or disabled; merely that one is statistically different from the majority.

The physical construction of The City, alongside the capacities of medical technologies within it, allows for the potential compensation of the negative aspects of nearly any impairment one could think of. From voice-activated computer systems installed throughout a person's apartment enabling those with mobility or visual issues to use systems no matter their location, to external hard-drives implanted within a person's neurological system to enable almost perfect memory recall even for those with conditions restricting mental faculties, the City can compensate for practically every condition thinkable. It is important to note, however, that while observing that the City 'can' do this, and so much more, there is no implication that it always does.

The social institutions and structures in the City are extremely discriminative towards a specific group of people referred to as 'The New Scum' by President Callahan. This group consists of the poor, the politically disenfranchised and the socially ignored. They are often individuals with atypical physical, mental or sociological

needs as a result of illness, trauma or impairment. When depicted they are often shown working, if they have employment at all, in menial jobs such as the fast food industry, dog-mongering or street cleaning. We meet a couple of these individuals during the course of *Transmetropolitan* including a nameless, homeless man who through deactivating a cloud of disassemblers^{xi} and thereby saving the lives of everyone in that building and that city block, lost both of his legs and consequentially his job. His positioning as a member of the 'new scum' is made ever more apparent by the fact that of the few possessions he appears to have, we see him sat on the street next to a broken Furby; a symbol consumeristic trends from the period in which *Transmetropolitan* was written and representative of the City's disposable attitude to those which no longer fit into the system. This point is further punctuated by the fact that the person talking to him is the equivalent of a roving reporter, an individual who is listened to throughout the City and whom presumably has a degree of influence regarding whose voices are and are not heard. We are also introduced to Mary, a photojournalist from the 21st century who suffered from a heart disease and was cryogenically frozen in order to wait for technology to develop to the point that it would be able to give her a new, younger body in which to transfer her consciousness. However, on being revived, she finds herself in a world that is more bizarre and complex than she could imagine, and one which has only revived her out of a vague sense of duty. Mary is placed in a hostel with other 'revivals' and, along with many others like herself, sinks into depression and a near catatonic state owing to being mentally unprepared to handle the strange future she now finds herself in.^{xii} ^{xiii} Even the panels that depict Mary's journey from the cryogenic centre to the hostel represent this unpreparedness for what awaits. While still in the centre, and having not yet experienced the City in its apparent chaotic form, the panels follow on from one another in a common left to right, top to bottom format. Furthermore, their spacing is for the most part consistent; each panel is placed next to or below the previous one, giving a sense of structure and order as a result of its familiarity. However, after leaving the centre and arriving at the hostel, the panel structure changes. Now the panels encroach on one another's space and are placed on top of each other. What borders are used are inconsistent with varying thickness and colour. There is even an increase in the amount of text used on each page. All of which, in contrast to the prior styling, combines to give a sense of sensory overload, claustrophobia and detachment from the familiar, exactly what Mary herself is meant to be feeling.

^{xi}While only mentioned in *Transmetropolitan* in passing, disassemblers—nanoscopic machines that pull apart matter at the molecular level—as well as other nanoscopic technology has been featured in science fiction since Boris Zhitkov's 1931 short story *Microhands*, with the term itself first being coined by Professor Norio Taniguchi in 1974 and popularised by Kim Eric Drexler in his book *Engines of Creation* in 1986.

^{xii}What Mary suffers from is commonly known in science fiction as 'future shock', a term taken from Alvin Toffler's book of the same name. Future shock is understood as the physical and psychological distress suffered by a person who is unable to process the rapidity of social and technological development and change. Mary experiences an extreme form of this as she moves from the 21st to the 23rd century in the blink of an eye.

^{xiii}The revivals act as a metaphor for no single marginalised group, but several parts of their story, especially the part regarding a government doing as little as it can to meet their needs, are certainly familiar. I would argue that their story most closely resembles the experiences of those with mental impairments, especially those who also have a problem with homelessness.

Because these individuals wield little or no political power or finances, the structures in place restrict the availability of the technology that could be used to assist them with their impairments. Cybernetic enhancements, including limbs, are regularly featured in *Transmetropolitan's* panels, yet the nameless homeless man does not have access to these as a result of his standing within society. The environmental adjustments are reserved for those who can provide something in exchange. This means that a person with a visual impairment who has money and political clout can afford to live in an apartment with voice activation systems; a poorer individual cannot and as such experiences a more disabling effect from their impairment as they face more obstacles in navigating their daily life. This fits in with the SMD definition of disability as these individuals are not being disabled by their impairments but by the lack of access to available resources that could cater for their atypical needs. An example of such systematic and non-universal restriction occurs in *Volume One: Back on the Streets*, when Spider comes into contact with Fred Christ and the Transient movement.

At some point prior to the start of *Transmetropolitan* humanity makes contact with alien life. Within the narrative, this contact is not the great event made out by classical or even contemporary science fiction. Even the way we as the reader find out about it is mundane with no panels set aside to illustrate the event; it is just mentioned in passing in a conversation between two characters in an inconsequential manner. Within a few years of first contact, the aliens^{xiv} have begun marketing their culture in order to facilitate trade between themselves and Earth. When the trend of body modification rose in popularity and early 'temping' technology became available, the alien colony offers their own genetic code for sale and use as a template for temping. Temping allows individuals to obtain the qualities and characteristics of another species for a temporary period through 'morphogenetic plug-ins'.³⁵ As such individuals could get reptile skin for a few weeks or give themselves the traits of a dolphin and swim around for the day. Once temping technology was developed enough to allow for permanent conversion, individuals began permanently converting themselves, although partially, into alien life forms resembling those contacted in *Transmetropolitan*. However, as a result of this permanent partial conversion, practically all those involved with the transient movement are no longer able to acquire or hold down jobs due to the social and institutional prejudice, as well as individual discomfort, of non-transients against those who have made a permanent conversion. Spider himself, not long after returning to the City, when first seeing transient leader and old acquaintance Fred Christ on television, is depicted as being shocked, falling to his knees, grabbing onto the television and exclaiming 'Fred. What did you do to yourself, man?' (Ellis, 27, emphasis in original).³⁵ As a consequence of this general attitude, they are unable to pay rent in any respected area of the City and are forced to live in the Angels 8 district, one of the poorest in the City and no better than a slum. Those living within the district are shown huddling around fires for warmth and light, or cowering in alleys hoping for safety, all looking visibly shocked and scared when they see Spider, a non-transient, in the district. It is here that Spider comes face to face with Fred Christ, who is threatening to secede from the City and establish his own form of rule over the district. City Hall eventually has enough of the Transient movement and orchestrates a riot

^{xiv} Based on the visual appearance of the Roswell Grays depiction of aliens; associated with the Barney and Betty Hill abduction claim that took place in the 1960s, as well as the Roswell UFO incident in the 1940s.

within the district that then permits them to use force to remove the politically troublesome transients from the area; however, an excessive and visually graphic level of force is used, and many transients are killed in the ensuing fight. This riot and subsequent crackdown bring an end to the political aspect of the transient movement, and the surviving transients go back to simply trying to survive in one of the largest poverty areas in the City.

While the possibility of altering one's genetic code to enable a person to take on the traits of another species, be it temporary or permanently, is one of great ethical controversy and would require extensive evaluation, this will not be done here. Rather I wish to use the transient movement as a proxy for those with a form of impairment to better illustrate the disabling effect society can inflict on those who inhabit an atypical body construct. This is in keeping with the theories of the SMD. We know that transients find it difficult to acquire jobs, and in fact, throughout the narrative, we see transients repeatedly in various parts of the city, yet we rarely see them in any form of employment, and when we do, it is by working for another transient, like Fred Christ. It would appear from what we see within the narrative of *Transmetropolitan* that this is due simply to their physical constitution and the prejudice levied against them as a result of it. At no point is it suggested that being transient or altering DNA in the process of becoming transient has any form of detrimental effect on ability or cognition, or have any long-term negative health consequences. The process of altering one's DNA in order to become transient does not even appear to affect one's ability to have children as during Spider's exploits in the Angels 8 district, we see a new transient mother with her child (Ellis, 34–35).³⁵ It would seem therefore that a person is just as capable of performing a job after the transient transition as they were before. It would therefore make sense to assume, given the overwhelmingly negative reaction demonstrated by the City's government, as well as its populace, that the reason for the poor employment prospects of transients is a form of institutionalised prejudiced against them as a collective, though we do see later in the narrative that this is not the case for all transients.

In *Volume Five: Lonely City*, Spider begins investigating Senator Tarleton Sweeney, who is accused of funding the production and distribution of pornographic movies, as well as various other undeclared earnings. Through the act of 'monsterring',^{xv} Spider is able to gain evidence of the Senator's corruption. The Senator has a daughter who is transient. As the daughter of a Senator, it would seem safe to assume that she lives a rather privileged life, and she is shown being driven around in a limousine right before her father's press conference (Ellis, 63).³⁷ With the availability of such privileges, it seems likely that the Senator's daughter has a wide variety of options open to her despite the fact that she is a transient. Among these options would surely be opportunities for employment if she so wished. It is the dichotomy between the opportunities experienced by these two instances of transience that demonstrate that even in an environment in which opportunities can be present that does not mean they are present for all.

The transients living within the Angels 8 district have a restriction on their abilities and available choices as a result of their physical constitution; however, this does not need to be the

^{xv} In this case, monsterring entails repeatedly ambushing the senator with multiple questions about the porn films and his own sex life in an aggressive manner when he is not expecting it. The term is actually drawn from real-world journalism in which journalist will pounce unexpectedly on their target and berate them with questions.

case as shown by the availability of choices offered to Senator Sweeney's daughter. The negative or disabling factors associated with being a transient are applicable only in certain circumstances, and these can be overcome. It is not the aspect of being transient that is disabling but the social institutions, in this case, the institutionalised mentality against those of a transient nature, that restrict the available choices of those with an atypical body trait. Without this negative mentality towards them, those transients with an atypical body construction could very well be just as happy, or as unhappy, as anyone else in the City, a city that appears to have incorporated other forms of body modification, such as full consciousness download into a cloud of nanobots, into its social, economic and legal structures without perceivable issue. This matches the premise of the SMD that advocates that the atypical physical constitution of a person's body—their impairment—is also not the exclusive source from which disabling effects arise, but that disability arises from the way in which society has been set up that prevents those with impairments and who do not conform to mainstream expectations of appearance, behaviour or functioning from taking part in everyday life.

While the transient movement is an interesting depiction of the way in which systematic and social prejudices and structures can act in a disabling manner against those who do not necessarily have an impairment but still differ drastically from what we would classically consider the biological statistical norm, at least by our standards, it is not the only time that the theme of the SMD arises within *Transmetropolitan's* narrative. It can also be seen when Spider visits the City's various cultural reservations.

The City's reservations act as cultural bubbles in which recreations of past societies are housed in isolation from the outside world and the main city. Even the format in which they are depicted is in isolation from the City. This is achieved by us following Spider as he explores both the reservations and parts of the City at the same time but on consecutive pages. So on one page we see Spider on a full-page spread, naked and taking in the endless 'natural' view within the Caledonia reservation, but on the next page, he is on a payphone in the City talking to his editor. The page after that he is standing on a street corner asking a woman out on a date, yet the next page he is taking in the music played during harvest in the Akita Prefecture Reservation (Ellis, 64–67).³⁸ This jumping from one scene to another, and isolation of each scene on each page, gives the reservations a feeling of segregation from the City and from the way the rest of the narrative is told. It is never stated how many of these have been established; however, we do see Spider visit four separate communities: Caledonia, Agrarian Akita Prefecture, ancient Tikal and the Farsight Community. After a stringent medical examination and briefing, individuals are permitted to enter any of the reservations in the hopes that such visits will provide a level of historical context that is otherwise missing from the City.^{xvi} Those within the reservations are either born on-site or volunteer to live there. The volunteers have their memories wiped and implanted with new ones so they believe they had

always had that way of life on the reservation and do not know anything about the world outside. This is maintained through constant memory manipulation so that when people visit the reservations, they are perceived by the residents as belonging there.

The reservations act as an example of the SMD in regards to the difference in the lived environment and adapted nature of those who live on the reservation compared with those who reside in the City. When Spider visits the Caledonia Reservation, he has to undergo a medical examination. During this examination, he is given a list of things that he is not allowed to do including spitting or letting anyone taste his sweat. He is also provided with an emission suppressor; this is done because 'the people inside have been configured to when people were a lot less radioactive. Unsuppressed, your very presence would constitute a nuclear excursion the likes of which their world has never seen' (Ellis, 56).³⁸ As such if the roles were reversed and a member of the reservation left and visited the main body of the City, they would have to be provided with a form of radiological protection as the background radiation of the City would kill them as they are not adapted to withstand it. It is this idea of being limited to a certain environment unless you possess or have easy access to the correct method, be it technological, medical, social or institutional, to adapt to that environment that resonates with the SMD. To withhold such measures creates disability on top of an already existing impairment; however, to provide them where necessary would allow those individuals to participate fully in society, thereby reducing the disability they experience without needing to alter their physical construction to better fit in with the mainstream.

Unlike the medical models of health and disability that preceded it, the SMD is able to take into account the fact that not all built environments are the same. As such it is able to understand that the needs of individuals of the same species are not universal but are specific to the environment in which they live, and in accordance with this, it is able to take into account the subjective nature of health and disability. A person leaving a reservation to go to the City would have an impairment in regards to their ability to survive against background radiation in comparison with someone who is adapted to life in the City and would thus experience the disabling effects of radiation poisoning as well as a limitation in their mobility. They are unable to go to certain areas of the City due to the biochemical nature of their bodies. Yet, this impairment does not exist while they are living in the reservation where the various degrees of the environment are suited to their needs. It is the context in which an individual lives that provides the definitions of health and disability, not the level of normal species functioning as envisioned by medical models. The adaptation of the environment to suit the needs of the individual, in this case, those with impairments, is as viable an option to reduce the effects of disability as is the implementation of restorative medical or technological interventions.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

This paper focused on *Transmetropolitan* because, while it still receives critical and public acclaim regarding its social and political commentary (6),^{33 39–42} it did not aim to comment on such issues relating to disability and impairment, and yet they are still present throughout, and the narrative has much to say on the matter. The reason that a disability studies reading of *Transmetropolitan* matters is because it is not something that can just be limited to this series, nor should it be. When an active yet critical

^{xvi} Throughout *Transmetropolitan*, there is an uneasy relationship between the cutting edge of City society and its prior identities. This results from the death of the past. As none of the characters, nor the reader themselves, know what year *Transmetropolitan* is set in, the concepts of the past, present and future are forced to revise themselves or fall into irrelevance. In Spider's words, 'because it's difficult to refer back to the past, we tend to live more in the present moment a lot more than we used to. Or, at least, than we presume we used to'. This loss of historicity bears a resemblance to postmodernism.

eye is turned to the wider library of science fiction narratives and a reflective 'horizon of expectation' employed, questions regarding the source of disability, what is classified as an impairment and the presentation of various theoretical models abound. How do theories of health and disability that incorporate species-typical functioning react in a world in which multiple humanoid species exist, such as in *Star Trek*? In *The Matrix* films, is an inability to 'plug into' the matrix by those born in the 'real-world' considered an impairment, as those individuals are excluded from a reality experienced by the majority of humanity? Indeed, this paper holds that it is the case, as described by David Mitchell in his chapter in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, that 'once a reader begins to seek out representations of disability in our literatures, it is difficult to avoid their proliferation in texts with which one believed oneself to be utterly familiar' (Mitchell, 52).⁴³ It is a little like a magic-eye picture, once you are able to identify what was previously concealed from your perception, you wonder how you missed it in the first place.

Moreover, this proliferation effect is not limited to science fiction or even fiction in general. As pointed out by Mitchell, 'to give an abstraction a literal body allows an ideology to simulate a foothold in the material world that it would otherwise have failed to procure' (Mitchell, 62–63).⁴³ Graphic novels, of which *Transmetropolitan* is included, are an excellent format to provide these literal bodies as they make use of both written word and visual images to 'convey the complex social impact of a physical or mental impairment, as well as the way the body registers social and institutional constraints. Portraying embodiment through gesture, posture, and design choice; through choice of panel, frame and character; and through the conventions of character creation' (Squier, 74).⁴⁴ By being more receptive to the way in which theories of impairment and disability are present and represented within fiction, one is more receptive to these theories and models expressing themselves in the 'material world'.

It follows that if one is more able to readily identify the ways in which theories of disability and impairment affect the 'material world', one would be in a better position to use this information and make decisions that promote the needs of those with impairments, thereby reducing levels of disability. If readers can look at a piece of fiction that claims to have a liberal and inclusive message, such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and identify critiques of the representation of those with impairments within that narrative, such as the way the blindness of Lt Commander La Forge is addressed via an attitude of restorative function and not environmental adaptation, the reader may be able to do the same in the material world, taking policies and measures that on the surface have no impact on those with impairments, and identify how such measures could cause disability or reinforce ideologies based on controversial concepts of the ideal. This is arguably the reason why the SMD has had such an impact on policy-making decisions as they relate to impaired individuals. To quote Parrinder again, 'by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective' (Wells, 4).⁷

Returning to Preston, reading science fiction narratives through a disability studies lens grants the reader "the ability and the permission to wrestle with the concepts and realities of disability in private and personal ways, thereby making future transitions to acceptance much easier" (Preston, 168).¹⁷ These narratives afford us the thinking space in which to question commonly held assumptions regarding the normal and ideal, and can lay the groundwork for a future change of perspective of these issues. This paper argued that any method that

enables acceptance of those with impairments and allows for the reduction they experience in terms of disability is something that should be given serious thought, even when it includes the adventures of a 23rd-century gonzo journalist.

In regards to examining political and moral issues, *Transmetropolitan* can be a little heavy-handed at times. Much like its main protagonist, it attempts to shock readers into realising problematic aspects of their life and the society in which they live, aspects that they may otherwise turn a blind eye to, either consciously or unconsciously. If the reader looks past the clones, tattoos, murder and bombs disguised as headless children, they will find that *Transmetropolitan* has a vastly more subtle side to it. The comic aims to help readers recognise that societies are in a constant state of change and that this change has, and will continue to, alter society beyond recognition, time and time again. Despite this change, however, the central problems of the future will be the same as those challenges faced today and that is because these problems arise not from technological or resource constraints but because they are human problems. The SMD is far from a perfect model and fittingly the City is far from a perfect society, but they each demonstrate that to be adapted to one's individual's environment does not always require the individual to change, and sometimes for the betterment of all, it is the environment, be it physical or infrastructural, that needs to adapt to the needs of the statistical minority.

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ORCID iD

Richard Gibson <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3982-4029>

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