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The Boy from 6B: How Only Murders in the Building Created Groundbreaking Television

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ABSTRACT. Non-disabled actors continue to be cast over disabled actors to portray disabled characters, and disabled storylines are told from an able-bodied perspective. This paper explores how *Only Murders in the Building* set an example for approaching projects featuring disabled actors and roles while maintaining a complex storyline in the episode titled "The Boy from 6B" (2021). Analyzing this episode through the lens of the classical idea of *anmut* shows how it subverted the typical viewing experience of watching a storyline that features disabled characters from an able-bodied perspective. *Anmut*, as a rhetorical concept, recognizes that the value of physical characteristics is socially constructed; a body can be just as desirable in one cultural setting as it can be undesirable in another. To illustrate this point, *anmut* creates the space for reconsidering disability by bringing social reactions and underlying assumptions about the human body and physical diversity to the forefront. *Only Murders* utilized this concept in "The Boy from 6B" by casting a deaf actor to play a deaf character and placing the viewer in the character's world by removing their sense of hearing and their reliance on sound. The result is a more powerful connection between the viewer and the disabled character. Further, when compared to the movie *Music* (2020), directed by singer Sia—which features a disabled protagonist—*Only Murders* stands out by reattributing complexity to a community that is often portrayed reductively and by asking the audience to step, for thirty-one minutes, out of their abled body.

Introduction

A close analysis of the rhetorical spaces around disabled bodies can reveal important assumptions that inform perceptions of those bodies. A particularly important tool for analysis is the classical concept of *anmut*. As Jay Timothy Dolmage explains in *Disability Rhetoric* (2014), *anmut* is a concept that explains how "rhetor and audience might share nonnormative and imperfect, though profound embodied rhetorical connections" (p.139). Phrased simply, *anmut* considers how disability is best illustrated by sharing the disabled experience with a physically diverse audience to forge a more intimate connection. Dolmage uses several examples to illustrate this concept. One such example is Odysseus' transformation into the body of a weak beggar, which gave him the ability to physically relate his speech to the "common man" within *The Odyssey*. According to Dolmage (2014), this "radically revised our accepted rhetorical tradition, in which we have come to believe that the more perfect a body is, the more perfectly it can speak or signify" (p.138). He provides another, more modern example of *anmut's* effectiveness in how Michael J. Fox—an actor who famously has Parkinson's disease—delivers speeches without the aid of his medication. By performing his disability, Fox's message actually becomes a more effective means of communicating with his audience rather than an isolating one (Dolmage, 2014). To expand on this, Dolmage cites Nicole Quackenbush, who argues that Fox "performs disability not just to provide an exigency for research into cures but also to challenge the cultural norms that dehumanize the disabled subject" (Quackenbush, 2011, as cited in Dolmage, 2014, p. 138). Both of these *anmut* examples also speak to the formal and premeditated aspect of a rhetorical speech—the intention behind the rhetor's words.

Given that movie and television media—a multi-billion-dollar industry—has access to the resources that allow the opportunity for deliberate characterization, it is a wonder why media representation of disabled bodies continues to miss the mark. The result is a lack of storylines unrelated to the character's disability. In doing so, media portrayals often paint disabled characters as entirely two-dimensional and lacking the complexity of other characters. It then becomes the intention behind a production—the commitment to deliver more complex disabled storylines—that differentiates one from the rest. Hulu's recent series *Only Murders in the Building* (2021) serves as an example of a show whose ethos drove the storyline of one particular deaf character, effectively subverting the traditional approach to disabled characters. Specifically, the following analysis will examine how Episode 7 of *Only Murders in the Building*, written by Stephen Markley and Ben Philippe, utilizes Dolmage's *anmut* effectively by inviting the audience to share a nonnormative view of the deaf body.

Background Information

To begin, a succinct-as-possible summary of "The Boy from 6B" is necessary. The episode begins in a flashback with Theo Dimas, a young deaf boy, sitting in the living room with his hearing father, Teddy, who is listening to the *Carousel* soundtrack via headphones. He signs the lyrics to Theo, wishing his son could hear the music he loves. He places the headphones on Theo's ears, cranking up the volume loudly and willing him to hear (Markley & Philippe, 2021). Theo hears nothing, and Teddy breaks down in sorrow. The flashback ends, bringing the audience back to the present, following adult Theo as he spies on Charles, Mabel, and Oliver through the window using binoculars. Theo reads their lips, understanding their plan to break into Teddy's home, and catching sight of their suspect board which features the word "jewels" (Markley & Philippe, 2021). Shortly after, Theo witnesses his father getting into an elevator with Oliver, then turns directly to the camera and signs: "People talk way too fucking much in this city." This serves as an instance of foreshadowing to the audience that the remainder of the episode will be largely non-verbal, as it is told mainly from Theo's perspective (Markley & Philippe, 2021).

After this, Theo distracts the doorman, steals the key to Charles' apartment, enters it, and takes a photo of the suspect board to show his dad. Meanwhile, Charles and Mabel are up to a similar task, sneaking into Teddy and Theo's apartment and finding a suspicious room full of urns. A text from Oliver alerts them to hurry, but they are not fast enough, and Theo comes home before they escape—finally doing so when Theo's back is turned (Markley & Philippe, 2021). Theo shows his father the photo of the suspect board, asserting they are in danger of being discovered by the three true-crime enthusiasts. Teddy tells him not to worry and asks Theo to manage a shipment that night.

In a second flashback, Theo hides in the dark room that would later hold the urns and watches old friends Mabel, Oscar, Zoe, and Tim break into Teddy's apartment. Here, two major plot points are revealed: Zoe is the one that steals the emerald ring, and she—it turns out—knows sign language. The latter is essential because she signs to Theo while he watches from his vantage point, revealing that she knows he is watching her (Markley & Philippe, 2021). The flashback continues later, depicting a scene in the elevator where Zoe flirts with Theo, and Teddy spots the emerald ring on her finger as she leaves. This fuels both Theo's infatuation with Zoe and Teddy's suspicion. Back in the present, Oliver and Mabel sneak into a funeral, following the trail of someone with a cart of urns. They enter a room where they find jewels of the deceased (Markley & Philippe, 2021).

Mabel and Oliver watch Theo enter and steal a pearl necklace from a body. Theo sees their shadows on the wall as the pair tries to flee, leading him into another flashback—the night of Zoe's death. Theo witnesses an argument between Oscar and Zoe and then approaches Zoe to

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ask for the ring back—vowing to buy her a real ring one day (Markley & Philippe, 2021). Zoe laughs at this, revealing that the flirtation was always a game for her and that she had never been romantically interested in Theo. The pair's argument escalates, eventually sending Zoe sailing off the roof—though Theo and the audience never hear the thud of the body, it is evident that she is dead. Unfortunately, Tim witnesses this incident, leaving Theo shocked and scared. Teddy threatens Tim into silence to protect his son. The episode ends with Theo driving away with tied-up Mabel and Oliver in the back of his van (Markley & Philippe, 2021).

Discussion

This episode is unique in that the only line spoken verbally is at the very end, as a way to transition the viewer out of Theo's narrative. Since there is no dialogue in the episode, the space is filled with white noise, a distant ringing, or the show's signature score—each of which is used for dramatic effect. The decision to have Theo's point-of-view drive the episode is what makes it an example of *anmut*—because rather than being an alienating experience for the audience, where hearing viewers are unable to decipher sign language, the episode gently forces them to experience what Theo experiences each day in navigating a hearing world. The result is an episode that effectively establishes a more “profound, embodied rhetorical connection” (Dolmage, 2014, p.139).

Of course, the intent for this connection between the rhetor (Theo) and the audience was put into effect long before it existed on any viewer's television screen. According to a Yahoo News article written by Esme Mazzeo (2021), preparation for this episode involved months of studying sign language, receiving input from deaf actor James Caverly, and brainstorming “deliberate camera work” that would lend “power to the Deaf observer, one who will detect things with their eyes before hearing people do” (Mazzeo, 2021). Without his input and the utilization of tight camera shots, the director Cherien Dabis explains, the episode would be largely uneventful for the deaf viewer—since the media rarely caters to, or even considers, their viewing experience (Mazzeo, 2021).

These considerations go a long way toward establishing groundbreaking television. However, the creatives behind such production did not stop there. In fact, “One of the things we were really adamant about was this was not just a gimmick. The person driving the episode is a central, emotional component of the overall season,” said writer Stephen Markley (Mazzeo, 2021). This unknowingly takes into account another of Dolmage's assertions that disabled characters “only exist to promote the personal development of the main, able-bodied character” as part of the “Disability as Ethical Test” myth (Dolmage, 2014, pp.42-43). Instead, in Theo's case, he is an integral part of the story's plot and is presented as a complex and layered character whose mistakes snowballed.

This episode is newsworthy and relevant within a disability rhetoric analysis because such consideration within media is still not the norm. Unfortunately, non-disabled actors are still being cast over disabled actors to play disabled roles. One such example is a recent movie titled *Music* (2020), directed by singer Sia, in which an autistic girl is played by Maddie Ziegler—an able-bodied actress and established muse of Sia's. An Indiewire article by Ryan Lattanzio (2020) details the response to this casting decision, as many users took to Twitter to express their outrage and accuse Sia of ableism. One such user wrote that “Several autistic actors, myself included...could have acted in it on short notice,”—to which Sia twitter-replied: “Maybe you're just a bad actor.” (Lattanzio, 2020) The adamant refusal on Sia's part to consider the feelings of the autistic community surrounding a movie about autism, speaks to a larger issue—as well as a lack of imagination as to how the same creative project could be approached with this community in mind.

Conclusion

It was the ethos of *Only Murders*' production that made "The Boy from 6B" such an effective example of Dolmage's *anmut*. The consideration of the deaf community in creating such an episode allowed the narrative to shine by maintaining the inherent complexity of disability and making it entertaining—rather than alienating—for deaf and hearing viewers alike. "Framing the entire episode in the perspective of a Deaf person is a subversive act...it forces the audience to listen closely, but with their eyes instead of ears", says Caverly of this episode (Mazzeo, 2021). The use of *anmut* provided an environment for the episode's rejection of the traditional approach to deaf storylines, resulting in a profound rhetorical connection between the rhetor and their audience.

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