Reflections on a peculiar character representation in old films.

Of the Mutilé in Film:

A few movies seen recently on the Turner Classic Movie channel included male characters with missing or deformed limbs. While TCM often presents movies on a common theme—this occurrence of amputee characters was pure coincidence. The only commonality in the scheduling of those movies has been my own sensitivity to the portrayals of such uncommonly appearing characters. However morbid— that sensitivity has led to new insight into old stereotypes.

The stereotapes portrayed in the old films obviously reflect attitudes towards *mutilés* in the popular imagination of the same era. '*Mutilés'*, as defined in Lerouse, refers to those disabled though limb loss. Its synonyms include: 'incapacitated', 'maimed' 'lame' and 'crippled'. I am not using the term in any derogatory way in regard to real people. I use it only in reference to the stereotypical— often dehumanizing— portrayals of real people who happen to have missing limbs. The term is borrowed from critic, Leslie Fiedler, who used it in: '*Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self'*(1978).

Fiedler uses the term 'freaks' (oddly appropriated in the 1960s by hippies) in reference to people whose physical abnormalities appeal to the public appetite for the spectacle of human oddity. The physical abnormality of a *mutilé*, in contrast, especially when the result of a dreadful accident, is likely to arouse pity rather than perverse fascination.

While both freak and *mutilé* may secretly arouse both pity and dread in the beholder— freaks, Fiedler contends— represent "something mythic and mysterious, as no mere cripple ever is…"

Freaks have occupied the landscape of horror from the earliest era of cinema. Notable among these is Tod Browning's pre-code (1932) film classic, *'Freaks'*, which Fiedler discusses at length in his study.

The occurrence of *mutilés* in old films is less common. In the films I have watched recently, they are portrayed sympathetically— albeit within the confines a fairly rigid stereotype. While the stereotype of the *mutilé* is certainly not as dehumanizing as those of non-white people in older movies—it is worthy of closer examination…

Even in minor roles, *mutilés* seem to struggle more with their physical appearance than with the limitations imposed by the disability itself… In illustration of this, I begin with '*They Drive by Night*' (1940):

The main plot of this *film noir* involves the efforts of a driver, Joe (George Raft), to succeed in the ruthless long distance trucking industry. Its sub-plot depicts the struggle of Joe's younger brother, Paul (played by Humphrey Bogart) in coping with the loss of his right arm after falling asleep at the wheel of their truck. The accident leaves Paul almost helplessly dependent on his wife and without means of earning a living.

In one revealing scene— the older brother brings along a friend to dinner with Paul and his wife, Pearl, in attempt to distract Paul from his misery. Trying to pretend not to notice the newly pinned sleeve and the clumsy use of cutlery, the dinner guest attempts to joke:

"I like my beer so much," he says, "I almost wish I had three hands to drink three at a time!"

As the others flinch in the *faux pas*, the amputee drops his knife and bitterly blurts:

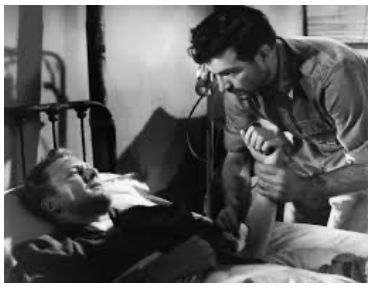
"Yeah, I know what you mean. Three hands are better than two— just like two are better than one. How do you think I feel depending on my wife to help me eat and dress? How do you think I feel— being a useless cripple unable to work?"

Even with the Hays Code restriction, the film conveys something of the anguish of the one-armed man's feeling of emasculation. It is noteworthy that among the list of synonyms for *mutilé* is *'impotent'*…

Yet Paul is blessed with a true pearl of a wife. Even at the hospital door where she rushed upon receiving news of the accident, she tearfully exclaims:

"I am glad in a way, that now I will have him home!"

By the end of the film, Joe has fulfilled his dream of managing a trucking firm in which he is able to employ the one-armed brother as chief dispatcher. In a heart-warming touch, the empty-sleeved dispatcher announces with a grin that that Pearl is expecting a baby— presumably not quite immaculately conceived…



A saintly wife similarly provides salvation to an amputee in '*30 Seconds Over Tokyo'* (1944).

In this patriotic flick based on the Doolittle bombing raids on Tokyo, a Captain Ted Lawson (Van Johnson) piloting the oddly named Ruptured Duck, runs out of fuel after his bombing run. In crashing on the coast of occupied-China, he and his crew are badly injured. Rescued from the surrounding Japanese by partisan Chinese, they are slipped away to a bush hospital.

Half-delirious as gangrene creeps up his smashed leg, Captain Lawson dreams of his wife, Ellen:

"Kinda funny, isn't it?" he mutters as the leg is about to be amputated. "Marry a guy with two arms and two legs and when he comes back, he hasn't any."

When his wife receives the news that her husband is alive but minus a leg, she drops the telephone and embraces her mother.

"There, there —cry it out," her mother consoles. "Lots of people lose an arm or a leg and live perfectly normal lives."

"As if that would make any difference!" says Ellen with a stoic smile.

Soon afterwards, Captain Lawson is recovering in a stateside hospital. General Doolittle (played by Spenser Tracy) comes to offer him a desk job. He then asks about his wife.

"I don't want Ellen to see me like this," Lawson replies. "I want to wait until I get fixed up with a new leg."

"What kinda girl did you marry anyway?" chides Doolittle.

As it turns out, Ellen is waiting behind the door. When he sees her, Lawson forgets his missing leg and stumbles towards her. He falls, but Ellen rushes forward and holds him. Just before the credits roll, the camera closes in on their joyous embrace. At that moment, innumerable handkerchiefs must have been pulled forth from 1944 audiences...

No film from the 1940s more directly addresses the anguish of the gravely injured veterans than William Wyler's '*The Best Years of our Lives' (*1946). Harold Russell, who actually did lose both hands in World War Two military service, plays one of the three vets who meet while flying back from the Pacific to their home city in a military transport plane. While the air force captain, Fred (Dana Andrews), and army sergeant, Al (Fredric March), look on nervously, Homer, in sailor uniform, lights their cigarettes with his hooks.

"You got nothin' to worry about," says the sergeant.

"You should me open a bottle of beer!" Homer jokes. I'm alright but—"

"—but what, sailor?" asks the captain.

Homer speaks hesitantly of the girl from next door who before the war, was his high school sweetheart. "She knows what happened," he says. "But she doesn't know what these things look like."

Later, when the handless sailor falls asleep, the two other vets look out the fuselage into the dark sky.

"I wonder how Homer will make out?" wonders Captain Fred.

Sergeant Al sighs. "I hope Wilma is a swell girl."

While the narrative tracks the travails of readjustment of all three vets, Homer's story centers on his self-torment over Wilma. He is shown wisecracking to others about his hooks but in her presence, he clams up and his face clouds.

In a climactic scene, Wilma comes to the back door after Homer's parents have gone to bed. She tells him that her family wants her to go away to her aunt's place and start a new life. She asks if he wants her to leave.

“Maybe that’s a good idea,” Homer says self-pityingly. “I don’t want you to stay around me just because you have a kind heart.”

After a pained silence he asks Wilma if she would be willing to accompany him upstairs to see how helpless he becomes after the removal of his hooks.

With a hint of fear, she agrees. “If I haven’t the courage, I will know,” she says.

In is a jarring scene for a 1946 audience, Wilma watches Homer struggle out of his harnesses. She then helps him button his pajamas, pulls up his bedcovers and even gives him a chastely goodnight kiss.

The movie ends with the home wedding of the pair in which the air force Captain (having endured his own travails), acts as best man. There is a tense moment when Homer struggles to slip the ring onto Wilma’s finger. But after the vows are exchanged, attendees rush forward to embrace the couple.

This ending no doubt left handkerchiefs sopping wet. The moral is clear: with a courageous wife and the support of family and friends— self-respect can be restored to a war-maimed vet... The consolation for the self-sacrificing wife is perhaps in getting a husband unlikely to cheat.

Levity aside— even with the devoted wife and the support of friends— there is still to be borne the self-consciousness in public.

At one scene in the film, Homer confides to Fred: “They keep starin’ at these hooks or they keep starin’ away from them. I just wanna be treated like everyone else!”

The one-armed Paul in *‘They Drive by Night*’, and the one-legged Ted in *‘30 Seconds Over Tokyo’*, could have made a similar plea.

In this regard, Russell’s Academy Award citation for “bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans through his appearance" was well-deserved. In the post war era, there were not only many thousands of amputees but burn victims and psychically scarred— none of whom deserved to spend their lives in hiding…

In stark contrast to the saintly women saving maimed men— there is the character of Mildred in '*Of Human Bondage'.* Of the two film versions of the Summerset Maughan novel seen recently on TCM, I preferred the later (1964) British version (directed by Ken Hughes), unburdened by American Hays Code censorship.

The film centers on the tribulations of one Philip Carey (played by Lawrence Harvey), who takes up medical studies after coming to terms with his limited talent in art. A sensitive young man, he is deeply self-conscious about his club foot. While ostensibly not a serious handicap— in the character portrayal, the psychological impact of the deformity seems no less than that of a missing limb. In a scene of Philip's medical training, an instructor asks him to take off his shoe to allow his fellow students to examine his deformity. He complies— but in a pained look of self-abnegation.

Later at a restaurant near his training hospital, he is attracted to the pretty cockney waitress, Mildred, (played by Kim Novak), whom one of his student friends, Griffith, has already dated. Before leaving the table, Philip offers Mildred the sketch he has made of her and asks her for a dinner date. Sensing his vulnerability, she plays coy.

After a show of reluctance, Mildred accepts Philip's offer. During the date, she playfully resists Philip's advances. He is not her sensual type— but his middle-class accent appeals to her instinct to socially rise. Philip perfectly understands she is selfish and coarse— but is unable to control his self-abasing obsession over her. His limp grows more pronounced in her presence…

Tormented when she elopes with another man, Philip fails his exams and temporarily drops out of medical school. In the meantime, he meets Nora, a journalist who encourages him to return to his studies. Nora is kindly but Philip is not physically attracted to her.

Just as he is getting over Mildred, she reappears— along with the infant from the lover who has deceived and abandoned her. Out of pity, Philip takes her into his sparse flat, giving her his bed while he sleeps on the sofa. Soon bored and listless, she forces herself upon him.

"It's too late for that," he says, pushing her away.

Persisting, she calls him into the bedroom where she lies lasciviously.

"You disgust me," says Philip, turning his back.

In the 1934 version of the same scene, Bette Davis who plays Mildred, crazily screams: “After you kissed me— I had to wipe my mouth. Wipe my mouth!”

In the more explicitly rendered 1964 version— Kim Novak’s Mildred, naked under the bedsheet, laughs and jeers:

“Me and Griffith— we would talk about you when we were in bed… We laughed at you. I said: *‘Wouldn’t the cripple like to be here, havin’ me now*?’ That’s what you are— a cripple— a bloody cripple!”

When Philip returns to his flat, he finds his furniture wrecked and paintings destroyed— but Mildred gone. It seems a fitting end to the obsession.

Back in medical training, Philip is invited to dinner at the house of the quaint Mr. Athelny, one of his patients who has taken a fatherly interest in him. There he meets Athelny’s daughter, Sally—a sweet girl who also takes a shine to Philip. Still wounded, he is reluctant to respond.

Some time later, after he has completed his training, Philip hears from Griffith that Mildred has been admitted to hospital. Her neglected infant has died, she has sunk into prostitution and is in the terminal stage of syphilis. He comes to her hospital bed and holds her.

“I just always wanted to be called a lady,” she murmurs before dying.

Philip decides to go abroad for a new start. As he is preparing to travel, old Athelny visits to tell him that his daughter is pinning for him. Philip admits he cares deeply for Sally but feels unworthy of her. Yet in the final scene, Sally appears. Their embrace in twilight leaves the hope that through a healthy marriage, Philip can overcome his old ‘bondage’…

Lawrence Harvey’s Philip is considerably more complex than the portrayals of the *mutilés* in the other films. In contrast, the portrayal of the sluttish Mildred seems misogynous by current standards— but is no more stereotypical that the saintly women of the other films. Sally— to the service of credibility— is presented as a young woman whose attraction to Philip is neither due to selfishness nor saintliness…

While the movie offers only a truncated version of the novel, it does capture something of the original novel’s exploration of the morbid self-consciousness that too often attends a disability. It is noteworthy that the novelist Maughan, who conceived Philip with a club foot, was deeply self-conscious about his stammer…

It may be a measure of progress that stereotypes of the *mutilés* in these old films would be as unacceptable in contemporary films as would the stereotypes of blacks and Asians in movies before the 1960s. Still, what might be looked back upon as demeaning portrayals— are the kernels from which current depictions have evolved. The depiction of disabled heroes designed to 'educate' the public of more recent times are usually no less patronizing than the old stereotypes.

But this is much too large a topic for the moment…

2012, February

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Postscript:

In a section on the portrayal of disabled people in '*America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies'* (2009) it is claimed that amputees in film tend to be portrayed in two general ways. They are either cast as "tragic victims" or as "obsessive avengers".

In my reflection a few years ago on stereotypes of amputees in old films, all the *mutilés* in the random selection were of the former type. The trucker amputee, the war-maimed vets as well as the medical student with the club foot were all portrayed as 'tragic victims'. None of the plots of those old films had an "obsessive avenger" character. Yet my familiarity with that type is considerably deeper than with the former:

Avenging *mutilé* characters abound— especially in horror films. From the era of silent film to the present, nightmares have been sown by such characters as the armless Alonzo in '*The Unknown'* (1927) or the avenging ghost with the bloody hook in '*Candyman'* (1992). Yet for me, the archetypal obsessive avenger is the one-armed man from the 1960s TV *noir* crime drama, '*the Fugitive'*:

The search by fugitive Dr. Richard Kimble, (played by David Janssen), for the one-armed murderer of his wife— the crime for which Dr. Kimble is unjustly convicted— was the premise behind the series that ran for several years. Until the last episode, the much referred to one-armed man rarely appeared. When he did, he was either fleeing though shadows or momentarily stunned in a flashlight beam. The character was played by an actual amputee, one Bill Raisch…

In the 1993 movie-version of '*The Fugitive'* (starring Harrison Ford) the one-armed man dressed nattily and wore a prosthetic limb. It was fake— since the actor in the role was not a real amputee. That was hardly as offensive as a white character appearing in blackface. Still, in certain quarters that casting could have been regarded as 'misrepresentation'…

Flippancy aside, the latter-day murderer of the fugitive's wife did not come close to evoking the creepiness of the original. Perhaps it is Raisch's empty sleeve. The primal reaction to a pinned or dangling sleeve can be even more jarring than a pair of lobster claw hands– which even in deformity— bear symmetry… Given the affinity of bilateral symmetry with the 'natural' order— there can be something almost instinctively disturbing about the *asymmetry* of a body with a missing limb— especially in an evil avenger. It is noteworthy that in a latter-day poll on the

"Nastiest TV Villains of All Time" the one-armed man of the original '*Fugitive'* series earned the #5 spot…

On a personal note—in my adolescence, I bristled during '*Fugitive'* episodes in which the one-armed man appeared. Once on the following day, a smart-ass kid called out from behind: "Hey, why did you kill Richard Kimball's wife?"

Amputee avengers have also been portrayed as 'freaks' to be ogled as much as *mutiles* to be feared or pitied... While I have never watched a martial arts film in entirety, apparently there is a sub-genre of such films featuring martial arts-trained amputees. In the standard plot (insofar as kung fu movies have plots), amputee fighters get vengeance on the gangsters or cruel masters who mutilated them...

Most movies in this niche have normal-bodied actors playing amputees. For example, the '*One-armed Executioner'* (1981) apparently had a spare arm hidden under his shirt. However, the Hong-Kong made '*Crippled Masters'* (1979) was unique in featuring genuinely disabled actors. The armless kung fu expert who teams up with another master who is legless, was notably played by a thalidomide victim. Of course, such films were made at a time when 'cripsploitation' was not presumed so unseemly.

I have also noted other one-armed characters in minor roles which neither fit the 'tragic victim' nor the 'obsessive avenger' categories. Characters in two classic westerns come to mind: There is a one-armed calvary scout, Samuel Potts (played by James Coburn), in Sam Peckinpah's *'Major Dundee'* (1965). The "half-breed" Potts is nearly always shown on horseback with one sleeve of his buckskin jacket dangling. Then in in Clint Eastwood's *'Unforgiven*' (1992), there is a scene in which deputies are gathered around their sheriff. Among them is a one-armed man twirling a six-shooter. In his few seconds on screen, that *mutilé* comes across as a comic figure––rather like a one-eyed taxi driver...

Yet even those characters in such minor roles with no significance to a plot, share two primary features: The scout is not just a scout but a one-armed scout— just as the deputy is a one-armed deputy. The *one-armedness* is the essential defining element of their characters.

At the same time, an audience would find it impossible to imagine such characters in any sensual context. The appearance of a empty sleeve (or pantleg) evokes— however fleetingly— a shuddering image of castration… In following up on this idea, a random Googling yielded no

surprise: '*one armed killer*' produced 2,900 hits while *'sexy one-armed man'* failed to produce any hits at all…

Interestingly, portrayals of certain other disabilities are increasingly challenging stereotypes that more readily persist with the *mutilé.* Beginning in the late 1960s with the wily detective (played by Raymond Burr), in the eponymously titled '*Ironside'* TV series, numerous paraplegic characters have been portrayed on screen as full-dimensionally human.

Most notable is the disabled Vietnam vet played by Jon Voight in *Coming Home* (1978). His character provides the hospital volunteer lady (played by Jane Fonda) better sex than she's ever had with her physically whole but PTS damaged husband. Obviously strong shoulders and a handsome face in a wheelchair-bound character are easier on the eyes of an audience than a character with an empty sleeve or a hook…

Finally, what of the near invisibility of female amputees in film?

In the era when industrial accidents and war maiming almost exclusively befell males, no social need was felt for 'educating' the public about a group as rare as women with missing limbs. At the same time, in the Hays Code era of American film, a one-armed woman character would probably have seemed too disturbing for an audience. There was possibly even a more awkward element to such discomfort— a belief that such characters might attract more perverse attention than sympathy…

It is revealing that older films which depict women with other disabilities usually portrayed them as sexually vulnerable. For example, the deaf woman played by Jane Wyman, in '*Johnny Belinda'* (1948) is raped and impregnated by a drunken oaf. In '*A Patch of Blue'* (1965) the blind girl admits to her rescuer (played by Sidney Poitier) that she was sexually abused by a friend of her prostitute mother…

Those old stereotypes, have, fortunately, largely passed into history… In their place are films like '*Children of a Lesser God'* (1986) in which the beautiful Marlee Matlin plays a strong-willed deaf woman. Still, the plot includes a back-story detail that as a teenager, the lead deaf character had been "used" by her sister's boyfriends.

One might still wonder: could a woman with a missing arm be cast in a lead role in a film in which she is shown in an intimate relationship—that is—outside of pornography?

In any case, there have been a few recent sci-fi movies with amputee female characters:

In the comedy horror flick, *Planet Terror* (2007) Rose McGowan plays a girl who gets a machine-gun leg to replace the limb bitten off in a zombie attack… In '*Mad Max: Fury Road'* (another flick I have no interest in seeing), Charlize Theron plays a tough character whose bionic arm works far better than one of mere flesh and bone… Notably, neither of these flicks casts a real amputee…

Still, all this is progress away from the old stereotypes— and refreshingly without a patronizing concern to challenge them… One looks forward to eventually seeing a movie in which a missing arm or leg of the lead character is of no more consequence to the plot than a set of abnormally large ears…

2019, March

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