

# THE HUMAN BOTTOM OF NON-HUMAN THINGS: ON CRITICAL THEORY AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES

## DE LA THÉORIE CRITIQUE ET SES CONTRIBUTIONS ENVERS LES ÉTUDES CRITIQUES DE L'HANDICAP

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Critical theory has potential application to several points of interrogation within the critical disability studies canon. While some disability theorists have made use of the analyses offered by critical theory, possible areas of contribution remain. In this article, following an historical overview which traces some of the fundamental developments in the critical theory canon, three areas of analysis are examined in light of their potential to broaden and interrogate current critical disability theory. These include the sense of *moral obligation* characteristic of early contemporary critical theorists, particularly from the Frankfurt school; *materialism* and the link between disability and economic means of production, including materialist links to socio-psychic explorations of disability; and connections between current understandings of disability and cultural *aesthetic* concerns.

*Keywords: critical theory, critical disability theory, materialism, aesthetics*

Dans le champ des études critiques de l'handicap, nous nous trouvons capable d'appliquer la théorie critique envers quelques questions centrales. Malgré l'usage des analyses fournies par la théorie critique par divers théoriciens, il reste toujours de l'espace dans notre champ d'études pour la théorie critique de s'appliquer. Cet article abordera d'abord un survol historique de la théorie critique qui soulignera ses développements fondamentaux, suivi par l'examen critique de trois domaines d'analyse à la lumière de leurs capacités éventuelles d'élargir et d'interroger la théorie critique de l'handicap actuelle. Ceux-ci incluront le sentiment d'*obligation morale*, typique des anciens théoriciens, en particulier de l'École de Francfort ; le *matérialisme*, le lien entre l'handicap et les moyens de production économiques, et les liens matérialistes vers les examens de l'handicap d'une perspective socio-psychique ; et la relation entre comment on comprend l'handicap et d'autres inquiétudes culturelles *esthétiques*.

*Mots clés : Théorie critique, théorie critique de l'handicap, matérialisme, l'esthétique*

## Introduction

At its core, critical theory is a body of philosophical analysis which strives to explain and critique social structures and their accompanying ideologies, while embracing emancipatory and utopian principles.<sup>1</sup> While critical theory's historical project covers divergent areas of thought and spans several centuries, more current definitions suggest that critical theory's primary aim is to describe and critically evaluate "forms of oppression...[including] sexism, racism, militarism and the domination of nature" (Simons, 2004, p. 5), as well as the structures underlying those oppressions. According to Horkheimer, it is critical theory's task to discern "the human bottom of non-human things" (as cited in Aranowitz, 1972, p. xiii), to practice a "theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions for life" (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 199), and to maintain "concern for the abolition of social injustice" (p. 242). Politically, critical theory can act as a means to "instigate social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality" (Rush, 2004, p. 1), and finally, critical theory carries a role in "historical remembrance and utopian will" (O'Neill, 1976, p. 3) by offering a framework within which to analyze previous historical injustices and to articulate possibilities for a more hopeful, egalitarian, and inclusive society.

In its potential as a "stimulant to political action...[and] social change" (Agger, 1976, p. 12), its investigation of "questions that might not otherwise be raised" (Rush, 2004, p. 9), and its willingness to engage with "aesthetic dissonance" (Agger, 1976, p. 20), critical theory clearly aligns itself with some of the fundamental tenets of disability theory, and has the potential to enrich and broaden the critical disability studies canon. While some theorists have applied elements of critical theory to disability scholarship (e.g., Krogh & Johnson, 2006; Oliver, 1990; Rioux & Valentine, 2006; Siebers, 2008), and indeed, the British social model of disability was formulated primarily on critical Marxist thought, potential areas of application remain. In this paper, I hope to draw attention to three areas of critical theory which inform critical disability theory from historical and social perspectives, and provide analytic tools with which to consider current understandings and representations of disability. These include the sense of *moral responsibility* underlying much of the work which has emerged from the critical theory canon, in particular regarding the building of a more just and humane society; *materialism*, that is, the link between disability and economic means of production, including materialist links to socio-psychic explorations of disability; and connections between current understandings of disability and cultural *aesthetic* standards.<sup>2</sup> While critical theory is vast in its applications, and has the potential to incisively analyze

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Joanna Rankin for her ideas here.

<sup>2</sup> Of note is the omission of certain key areas from the critical theory canon, such as language and semiotics, including the work of Habermas and Wittgenstein, and discussions concerning power, discipline, and governance. While each of these areas is vitally important to a comprehensive understanding of critical theory, my focus on the areas listed above is due primarily to space constraints, and in small measure because of a sense of personal resonance with particular sites of discussion.

numerous facets of social, political, and cultural life, this paper will serve primarily as an overview of critical theory and some of its possible points of interrogation within the critical disability studies canon. Further, while critical theory as an analytic tool is relevant to all forms, types, and indeed, definitions of disability, this paper speaks primarily to its potential in regard to physical and embodied difference. To begin, I will provide a brief historical overview, and while I do not presume that this synopsis is sufficient in breadth or depth, my hope is that it will provide a reasonable starting point.

### Origins and History: The Frankfurt School

While the contemporary emergence of critical theory is most often linked explicitly with “a period of extraordinarily complex intellectual activity” (Rush, 2004, p. 6) in pre-World War II Germany with a group of theorists known as the Frankfurt School (e.g., Chambers, 2004; Lenhardt, 1976; Roberts, 2004; Rush, 2004), its intellectual and social origins can be traced back two centuries to the emergence of post-Enlightenment thought and the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Despite intellectual disagreement regarding the accuracy and relevance of Kant’s vision of modernity (see Simons, 2002), he remains highly regarded as a formative critical philosopher from which more current bodies of thought originate (Simons, 2002). Likewise, Adam Smith (1723-1790), while not always included in current considerations of critical theory, produced what many regard as the first formal work of political economy, thus paving the way for more current intellectual analyses of economic structures and practices.

The Frankfurt School originated “in the threatening context of 1930s Germany, against the background of the rise of fascism and Nazism” (Simons, 2004, p. 2), an environment as ripe for rigorous critical analysis as it was stifling to those same analytic forces. Indeed, many of the contemporary critical theorists emerging from this era, such as Horkheimer (1895-1973), Adorno (1903-1969), Marcuse (1898-1979), and Benjamin (1892-1940), are recognized as key formative figures in the movement. That critical theory began among a group of thinkers, many of whom had some Jewish background during a time of increasing ostracization and persecution, is fundamental to our understanding of the historically destabilizing and subversive nature of critical theory. Indeed, the “pariah” status (Arendt, 1978) of many of the original contemporary critical theorists lends credibility to their critique of universalist theories in general, and their analysis of hierarchically-based models of exclusion in particular. Due to the intense intellectual and personal constraints of the day, many from this group took exile in the United States, at which time their thinking both “grew to maturity in expatriation” (Rush, 2004, p.1), and was more broadly applied to “capitalist consumer mass culture of post-Second World War North America and Western Europe” (Simons, 2004, p. 2), laying the groundwork for international, post-war social protest movements.

The influence of the Frankfurt School was further tempered by the “dazzling eruption” (Simons, 2004, p. 4) of French poststructuralist thought in the 1960s. While some historians describe this as a kind of European philosophical competition (e.g., Rush, 2004), others refer more generally to a lessening of the Frankfurt School’s supremacy within critical theory circles (Simons, 2004). Indeed, Foucault (1926-1984), Bourdieu (1930-2002), Cixous (1937- ), Kristeva (1941- ), and Irigary (1932- ), among others, have made vital contributions to contemporary critical thought, including

analyses of power, exclusion, and the construction of difference, which necessitate their inclusion here.

While not exhaustive, the above discussion provides a rudimentary overview of the historical foundations of critical theory.<sup>3</sup> As this paper will address various concerns emerging from the critical theory literature, and is organized thematically as opposed to historically or chronologically, I will draw from theorists across various categorizations and time periods. In so doing, I hope to contextualize these themes within current disability studies analyses, in the pursuit of a sound, critical, theoretical foundation within disability studies.

### Moral Responsibility and Obligation

Emerging as a response to the violence and extremism of post-Weimar fascism, critical theory initially positioned itself as a body of thought committed to the examination of historical injustices and the articulation of possibilities for positive social change (Agger, 1976; Bronner, 2002; Chambers, 2004). Confronted with the soon-to-be-realised horrors of the Nazi regime, theorists from the Frankfurt School, such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, began a long-term engagement with the project of imagining a more just and equitable society by “providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can...inform political action aimed at emancipation” (Rush, 2004, p. 9).

Essential to this undertaking is a sense of history and remembrance. O’Neill (1976) explicitly emphasizes the importance of tracing genealogical links between historical events and current oppressions: “by stressing the fundamental notion of our historical memory of guilt and unredeemed suffering, we recover the deepest grounds of the ethical materialism that motivates critical theory” (p. 3). Indeed, Horkheimer (1972) states that “the better, the right kind of society is a goal which has some sense of guilt entwined about it” (p. ix), thus suggesting that positive change can be facilitated through rigorous reflection on one’s participation in historic and sometimes tragic events.<sup>4</sup> Horkheimer further states that critical theory must “contribute to the fulfilment of the historical task of creating a world in which [the world’s children] and others will have it

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<sup>3</sup> This overview admittedly does not acknowledge the contributions of some more current feminist, queer, and postmodern scholars, such as Donna Haraway, bell hooks, Judith Butler, Deleuze and Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe, Nancy Fraser, and Seyla Benhabib, among others. These omissions are not meant to signify their lack of importance; rather, the intent of this paper is to provide an overview of the historical foundations of critical theory and their potential applications to critical disability scholarship, thus precluding the in-depth discussion that the contributions of the above-named theorists deserve.

<sup>4</sup> While “guilt” is not a notion adhered to within more current, relativist critical traditions, and is indeed often regarded as an archaic and unproductive concept, in this sense it suggests the depth of historical honesty and authenticity required to create a more inclusive and perhaps utopian society.

better” (p. 124), suggesting both the enormity of the undertaking and the archival reflection and analysis it requires. Horkheimer and O’Neill thus stress the importance of reflecting on the historical trends and tragedies of the past in order to understand and shape current social and political movements. Further, critical theory offers tools of incisive socio-historical analysis and future visioning, tools essential to fields of study that insist on inclusion and a re-imagined culture.

Emerging from this historical acknowledgement is the notion of a sense of communal responsibility. Indeed, Adorno, Horkheimer’s student and contemporary, speaks to the “share[d] responsibility for the continued existence of a society whose organizing principles are domination and fear” (Lenhardt, 1976, p. 53), and also makes use of “the moral language of guilt and responsibility” (p. 53). However, caution is needed when dealing with notions such as guilt and responsibility when referring to disability. While a sense of moral obligation can be well-founded and well-intentioned, and while critical theory as a whole encourages an engaged civic society (O’Neill, 2004), there is a danger in resting critical theory’s potential on the goodwill and utopian spirit of a population. Such assumptions can encourage dichotomous and ultimately unhelpful relationships wherein one group is held, or feels, responsible for the well-being of another, and fails to acknowledge the volition and autonomy of groups seeking social justice, including people with disabilities (Hughes, 2005).

All of this leaves critical disability studies in an interesting position. The tenets of critical theory certainly advocate for the creation of a society conducive to the inclusion and emancipation of people who are marginalized (Benhabib, 1992; Malhotra, 2006). Indeed, Kant, despite criticism from postmodernists regarding his stance on “reason as legislator” (Simons, 2002, p. 29), can be interpreted as posing key questions that point to a constructive optimism for those generally unaccepted by society: “What can we know?...What should we do?” (Phillips, 2000, p. 11), and What may I hope? Notable, however, is the lack of mention of disability within the critical theory canon. Not until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the work of feminist theorists such as Kristeva and Cixous, is there any mention of bodily difference,<sup>5</sup> and how this might extend the boundaries of what critical theory can offer. While some might attribute this to the lack of historical analysis within critical disability studies (Hutchinson, 2006; Metzler, 2006), thus facilitating a lack of recognition from other fields, others suggest that it is the ongoing cultural aesthetic aversion toward disability that results in the lack of its theoretical consideration, despite its enormous potential within philosophy as a whole (Wilton, 2003). Thus, while critical theory encourages a broad ethics of communitarian responsibility in the creation of a more just society, to date the vast majority of theorizing concerning disability and difference has emerged strictly from disability scholars (Davis, 2006; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Michalko, 2002; Mitchell & Snyder, 1997). While this is a hopeful start (“what may I hope?”), it appears that both critical theory and critical

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<sup>5</sup> The lack of theorizing around intellectual difference is even more notable. While feminist theorists have contributed greatly to the understanding of physical difference within the context of a gendered society, intellectual difference has largely been unaddressed in the critical theory canon.

disability scholarship have the potential to sustain a more mutually beneficial relationship. In short, critical disability studies can inform critical theory about the tension between advocating on others' behalf, and the need to leave room, socially and politically, for self-autonomy and self-determination, all within the larger project of building a better world.

### Materialism

Materialism, in its most orthodox designation, is an attentiveness to the “material circumstances...of human existence” (Bronner, 2002, p. 28), and counters the more idealist philosophical interpretations which preceded it. Materialism is best known through the analyses and theories articulated by Marx, and its principles bear significant import to many academic disciplines and applications. The disability rights movement and the British social model of disability are both deeply grounded in Marxist and materialist thought (e.g., Barton, 2001; Oliver, 1990, 1996; Thomas, 2002). Indeed, engagement in the field necessitates a critical understanding of the materialist forces that profoundly influence the lives of people with disabilities--in particular, notions of labour value and worker exploitation. In this section, I hope to address materialist explanations of disability by examining both Marxist principles, as well as more current theoretical extrapolations from theorists such as Horkheimer, Foucault, Cixious, and Bourdieu, which have a bearing, albeit often indirectly, on existing conditions and representations of disability. I will conclude the section with an examination of the integration of Marxist principles by critical disability theorists. While the work of Marx is too extensive to be adequately summarized here, there are two theoretical tenets that must be mentioned: the means and results of production, and the notion of alienation.

Marx's theories draw primarily from an analysis of the means of capitalist production, which refers, bluntly, to the creation of goods for the purposes of profit (Tormey, 2002), and the unjust relationships and conflict that result. Based on this assertion, Marx articulates “the paradox of modernity, [that is,] at the very moment when greatly increased productive potential seems to offer so much in terms of meeting human needs, it takes away so much in terms of increasing human misery” (Tormey, 2002, p. 53). For Marx, right relations should be “part of the moral and legal superstructure of society” (Wood, 1988, p. 13), but capitalism encourages the owners of production to accumulate and exploit at the expense of workers. Accordingly, Marx advocates “a process of historical self-reflection” (Shapiro, 1976, p. 155) and conscious analysis of one's material circumstances and social position, as well as participation in revolutionary measures to overcome oppressive life circumstances.

Inherent to the economic underpinnings of Marxist theory is the notion of alienation, or a sense of separation from cultural or self-emancipation because of social impediments (Wood, 1988) which can be traced to economic or materialist causes. This suggests that the notion and experience of exclusion are embedded within capitalist systems of production, alienation arising paradoxically when one is both entrenched in the system (thereby hindered in the process of self-reflection), and excluded from it. Marxist thought thus locates much of the world's current injustices, including exclusion and oppression, within a capitalist economic framework.

The longevity of Marxian theories, and their ongoing relevance within socio-cultural analyses, is evident in the work of more recent critical theorists. Horkheimer (1972), writing one century after Marx, reiterates the nature and workings of hierarchical systems of production, noting that “how authority is used [is] simply another way to secure the current economic status quo” (p. 71), thus suggesting that “progressive” economic policies may in fact simply be a reformulation of historically oppressive capitalist principles. Thus, Horkheimer suggests that capitalist ideology is embedded in the ongoing socio-political fabric and emerges across fields of analysis, and that economic frameworks can be used to analyze and understand broader socio-political mechanisms. For example, Foucault (1995), while focussing on the surveillance and discipline of those who are “outside nature” (p. 92)--that is, prisoners, the mad, the ill--his work references Marxist principles of economic forces, suggesting that the ebbs and flows of punishment have as much to do with the economics of power and authority as they do with the nature of the “crime” itself. Thus, punishment becomes “a way of inserting [prisoners] morally and materially into the strict world of the economy” (p. 127); those in power exert authority over the deviant as a way to ensure the ongoing workings of the capitalist project. Likewise, although the feminist work of Cixous is centred on the “disadvantaged position of the female subject” (Dobson, 2004, p. 123), she locates these subjectivities firmly within the “economic and libidinal economies of capitalist patriarchy...the *other* is maintained in its alterity only for its repression to shore up the illusion of unified subjectivity and mastery of the self” (p. 124, emphasis added). Thus, although the origins of their analyses differ, Foucault and Cixous both point to the compulsory placement of deviance, difference, and alterity within a capitalist framework, “hidden...behind the anonymous power of economic necessity” (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 86).

Bourdieu (1990) likewise furthers the relationship between economic principles and the socio-political distribution of power and authority. His theories posit that social “legitimacy is obtained through the accumulation and strategic mobilization of symbolic capital” (Krogh & Johnson, 2006, p. 156). That is, one gains authority and influence through the collection of “various forms of socially recognized wealth and prestige” (p. 156), and that these tithes of social, cultural, and economic capital are transferable for

other measures of power and cultural significance.<sup>6</sup> Of particular relevance here is Bourdieu's attention to the liminality of the process of accumulation and exchange. He states that our "relation to the future" (1990, p. 64) is defined by the relationship between the *habitus*, or the historical embodiment of permissible "schemes of perception, thought and action" (p. 54), and the nature of the "chances objectively offered to [us] by the social world" (p. 64). According to Bourdieu:

The relation to what is possible is a relation to power, and the sense of the probable future is constituted in the prolonged relationship with a world structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us), of what is appropriated in advance by and for others and what one can reasonably expect for oneself (p. 64).

This is, of course, particularly significant in the interpretation of disability within a materialist analysis. When disability is positioned within a Western, capitalist framework, the "prolonged relationship" between what is "possible" and what is "impossible" soundly favours the impossible for people with disabilities, to the point of what Bourdieu (1990) calls "symbolic violence" (pp. 122-134), or the imposition of one group's symbolic system on that of another (Krogh & Johnson, 2006, p. 157). Thus while Bourdieu's work can be analyzed through materialist principles, his theories also lend themselves to analyses of governmentality and social control.

The materialist principles outlined above are among the founding elements of the non-traditional, rights-centred disability theory which began to emerge in Europe and North America in the 1970s. In particular, the British school and social model theorists have made significant contributions to materialist understandings of disability. The work of Barton (2001), Barnes et al. (1999), Oliver (1990), Thomas (2002), and Morris (1991), among others, has been instrumental in illuminating the relationship between capitalist modes of production and the production of disability. Oliver, a prolific writer and one of the original social model theorists, draws strong links between materialism and the experience of disability. He (1996) states that disability does not simply exist, but is a

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<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu's *habitus* is succinctly described by Krogh & Johnson (2006) as the "gradual embodiment of social rules (structure), combined with actors' own choices of how those rules should be interpreted or practiced (agency) within a particular field" (p. 157). Thus, according to Bourdieu (1990), "being the product of a particular class of objective regularities, the *habitus* tends to generate all the 'reasonable', 'common-sense' behaviours (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these regularities" (p. 55, emphasis in original). Further, he refers to the places of interaction between the *habitus* and "immanence in the world... things to be done or said, which directly govern speech or action" (p. 66) as the *field*. Lastly, he describes "miraculous encounter[s] between the *habitus* and a *field*...which makes possible the near-perfect anticipation of the future...as the *feel for the game*...[manifested in] concrete configurations on the *pitch or board*" (p. 66, emphasis added).



classification, a trope formed through the dynamics of capitalism. Thus, disability is described in the following way:

a category...produced by capitalist society in a particular form...the production of disability...therefore, is nothing more nor less than a set of activities specifically geared towards producing a good--the category disability--supported by a range of political actions which create the conditions to allow these productive activities to take place and underpinned by a discourse which gives legitimacy to the whole enterprise (p. 127).

Oliver (1990) further links economic factors to the lack of inclusion of people with disabilities: “the embodiment of these social and economic relations under capitalism...has led directly to the exclusion of disabled people in capitalist society” (p. 21), thus underscoring both the mechanisms and prohibitive consequences of disability’s construction under capitalism.

Further, and perhaps unconventionally, Marxist and materialist principles assist in understanding current, socio-psychic, and negative interpretations of disability. Marx (1867) devotes a chapter of *Capital* to explain the fetishistic nature of commodities (as cited in Wood, 1988, pp. 218-229); that is, “commodities ‘enchant’ us; they persuade us that they offer us the solution to the general feeling of ‘lack’ induced by the harsh realities of capitalist life” (Tormey, 2002, p. 59). Further, the relentless and unsuccessful pursuit of *things* to avoid potentially uncomfortable feelings of need can be seen to parallel a generalized collective sentiment of avoiding the lack that disability represents. What Marxist thought encourages, therefore, is an attentiveness to capitalism’s unconditional support of the misrepresentation of disability as deficiency or lack in modern society. Disability scholarship, particularly in North America, has turned in recent years to the examination of socio-cultural demarcations of disability as “lack” (e.g., Garland-Thomson, 1997; Michalko, 2002; Titchkosky, 2007; Wilton, 2003, 2006); conversely, British theorists have remained faithful to the interrogation of materialist dynamics that underscore the lives of people with disabilities (e.g., Barton, 2001; Oliver, 1990, 2001). What I am suggesting, however, is a more complex engagement between seemingly disparate bodies of thought--that is, a theoretical convergence of the symbolic representations of disability as deficiency and the socio-cultural trepidations attendant therein, and the materialist and economic forces underlying them. In this vein, Horkheimer provides some guidance, as he demarcates “recognisable connections between the economy, class, ideology and psychic structure” (Connell, 2002, p. 134). More currently, Žižek (1989) offers an interrogation of the relationship between the material--in his words, the “commodity-form...[and] all other forms of the ‘fetishistic inversion’...which, at first sight, have nothing to do with the field of political economy” (p. 16), and underlying socio-psychic structures.

### Aesthetics

Aesthetics, or the concern toward beauty, its social expression, and the communal and individual considerations of its relevance and position in culture, does

not, at first, seem to be of central importance to the emancipatory principles of critical theory (Weber, 1976). Indeed, despite, for example, Adorno's (1997) insistence that aesthetics be given its due, particularly through his contextualisation of aesthetics within a materialist framework, Bernstein (2004) suggests that from a philosophical standpoint, critical theory has not, historically, felt unanimously compelled to concern itself with fundamental aesthetic questions such as "what is art?" and "what is beauty?" (p. 139). Bernstein (2004) elaborates, however, and recognizes a fundamental philosophical tension between the need to address with gravity the moral and emancipatory questions of the day, and to acknowledge the fundamental human desire for artistic expression and appreciation: "human beings care inordinately about art and beauty, [and] we are moved by aesthetic phenomena in a manner altogether unseemly in comparison with how we think we should be moved by things moral and political" (p. 140). Thus, despite concerns about the significance of aesthetics, several critical theorists suggest that it is of fundamental importance, and goes beyond the assessment of the relevance of beauty, to a role in "the recovery of wholeness [and] the abolition of alienation" (Weber, 1976, p. 79), thus serving as a link between the divisive consequences of capitalism, as articulated in materialist theories, and the establishment of mutually emancipatory relationships. Further, Bernstein (2004) suggests that the aesthetic is the "social locale where the normative binding of reason and sense is forged, elaborated, and reproduced" (p. 141), thus suggesting that the aesthetic is as relevant to the culturally recognized pursuit of enlightenment and the development of reason, as it is to artistic endeavours.

In order to address the role that the aesthetic plays in current interpretations and representations of disability, I return to one of its more fundamental definitions, that is, the aesthetic concern with beauty and presentation. For it is in the nexus between disability and cultural aesthetic expectations that we become aware of the existence of profound intellectual and emotional discord. In this section, I intend to explore more fully the origins and implications of the "aesthetic dissonance" (Agger, 1976, p. 20) that disability embodies, as well as the potential that such dissonance might offer to both critical theory and critical disability canons.

To begin, I turn briefly to some linguistic considerations. Phillips (2000) notes that the word "criticism" is derived from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning "to decide", thus suggesting that processes of evaluation and judgement are integral to critical theorizing. He notes that "the easiest decisions are the ones that meet with least resistance...[signifying that] they are not decisions at all but forms of acquiescence to established norms and expectations" (p. 9). This observation helps illuminate the discord between disability and socio-cultural aesthetic expectations. If, as Phillips suggests, criticism, including that articulated within critical theory, involves an evaluative element, then the link between cultural aesthetic norms and the historic and ongoing repulsion toward disability is more easily understood. That is, confronted with the difference that disability embodies, the position to which we acquiesce is influenced by current, evaluative norms, despite our protestations otherwise. Further, while critical theory *in principle* interrogates cultural norms and the social processes that obscure their oppressive nature, the interrogation of the aesthetics of disability and the resultant socio-cultural exclusion has been, to date, largely unarticulated within critical theory. Thus, while Benjamin's theorizing on the artistic "aura" (Rosen, 2004) and Baudrillard's

(1993) interrogations of modern photography do reveal aesthetic concerns, these do not extend beyond traditional aesthetic territory into the more seemingly tenuous yet material considerations of the disabled body. For example, Adorno (1997) theorizes the aural dissonance of modern music, and in the process, “refuses to be sentimentally hopeful by giving into harmony” (Agger, 1976, p. 20), and while critical disability theorists are clear in regard to the “aesthetic anxiety” (Hahn, 1989, p. 370) and dissonance that the disabled body represents (see also Bogdan, 1988; Garland-McRuer, 2006; Thomson, 1997), the general disregard for the disruptive potential of the disabled body in aesthetic reflections of critical theory is notable.

A more robust examination of the application of the aesthetic branch of critical theory to disability necessitates a turn also to bodies of work concerned with psychio-social conceptualizations. Psychoanalytic theories shed some light on the social acceptability of the human body, or of particular types of bodies, within aesthetic boundaries, suggesting a relevance to disability studies in our attempts to interpret cultural rejections of, and abhorrence to, disability. While the possibilities for analyzing the psychoanalytic literature are vast, for the purposes of this paper, I will look briefly at the work of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva.

Freud’s primary concerns include the theorization of therapy (King, 2002), with particular emphasis on the integration of repressed fundamental desires which complicate social interaction, as well as the developmental nature of psycho-social maturation. My primary interest here lies in the notion that Freudian thought can be extrapolated to define disability as lack, particularly in regard to theories of castration, thus having profound implications on the social construction and interpretation of disability as a “culturally devalued” (Wilton, 2003, p. 370) entity. Further, Freud’s work is categorically normative, with a “by no means unproblematic development of normality” (King, 2002, p. 105), which, along with its generally misogynist nature, is problematic in its application to feminist, queer, and disability studies. In addition, Freud (1991) states that an “aesthetic attitude” (p. 270), or an appreciation for beauty, can allow one to compensate for the inevitable “threat of suffering” (p. 270) one will encounter, thus suggesting that the suffering that disability entails, if it is interpreted as such, should be met with a sense of compensation, or of amending a loss, as opposed to a fundamental acceptance of the complex and fragmented nature of human existence.

Despite these limitations, Wilton (2003) suggests that Freud’s work might offer “insight into disability oppression” (p. 371) by providing “an explanation for the anxiety expressed toward physical disability” (p. 374), and that it might have “potentially radical implications for interrogating cultural constructions of disability” (p. 382). While not extensive at this point, theorists such as Davis (1997), Garland-Thomson (1997), Evans (1992), and more recently, Inahara (2009) and Shildrick (2009), have begun to examine the applicability of psychoanalytic theory to critical disability studies. While much of this work has thus far focussed on the interrogation of cultural and artistic sites of disability representation, Inahara suggests a psychoanalytic analysis of disability which might “open up possibilities for physical disability beyond its position as castrated able-bodiedness” (p. 47), and Shildrick delves extensively into the notion of the “transhistorical” (p. 45) psychic anxiety underlying fearful and oppressive responses to disability. Indeed, Shildrick, in her work *Dangerous Discourses* (2009), goes beyond the notion of psychoanalytical representations of disability, and brings forward more

fundamental questions regarding the “psycho-social imaginary that disallows morphological imperfection” (p. 5).

Continuing in the psychoanalytic tradition, I turn now to a brief examination of the work of Lacan and Kristeva in regard to their contributions to a critical aesthetic interrogation of disability. “Notoriously difficult to interpret” (Sim & Van Loon, 2004, p. 68), Lacan nonetheless deserves attention here in his attempts to explain socio-political phenomena relative to “some sort of psychological substratum” (Stavrakakis, 2004, p. 20), specifically in regard to the signifiers, or language, underlying our subjectivity. While much of Lacanian thought is recognizable in its Freudian origins concerning lack via castration and death, Lacan also remarks on the “privileged signifier” (Wilton, 2003, p. 380), which in this analysis connotes the meaning ascribed to the more acceptable “physically fit and aesthetically pleasing body” (p. 380), in contrast to the disabled body. Further, Lacan’s work is marked by a consistent theoretical thread which connects one’s emergence into the realm of “the symbolic system of language and social relations” (Stavrakakis, 2004, p. 26) with an inevitable loss, the sacrificial castration of *jouissance*, or pre-symbolic, authentic enjoyment. This entry into the “field of linguistic interpretation, the symbolic register [denotes that] something is always missing...the Other is a lacking Other” (p. 25), thus seemingly positioning those marked as Other in permanent positions of deficiency and ineptitude. Kristeva (1982), in contrast, explicitly remarks upon the social processes that ensure that those marked as aesthetically displeasing are categorically banned through processes of abjection. Kristeva’s theorizing on the abject provides grounds for a solid understanding of the rejection of disability in modern culture, and I quote at length from Lloyd (2004), who provides an incisive interpretation:

The abject is that which consciously we recoil from, which horrifies us, but which is nevertheless part of our subjectivity and part of our culture; it is that which paradoxically repels as it fascinates. As with the semiotic, the abject / abjection is that which must be repressed in order for symbolic and cultural order to be established, but which is ever present, looming and haunting the security and stability of that order, threatening its dissolution (p. 142).

Lloyd’s reading of Kristeva emphasizes a key point in our attempt to draw connections between broad aesthetic concerns and the rejection of disability--that is, the acknowledgment of an assumed social imperative to discard the most different among us in order to establish and maintain the status quo. Thus, while Lacan suggests a link between social phenomena and their psychic foundations, Kristeva offers an explicit interrogation of “the psychic underpinnings of the social order” (Lloyd, 2004, p. 147), and encourages a broad examination of the “universal” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 208) nature of the evaluation and subsequent rejection of embodied difference. Further, and in a different vein, Kristeva (1982), in an assertion illuminating the connection between aesthetic and materialist concerns notes that “all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (p. 5, emphasis added), suggesting that self-recognition of the abject within becomes manifest in the compulsions to both reject the undesirable, and to fill the psychic gap remaining with material and relational objects. In this way, Kristeva’s work ties together two

fundamental threads of critical theory, and presents fundamental and profound questions toward the disability “problematic”. This overlap between materialist and aesthetic concerns presents an inviting and currently under-theorized area in critical disability scholarship. While contemporary critical theorist Zizek (1989) and, as mentioned earlier, Shildrick (2009) have initiated this discussion, potential for rigorous theorizing between these two streams of critical thought remain.

### Conclusions

Critical theory, simply put, is a “principled intervention” (Sim & Van Loon, 2004, p. 164) into political, economic, and cultural practice. It encourages rigorous analysis, challenges hegemony, and maintains an agenda of utopian ideals and human emancipation. Critical theory challenges cultural discursive institutions which undergird visible practices of exclusion and misrepresentation, and thus offers a map toward greater understanding and informed challenge. At its core, critical theory insists that we remain attentive to “the human bottom of non-human things” (Horkheimer, 1972, p. xiii), suggesting an ongoing commitment to the lives implicated in cultural and political practices.

Critical theory, as opposed to mere criticism, is thus essential to current undertakings within critical disability studies, as it insists upon praxis formulated on penetrating inquiry beyond wilful action and reaction. Similarly, critical disability studies, with its commitment to in-depth analysis of the structural and as-yet incompletely understood psychic underpinnings of oppression, offers an appropriate and insightful site of investigation within critical theory. While cursory, it is hoped that the discussion above has suggested points of intervention and analysis within the critical disability studies canon from a critical theory perspective, in particular, the materialist and aesthetic underpinnings of current interpretations and understandings of disability.

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