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## Exploring Disability through Phenomenology: Analysing M.T. Anderson's *Feed* and Frances Itani's *The Deafening*

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**Abstract:** This article explores aspects of disability in M.T. Anderson's *Feed* and Frances Itani's *The Deafening* through the mechanics of the Phenomenological Theory. The phenomenological approach is defined by a focus on lived experience and subjectivity, with particular attention to how each constructs meaning from their knowledge of disability. In *Feed*, the characters are cognitively disabled because of a technological impairment in the form of a brain implant that regulates their thoughts, wants, and feelings for them, stripping them of their autonomy and agency. The analysis focuses on how structural aspects of the societal technological systems contribute to this condition of mental disability. In contrast, *The Deafening* depicts deafness as a socially invalidating disability, such that Grania's situated being was influenced by society's inability to improve access to communication, resulting in her social isolation. Both these works reveal that disability is not a straightforward biological fact; it is a socially reproduced, corporeal experience established through the mediation of external actors. This paper demonstrates the application of phenomenology to the theorisation of disability, examining the factors through which disability is lived and internalised by people in different societal contexts. Therefore, it presents phenomenology as a potentially important avenue for disability studies, as it offers a way to theorise disability.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Disability Studies, Lived Experience, Social Model of Disability, Embodiment

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and Context

Representations of disability in literature have shifted significantly over time, moving from symbolic and moralistic portrayals toward more complex depictions centred on lived experience. Earlier literary traditions frequently positioned disabled characters as narrative devices i.e., figures of tragedy, moral instruction or spectacle, rather than as subjects with interiority (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Garland-Thomson, 1997). In contrast, contemporary disability studies emphasise disability as a culturally mediated and socially constructed experience rather than a purely medical condition (Davis, 2013). Phenomenology provides a powerful framework for analysing this shift because it foregrounds the embodied, affective, and perceptual dimensions of human experience. Rather than treating disability as an abstract category, phenomenology directs attention to how individuals experience their bodies in relation to the world around them (Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This approach aligns closely with critical disability studies, which interrogate how cultural norms and social structures shape disabled lives (Siebers 2008; Garland-Thomson 1997).

However, modern literature has started to fight back against these overly simplistic, often stigmatising ideas. Newer narratives are aware that disability is not only a physical or medical issue but rather a complex, systemic, multi-layered experience (Davis, 2013). This shift in depiction can be understood within phenomenology, which emphasises the first-person perspective on how people perceive or make sense of their world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenology The interpretive, lived experience and embodiment focus of phenomenology provides a vital insight



into the internalised nature of social reality of disability (Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Recent work (e.g., Kafer 2013, Tremain 2023) has complicated this interpretation by incorporating an intersectional lens and a focus on technological mediation.

Rather than allegorical tropes of external discourse that bathed in and broke classical representations of disability, these modern instances, best represented to me by works like M.T. Anderson's *Feed* or Frances Itani's *The Deafening*, are often denser, mulch-like totalities that approximate a democratised embodiment of disability journalism. Thus, they tend not to depict disability as an individualistic medical or physical challenge but as a socially constructed mode of existence. In *Feed*, the brain-deadening effects of the "feed" implant symbolise outside control of thought and desire, overruling even free will in a society that has become entirely dependent on technology (Anderson 2002). Grania's deafness in *The Deafening* is not primarily a disability, but an entire culture of language and society (Itani, 2003). In doing so, both texts depart from the more predictable tragic or inspirational story arcs of disability while also stretching the emotional interiority of their disabled figures beyond them.

This article effectively applies a phenomenological approach to disability studies in literary criticism, going beyond medical and social models of disability. Using phenomenology, this article focuses on disability aesthetics, a term coined by Siebers (2008) to discuss how disabled characters in literature can become objects and symbols rather than entities. Instead, these symbols are not grounded in lived experiences but instead reflect societal stereotypes and constructs that shape how disability is understood. Garland-Thomson (1997) explains that embodiment elucidates how disability is lived in the body and that these experiences are influenced and constructed by society.

By examining disability as an embodied, subjective experience shaped by external societal forces, such as technology in *Feed* and cultural attitudes in *The Deafening*, this Study broadens the scope of disability representation in fiction. It offers new perspectives on disability not only as a biological or social phenomenon but also as a lived experience that intersects with personal identity and social organisation. Using phenomenology, this paper advocates that disability cannot be understood as merely biological or medical since external factors that are technologically or culturally imposed shape how characters experience and work through disability.

Recent scholarly work backs this trend, showing more nuance and an emphasis on the first-person experience and bodily presence of disability. According to a scoping review by ter Haar & Schippers (2025), the media portrayals of disabled people are still being experienced as "ignorant", "incapable" and "other" by the disabled people themselves; and this is despite greater attention being paid to disability representation. Thus, stigmatising frameworks remain influential. (ter Haar et al., 2025). A contemporary research study by Ventura and Das (2025) also states that, regardless of the medium, design, or literary type, cultural production has historically made a "standard body" the norm, thus marginalising disabled embodiment. Their proposed somaesthetic framework accepts disability not just as a philosophical but also as an aesthetic, political, and phenomenological category. Research shows measurable social effects. In a 2025 randomised-controlled trial, Hammer and Stutts (2025) showed that counter-stereotypical representations of disability (i.e., capacity, contentment, and social engagement) reduced stigmatising attitudes relative to stereotypical representations of disability. Phenomenology has also been applied to the literature of authors with disabilities. Ahmadi et al (2025) analysed forty-five works of literature produced by disabled authors. He notes several themes in these works—absurdist, religious, romantic, feminist, social-critical, etc. The social-critical theme appears to be the most common. This shows that literature is actively used to resist oppression and to define oneself.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

This study has three core objectives:

1. To apply phenomenology as a theoretical framework for examining how disability is lived, embodied, and understood by characters in *Feed* and *The Deafening*. This approach prioritises subjective experience over medicalised or purely structural interpretations of disability.
2. To analyse how each text constructs disability as a socially mediated condition shaped by external forces—technological infrastructures in *Feed* and communicative-cultural barriers in *The Deafening*.



3. To demonstrate how phenomenological reading can extend disability studies by foregrounding the embodied, perceptual, and affective dimensions of disabled characters' lives.

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

Disability studies in the literature have become increasingly significant, though phenomenological approaches remain infrequent. Drawing on phenomenology, this paper also examines the treatment of disability in *Feed* and *The Deafening*, examining disability as both a social construct and a lived, embodied experience. This perspective invites a more nuanced view of disability that also points us away from a purely medical or social model (Davis, 2013). The medical model perceives disability as a problem to be solved; the social model understands it as a product of societal divisions (Oliver, 1990). Phenomenology, on the other hand, addresses how individuals experience disability, including its impact on bodily and identity experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In *Feed*, technology warps characters' mental delays, robbing them of free will. In *The Deafening*, deafness is not only a condition but is also formed by social attitudes and cultural barriers. Phenomenology exposes the fact that disability is an internal experience moulded by external forces; that the psychological and sensory aspects of that experience are difficult to communicate, yet elements central to the fundamental meaning of disability (Siebers, 2008). This article advocates for a less reductive reading of disability in literary studies, one that emphasises the subjective experience over the more conventional medical or social models. Through phenomenological readings of *Feed* and *The Deafening*, this paper shows that disability is more than a condition; it is a socially constructed, embodied experience.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Disability Studies in Literature

For a long time, disability has been a subject of literary representation, and its portrayal has significantly varied throughout history. Representations of disabled characters were consigned to the margins of narratives and stereotypical forms, either as tragic figures or symbols of inspiration. This mirrors broader societal attitudes, where disability is often seen as a defect or something to be overcome. Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Victor Hugo's *Quasimodo* are classic literary examples of this monstrous or morally flawed portrayal of disability. They used these figures to reflect societal fears or teach moral lessons about suffering, although such representations were often simplistic and did not engage those with lived disability (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).

It has also made way for new, nuanced representations of disability as a complex and multifaceted experience, in contrast to the one-dimensional culture of addiction in much contemporary literature. Davis (2013), author of *The Disability Studies Reader*, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997), author of *Extraordinary Bodies*, have argued that disability is more a social construction, an outcome of culturally and socially revised representations, rather than a simple medical pathological condition. The social model, developed in the late twentieth century, emphasises the barriers to participation in society created by social structure and environment rather than the physical impairments themselves (Oliver, 1990).

Narrative prosthesis is a key concept in disability studies (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000), referring to the way disability is depicted in literature as a "tool" to advance the narrative or to express a moral or maximal thematic message. This communication of disability is more than incidental or natural; it plays a functional role in the storytelling process. It illustrates how disability has been used as a mere storytelling tool, rather than a human condition, to whittle a character down into an icon rather than flesh that figure out into a human being. This discussion begins with narrative prosthesis, then contrasts this far more functional, symbolic use of disability with the nuanced, complex portrayals found in *Feed* and *The Deafening*. In these novels, disability emerges not as a plot device but as a lived, embodied experience, moulded by social and cultural forces.

In the field of disability studies, disability aesthetics and embodiment provide essential means for interpreting the portrayal of disabled figures in literary works. Disability aesthetics, as Siebers (2008) suggests, characterises the way that literature portrays disability not as a lived human experience, but as an object or metaphor. Such depictions tend to be symptomatic of broader cultural values and may support either the marginalisation or valorisation of disabled subjects. As Garland-Thomson (1997) defines it, embodiment moves the location of disability from impersonal pathology to the lived embodied experience of disability. Here, disability materialises not only as a



difference in or against those bodies and environments, but also as the very social and cultural processes and structures that condition what it means to 'have a disability' and 'be a person with a disability'. Both considerations will be addressed here to investigate how *Feed* and *The Deafening* depict disability not as a fixed state but as something that evolves and becomes constructed in social terms.

## 2.2 Phenomenology and Disability

As a philosophical framework, phenomenology provides disability studies with a robust method for moving our understanding of disability away from the medical model and towards how people experience disability in their everyday lives. Phenomenology, which emerged from the ideas of Edmund Husserl and was subsequently expanded by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, foregrounds the first-person perspective and the lived experience of perceiving and actively interpreting the world through one's body. Merleau-Ponty's lived body explores the idea that the body can be more than an object; it can be the medium through which individuals sense and interact with one another (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Phenomenology's emphasis on lived experience and embodiment makes it especially relevant for conceptualising disability. Unlike other approaches in the literature, phenomenology allows us to examine how people with disabilities experience the world and participate in society. Here, disability is conceptualised as both something that occurs at the intersection of body and person and a result of society, and the attitudes, structures, and institutions that configure social relations. Disability theorists, most notably Tobin Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, have more recently utilised phenomenology to explore disabled people's lived bodies, particularly in terms of how cultural narratives and social forms shape disabled persons' experiences of disability (Siebers, 2008; Garland-Thomson, 1997).

More recent thinkers, like Tobin Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, have utilised phenomenology to narrate disabled people's experience while also asserting, first, that disability itself is in fact primarily formed by cultural codes and social institutions, and second, by interpretations disabled people make of their own lives as disabled (Siebers, 2008; Garland-Thomson, 1997). According to Garland-Thomson, disability is not fundamentally flawed with a person that needs to be cured or eliminated to become, in her words, an 'idealised normate' person. This perspective reframes the conversation about disability and emphasises how the social and cultural milieu shapes disability experiences.

In addition, in his Disability Theory (2008), Siebers criticises the medical model of disability that regards disability as something deeply intimate and personal, as a problem inside that is only a fault of the individual. Bodily impairment is one form of human diversity and is conditioned by the social, rather than merely a lack (Siebers, 2008). Phenomenology is concerned with subjective experience and seeks to understand how disabling, as described through disability studies, materialises in the disabled person's embodied experience. It is an exploration of their knowledge of the world as mediated through the realities of disability at both the internal (personal) and external (societal) levels.

Juxtaposing phenomenology with critical disability studies, this alternative perspective centres on embodiment, the experiential, corporeal aspects of living with disability, rather than reductive, medicalised conceptions of disability. Focalisation and narrative reliability (as they are called in cognitive narratology) may be instrumental when analysing how narratives represent disability. The type of narrative focalisation, that is, whether the narrative is internal or external to the character's experiences, informs how readers interact with and empathise with disabled characters. For instance, the representation of Lionel's disability will be framed for readers by the narrative devices through which disability is also thematized in *Motherless Brooklyn*, possibly reinforcing or disrupting socially conditioned views on disability.

That phenomenology and critical disability studies come together is what gives us insight into how disability is made up and makes up not only in lived experience but also through how it is depicted in media, art, and cultural practices. Bringing together the internal dialogue (the one who lives the disability) and the external dialogue (the way in which one lives the disability) in relation to the social representation of disability contributes to a more multi-layered, more inclusive representation of disability. It goes beyond the medical model to the social and bodily worlds of impairment and shows how impairment is both a personal and a social phenomenon.



### 2.3 Cognitive Narratology and Reader-Response Theory

By examining *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, cognitive theories of narration also reveal how Christopher's cognition is represented to the reader. Cognitive narratology examines how characters interpret and make sense of their worldviews and experiences, and how those worldviews influence the reader's perception and understanding of the story. First-person voice in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is offered by Christopher himself, which immediately immerses the reader in a very ordered, logical world on the one hand, while also providing insight into a unique cognitive experience. The story mirrors Christopher's difficulty with being overwhelmed by sensory input, processing emotions and social interactions- the way his mind works. The novel's structure, which reflects Christopher's thinking, also provides readers with a path to access his outlook, if only under particular conditions.

Finally, reader-response theory can be used to analyse how various readers might interpret Christopher's cognitive differences through their own frameworks and prejudices. The reader is the scribe of reader-response theory, not simply a voyeur or a dilettante. The empathy (or frustration) readers feel for Christopher's point of view may be entirely contingent on their cognitive schemas or experiences. This method implies that cognitive narratology and reader-response theory collide to structure the very depiction of Christopher's cognitive differences, and the way he is seen by readers, forcing them to criticise their preconceptions about neurodivergence.

### 2.4 Technology and Disability

In *Feed*, the function of technology in shaping disability is central to the critique of a technologically mediated world. In *Feed*, the characters have a "feed" implanted, a piece of technology that gives them direct access to a long thread of information, entertainment, and advertisements in their brains. The feed does provide individuals with some element of convenience and connectivity, but it also takes control over their thoughts, desires, and Emotions, resulting in a sort of cognitive disability. This manipulation of cognition, both enabling and disabling, reflects the techno-determinist duality explored in Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), which theorises the intersection between humans and machines.

This relates to Haraway's notion of the cyborg as a human-machine hybrid, which also applies to *Feed* as it turns human cognition into a process that is regulated and commodified. Devices transform humans into avatars to be fed to advertisers and other parasites that have appropriated (in both senses) the processes of socialisation, encouraging connectivity and swamping everything else, from subjectivity to desire, with external sensations. Loosely built upon the principles of social and ascribed disabilities, this technological control creates an innovative format of disability that is neither biological nor artificially delineated by technology itself. Here, *Feed* comments on how systems of technology can remove ability by shaping the ways individuals know themselves and become themselves.

### 2.5 Deafness and Communication

*The Deafening* is an immensely nuanced exploration of deafness both as a medical condition and a cultural identity. The novel depicts Grania's deafness as a disability with both physical and social dimensions, as attitudes toward her and other barriers to communication shape her experience of deafness. Ever since she described growing up deaf, Grania has been the product of hearing non-communication in many ways – and is very much an example of the social model of disability. Over the past several decades, deafness has come to be understood as a cultural identity, rather than only a medical one (Lane, 1992), suggesting that the relationship between being deaf and being hearing among human beings extends beyond the medical and involves social and communicative interactions. Something about the medical model of deafness as the killer disease has always troubled Lane (1992), and those pages echo the same theme in *The Deafening*. Grania's difficulty with communication, especially her reliance on lip-reading and her resentment of the lack of sign language education, shows how social barriers to communication create disability. It strongly supports the notion that disability is a social construct. Grania's deafness is not simply a condition to overcome, her teacher finds, but an essential part of her identity that allows her to function in the world through silence and to establish her own identity.



## 2.6 Gaps in Existing Research

While there has been significant scholarship on disability in literature, there is a gap in the application of phenomenology to works like *Feed* and *The Deafening*. Phenomenology's most common applications within disability writing have focused on physical impairment, but *Feed* and *The Deafening* present rich possibilities for engaging with phenomenology by considering cognitive disability and social ostracism. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by providing a phenomenological reading of such texts, thereby suggesting a different way of seeing how subjects internalise and are frustrated by turning off conceptualisations. In addition, disability aesthetics and embodiment offer a theoretical language through which to examine the mechanics of how disability is more than a biological or social phenomenon, but rather a live, embodied experience conditioned by societal attitudes and structures. By incorporating disability aesthetics and embodiment, this paper will demonstrate how the novels explore the stigma surrounding disability and offer a more complex, external view of disability. These will help us to move beyond the medical and social models of disablement and to continue to investigate how disability is encountered, lived, and socially constructed.

## 3. Methodology

The article applies a phenomenological interpretation to demonstrate how figurations of disability appear in *Feed* by M.T. Anderson and *The Deafening* by Itani Frances. Through close reading, the analysis brackets preconceived assumptions about disability and instead attends to how each character experiences their bodily and perceptual relationship with the world. This involves identifying moments in the narrative where characters articulate or struggle to articulate their embodied realities. Following Merleau-Ponty, the reading focuses on sensory modalities central to each protagonist's embodied life.

- cognitive mediation through the feed for Titus and Violet,
- visual/tactile perception for Grania.

These sensory modes shape how disability is lived and how characters interpret themselves and others. A comparative approach highlights how external structures—technological regimes in *Feed* and communication barriers in *The Deafening*—mediate disability. This supports the paper's claim that disability emerges from interactions between embodied subjectivity and social environments. Each of these factors will be analysed in sequence, as outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Methodology Components for Analysing Disability Representation in *Feed* and *The Deafening*

Methodology Component	Focus	Goal
<b>Textual Formalism</b>	Close reading of texts to analyse narrative techniques (language, structure, character development)	To explore how disability is represented through the text's structure and language
<b>Thematic Analysis</b>	Identification of recurring themes like alienation, embodiment, and resistance	To understand how these themes shape characters lived experiences of disability.
<b>Embodied Reading Strategies</b>	Analysis of characters' physical and sensory experiences of disability (e.g., cognitive control in <i>Feed</i> , Grania's deafness in <i>The Deafening</i> )	To explore how disability is embodied and experienced by characters
<b>Epoché (Bracketing)</b>	Setting aside preconceptions to focus on characters lived experiences	To ensure an authentic, bias-free reading of the characters' subjective experiences.
<b>Comparative Analysis</b>	Comparing how disability is portrayed in <i>Feed</i> (technological control) and <i>The Deafening</i> (cultural attitudes)	To contrast how different societal forces shape the embodiment of disability in each text



## 4. Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology

### 4.1 Overview of Phenomenology

Developed as a philosophical method by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, phenomenology was expanded several decades later by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenology is the Study of human experience, focusing on perception, embodiment, and subjectivity. It focuses on the firsthand, personal perception of moving through life and understanding a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology is built on key notions of intentionality, embodiment, and perception. Consciousness is always directed toward something, an object, an idea, or an experience. This, to a phenomenologist, implies that our worlds are not merely passively understood but are instead actively created by the being with which one engages. This notion enables us to appreciate that the world is interpreted just as actively using our prior experiences, impressions, beliefs, and understanding (Husserl, 1931).

The central problem of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is that of embodiment: the body is that through which one has access to the world, that which makes the experience of the world possible, not simply an object like others in the world. The lived body (*le corps vécu*) allows us to gain consciousness and an embodied understanding of disability, which means disability is not taken as a medical diagnosis or social dimension (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenology calls for us to go beyond observing or classifying experiences and to consider how people experience their disabilities in their day-to-day lives. Understanding disability solely as a lack of external imposition and even less as an oppression or systemic marginalisation fails to capture the depth of how it lives in the body and mind of the individual in interaction with others and with environmental forces and conditions.

### 4.2 Phenomenology and Disability Studies

Phenomenology provides an essential counterpoint to the medical model that dominates much of disability studies, as well as the experience of people with disabilities, by delving more deeply into what it means to live as a person with a disability than what it means to be fixed as a person with a disability. Disability is often understood as a static condition (Goodley, 2024), one that has been traditionally responded to through medical models of treatment or through the absence or addition of barriers in society (Oliver, 1990). However, phenomenology encourages a view of disability not just as an individual problem or as a simple construction by external structures. Instead, it suggests what an embodied experience with disability would look like, one that is seamless between bodily experience and social response while giving credence to the integrated experience of physical life and social constructions (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

The social model of disability, which arose in the late 20th century, does not see disability as a biological impairment but rather as the result of physical and societal barriers that come between full participation in society. It argues that society, not people's impairments, disables them. The social model argues that disability is formed by structural and attitudinal barriers intentionally built around the impairment (Oliver, 1990). The phenomenological approach, viewed in connection with the social model of disability, shows how disability is both an internalised experience and a social product. Phenomenology views disability not simply as an individual problem but as a product of the person's interactions with the environment, social constructions, and culture. Using phenomenology, one can examine how these external challenges impact disabled people's experience of their bodies, the embodied experience of their surroundings, and the incorporation of attitudes towards their disability into their being (Siebers, 2008).

Tobin Siebers (2008) proposed that disability is a form of human diversity and that human diversity is shaped by internal factors (e.g., how the individual experiences their own body) and by external social structures. Using phenomenology, he demonstrates that disability is not simply a lack of functionality but rather a mode of existence that is constituted by social, cultural, and environmental contexts. Likewise, employing phenomenology, Garland-Thomson (1997) demonstrates how societal attitudes and beliefs about disability are internalised and affect disabled individuals' sense of self, identity, and lived experience. As a model of disability, phenomenology's focus on lived experience helps us step outside the model's tendency to value barriers over experience and illuminates how individuals experience disability. It allows us to understand that disability is not merely a set of external obstacles or medical conditions but a lived and embodied experience that is constantly engaged with and resculptured by social attitudes and cultural norms.



### 4.3 Application to Literature

The phenomenological lens is powerful when applied to a literary character, and even more so to one with a disability. Characters' disabilities in literature are frequently portrayed as something that happens to them. However, phenomenology allows us to turn the lens to how they experience disability, from how they sense their bodies to how they move in their environments, absorb societal attitudes, and relate to others. One of the aspects of *Feed* by M.T. Anderson is, on a very shallow level, the musings of a world submerged in the techno-feed like a perverse matrix, a form of technological cognitive disability in which Marcus and his friends' lives are dictated entirely by their feeds, the hypnosis of their automaton universes. Such a pervasive technological influence on thought and desire permeates the characters' lived experience, especially Titus's. Instead of being brimming with freely passing thoughts, they are snagged; their consciousness is enslaved and programmed like an outsourced factory to whatever technological powers dictate. Through phenomenological analysis, investigate how this novel loss of agency and autonomy warps their perception of themselves, their bodies, and their relationships with others. The lived body becomes a medium for external power projection over it, and, vice versa, the neutral body morphs into a socio-technology model of disempowerment. This view of disability illustrates the relationship between the feed (a constructed technological societal cause) and the individual, creating a distinct embodied experience within a dystopian society (Anderson, 2002).

Similarly, Frances Itani's *The Deafening* is the story of a deaf girl named Grania whose deafness is also treated as a cultural identity rather than a medical deficit. Grania's embodied experience is conditioned by her dependence on visual and tactile signifiers in a sound-centred world. Heard by a hearing person, her perception of the world is very different, and phenomenology lets us access that as a subjective experience, born in the perceptions of the self and the world, but also shaped by the attitudes of the societies in which one lives. Grania's embodied experience, then, is not solely about silence; it is also about how her body becomes a site of communication and resilience in a world that marginalises her (Itani, 2003). This is called the social model of disability, and by applying phenomenology to both *Feed* and *The Deafening*, one might see that these novels do not portray disability solely as biological but also as an embodied and socially constructed experience. These novels dramatise how disability is configured through social interactions, whether through technological manipulation or cultural exclusion. With the insights of phenomenology, this passive way of embodying offers us access to their epistemology; that is, how these characters, in line with the experience of the lived body, take on a disability through the internalisation of those worlds (Siebers, 2008).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Analysis of M.T. Anderson's *Feed*

#### 5.1.1 Overview of the Novel

M.T. Anderson's *Feed* is a dystopian novel about the way technology dominates our lives. In a future where everyone has a "feed" implanted in their brains, a device that provides information and entertainment in a highly sensual form, characters navigate a world where their thoughts, wants. The demands of other people and corporate entities constantly reconstruct reactions. The feed networks people into streams of information, entertainment, and advertisements, but do so at the expense of autonomy and agency by determining their thought processes. Titus's life revolves around the feed, and when he meets a girl named Violet who resists its influence, the tension in their relationship arises. The loss of autonomy and, thereby, individuality becomes a significant theme of the novel, while still portraying a pathologised cognitive disability of sorts, one that extends beyond physical disability (Anderson, 2002).

#### 5.1.2 Phenomenological Analysis

In order to understand Titus's experience in terms of his emotional and psychological development, the first step is to outline some critical phenomenological ideas. One of phenomenology's central concepts, intentionality and embodiment, is of great importance for this analysis. It refers to the concept of treating your mind as something always pointed towards something; whatever you consider a thing may be your next direction, be it a material object, an abstraction, an experience, etc. For phenomenologists, this provides that individuals experience the world actively,



not passively, that is, by engaging with it and not simply cognising it (Husserl, 1931). This idea helps us gain insight into how people actively shape their understanding of everything around them, depending on who they are and what they have experienced.

As Titus gains a clear understanding of the feed influencing his thoughts, feelings, and wants, he offers a mind-body disconnection, a hallmark of phenomenological embodiment. His body, his thoughts, his desires, and his actions, which should be all his own, are controlled by an external party. When this realisation dawns on him, it frays his self-image. This fractured embodiment is also reflected in his growing alienation from his internal experiences. This awareness, as Anderson (2002) points out, "Everything we think about, everything we want, it has all been programmed by the feed" (p. 97), shows his body reduced to a servant of external control. His emaciated relationship with Violet demonstrates this corporeal estrangement, as her refusal to accept the feed stands in stark contrast to Tito's acceptance of it. Violet's ordeal is proof that the capacity to physically resist can be moulded, hindered by external influences (such as the feed). The degradation of her body symbolises that the technological machine had ultimately defeated her agency and supports an embodied psychological perspective that stresses that individual actions and resistance must be seen as part of the materiality of a subject's body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

### 5.1.3 Societal Implications

The cognitive control of the feed-in has important implications for human society, especially with respect to freedom and identity. The feed is, in itself, a technological system that attempts to curate what is most stimulating for you, the consumer. This gadgetspeak stands as a metaphor for how contemporary society might transform you into a commodity and a controllable individual via the processes of consumerism and capitalist power. Feeding, individuals have been made consumers of others' thoughts. The feed makes us a product, as it continuously crafts our desires and behaviours, preventing self-direction. 'This criticism of consumerism and agricultural/technological control, observed in abstraction from lived experience, connects closely to the phenomenologist's concern for lived experience and the ways externalities impact that experience. In *Feed*, the characters are not "permitted" to experience the world as subjects; instead, their cognition is continuously shaped by the feed.

The book serves as a cautionary tale, warning of the risks in a culture where technology shapes our outlook and we become passive recipients of influence from without. They are also alienated from themselves, Titus most of all, and this is a direct consequence of that forfeited entitlement. They get hijacked, trapped by external forces... they disconnect from their bodies and what they want. The book also condemns the manner in which societies create disability when they deny people access according to who meets (or fails) a technological standard. The fact that Violet, who will not submit to the feed even as it is killing her, ultimately becomes a type of waste, dying in solitude far from others. She represents the body we can form when resistance to social structures produces exclusion and greater disempowerment (Haraway, 1985). Violet's downfall exposes the futility of resistance in a highly technologized world; it demonstrates the extent to which the feed extends and the difficulty of shaking yourself free from its clutches.

### 5.1.4 Key Themes

- **Alienation:** The characters of *Feed* feel a profound level of separation, since what they think and want isn't even wholly theirs. The feed's control over their minds distances them from the world of their own thoughts; both body and surrounding reality lose significance. Titus personifies this self-alienation and learns the hard way the extent to which the feed has determined his thoughts and emotions. The truth behind the feed's control becomes a separation of inner and external reality on Titus's part. This tension constitutes the core of phenomenological lived experience (Siebers 2008).
- **Commodification:** The feed doesn't treat people as full-fledged agents, but rather as consumer bots to be manipulated. Consumption is no longer the result of, but the definition of this image, in which there are too many commodified sites that feed citizens advertising and entertainment, creating a hyperreal situation in which truth becomes false. This is where an embodiment concept from phenomenology comes into play: that the individual has not just been influenced by some external technological force to change, but that their experience of their own body and desires is changed as well, resulting in a sense of disembodied



selfhood. Feed's critique of consumerism emphasises how technological systems can produce disability by conditioning people's desires and experiences.

- **Resistance:** One of the significant events in *Feed* is Violet's resistance to the Feed's controlling mechanisms. This falls within a broader theme of independence and freedom as key to resisting an external technological attack. But Violet's resistance comes up short in and through her corporeality. Her body is war-torn, her feed is down, and she's in network isolation. This conflict between resistance and feed permeates the phenomenological conception of embodiment, as Violet grapples with her autonomy within a system maintained by what her body knows. Violet's rebellion, in the end, is no match for the overwhelming tide of structure and its decisive role in experience, a hard lesson made worse by the omnipresence of technology's controls in *Feed* (Garland-Thomson 1997). This aligns with Puar's (2022) concept of debility and also fits Goodley & Runswick-Cole's (2021) characterisation of embodied resistance under systemic limitations.

In a series of increasingly implicated phenomenological readings of *Feed*, the realisation that the novel is not in fact a critique merely of political economy in technoscience but instead a far more subtle narration on what it might be for outside forces (like technosciences) to colonise our experiences as inner lives lived and experienced by sentient subjects. Titus's character arc, his awakening to the feed's control, and what Violet does to refuse to be controlled are good food for thought on how our 'lived within a society' experience takes its roots in (and out of) societal structures. From a phenomenological perspective, what the feed does to characters' perceptions of their lived bodies and worlds: it produces disability in this new way, and everything is technologically mediated. This extended exploration of what Titus and Violet undergo and how they express as a consequence of the feed's domination is revealing as to how manipulative external forces empower/control and separate an individual from their sense of personal autonomy. The book offers a grim diagnosis of the world in which technology has clogged up our material environments to such an extent that it has clogged up our inner ones as well: this is a sort of cognitive disability, but one that is experienced both as socially constructed and embodied.

## 5.2 Analysis of Frances Itani's *the Deafening*

### 5.2.1 Overview of the Novel

*The Deafening* by Frances Itani (2003), the first book in a trilogy, is set in the early 20th century and centres on a little girl named Grania who becomes deaf as a result of a childhood illness. In the novel, Grania is portrayed in her Searinghearing world, struggling with communication issues, identity and rejection. Grania's identity as a deaf person, how she experiences the world, doesn't match completely with that hard or fast diagnosis. Drawing from the world of dating, Itani takes a terrifying journey down lines of emotional and social disability experiences that rarely get recognition or representation, particularly in ableist gender storytelling. Here is the tale of a Deaf man. The frame of Grania's story is the broader historical context of World War I, in which her husband, Jim, is serving as a soldier overseas. The dual narrative structure also permits the novel to explore the interlacing of social and individual troubles, showing how external pressures affect inner lives. In this sense, and in the context of Grania's life narrative, *The Deafening* offers a critique of social attitudes toward deafness that have yet to question how not being able to hear reinforces stumbling blocks to dialogue and participation, thereby disabling (Itani, 2003).

### 5.2.2 Phenomenological Analysis

Grania's experience of deafness in *The Deafening* is convincing in its ability to penetrate it on the grounds of embodiment and lived experience, two critical phenomenological principles. As Grania lives in a world made with hearing in mind, the embodied idea that the body is the medium by which one knows the world plays a prominent role. Grania is deaf, and that significantly shapes her embodied experience, including her sensory perception, her means of coherent communication, and her relation to other people (and their senses, interactions, sound, and silence). Her communication with the world is underpinned by visual and tactile information, i.e., lip-reading and body language (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Grania's deafness, though not a disability, becomes a cultural identity. Grania's deafness is forged through her relationship with those in her world. The way that others see deafness defines her sense of self. She has a great deal of affection for Jim, her fiancé, but she suffers. This is because she feels so cut off from him that she can't bring



herself to speak to him. Then, when she does talk to him, it prompts what feels like an inevitable strain on their emotional interactions. From a phenomenological perspective, these communication roadblocks are a kind of embodied estrangement, Griffiths's affective and corporeal isolation, the effect of her deafness in a world that marginalises her (Siebers, 2008). Grania firmly believes in her ability to communicate and acts accordingly, actively experimenting with new movements. Through these efforts, she demonstrates a refusal to be defined as a deaf person. This encapsulates embodiment in phenomenology. Resilience is not just an emotional or psychological answer. It is an embodied action in Grania's case. She encounters the world through the body, irrespective of social obstacles. (Garland-Thomson, 1997)

### 5.2.3 Societal Implications

Grania's deafness in *The Deafening* is constructed not only through the communication barriers she faces but also through the social violence of marginalisation. The fact that she is deaf becomes her identity due to her exclusion from society, which is hearing-centred. Wilks (2024) further backs this up, as he argues that the most significant cause of social disablement is the exclusion of Deaf people from language. The book illustrates how communication ought to be made accessible and how social mechanisms disable a person. Deafness is the root of deeply entrenched attitudes that impact what people can offer. Grania's lip-reading difficulties and the absence of opportunities to learn sign language are examples. The book criticises the medical perspective on deafness, which views it as a condition to be cured. Instead, it promotes the deaf perspective (which will be used to refer to commentators who are deaf, as opposed to a medical view of deafness) of deafness as an identity (Lane, 1992). Grania's experiences highlight how the social understanding of deafness creates her identity and experiences. This demonstrates the importance of recognising the social and cultural influences of disabilities. The novel highlights the emotional effects of having a disability that is severely misunderstood and ignored by society. Grania experiences loneliness and frustration because barriers to evolution, which work through deaf people, prevent deaf people from fully accessing society. This powerful note urges communities to be inclusive and enable persons with disabilities to fit in.

### 5.2.4 Key Themes

- **Communication:** Grania has the most trouble communicating outside herself, which is what tends to structure everything she narrates since she lives in a hearing and speaking world. Her issues with lip reading, and the lack of available communication shows just how difficult it is for deaf individuals to exist in a world that prioritizes the ability to hear. This theme links closely to phenomenological notions of embodiment, wherein Grania's reliance on either visual and tactile cues informs her perception as well as her very relationship with the world (Garland-Thomson 1997).

- **Isolation:** Grania's deaf and feels deeply disconnected from society due to its limitations. Through the lens of alienation and frustration, Bone provides an inside account of how social attitudes towards deafness actually constitute disability through not allowing people to fully participate within society. This focal point is essential for the making of spaces conducive to participation by people who have disabilities (Siebers, 2008).

- **Perseverance:** Grania won't be felled by the difficulties she encounters, just like her mother can't, and refuses to be daunted by a world that would rather silence her. This mirrors the phenomenological concept of epoche as Maxine tries to gain agency and take back control even when everything around her tells her is it impossible. In considering Grania's rebellion, this is one method where persons can resist the networks in which they work that constrain their survival (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

## 5.3 Critical Reflection on the Representation of Neurodivergence in *Motherless Brooklyn*

In *Motherless Brooklyn*, Lionel Essrog's Tourette syndrome ends up having an enormous impact on his character overall, but it threatens to become a simple plot device. Though novels go inside Lionel's head, it presents his neurodivergence in a way that often gets mistaken for him not having any agency. This reductionist view risks turning his condition into a narrative tool, rather than offering it as a fully developed aspect of his identity. From a phenomenological perspective, Lionel's compulsions and tics, which are hallmarks of his Tourette syndrome, can be



viewed as the embodied manifestation of his lived experience, as theorised by Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Instead of portraying Lionel's tics as pathology or a plot device, they need to be conceptualised as a constituent of his embodied being, an aggregate of how his neural state co-acts with the world to continually condition his perception and engagement with it. However, in *Motherless Brooklyn*, such an embodied experience is frequently exteriorised, objectified at the expense of the internality of Lionel's experiential world. Lionel's neurodivergent perspective tends to be made into an object that can be seen, rather than prioritising his subjectivity.

This externalisation also presents ethical issues around the portrayal of neurodivergent characters. When a character's illness is exploited to elicit sympathy or introduce mystery or intrigue, this is called aesthetic exploitation. This happens when the complexity of the condition is reduced to narrative blocks, reducing the character to a caricature. With Lionel, it seems as though Tourette's syndrome is often externalised in a manner that reaffirms stereotypes, rather than understanding the experience of life with the condition. Focusing on signs and symptoms rather than the character's subjective world, the novel may contribute to a reductive, pathologising representation of neurodiverse people (Davis, 2013; Siebers, 2008). This narrative cannibalising reveals that Lionel's neurodivergency is construed not as part of his character but as a trope, a means to produce affective readers' reactions.

Phenomenologically, Lionel's disease might also be more adequately represented as a function of an experiential dynamic, one that arises from within cognitive processes as well as from without, from society. His tics could be read not just as disruptions of social norms but as active participation in this world through his body. Seen from a phenomenological perspective, the body is not a neutral channel of medical diagnosis, but the means through which individuals experience and communicate with their environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). So Lionel's Tourette's could be seen as a complex mode of embodiment: one that is symptomatic of personal difficulty but also of social misconception. It extends well beyond its psycho-sexy premise to demand that Lionel's ethos of dis/ability be seriously considered as a lived reality in his body, his relation to the social world.

Because it pays such close attention to the processes of relating to these characters, adding phenomenology into the mix seems to me to provide even more depth to how such characters are constructed in literature, specifically in relation to how the internal experience and external response to their condition is felt. In *Motherless Brooklyn*, Lionel's Tourette's syndrome is one possible device to explain and even moralise the criminalisation of children based on behaviour that deviates from the norm (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). However, this approach questions the externalised perspective, proposing an internal and even trans/cyborg reading of the character in the context of 1980s neurodivergent politics, by considering both the internal and external aspects of Lionel's experience. This approach offers a more complex and ethical representation of neurodiverse individuals in literature.

#### 5.4 Ethical Considerations and Voyeurism

One of the most significant ethical issues that arises in *Motherless Brooklyn* is the voyeuristic depiction of Lionel's neurodiversity. His tics are frequently presented as a spectacle for the reader's prurient interest; the condition itself becomes episodic and eventful rather than something to be considered or lived with in its complexity. This sensational form of storytelling serves only to reinforce stereotypes, while not characterising Lionel as a whole human figure with emotions and intellectual independence, but rather as a weirdo. These types of portrayals contribute to stigmatising views of neurodivergent individuals.

#### 5.5 Authorial Authority and Ethical Responsibility

The issue of authorial authority in *Motherless Brooklyn* is crucial. Because the author, Jonathan Lethem, is not someone with a condition like Lionel's, one can see what is happening in Lionel's world, but from the outside, through someone who does not think as he does. All these risks make Lionel's neurodivergence something to gawk at rather than a fully fleshed-out portrayal of lived experience. This then leads to the question of whether a non-neurodivergent author can ethically write about neurodivergent characters, or whether writing about them risks falling into narrative convenience. Ethical representation means depicting neurodivergent characters as having agency rather than as cogs manipulated to serve the plot.



## 5.6 Comparative Analysis

### 5.6.1 Disability as a Social Construct

*Feed* and *The Deafening* both demonstrate that disability is a social experience, pointing to the active forces of society and other systems that shape the characters' lives and experiences. In *Feed*, see the character's disability created through technology that alters thoughts and desires. Their mind is fed, destroying their autonomy and agency. Such a mental defect arises when they are continuously bred by technological systems, forcing them to lose independent thinking and become passively accepting of externally generated impulses. Disability, in this case, is external to the individual, as the characters are only turned off in the sense that they lack a socially constructed medium of technological interaction that accounts for their agency, thoughts, and functions; their sense of agency is entirely mediated through the technological framework that shapes their lives.

Unlike the long-ago popular uproar vision, *The Deafening* accepts that inability is not just a material disability, an absence of material or embeddedness in a soundless society, or a failure of autonomy, freedom as proficiency, or refuge. Grania, though deaf, is a disabled person essentially because society does not provide her with the means of communication and accommodation. This is a clear example of how disability is not a natural consequence of her condition, but rather a social experience that arises from environmental barriers and cultural ableism. That is analogous to the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), in that impairment does not, in and of itself, create disability; it is how society reacts to and imposes potential barriers on the individual that produce disability.

### 5.6.2 Embodied Experience

Even within novels, the characters' disabilities exist not merely as abstractions but as living, breathing flesh, breathing an air whose nature sometimes seems hot and perfumed, other times sharp and bitter, and always with that uncanny tang of vicinage to the stench of death. *Feed* goes a step further, though the feed literally disconnects characters from their bodies, which is, of course, a form of disability. This fragmentation of the embodied experience through the feed's manipulation of thoughts, desires, and emotions renders the characters alienated from their flesh and blood, and their feelings. The acknowledgement of the feed owning him emphasises how Titus's life as a body is breaking down, with the internal monologue that had taken the place of his tips and tricks becoming increasingly dissociated from his corporeal experiences.

Likewise, through Grania, *The Deafening* roots the experience of deafness in the body, as she relies on her remaining senses, particularly sight and touch, to feel her way through a world that has left her behind. Her deafness is not simply a physical attribute, but embodied experiences that are socially reflexively characterised as disabled. Hers is the story of how she communicates with others, using lip-reading, sign language, and other nonverbal means to succeed in a society that privileges hearing. Her narrative demonstrates the socially constructed nature of disability, an embodied experience, not merely a physical one (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

### 5.6.3 Agency and Resistance

Both *Feed* and *The Deafening* explore the complex dynamics of agency and resistance within oppressive systems. In *Feed*, characters like Violet and Titus battle to regain their agency in hopes of escaping their feed. Violet's opposition to the technological system that feeds the feed has little to no impact because the feed is an all-consuming advertisement with a firm grip on her. While the emphasis is on an internal realisation, the thought that the feed has programmed the desires wired into his brain as it controls his every desire creates a tension that exists very much as a conflict between outward emotion and internal acceptance. His later fight to reclaim autonomy shows just how pervasive that outside system is: making not just acting, but thinking the wrong way, a form of resistance that is hard and often a near impossibility.

The Deafening's Grania also resists, but her fight is against the social constraints that marginalise her because she is deaf. She defies being defined by her impairment as she actively tries to inhabit a space both in the hearing and the deaf world to articulate herself. However, this resistance is made fraught by the systems in place that always place her in the periphery. Grania's physiognomy of alienation suggests an inability to escape the ideological inscriptions of her body and the restrictions of the system that constructs and contains her subjectivity, much like



the characters in *Feed*. Both books show how external interference, whether technological, as in *Feed*, or social, as in *The Deafening*, influences and limits the characters' capacity to act, turning their fight for independence and opposition into the core issue of both stories.

**Table 2.** Comparative Table

Theme	<i>Feed</i> (M.T. Anderson)	<i>The Deafening</i> (Frances Itani)
<b>Voice</b>	External control through the feed limits characters' self-expression.	Grania's voice is shaped by deafness and societal exclusion, asserting identity through non-verbal communication.
<b>Perception</b>	The characters' perception is distorted by the feed, leading to a loss of autonomy.	Grania's perception is grounded in silence, navigating a hearing world with visual and tactile cues.
<b>Agency</b>	Characters struggle to regain agency from the controlling feed.	Grania resists marginalisation, asserting agency through communication despite societal barriers.
<b>Narrative Framing</b>	Dystopian framing highlighting technological control over thought.	Historical framing emphasising deafness as a cultural and social identity shaped by exclusion.

## 5.7 Implications for Disability Studies

Phenomenologically speaking, the disability is no longer an "abnormal" but is another reading of the human condition. This paradigm shifts the discourse on disability away from the medical model, toward social movements and cultural archetypes. Reading *Feed* and *The Deafening* through this perspective helps one perceive how disability is produced and lived. In another instance, in *Feed*, the technological feed induces cognitive incapacity by dictating users' thoughts and desires, showing how outside forces collide with personal experience. And likewise, in *The Deafening*, Grania's deafness is formed by the way that society views what deafness is, notably as a result of a lack of access to communication. These texts and others similarly make a compelling case for recognising the social and cultural aspects of disability while also providing a biting critique of societal systems that consign disability to the margins (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

## 5.8 Broader Societal Implications

*Feed*, and *The Deafening* walk the line between how the world is made (of bodies, of institutions) and how its intersections make it work, with a tension between the physicality of disability and regulation. In *Feed*, the feed technology hacks cognition in a radical departure from the mind, as characters' fantasies and wishes escape their reifications and become denizens of the technological force itself. This brings us back to economic control of bodies and minds in society, autonomy and embodiment in disability, and how technology can also lead to a lack of agency and a diminishment of self.

In *The Deafening*, too, the social construction of deafness acts as a hindrance that colours Grania's perception of the world. These attitudes are a manifestation of the refusal to provide resources, such as communication systems, and allow full participation in society, which are not only humiliating but also disable people. Grania's struggles, specifically with lip-reading and without sign language education available to her, also highlight the social forces that work to construct disability (Lane, 1992). Barriers to her experience of embodiment beyond mere participation highlight the role of accessible communication in redesigning disability.

These two novels explore how forms of culture or technology hinder our abilities for an embodied being-in-the-world that allows for agency and intentionality, as well as how our existence is constrained through these modes of being. These works ask us to rethink what this must mean for disability more broadly, and how spaces can be shaped that recognise the embodiment of disability and the potential for inclusive participatory engagement with a disability, or what is called the "math" of disability in some societies (they draw from experiences beyond the Western frame). Resilience, in both novels, is framed not just as emotional stamina but as physical performance, whether in



Violet's defiance of the feed or Grania's reliance on visual and tactile communication in a world irrevocably dominated by hearing. This embodied resilience offers insight into how individuals resist external forces that attempt to marginalise or control them (Siebers, 2008).

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that phenomenology offers a valuable lens for analysing literary representations of disability because it centres embodied experience and the subjective negotiation of social worlds. In *Feed*, technological infrastructures shape cognition and autonomy, producing a technologically mediated form of disability. In *The Deafening*, disability emerges through societal failures to provide communicative access, showing how deafness is lived differently depending on cultural attitudes and environmental barriers. Together, these texts illustrate that disability is neither solely biological nor solely socially imposed but is instead constituted through the dynamic interplay between bodily experience and external structures. By positioning phenomenology alongside disability studies, this paper highlights how literary texts can reveal the internal textures of disabled life, its sensory landscapes, affective challenges, and acts of resistance. This approach encourages scholars and educators to move beyond reductive models of disability and to adopt interpretive frameworks that recognise disability as a complex, embodied, and relational phenomenon.

## 7. Future Research

Future research may extend phenomenological frameworks for discussing invisible disabilities issues, such as mental health conditions, chronic pain, or neurodivergence, to the literature. Other disabilities are either overlooked or misunderstood, but are part of a much larger lived experience for so many. How is the body and experience of those who live with these disabilities? Dimensions of need: Risky experiences of invisible disability as identified through phenomenological engagement with narratives of peril. It could also inspire new avenues of inquiry into the relationship between technology and disability through an interdisciplinary lens, as phenomenology, alongside disability studies, now includes much of the discourse surrounding emerging technologies and the experience of disability. As those digital and virtual technologies advance, there's an increasing demand to interrogate how people are experiencing and embodied with digital disabilities, whether those come from access barriers online or in virtual environments. From this perspective phenomenology can illuminate the experience of disability and technology, especially in these times which have seen the development of virtual reality, digital communication technologies and related technologies as well. This study may also start to open how these new representations of disability shape self-identity and participation in society, connecting enabled physicality with the phenomenology of disability in a digital age.

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### Does this article screen for similarity?

Yes

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