

**Urban Difference “on the Move”: Disabling Mobility in the Spanish Film *El cochecito* (Marco Ferreri, 1960)**

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**Introduction**

Pulling from both disability studies and mobility studies specifically, this article offers an interdisciplinary analysis of a cult classic of Spanish cinema. Marco Ferreri’s film *El cochecito* (1960)—based on a novel by Rafael Azcona and still very much an underappreciated film in scholarly circles—depicts the travels of a group of motorized-wheelchair owners throughout urban (and rural) Madrid. From a disability studies perspective, the film’s focus on Don Anselmo, an able-bodied but elderly protagonist who wishes to travel as his paraplegic friend, Don Lucas, does, suggests some familiar tropes that can be explored in light of work by disability theorists.<sup>1</sup> From an (urbanized) mobility studies approach, the characters’ movements through the Spanish capital suggest the familiar image of a filmic Madrid of the late dictatorship, a city that was very much culturally and physically “on the move.”<sup>2</sup> Though not unproblematic in its nuanced portrayal of the relationships between able-bodied and disabled Madrilenians, *El cochecito* nonetheless broaches some implicit questions regarding who has a right to the city and also how that right may be exercised (Fraser, “Disability Art”; Lefebvre; Sulmasy). The significance of Ferreri’s film ultimately turns on its ability to “universalize” disability and connect it to the contemporary urban experience in Spain.

What makes *El cochecito* such a complex film—and such a compelling one—is how a nuanced view of (dis)ability is woven together with explicit narratives of urban modernity and implicit narratives of national progress. The result is perhaps an important cinematic masterpiece. That said, it is also

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a tangled text—one comprising numerous, even competing meanings of mobility. The central focus on multiple notions of mobility is, in turn, simultaneously elaborated by way of varied (and often subtle) definitions of disability itself. As a proper exposition of the theoretical ground for this study could easily fill more than an entire article-length publication, a few concise paragraphs will prepare the reader for the analysis of Ferreri's film, which is the real subject under analysis here.

First, mobility must be understood within both a national and an urban context as well as in tandem with the theme of physical disability. By the 1960s, as an increasing number of studies have explored, the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939–75) had entered a period known as the *años de desarrollo* [development years].<sup>3</sup> The economic and social isolation that had characterized the early years of the dictatorship was waning, and the government began to invest significantly in international tourism to achieve greater global visibility. These trends effected cultural changes that brought Spain closer to its European neighbors and to the American influences that were shaping European music, culture, fashion, and more. And yet there is also a distinctly urban context for this palpable feeling of cultural change. The flow of tourists in and out of the country—famously represented in Juan Goytisolo's *Señas de identidad* (1966), for example—was complemented by continued internal immigration from rural areas to Spain's large cities (see Fraser, *Henri Lefebvre*; and *Antonio López*). During this time, the filmic representation of Madrid's urban environment in particular functioned as a synecdoche for this broader national change—but it also depicted the way urban cultures specifically were being defined as cosmopolitan spaces “on the move,” in contrast with a characteristically rural Spanish way of life that was seen as slower and more traditional (Fraser, “Editorial”).

Filmic representation of life in the capital city was thus not merely a sign of the pace of national change but also a concrete manifestation of that change unfolding across numerous urban environments. As it was with other cities seeking to pass the threshold of modernity, Madrid's twentieth century was defined by massive urban restructuring plans that privileged increased vehicular and pedestrian traffic.<sup>4</sup> These changes contributed to the formation of a uniquely urban way of life based on an ability to adjust to the rapidly changing conditions and sensory overstimulation that now characterized both the city environment and new forms of urbanized consciousness (Harvey; Simmel). In broad strokes, then, *El cochecito* is not unlike other Madrid films of the 1960s that juxtaposed the city to the country and defined the urban environment as a mobile space embodying the country's larger-scale economic and social shifts.

And simultaneously, of course, mobility in *El cochecito* is also very clearly tied to notions of (dis)ability at the level of plot. The film centers around the friendship of Don Lucas and Don Anselmo. Don Lucas is an elderly para-

plegic widower whose close-knit family runs a dairy shop in central Madrid and who has acquired a wheelchair with a motor that will allow him to get around town more easily. Don Anselmo is an able-bodied elderly widower of approximately the same age as Don Lucas who lives with and feels somewhat neglected by the family of his son, a successful lawyer. Though he is capable of walking around the town, because of his age he tires easily and begins to crave his own motorized wheelchair, even though medically he does not require one. While Don Lucas is confident, Don Anselmo is less so, and his situation is likely made worse by what appears to be some level of depression associated with the social change he is experiencing in his senescence. First, it is significant that Ferreri begins *El cochecito*'s diegesis on the very day that Don Lucas first acquires his motorized wheelchair, providing him with the ability to cover great distances quickly. Moving around the Spanish capital with ease, the character of Don Lucas functions as yet another sign of the rapid pace of urban life in a quintessentially modern and also mobile nation. And yet he also incites jealousy in the character of Don Anselmo, his friend who—without a similar vehicle of his own—is now unable to keep up with Don Lucas. In contrast to Don Lucas's increased autonomy, enabled through technological means, Don Anselmo must now depend markedly on others for his transportation needs.

Second, it is important to mention that the stark opposition between the able-bodied Don Anselmo and the paraplegic Don Lucas notwithstanding, the portrayal of disability itself in the film is far from simplistic. Were it not for Azcona's layered script, it might be possible to see disability in *El cochecito* as merely incidental to the film's flirtation with that same lighthearted cosmopolitanizing agenda that characterized other films of the era (those of Pedro Lazaga, for example). But numerous other interesting characters figure into the script, extending the range, nature, and severity of the disabilities depicted on screen. These characters are important and have figured into previous published analyses of the film. Yet it is the contrast between the two elderly friends that drives the essay you are reading. The filmic presentation of the pair is of interest because it speaks immediately to the different disciplinary concerns of disability and mobility studies. In the end, what should be clear for viewers and disability scholars alike is that, despite the use of his legs, Don Anselmo's newly marked period of social dependency can be seen as his experience of another disabling social condition—namely senescence (Kittay, Jennings, and Wasunna; Marr).

In the sections that follow, I first introduce the film's complex intertwining of the themes of disability and mobility as is evident in *El cochecito*'s first scenes, and particularly in a privileged long take that occurs early in the film. This section (“Mobilizing Modern Madrid”) includes a close reading of cinematic technique as it unfolds in selected early scenes as a way of merging

this essay's two themes directly, scenes that are significant because they are broadly representative of the way the director visually articulates the relationship between Don Anselmo and Don Lucas as indicative of broader questions surrounding disability and mobility. In the next section ("Disabling Modern Madrid"), I turn to the film as a whole, writing of Ferreri's depiction of disability more globally and reassessing how previous scholarship has dealt with Don Anselmo and his preference for a disabled world over an able-bodied world (Prout, "Cryptic" 172). This section relies on recent disability studies scholarship—both in and outside of Hispanic studies—that articulates the links between old age/senescence and disability, in order to assert a new interpretation of *El cochecito*'s plot and thematic reliance on disability.

While the links between "freaks" and disabled protagonists of film (broached in the introduction to this anthology) are complex and worthy of extended consideration, I engage those connections here only implicitly. Yet it is worthwhile to make a few general remarks. It can be said that, in its emphasis on exclusion and marginality as well as the destabilization of social norms, *El cochecito* reactualizes the spirit underlying classic "freak" films of Hollywood cinema. In particular, Tod Browning's well-known pre-code film *Freaks* (1932) charted, in its own way, a course that other films (including *El cochecito*) have followed. These films problematize the often simplified and necessarily normative notions driving social marginality and exclusion of difference by placing that which is marginal in center stage. The most effective of these films—in my view, this is a list that would include both *Freaks* and *El cochecito*, even though they are quite distinct—introduce multiple "freaks" or disabled characters as a way of subverting those normative simplifications, thus prompting viewers to confront and perhaps even rethink their assumptions about bodily and thus social difference. The presentation of multiple stigmatized bodies—to the extent that they suggest not merely marginalized individuals but rather marginalized communities—helps render the process of social exclusion visible instead of potentially reaffirming a simplistic correspondence between stigma and the individual body. From this perspective, Ferreri's film functions as a complex commentary on not only social marginality but also community. In the end, *El cochecito* potentially asserts the universality of disability, inverting the social normativity that viewers might otherwise use to ignore disability on its own terms, even suggesting that disability is not a deviation from but rather constitutes the basis of the human experience. That this theme of disability and social difference plays out in the context of a modern and mobilizing urban Madrid clearly foregrounds connections between disability studies and mobility studies.

## Mobilizing Modern Madrid

With the opening sequence we fade in from black to witness a zoom-in on a quintessentially pedestrian urban scene. Through a tinny stringed instrument and plodding horn, the nondiegetic music connotes an old-fashioned, traditional lifestyle and thus a traditional national identity, even if in the urban context of Madrid. The zoom brings a street corner clearly into focus and soon highlights the right-to-left movement of Don Anselmo, captured via a long shot, dressed in black coat and black hat, bearing flowers for we know not what purpose. Walking in a straight line, he crosses the paths of other pedestrians running personal errands or involved in their work, cautiously steps by someone hammering away at the curb, and walks across the busy street avoiding cars, trucks, and a motorcycle—movement within the scene that clearly foregrounds the urban reality of the able-bodied pedestrian. A dissolve (and thus an implied time lapse) is coupled with a low-angle shot of Don Anselmo walking uphill, passing by a group of eight workers striding purposefully, each carrying a toilet on his head. A second dissolve captures our protagonist rounding the corner—having to navigate a number of workmen on ladders and strolling pedestrians—to finally enter a dairy shop’s doorway immediately after a calf has been led out of that same doorway by its owner. Along with the use of dissolves, formal techniques that exaggerate the effort put forth by the protagonist in his urban journey, Don Anselmo’s consistently shuffling gait and his notably exhausted speech upon entering the shop depict the lethargy and instability of old age. The strategic use of *mise-en-scène* excessively depicting the movement of work and commerce—car traffic, ladders, pedestrians wandering to and fro—brings the viewer to oppose work to retirement, youth to senescence, and to fold larger questions of aging and adaptation together with issues of mobility through urban environments.

The building *El cochecito*’s protagonist has entered turns out to be the *vaquería* of his friend, Don Lucas (*Vaquería Imperial de Mateo Fernández*)—whose greeting reemphasizes how long it has taken Don Anselmo to walk over (“*media hora que te estamos esperando*” [we’ve been waiting for you for half an hour]). We hear his heavy breathing and see his weary gait—and the use of handheld camera that accompanies Don Anselmo emphasizes his unsteadiness. When a woman in the locale remarks that he does not look well, he responds, “*Es que he venido muy de prisa a todo el camino*” (It’s just that I was rushing the whole way here), implicitly anticipating his stated need for a motorized wheelchair. When we first see Don Lucas—located in the back part of the dairy business and surrounded by bales of hay and the sounds of nearby cows—he visually represents a curious fusion of old-world Spanish ruralism and, proudly seated on his new motorized wheelchair (the *cochecito*

of the film's title), a modern urban lifestyle in Spain's capital city.<sup>5</sup> Once he is pushed out to the street by others, Don Lucas impatiently awaits the arrival of the taxi that he will follow on his motorized vehicle to the cemetery on the outskirts of town. As both men ride off—Don Anselmo a passive passenger in the taxi and Don Lucas the active driver of his own *cochecito*, and by extension the driver of his own urban life—the camera pans right back to the group of caring onlookers (composed of members of Don Lucas's family and friends), who discuss the dangerous nature of the novel driving machine. The pair of senescent men are going to pay their respects, presumably to their respective wives, and subsequent shots of the cemetery are crafted to visually ensconce the men in a plethora of grave markers, static reminders of the opposition between movement, vigor, and life on the one hand and stasis, inertia, and death on the other—oppositions that are persistent throughout the film's duration.

While at the cemetery, two boys observing the senescent men argue about whether Don Lucas's vehicle is a "coche de cojo" (cripple's car) or a "moto" (motorized vehicle). This conversation highlights the machine's dual role as a disability-related technological prosthesis (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*; also "The Geo-politics") and as a modern symbol of the prestige associated with increased mobility in urban contexts. It should be noted that here, we are only ten minutes into the film and already the superimposition of the themes of disability and urban mobility could not be clearer. Nonetheless, it is when the two men exit the cemetery that we have the clearest visual depiction of the central opposition between Don Anselmo and Don Lucas. This juxtaposition is the central idea that drives the entire film.

This is a crucial scene that deserves our further attention. It consists of a long take lasting a full two minutes (10:02–12:02) and it incorporates a number of cinematic techniques without a single cut (a sequence shot). Dwarfed by the monumental wall of stone arches and columns that mark the border of the cemetery, an extreme long shot captures the two men exiting the cemetery toward the left of the frame—Don Lucas, as always, on his vehicle, and Don Anselmo pushing the vehicle from behind. The positioning of the characters is functional—someone must push Don Lucas from behind if he is to exit the cemetery without engaging the motor of his *cochecito*. This action is itself an adaptation on Don Lucas's part, in that it may be assumed by viewers that his reasoning in not engaging the motor is that he does not want to disturb the tranquility of a rural and traditional space reserved for respect, mourning, and contemplation. But the order in which the men leave the cemetery is simultaneously important at a thematic level. Don Lucas is at once both literally and figuratively "ahead" of Don Anselmo. He represents a push into modern living and urban mobility while his friend is being "left behind" by technological and cultural advances that remain out of his reach.

As they gradually move into the center foreground of the static camera shot, they are surrounded by multiple forms of transportation—highlighting the city as a place that is always “on the move” (Cresswell): a pedestrian is visible at left, walking out of the frame; a man on horseback exists stage right; and a motorized car pulls up behind them to leave the cemetery, pressuring them to make way by venturing into the middle of the street. With bells continuing to toll—an aural representation of the traditional church-centered Spanish rural life that persists in urbanizing social forms—the camera makes a few small movements of adjustment as the pair advances toward it and thus also toward us, the viewers. The long take allows for the viewer to visually juxtapose the various forms of transportation that share the frame in this sequence, and arguably even to interpret the scene in terms of a linear and historical progression. We thus move from walking to travel by horseback to car travel, with the implication being that the *cochecito*—privileged by the framing and its presence throughout the sequences—is the most modern form of transportation available for Madrid’s urbanite.

The long take also allows us to see the novel vehicular technology literally take center stage, its physical presence within the frame increasing dramatically as it inhabits the mid- and then the foreground of the cinematic image, as if its growing size in the frame were proportional to its increasing cultural significance. At this point, still without having introduced a single cut, the director has set the stage for a very important conversation. When Don Anselmo begins to fret about how he will get home given that no taxi is visible nearby, Don Lucas responds quite decisively: “Mira lo mejor será que tú vayas despacito. Yo con el coche me planto en casa en un momento” (Look, what’s best is if you go at your own pace. With the [motorized] car, I’ll be home in a flash). Of course, Don Lucas eventually capitulates and suggests somewhat reluctantly that he will give his friend a ride home. At this moment, Don Anselmo climbs on the back of the little coach—thus confirming his role as a passive passenger in direct contrast to Don Lucas, who controls his own destiny, and reaffirming the visual equivalent of the linear narrative of progress in mobility evident when the pair first exited the cemetery.

As the motor starts up, the *cochecito* moves, and the sympathetic camera becomes a semi-subjective shot of sorts; we are “with” the characters, but not seeing the world directly from their perspective (à la Pasolini). Like them, we are mobile. As the pair turns to their left, the camera continues a dolly shot while also panning right to capture their movement and ultimately coming to rest in a static point as they move off into the distance, back from the relatively rural space of the cemetery toward the center of the city. We can now read this scene against the earlier trip toward the cemetery from the city center: while before two different modes of transport (taxi vs. *cochecito*) were contrasted, now it is even more clear that two different bodies are being

contrasted. Curiously, it is the able-bodied Don Anselmo who is unable to move in comparison with the disabled—but highly mobile—Don Lucas. In the context of the film’s two superimposed themes, this scene poses technology as an enabling force for Don Lucas and links senescence with the inability to adapt for Don Anselmo. But there is another dimension to the meaning of this single take. As the scene slowly accelerates (from static camera to subtle movements to dolly and moving pan), its movement mimics Madrid’s own increasing “mobility” during the development years of the 1960s. Our brief brush with mobility notably comes to an end as the camera settles into a static position and we are left behind, alone on the street and without a ride, while able-bodied Don Anselmo—newly dependent on the disabled Don Lucas for his mobility—is taken back into town. As demonstrated in this scene, Don Lucas is able to avoid the social isolation that typically accompanies old age and even assume an active role in his transportation needs, while Don Anselmo embodies the plight of the typical elderly person who experiences the frustration and depression that more routinely arise with old age.

Perhaps more than any other, this sequence establishes the tangled connections between disability and mobility at the center of the film, connections that will be further complicated as *El cochecito* moves on.<sup>6</sup> As the film continues, other disabled characters are introduced: Julita and Faustino, a disabled couple (Faustino has no upper limb function and is towed about by Julita); and Vicente, who appears to have developmental disabilities. The plot increasingly emphasizes Don Anselmo’s ongoing attempts to integrate himself into the group—a group that should be understood as both a heterogeneous disabled community and also a mobile, cosmopolitan community, simultaneously raising issues of social integration and Spanish *desarrollismo*. Importantly, when understood at a small scale of analysis, the presentation of this disabled community inverts the long-standing trope of the disabled as marginal and instead places them at the center of social privilege, even if ephemerally and cinematically.

It is hard to ignore that there is in *El cochecito* a conscious inversion replacing the social privilege routinely afforded the able-bodied with the social privilege associated with the experience of disability. It is similarly hard to ignore that this inversion is successful precisely because it connects disability with the trope of being modern. In a sense, Ferreri’s masterpiece allows this disabled community of motorized-wheelchair users to become the quintessential modern urbanites of the Spanish 1960s. Don Anselmo is unable to integrate himself into the group for the simple reason that he does not have his own transportation—as the other characters do—and is therefore someone the others must assist (as did Don Lucas when he reluctantly drove Don Anselmo back from the cemetery, above). From this perspective, then, the fact that Don Anselmo is unsuccessful at integrating himself into the group speaks

to the unevenness of Spanish modernization portrayed in other urban films of the late dictatorship (e.g., José Antonio Nieves Conde’s *El inquilino* [1957], Pedro Lazaga’s *La ciudad no es para mí* [1965]).<sup>7</sup> But a full consideration of the theme of disability in the film leads us beyond this undoubtedly meaningful interpretation. When informed by the broad understanding of disability that ties senescence and the conditions that so often accompany it into more socially visible forms of (physical) disability (as suggested in the writings of Kittay, Jennings, and Wasunna and Marr, for example), an analysis of *El cochecito* reveals that Ferreri’s Madrid is far more disabled than previous studies have asserted. To see how this is so, we must consider more carefully the subtle way in which disability in *El cochecito* takes on multiple forms.

### Disabling Modern Madrid

Even in 2014, work on disability in Spanish film has been somewhat limited.<sup>8</sup> Regarding *El cochecito* in particular, it should be noted that previous considerations of the film have failed to do justice to its twin themes of disability and mobility. This has occurred in one of two ways: either by privileging the film as the standard fare of dictatorial-era cinema at the expense of discussion of disability per se or else by concentrating on disability and social normativity under Franco without acknowledging the special circumstances manifest in the marked shift toward *desarrollismo* in the late dictatorship. Making this situation all the more problematic is the relative scarcity of critical discussions of the film.<sup>9</sup> In this context, an article by Ryan Prout published in the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* (2008) is the most significant of existing scholarly interpretations of the film because it brings an unusual interpretive depth to Ferreri’s cinematic creation. As such, Prout’s is a perspective on which I would like to build here.

In “Cryptic Triptych: (Re)Reading Disability in Spanish Film 1960–2003,” Prout successfully moves beyond an earlier reading by Martin Norden, who interpreted *El cochecito* mainly within an able-bodied agenda (Prout, “Cryptic” 169; Norden 187). The critic also moves beyond the contentions of scholars such as Marsha Kinder who have followed an established line of allegorical interpretation—reading the film in light of the dictatorship (Kinder 111–26; see also Egea 78; Segura) and effectively sidestepping the discussion of disability on its own terms. Those familiar with disability studies, of course, will naturally recognize this tendency to read disability as metaphor as one that has existed both within and beyond Spain (Prout, “Cryptic” 170–71; see also Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, and the special section of the AJHCS edited by Encarnación Juárez Almendros). By and large, the problem of previous interpretations of *El cochecito* is that, if there is a metaphor

to be unraveled in the film, it is not disability but rather the trope of mobility that is metaphorical. Disability in the film can be seen as a representation of the material experience of disabling social conditions, while its trope of mobility is a clear metaphor for social progress and urban modernity in Spain as a whole.

What is clear is this: to date, Prout has been the critic who has most successfully employed a disability studies perspective when approaching the film. He asserts the potentially radical staging of disability that Ferreri has accomplished: “Made available to a reading informed by the objectives of crip theory, *El cochecito* tells a new story. It concerns a group of radical uppity crips whose bodies, prostheses, and devices cause a distinctive environmental displacement which makes them visible to even the most dematerialising of perspectives” (Prout, “Cryptic” 172). Drawing on *Crip Theory* (2006) by disability studies theorist Robert McRuer, Prout locates the radical nature of the film in the fact that the protagonist, who is for his purposes presumably not disabled, desires to join the film’s disabled community, writing, “It does not particularly matter how authentic Anselmo’s disability is: the point is that he is trying to come out crip and that he, and his subjectivity in the film, prefers a disabled world to an able-bodied one” (172). This is undoubtedly true at one level. As corroborated below in this section (with a slight shift of perspective), Don Anselmo’s yearning to become part of the disabled community potentially destabilizes the viewer’s acceptance of able-bodied social norms. Yet Prout’s analysis—while it is welcome, convincing, and certainly more attentive to disability than previous approaches—misses out on an important if subtle point. When he writes of “Anselmo’s disability” (above), Prout references the major plot device of the film: Anselmo has to feign disability to qualify for his own *cochecito*.<sup>10</sup> But at another level, Anselmo’s disability is very important indeed. That is, there is, in Ferreri’s film, a contradiction in Anselmo’s character.

First—as is evident in the sequence shot analyzed in the first part of this article—Don Anselmo is clearly intended to evoke the able-bodied counterpart to Don Lucas. Persistently portrayed in “thresholds and passageways” (Prout 169; following on Egea 88), he is meant to be taken as a liminal figure, one who is paradoxically left behind as an afterthought of an able-bodied society while his friend literally moves on to form part of a disabled social group. This allows for Anselmo to be “left in the isolated position often reserved in film for the disabled. . . . He takes the place formerly occupied by the cripple in cinema’s isolation of disability when he is left alone, instead, as the wheelchair users take off without him” (Prout, “Cryptic” 169, 173). To the extent that viewers are able to identify with Don Anselmo—who is notably the lead protagonist of the film—they are able to experience this isolation and social marginalization as he does on screen. It is even possible that they, like

Don Anselmo, will come to “[prefer] a disabled world to an able-bodied one” (172). And yet there is a subtle point to underscore here. It may be said that Anselmo is feigning one disability while remaining disabled in another sense. Clearly, of course, he is not physically disabled in the same way that other characters in the film are—if he were, this would short-circuit the pathos that drives the film most directly. Instead, his material experience of disability can be described in these terms: he is senescent, chronically depressed, and potentially—if we are attentive to the final sequence of the film—even experiencing a psychotic episode. Let us consider these states in turn.

That Don Anselmo is senescent and depressed is made clear enough in the film’s action itself—as well as in the existing studies of the film (particularly in Prout, Segura, Kinder, Egea, and Estrada)—so as to make retracing those details here superfluous at best. What is less well understood is the way in which senescence and chronic depression in the elderly relate to disability studies.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the work of theorists such as Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson has had the effect of reinscribing the discussion of disability within the broader context of dependence. As a species, we humans are all dependent at one time or another. We are born dependent and pass through periods where we are inevitably again so—a reality that is hidden by what might be called “the myth of the independent, unembodied subject” (Kittay, Jennings, and Wasunna 443, 445; see Carlson). Elsewhere Kittay asks a question that frames dependency as universal in another way: “[W]ho in any complex society is not dependent on others, for the production of our food, for our mobility, for a multitude of tasks that make it possible for each of us to function in our work and daily living?” (“When Caring” 570). We thus do well in recognizing that dependency and, with it, infirmity and disability are not deviations from but rather the basis of human social life. In this sense, Don Anselmo’s senescence and depression are themselves linked with dependence, and thus also with disability. But still more might be said of Don Anselmo’s relationship to discourses of disability.

In the field of Hispanic studies, Matthew Marr’s recent book *The Politics of Age and Disability in Contemporary Spanish Film* (2013) has been the only serious and sustained study of the connections between age and disability in cultural texts. Although he does not take on *El cochecito* specifically, his book links questions of adolescence and senescence with previous work on disability and provides a compelling model for how the coexistence of multiple disabilities in a film may be ignored by unnuanced approaches (an unfortunate situation that he marvelously critiques in his fifth chapter’s discussion of Alejandro Amenábar’s film *Mar adentro*). Understood at a general level, Marr’s statement there is just as relevant for the analysis unfolding here: “Both in real terms and at the level of social theory itself—for health-care practitioners, policy makers, and mental health consumers alike—the question of mental

illness's tendency toward invisibility is paramount" (*The Politics* 101). Marr's seemingly audacious but nonetheless convincing supposition regarding Amenábar's film is that a mental illness coexists with the physical disability for which the protagonist is known, manifesting itself through depression and suicidal thoughts—a situation that causes us to read the film's presentation of disability differently than we might otherwise.

We need to approach Don Anselmo's character in *El cochecito* in much the same way. The final sequence of the film—which provides crucial characterization of the protagonist—has been much discussed and, I would say, little understood. Frustrated at his inability to join the disabled community to which Don Lucas ostensibly belongs, Don Anselmo “adds poison to the family stew and makes a getaway in the *cochecito*,” and—when caught—simply “asks if he will be allowed to keep his mobility device in prison” (Prout, “Cryptic” 169). It is perhaps this detail that pushes Kinder to label the protagonist in derogatory terms as more or less a consumerist assassin. There is a certain horror to the events here, one that might be otherwise written off as an extreme point that affirms the film's propensity for melodrama. But *El cochecito*'s presentation of people with a range of disabilities (and especially the cognitive disability of Vicente, which departs from the more prominent on-screen appearance of physical disabilities) is instrumental in getting viewers to think more broadly about disability, in both cognitive and physical terms. The fact that disabled characters are shown to be of many ages—not merely repetitions of the Don Lucas type—also gets us thinking more broadly of disability. In this context, it would be simplistic to think that Don Anselmo is not himself also disabled to some degree. If the scholarly record is any indication, it appears that this has not tended to be considered. Viewers should ask themselves whether murdering one's own family represents reasonable retribution for the depression and feelings of uselessness that so often accompany old age. Either Don Anselmo is experiencing a psychotic episode brought on by senescence and chronic depression, or else there is a similarly serious coexisting mental condition that problematizes how we must interpret his violent actions.

Placing Don Anselmo on the spectrum of disability—whether at the very least he is senescent and thus dependent (*a la* Kittay et al. and Carlson) or whether he has a more severe, if undiagnosed, mental illness—ultimately has consequences for how we view Ferreri's film. If Prout was able to point to Madrid as a “crippled” city, this is even more apt once one begins to consider Don Anselmo from perspectives both physical and related to cognition. *El cochecito* in essence triumphs precisely by “disabling” Spain's capital city—by equating physical disability simultaneously with physical mobility, by linking it with social progress as connected to 1960s *desarrollismo* and national narratives of Spanish urban modernity, and finally by expanding the sphere of disability's resonance from a small disabled community to more

universal matters of the dependence in which we humans all find ourselves at one time or another. Ferreri’s film ultimately harmonizes disability with the human condition and—through its links with old age in general—renders it a universal attribute of contemporary urban living.

## Notes

1. I am thinking here of works by Siebers; Mitchell and Snyder (“The Geo-politics,” *Narrative Prosthesis*); Davis (“Introduction,” *Enforcing Normalcy*); McRuer; Murray and Barker; in Spanish Peninsular studies: Fraser (*Disability Studies*); Prout (“Cryptic”); Juárez Almendros; Marr (*The Politics of Age and Disability*).
2. See Cresswell; Latham and McCormack; Urry (*Tourist; Sociology*); Hannam, Sheller, and Urry; in Spanish Peninsular studies: Afinoguénova and Martí-Olivella; Crumbaugh; Fraser (*Henri Lefebvre*, “Editorial”), Pavlović (*The Mobile Nation*, “España cambia de piel”); Pérez; Prout (“Between”).
3. See Afinoguénova and Martí-Olivella; Crumbaugh; Fraser (*Henri Lefebvre*, *Antonio López*); García Delgado; Longhurst; Pavlović (*The Mobile Nation*, “España cambia de piel”).
4. See Baker and Compitello; Compitello; Fraser (“Editorial”); Larson (*Constructing*); Ramos; Sambricio.
5. See also the role of the central paleta character of *La ciudad no es para mí*: Fraser (“Editorial”); Richardson (*Postmodern Paletos*, *Constructing Spain*).
6. There are clearly nuances in the filmic presentation of disability throughout the remainder of Ferreri’s visual text that deserve further mention. Nevertheless, the limited space available here combined with the multiple threads of this analysis prohibit me from any further close readings of the filmic text itself. I do intend that the one I have chosen, above, be broadly reflective of *El cochecito*’s presentation of disability and mobility.
7. See Fraser (“Editorial”); Larson (“The Spatial Fix”); Richardson (*Constructing Spain*, *Postmodern Paletos*).
8. Note that this essay was written in 2014. My more recent book (Fraser, *Cognitive Disability Aesthetics*) explores the relative invisibility of cognitive difference in greater theoretical, historical and cultural depth. Note that Alegre de la Rosa’s book *La discapacidad en el cine* is focused on films from the Anglo-American context. Better are works by Conway (“The Politics,” “Representing Difference”), Fraser (*Disability Studies*, “Toward Autonomy,” “The Work of [Creating] Art,” “Disability Art”), Marr (*The Politics*, “Representation”), and Minich that focus on disability in Spanish visual art and film. On disability in the broader context of Spain, see *Discapacidades humanas*; Gámez Fuentes; Juárez Almendros; and Pallisera. On disability and media, see Riley.

9. The writings of Kinder, Egea, Prout (“Cryptic”), Estrada, and Segura are important in this regard, but in most cases, discussion of *El cochecito* unfolds along with discussion of other films, such that *El cochecito* has very rarely been approached on its own terms. Other scholarly writings discussing the film can be found online, but many of these are published versions of academic presentations (De las Heras, Deltell, García Serrano, Hafter, Macchiuci, Morán Paredes, Ríos Caratala, Rodríguez Genoves, Sánchez Salas, Zamora) and as such do not necessarily enjoy the same recognition as those articles listed above.
10. Here it is necessary to reference that feigning disability is itself of course a long-standing trope in ableist cinema as well as literature.
11. It is important to note that the present article is part of a much larger attempt to broaden the approach to disabilities, generally speaking. That is, my own work has attempted to broaden the scope of disability studies from an emphasis on physical disabilities to include cognitive (dis)abilities such as autism, Down syndrome, and alexia/agnosia (see Fraser, *Disability Studies and Spanish Culture*, “Disability Art,” “Toward Autonomy,” “The Work of [Creating] Art”). My attention to senescence in this article, however, is particularly inspired by the work of Matthew Marr, who is cited above. See my review of Marr’s book in the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* (2015, 16.2).

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