



HabibAzar. 2010. *Armless*.

Wannabe people and the desirability of the disabled body: A film review of *Armless* by Andrea García-Santesmases

What is this film about? The wannabe question.

Armless (directed by HabibAzar in 2010) is the story of John, a wannabe person. Wannabes are people who, despite having a healthy body, feel that they have a disability and wish to change their bodies because of this, for example, through amputations and spinal cord injuries. These people are diagnosed with *body integrity disorder*. This “disorder” has no cure or successful treatment, so wannabe people usually live their condition in a traumatic way, experiencing shame and guilt. Because their stigma is an invisible plight, wannabes are categorised as “discreditable” according to Goffman’s Theory of Stigma (1963), unlike those who are “discredited,” who have an outward manifestation of the trait that stigmatizes them.

The wannabe question is a reality largely unknown by the general public, and as such, the analysis of the few audiovisual products on the subject that have been produced in the last few years is crucial in order to interpret the first projections of this question into the public sphere. The cultural industry is constructing a “monstrous” image of wannabe people, portraying them as people who should be ashamed of their condition, suffer it secretly and in silence, and expect social and personal rejection. The stigma tends to be the most dominant attribute by which society explains all of the stigmatized individual’s actions and behaviours (Goffman, 1963). Consequently, it is unsurprising for wannabe people, in this case, to try to hide their condition.

Armless is a great example of Goffman’s theory. The main character of the film feels the need to amputate his own arms. As he is aware of the lack of comprehension of his desire for body alteration, he lives in permanent fear of personal



and social rejection. In *Armless* John often closes himself in his bedroom closet, a metaphorical act symbolizing a hiding of his desire for body alteration.

Another scene that illustrates a wannabe's hardship is when John decides to travel to the capital to contact a surgeon. He leaves a message to his wife, saying merely "You are not going to see me anymore. Sorry. I love you." He prefers her to think that he is having an affair or that he simply doesn't love her anymore, rather than share his painful secret.

Born in the "wrong body": similarities and differences with transsexuality

Usually wannabe people, like John in *Armless*, know exactly which type of amputation they require and which part of the body to start with. Baine and Levy (2005) explain that, "in the case of at least some wannabes, the limb in question is not as healthy as it might appear: in an important sense, a limb that is not experienced as one's own is not in fact one's own." (P. 85) In that sense, wannabe people consider the procedure essential in order to feel "complete." Another important and frequent element is the emergence of the desire in early infancy, after seeing an amputee who intrigued and fascinated the small child. In *Armless*, John refers to an amputee man that captivated him when he was 8 years old.

The wannabe person's body alteration is usually portrayed as a necessity, which if not addressed by regular surgery, may cause him or her to resort to illegal surgical procedures, self-harm, or to provoking accidents, placing their lives at risk. The narration of this reality has a morbidly recreational tone in *Armless*: John goes to a shop in order to buy the most powerful chainsaw to cut off his arms.

The way the wannabe question is presented is reminiscent of transsexuality: people who feel that they have been born into the "wrong body" and who are willing to subject themselves to the necessary medical surgery in order to adapt their physical bodies to their body image ideal. In *Armless* when another character asks John what is wrong with his arms, he simply replies, "They are there." In the case of transsexuality, the body adaptation refers to a sex/gender change, and in the case of wannabe people, from a healthy to disabled body. This analogy is being reinforced by the biomedical discourse in referential documentaries such as *Whole* (2003) and *Complete Obsession* (2000). The surgeon in *Complete Obsession* explains that, after initially feeling disconcerted by the wannabe people's request,

he realised that “they are not that different from transsexuals who amputate a healthy part of their body in order to fulfil their ideal body image”. Other authors further this analogy, explaining that these groups of people experience their desire for body alteration involuntarily (since infancy, First, 2005; Barnes, 2011), unchangingly (the desire must have always existed, Barnes, 2011), and incurably (cannot be resolved by psychological or pharmaceutical treatment, Bayne and Levy, 2005).

This interpretation of the wannabe condition is an attempt to normalise it via an analogy with transsexuality and obtain social acceptance. However, the pathologisation of the wannabe condition through psychiatric diagnosis ignores many other important aspects of their reality (Lawrence, 2011).

What about desire?

Armless shows how John believes that the amputee body is desirable, even attractive. He describes the amputated body as “beautiful, as it should be.” When he makes love to his wife, he pretends to be amputated, playing a submissive sexual role: “There’s nothing here, no arms, do what you want to me, I can’t do anything, make me suffer.” First (2005) shows the connection between the desire to possess an amputee body and the sexual arousal for amputee people.

Wannabe people demand a body alteration, which in many cases will leave them in a situation of dependency, or at least, a loss of autonomy. From a biomedical point of view, this can only be seen as a problem, an unwanted inconvenience (Bryan, 2012). For instance, when the surgeon’s secretary asks him why he doesn’t want to operate on John if he cuts people all the time, he answers angry, “But in a normal way! He couldn’t do anything without arms!” In contrast, wannabe people do not appear to view this situation of dependency as something totally undesirable (Duncan & Goggin, 2002). John refers to an amputee who had achieved his dream of being amputated as someone who “no longer has fear,” and believes that if he also undergoes an amputation procedure, the loss of a body part will lead to a liberation from the fear of loss in general.

Monster of Nowadays

Armless does a wonderful job of analysing the cultural representation of wannabe people. It has all the important elements with regards to this question: the social

stigma, the ethical debate and the psychological pathologisation. John is portrayed as a typical wannabe: stigmatized, guilty, ashamed, but also convinced that he can't change his desire that needs his body to change.

John's wife and John's mother represent the expected behaviour from a "normal" family, which makes it even easier to empathize more with them than with John. His strange, incomprehensible and terrifying desire converts him into the "other one" because, despite the advances of social acceptance that have taken place in this field throughout history, the disabled body continues to be perceived as something monstrous. Thus, the wannabe people's desire to claim disability is considered even more monstrous.

One cannot, and must not, feel sexual desire for a monstrous body. Moreover, one cannot, and must not, desire to be the owner of a monstrous body. Devotee people (people who feel sexual attraction towards disabled bodies) and pretender people (people who simulate disability through the use of prostheses and orthoses due to an aesthetic and/or sexual attraction for these types of bodies) are also socially stigmatized for this reason.

We must keep in mind that we are before an unknown reality that, up until now, has never been seen as more than a psychological disorder. The analogy between wannabes and transsexuals leads us to believe that the psychiatric pathologization is only a first step towards the full realisation of their rights: for years the queer movement has been working on a political level for the depathologization of transsexuality, which makes it reasonable to believe that at some point, wannabe people will also politicise their condition and demand its depathologization.

Nowadays, there are still few cultural products about wannabe-pretender-devotee question. This vacuum fosters isolation, secrecy and fear surrounding the lives of these people. In this sense, *Armless* is a bold gamble that seeks to faithfully portray a hugely unknown phenomenon and, at the same time, meet the formal requirements of fiction. These kinds of films are a very good opportunity, from an academic and activist point of view, to discuss important topics such as disability, dependency, sexual desire or embodiment and to also challenge some views surrounding them.

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