

**Ability without eyes, disability with eyes:  
Aaliya's embodiment of technologies in *Ship of Theseus***

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**Abstract**

*Ship of Theseus* (Gandhi, 2013) an experimental film, presents an intriguing narrative of human and technology relations involving three characters namely Aaliya, who is a visually differently abled woman photographer, Maitreya, a monk diagnosed with liver cirrhosis and fighting against testing animals for drug validation, and that of Navin, a stockbroker, who after receiving kidney transplantation set out to help a poor man to get back his stolen kidney. This study examines the human-technology relations between Aaliya and her passion for photography that she took up after she lost the cornea in both her eyes. The film narrates the post-abnormal phase in her life and how she engages with the world without eyesight. However, regaining her eyesight following cornea transplantation, affords a different experience engaging with photography wherein she realizes that visuality squashes her ingenuity. The ocular-centric visual regime surrounding photography disables her from clicking pictures. Her feeling and sensing the world through technology is dictated by seeing unlike her embodied relations she experienced before her surgery. Analysed through the theoretical frameworks of phenomenology and post-phenomenology, this paper found out that, prior to

regaining eyesight, Aaliya embodied camera and concomitant technologies to make sense of the world. Her embodiment of photo editing software, video chat with her mother online and other technological material objects anchored her sense of *being*. While Aaliya is caught in a tension between her embodied relations with technologies during the moments when she was visually differently abled and later when she regains eyesight, she comes across as a post-human establishing an intercorporeal relationship between Aaliya and technologies she uses in the film. Besides, her differently abled body represents a cyborgian body challenging the corporeal fetishism humanistic approaches advance.

**Keywords:** disability, phenomenology, post-phenomenology, embodiment.

## **Introduction**

Several epistemologies have emerged to critically engage with disability studies. While post-structuralist approaches to disability derived its strength from the constitution of disabled subjects by discourses and forces of power, phenomenological methods to study body and embodiment present another critical framework to study disability.

This paper explores the theoretical framework of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and the post-phenomenological approaches discussed by Don Ihde (1990). The development of modern phenomenology established by Edmund Husserl in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is a break from Cartesian system that distinguishes between the outer reality and the individual experience of reality. According to Descartes (1931), outer reality is a separate and distinct entity that can only be understood in rational terms through cognitive processes of deduction. In contrast, phenomenology seeks to understand the outside world as it is interpreted by and through human consciousness. Martin Heidegger (1962), a key founder of phenomenological approach that involves technologies and tools, was critical of Husserlian phenomenology. Heidegger employed the notion of '*Dasein*' (1927), or the situated meaning of a human in the world. He said (1962) that reality and consciousness are co-creations and human understanding arises from the relationship between the two acting upon each other.

Unlike Husserl and Heidegger, Merleau Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) focused on body images and the experiences of one's own body. Extending the Husserlian concept of lived body, body lived within, Merleau Ponty (1962) argued that body is both lived and corporeal. He, further, opposed the Cartesian separation of mind and body. Descartes (1967) explained that mind and body

exist as two different entities and that body is inert and devoid of purpose or desire. Body is quantified and considered as matter that is capable of extending spatially, while the essential property of the mind is that it thinks. He further argued that, even in perception, it is the mind and not the senses that are active. Descartes thus inferred that bodies are not perceived because they are seen and touched, but only because they are understood by the mind. This brings to light the Cartesian overreliance on visual perceptual skills than tactile or other modes of knowing.

Phenomenology, in relation to films, opens up cinematic experiences and presents the outside world appearances on the celluloid screen. This paper seeks to examine how Aaliya, a visually differently abled photographer, experiences and perceives the world through camera or through her act of taking photos in the film *Ship of Theseus* (Gandhi, 2013). She exhibits hope and resilience to overcome the loss of her 'normal' life. Hope has been used as a trope in films. Filmmakers create stories that help us understand "pain, desire, pleasure [and] fear" of the characters in their life (Delbanco, 1999). These narratives and portrayals also help us navigate through the seamy side of life and face challenges boldly. It is this hope that helps characters in documentary films transcend barriers of disability, troubled times of abnormality and cope with as well as carry on with life in the new circumstances, in new enabling conditions.

For example, documentary films like *The Inner Eye* (Ray, 1972) and *Diler Arunima Sinha* (Shridhar, 2018) are inspiring tales of people with disability. The character Benode Behari Mukherjee is an accomplished painter from the documentary film *The Inner Eye* who lost his sight and continued to create paintings despite his loss of sight. He states that 'Blindness is a new feeling, a new experience, a new state of being' (Ray, 1972). Whereas the character Arunima Sinha in *Diler Arunima Sinha* is a first female amputee Mount Everest climber, who lost one of her legs in a train incident when she was pushed from a running train by thieves in 2011. She stated 'It's the mountaineering which helped me in gaining my confidence back after the incident which changed my life drastically from normal to physically-challenged' and henceforth my amputated leg became my strength to conquer the disability (Shridhar, 2018).

In the midst of disaster and panic, hope seems to be the only antidote to combat uncertainty. It is this post-abnormal condition of life that is reflected in *Ship of Theseus* wherein Aaliya exhibits hope and resilience to maneuver the loss of her 'normal' life since she was a child. She harbours hope to deal with the situation and lead her life in new normal conditions. Inspired by her hope, this paper discusses the possible world of Aaliya beyond the filmic end, where she regains eyesight, to reveal vignettes of her post-abnormal life.

### **Phenomenology and disability**

While body is quantified as a material object, which has basic structure, mass and size, phenomenologists accounted for subjective experiences of human body. According to Cartesian framework, body is something beyond what its materiality contains as a bio-chemical physical substance. This positioned body as subordinate to the mind.

Descarte's (1677) mind-body dualism gave rise to a wide range of theories that placed body and sensibilities as equally dominant mode of knowing the world. Merleau Ponty (1962) explained that all sensory registers account for one's experiences with and perceptions of the world. This denies the formation of classificatory mechanisms to group bodies based on essential and normative categories on the one hand and non-normative bodies on the other. However, epistemologies of engaging with disability points to differentiated potential of physically disabled bodies which can interact with the external world despite their infirmities. Thus, it becomes clear that physical disability does not become an impediment for people with disabilities to experience the material sphere through their minds that Cartesian philosophy associated with light and reason. In Husserl's phenomenology, embodiment and sensations play a key role in lived body. While discussing intentionality, Husserl (1970) argued that the possibility or capability of one's perception could go as far as the horizon of ability of one's lived body indicating a dichotomy of normality and abnormality. Lived body is one's own body which is experienced by oneself. However, Husserl's intersubjectivity wrests the ability to experience sensations from non-living material objects plunging the debates of phenomenology into humanism. While Husserl (1970) postulated 'mobile body', this concept needs to be tempered with the integration of non-human bodies that carry equal potentiality.

Heidegger radicalized Husserl's method of phenomenology to study the basic sense of "being". He used the term *Dasein* (1927) which talks about 'Being-in-the-world'- as it happens in the present. The actual meaning of being is *a priori*'within-the-world'; it is independent of the knowledge of physical representations. When we interact with tools and technologies we are being-in-the-world, participating in something to comport our self. For instance, a teacher defines his or her self as a teacher in the living world where she or he teaches. Likewise, a carpenter interacts with tools through his/her engagements with them to accomplish vital tasks.

Heidegger (1962) explained that there exists a difference between what a person does with a tool and the manner in which a person thinks about a tool. When users use a tool, it becomes invisible and thus it becomes an extension of their body. As the user focuses on the immediate performance of the tool, the technology disappears which Heidegger (1962) termed as 'ready-to-hand' condition, because the tool, through the experience of the user, is fused with the body. In order to return to the tool's presence as an object, its functionality must be disrupted. As the broken hammer loses its functionality

it becomes what is described in Heideggerian terminology as being 'present-at-hand'. The objective presence of the tool is realized only if it breaks during its application. Thus, the terminology of 'invisible tool' helps us to understand technology not according to physical qualities but by an immaterial, experience based approach. Heidegger's theory of perception regarding tool handling does away with the interactive system between the tool and the disabled body. The body focuses on the task not on the tool. Tool and body effectively disappear, but as the body and awareness of self become the central point of interest in technology design, the tool becomes visible. In a disabled body, tool or technology becomes a mediator of experience and transforms and constructs one's attention to self. These technologies can assist in creating aesthetic and meaningful body based on interactive experiences of self exploration, self-cultivation which can improve the life of the disabled.

Merleau Ponty (1962) would argue that ability of normal humans and that of pathologically afflicted ones is different. He did not stratify ability in any structure of dominance between the two refuting the claims of behaviourist and intellectualist claims. Merleau Ponty (1962) posited that a body is the locus of emotional, social, cultural and sexual expressiveness. These values constitute and constrain the subject in dealing with the external world. In addition to phenomenological approach Foucault's (1990) concept of biopower becomes highly relevant to expand critical approaches to disability studies. From his concept, the disabled could be constituted as subjects who claim a "right to life," a claim that relies on the essential promise of a form of power that produces "disability" as a socially and politically marginalized identity (Lasslett, 2014, p.649). However, the subjectivity formed out of ideological affiliation and compulsions is different from body-subjecting of lived bodies understood phenomenologically.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Body, mind and Merleau-Ponty*

Unlike Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty (1962) worked on mind-body relation where he placed the body as a material artifact and consciousness at the center of his philosophical investigation. For Merleau-Ponty (1962), the primacy of perception of the perceived world is the primary reality whereas Heidegger stated that the being of Beings as the primary reality. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1962) talked about lived body viz. one's own body is experienced by oneself. Merleau-Ponty (1962) gave the example of the phantom limb (disabled body) in order to analyse the phenomenology of bodily awareness, stating that a person with a phantom limb experiences the actual limb and incorporates it into the movements of his body. For instance, when a person with surgically removed leg slips and his phantom leg fails to save him from falling, the person realizes that his actual leg is missing and this can be tangentially connected with Heidegger's present-at-hand. The

phantom leg is not consciously registered in the body-schema but incorporated into the subconscious body schema. In the phantom-limb phenomena, the visible and invisible body parts meet each other in an inquiring way. Merleau-Ponty (1962) explained the phantom limb as “an actual presence of a representation” and “the representation of an actual presence”. Through phantom limb, ‘bodily experiences’ can be shared (p. 102).

Further Merleau-Ponty (1962) explained that body experiences in space and the relationship of body itself is spatial, the space inside body is experienced external to body and as ‘*motor relations*’ (p.150). For instance, while driving a car and texting to a friend one does not outstretch his/her hand and a fist to drive and text but expresses it in terms of the motor skills. He also describes ‘perceptual relations’ in which body schema changes the experienced properties of one’s environment along with it in order to perceive the change in the environment. For instance, artifacts can also become a means through which perception takes place (e.g. using of hearing aid, you perceive the songs sound according to the hearing aid volume, quality etc.). When these skills are learned like handling the object, the object becomes incorporated into one's body schema. Objects become the means through which skills are expressed. Further, they function as extensions of one’s self and as an integral part of our body. Elena del Rio (2009) asserted that Ponty’s phenomenology falls short of considering the body in particularly gendered ways and alleged that his approach assumed white, male body as the universal measure of all bodies. Arguing along similar lines, Ahmed (2006) suggested that mobility of bodies that Husserl’s phenomenology underlines helps in quelling hegemonic supremacist bodies. Husserl’s ‘I can’ assumes bodies as having ability to function in their own ways not trapped in the hegemonic discourses. In similar ways, it is essential to draw on Ahmed’s concept of the possibility of desire a body constitutes, a social and cultural body, to understand how differently abled orient their bodies towards the world. This view runs counter to the phenomenal body inscribed with ideological hegemonic discourses that support ableist assumptions denigrating the differently abled bodies.

#### *Post-Phenomenology and embodiment of technologies*

Post phenomenological approach evolved as a critical discourse drawing on the phenomenological tradition to explain embodied experiences mediated by technologies. It emerged as a method of inquiry subsequent to the advent of science and technology studies. Don Ihde, a key contributor to post-phenomenology, sought to integrate technologies as part of embodied experiences. Likewise, Bruno Latour (1992), though not phenomenological but post-positivist in his approach, outlined the significance of non-humans in the constitution of emergent lifeworlds through his Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This phenomenologist such as Heidegger and Ponty who have contributed to the

understanding to technologies and tools in embodied experiences. Post-phenomenology has become the central method to engage with digital experiences of humans and non-humans.

Drawing on phenomenology, Don Ihde (1990), like Heidegger, attempted to describe real human experience through mental states of consciousness. In post-phenomenological approach he analysed various types of relations between human beings, technologies and the world. He presented three sets of relations with the technological artifacts. Firstly, Ihde (1990) expounded on *alterity relation* where the relation is not via artifact to the world but to the artifact itself. In such situations, human beings will have a relation to the artifact. Secondly, in *background relation*, technological artifacts shape our relation to reality. But they still remain in the background (e.g. thermostats that automatically switch the heat on and off without our intervention or even awareness). Thirdly, he discussed *hermeneutic relation* in which human beings interpret how technology represents the world. For instance, X-Ray and MRI scan the bones and brain activity respectively, analyse the body parts and give feedback. These relations between technology and human being where, human being experience the world through technology and vice versa are capable of engaging in 'symbiotic' relationships. These technologies get embedded in their life worlds and foster embodied relationships with their body.

Further Ihde (1990) considered perception as a key for understanding human experience or what is called the "relation between human beings and their world" (p.89). Ihde (1990) distinguished two dimensions of perception viz. *microperception* known as sensory perception that discloses the meaning of bodily dimensions like 'seeing' or 'feeling'. *Macroperception* is an interpretive dimension that demands that *microperception* be situated in a cultural frame of reference (p.94). *Macroperception* emphasizes on understanding perception as polymorphic. The two can be distinguished from each other but they cannot be separated. Polymorphic structure can be named as "structured multistabilities" of perception (Ihde 1993, p.73). Multistabilities occur when a single bodily stimulus produces alternations between different subjective percepts. For instance, when we see the object through eye and when we touch the object through hand both have different perceptual modalities which provide different framework for understanding the attribute of objects.

Don Ihde (1990), as a philosopher of technology, also expounded on the incorporation of technologies into the perceptual bodily world of human beings. Focusing on the mediating experiences by technology, Ihde (1990) reflected on how the experiences of technologies become part of the phenomenal bodies of users/human beings. Differently-abled people go through the habitation of a new hybrid body formulated by technologies and their interactions with these technologies. Intentionally, some users insist on looking at technologies that they use in their everyday life as the

'other'. Some users become adept at integrating their technology into their lifeworld. With time and practice, the differently abled could reconfigure their body using technologies at hand. However, technologies are designed in favour of non-disabled subjects in the world. As a result, technologies and artefacts embodied a particular understanding of the external world. Langdon-Winner (1980) stated that artefacts already embodied certain values much before they are made available for social use. Conversely differently abled cannot be considered as lacking agency because they can re-appropriate the signification systems of technologies to suit their needs.

Embodiment is considered as body aspects of human subjectivity. The body action and perception have strong interconnections. An abled body as well as a differently abled body has its own medium to interact with the world according to its own perceptions. Technological mediation by abled or differently able body foster embodied relationship. This notion helps in understanding that able or differently abled body and its embodiment of technology is about a person engaging technology as part of his/her world and to reflect it by being embedded in our life worlds (Germonprez et al., 2011). It is harder to imagine abled human life without technology because it is mostly constructed and mediated through technological systems that shape our culture and environment, and influence who we are and how we live. There are artifacts such as telescopes, probes, hearing aids, and similar items that help in formulating a 'symbiotic' relationship with the human body. These artifacts are not normally perceived and acted on as objects in one's environment, but instead are used as means through which the environment is experienced and acted on (Brey, 2000). One is shaped by the technology and the technology shapes one, but both are generally independent. This orientation is true in every sense because we make the technology and technology makes our life.

#### *Posthuman bodies and disability*

Post-humanism posits that there is no absolute demarcations between body and tools or technologies or computers (Hayles, 2008). Human organisms use technological means which ultimately allow us to move beyond what is termed human. Hayles (2008) in her book *How We Became Posthuman* outlined about how humans and machines will be effectively merged with no differences. The contemporary human bodies are open to forms of technological modification and intervention.

Posthuman is almost synonymous to a cyborg, a concept of Donna Haraway (1984) where she explained the term as a cybernetic organism which is constructed of both mechanical and organic material. Bodies are like molecules - an organ of one body integrates with other organs of another body to produce a new hybrid body and identity. In that sense, one organ is prosthesis for another body. A new hybrid body, cyborg, emerges when the eyes or kidney receive transplantation. A technologised body thus produces a differently-abled body which is equally abled. Deleuze (1947)

argues for a molecular body that constructs and reconstructs its subjectivity through continual and shifting interactions with multiple components of other bodies.

This paper draws on post phenomenological and posthuman approaches to explain how the visually challenged Aaliya in *Ship of Theseus* (Gandhi, 2013) embodies technologies to interact with the external world.

### **Analysis**

Aaliya experiences, through her objective and phenomenological body, the external world mediated by technologies. Being a visually challenged and visually-abled, technologies extend Aaliya's body schema enabling her to express and perceive the world outside visually, aurally and through tactile means. The human and technology relations co-constitute the subjectivity of Aaliya through different intercorporeal relations. Aaliya's embodied experiences extend beyond humanistic realms and her eye transplantation as well as use of technologies to pursue her interest in photography can best be explained using posthumanist and cyborgian concepts.

#### *Technological embodiment of camera by Aaliya*

In *Ship of Theseus*, Aaliya experiences and lives the phenomenal body which tacitly conveys what her body could do and what its capacities are in being able to make sense of the world and interact with it. The phenomenal characteristics of the body are actualized through camera, a technology through which she visualises the world and captures the essence of surroundings. She uses her hand, nose and ear to feel and identify the objects she wants to photograph. According to Merleau-Ponty, objective body is a psychological entity while that of phenomenological body is one which is experienced and lived. Individuals experience their own body tactility as a unified composite capacity being able to accomplish tasks such as running, fighting, doing household chores, writing etc. In the movie *Ship of Theseus* (Gandhi, 2013), Aaliya chops vegetables with a knife and use stylus on her touch screen laptop to edit her clicked photographs pointing to the potential of her phenomenal body wherein she experiences chopping and use of stylus through her tactile sense rather than carrying it out through her visual *perceptual skills*.(Figure 1 and 2)



**Figure 1.** Aaliya chopping vegetables



**Figure 2.** Aaliya uses the software to edit photographs with the help of stylus and the touch-screen laptop.

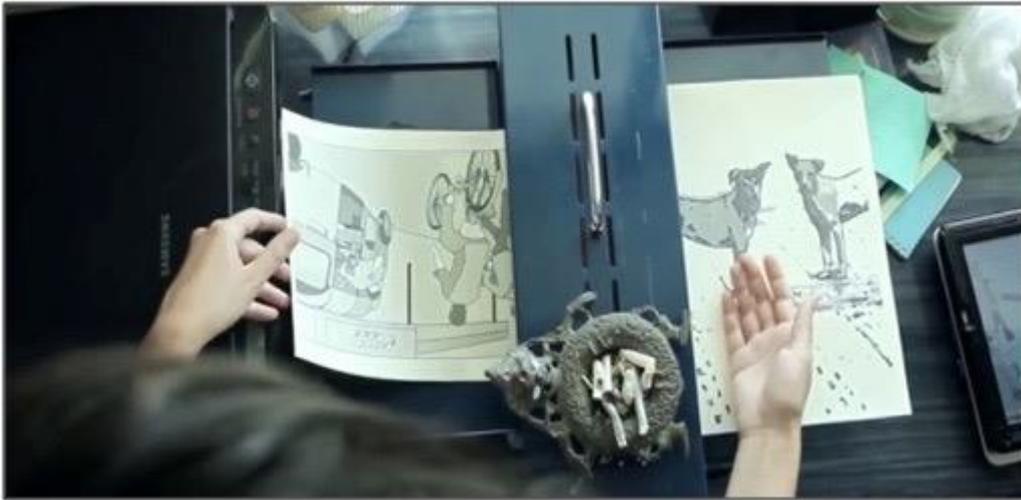
As it is evident in the film, embodiment is extended through technology or artefact that Aaliya uses. Aaliya's camera mediates her visual perception: the aural feature of the camera and audio visual chatting mediate hearing, and editing software mediates visual, hearing and tactile perceptions (Figure 3). The stick she carries to navigate through physical spaces mediates tactile perception. These artefacts serve as mediating tools that facilitate Aaliya to interact with the environment. These technologies get integrated and embodied in her lifeworld. The artefacts become a medium through which Aaliya expresses her *perceptual skills* Ihde (1990) termed this embodiment relations. Brey (2000) explained three of the senses as perceptual skills:

Three of the senses can be mediated in this way: sight, hearing, and feeling. Optical instruments like telescopes, microscopes, and glasses mediate visual perception. Aural instruments like hearing aids and stethoscopes mediate hearing, tactile instruments like probes and blind man's canes serve to mediate tactile perception (p.9).



**Figure 3.** Aaliya chats with her mom through audio visual Skype.

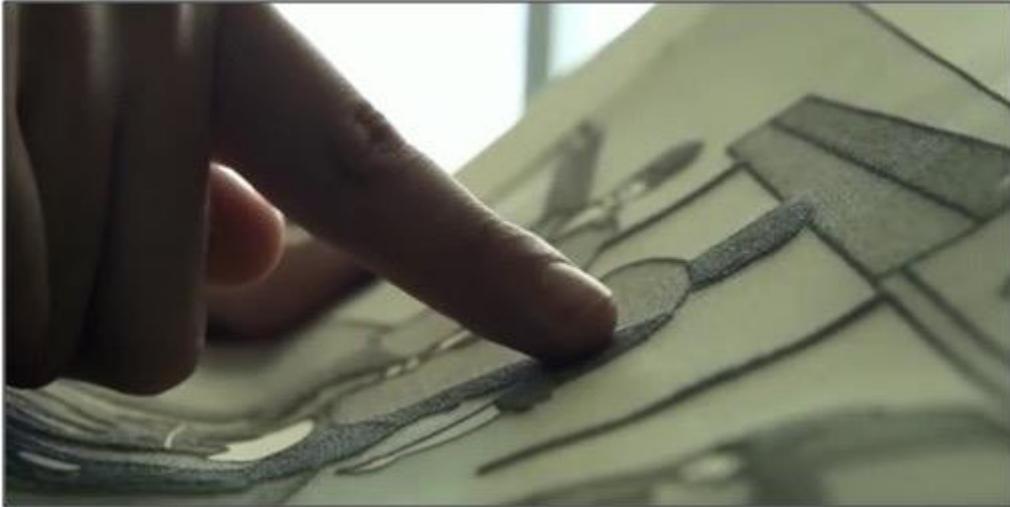
Merleau-Ponty (1962) also contributed to the human artefact relations stating that human beings use artefacts to stretch the spatiality of their body. He distinguished two types of embodiment relations considering the ways an artifact may get integrated into body schema. Either artefacts become the means through which *motor skills* are expressed (e.g. driving a car, texting to a friend) or they become the means through which perception takes place (e.g. using a hearing aid). The visually differently abled Aaliya experiences different kinds of being-in-the-world and constructs different modes of embodiment and body-relations with technologies. For instance, Aaliya's camera is an artifact through which she expresses her *motor skills* to use it and take photographs. At the same time, it is an artifact through which she forms her perceptions about the quality of picture through tactile interactions with an abstract image on the silver halide photographic paper or its digitally archived version. In the film, Aaliya takes the print outputs of photographs in the form of Braille embosser to visualize and feel her own photographs (Figure 4 and 5). She runs her finger on the Braille embosser format to make sense of the photographs clicked by her (Figure 6).



**Figure 4.** Printing in Braille embosser format.

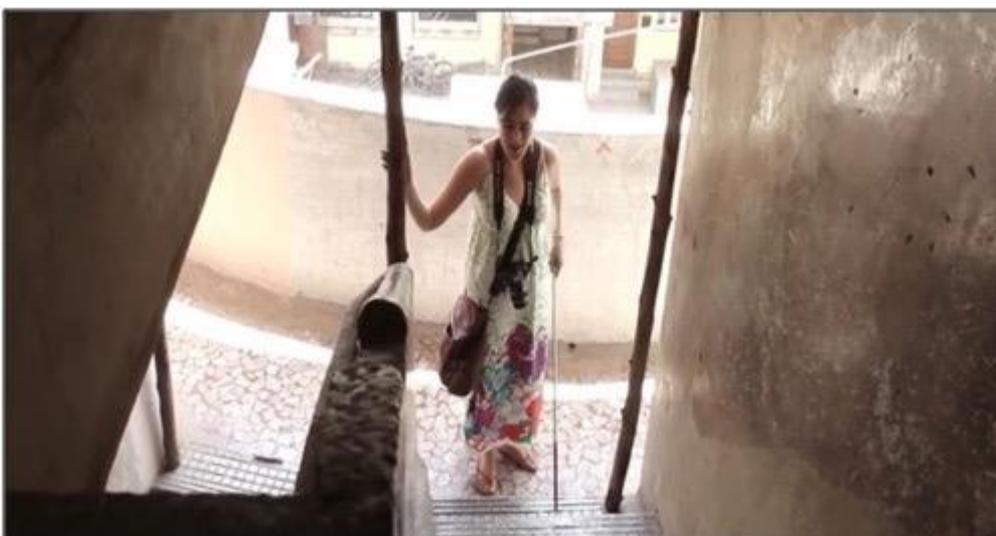


**Figure 5.** The two different formats viz. silver halide photographic paper and the same copy in Braille embosser format.



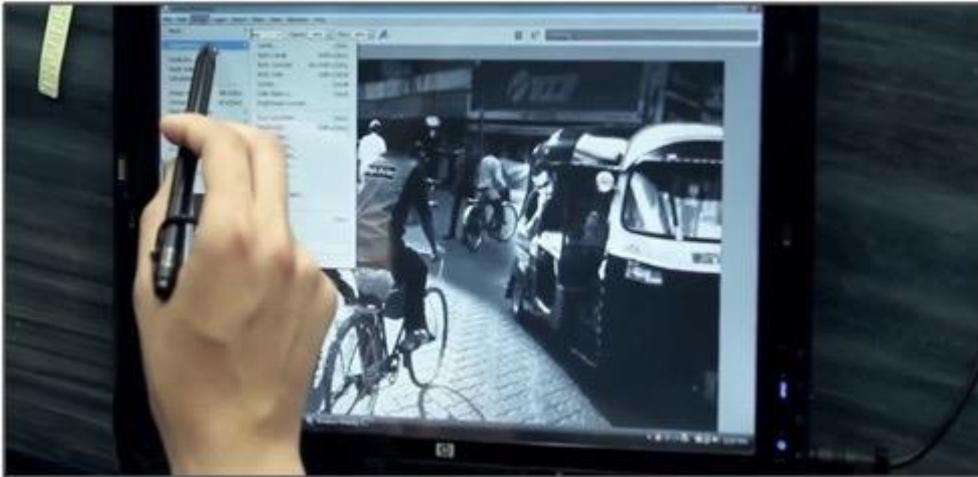
**Figure 6.** Aaliya analyses her photographs by moving her finger on the Braille embosser.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) explained the role of an object in helping human beings to understand their embodied relations with it and how human beings stretch their spatial relations with objects. Presenting the example of a blind man's cane, Ponty explained that the cane becomes an extension of the body and gets fused in the corporeal schema through which she perceives the world. In the film, Aaliya depends on objects and they become trust systems for her to interact with the external world. The stick she uses while walking on the road or while climbing the stairs illustrate the alterity relation (Ihde, 1990) she forms with it. Besides, the cane helps her in extending the spatiality of her lived body while it also allows her to perceive the world (Figure 7). Likewise, as Heidegger (1962) mentioned the cane is *ready-to-hand* resulting in Aaliya withdrawing herself from her experiencing the technology per se. Instead she immerses her in accomplishing her tasks.



**Figure 7.** Aaliya uses the stick and hand to walk on the stairs.

Being a visually differently abled person, Aaliya does not engage with immediate bodily perception of seeing images to capture them but experiences mediated perception of the same by touching objects as well as using assistive features in the camera to click pictures. Initially, she experiences a sense of absence when she expresses her disappointment and apprehension over taking to photography as her passionate career. The loss of cornea stands for the death of seeing and therefore an abrupt closure of the ocular-centric mediation of the world and the environment. At the same time, the loss of cornea comes to mediate her fear to handle technology and pursue taking photographs like she used to do. In this context, the non-existence of *microperceptual* 'seeing' is supplanted by *microperceptual* hearing and feeling. However such a microperceptual Aaliya undergoes also intertwines with her *macroperceptual* feeling of pursuing her passion as a photographer. *Macroperception* of situating *microperception* in a hermeneutic, cultural and interpretative framework. Aaliya re-contextualises the established normative conceptions of perceiving the world. As Ihde (1990) pointed out, Aaliya engages in hermeneutic relation with the world by means of camera and not through it. Her embodied and mediated relation with the world changes primarily due to the technology that has audio or voice over support. Handling camera becomes an embodied practice with the support of audio feature explaining her each step involved in clicking a picture from setting the aperture to clicking the picture. Audio centric camera, audio centric photo editing software and the stick extend the spatiality of Aaliya's body besides becoming integral parts of the body schema (Figure 8). Camera, software and the cane change the perceptual sense of photography and, with it, the *macroperception*. While using camera, Aaliya maintains a certain distance to click pictures in proper composition. Her sense of the space in relation to camera and the object she wants to capture illustrates the hermeneutic and embodied relations operating at the level of identifying objects through tactile perception and through her lived body experience.



**Figure 8.** Aaliya uses audio speech synthesizer to select tools from software to edit pictures

### *Post human subjectivity of Aaliya*

Aaliya loses her eyesight in the film and engages with the world through her other sensorial modalities. Her engagement with the world is a double embodiment with the camera first and through it the external world. Although the features of the camera demand and summon visual perceptions, her sensations, felt and experienced bodily to capture images, result in phenomenological perception of the world. She is an amalgamation of multiple components and is therefore a posthuman (Hayles, 2008), which includes her body as prosthesis. Further, her body folds and unfolds to interact with the camera to produce a subjectivity that is characterized by the material-semiotic assemblages surrounding her own physical body and that of the tools that she embodies to interact with the world as a photographer.

Techniques of implantation and organ transplant in the movie point to posthuman practices. In that sense, Aaliya is a cyborg (Haraway, 1985) with the transplant performed on her. At the same time, during her differently abled condition, she is a posthuman performing her functions through embodied practices of handling the digital still camera, taking pictures, sensing the environment, clicking pictures, editing them using software, and later chatting with her mother through Skype.

Invoking the Deleuzian (1987) term 'bodies without organs', it is essential to understand how Aaliya engages with her passion to take photographs in the absence of visibility. A technologised body thus produces a differently-abled body which has potentialities and capacities to act in its own ways and is therefore abled. It shows that the agency and the subjectivity of Aaliya seek to appropriate technology designed for the abled and turn it over to suit her own requirements. While the design of technology is hegemonic and elucidates the body politicking, the assistive support in technologies subverts the hegemonic discourse through Aaliya's appropriation of the features to create level-playing perceptual

experiences of the world without any discrimination privileging ocular-centric or other sensory capabilities.

In the second half of the movie, Aaliya gets the eyesight back through transplantation. She can see and sense things around with her new transplanted eye. The surgery explains that Aaliya is a posthuman having absorbed the transplanted eye and now functions like the way she used to when her perception of the world was mediated by technology. Aaliya as posthuman lives like a cyborg whose body is a combination of human and non-human entities.

### *Aaliya's embodiment of assistive technologies*

Technologies have a design bias and enable the able-bodied disadvantaging the differently-abled. The interfaces of gadgets consider the abled as the universal users and are mostly visual-centric placing eye at the centre of their use and relegating the functions of other sensory experiences to inferior positions. Assistive technologies, though much talked about, remain far from normative discourses. The hegemony involved in the design of technologies has crippled the differently-abled from using most of them without glitches. Such biases in technology widen the social disparity between the non-disabled and differently abled bodies. The politics of design excludes marginalized groups and reveals a flawed fetishism of interface towards ocular-centric regimes of perceiving the world.

“A computer technology is biased if it systematically and unfairly discriminates against certain individuals or groups of individuals in favor of others. A technology discriminates unfairly if it denies an opportunity or a good or if it assigns an undesirable outcome to an individual or group of individuals on grounds that are unreasonable or inappropriate”Friedman et al. (1995, p. 3).

### *Cameras, visuality and perception*

A normal digital camera, as it is advertised in media, or designed for use, favours visuality. It is premised on the essential *microperspective* of 'seeing' an image through the lens to capture it. Its functionality as an external object ceases to exist without the embodiment of 'seeing'. The micropolitics of the *microperspective* of seeing an image through the lens involves undoing or negation of the camera in the absence of 'an eye 'or a pair of 'eyes'. The common material practices surrounding a digital still camera in this movie are forms of visuality and hepaticity. However, for the differently abled visuality is not central to their experiences of the world. The camera does not offer the same sense of engagement to Aaliya as it does to someone who leverages visuality to perceive the world. The features of camera setting like aperture, ISO and shutter speed are set manually to control or adjust the light setting.

Aaliya uses her hands and ears to feel the objects and maintain distance from objects to be able to click pictures using her camera (Figure 9, 10 and 11). She clicks photographs from different angles, directions and positions to get the right composition. Her body gets adapted to these actions as it has become her regular practice. She embodied the bodily spaces from the object when she clicks the pictures. As a body moves around in space, there is an ongoing perspectival distortion and modification, whereby what is perceived is in motion as well. Further, in the movie, Aaliya uses her hand and her boyfriend aural elaboration to understand the photographs she captures.

Additionally, thereof in the film, Aaliya is instructed by the camera that automatically detects the ISO and the camera auditorily informs her ISO setting while clicking pictures. Audio centric camera instructs Aaliya to perform a range of activities (Figure 12).



**Figure 9.** Aaliya uses her hand to identify objects before clicking them.



**Figure 10.** Aaliya touches water to make sense of it.



**Figure 11.** Aaliya feeling the duck with her hand before clicking its picture

Heidegger (1962) analysed the ways in which tools/ technology are becoming present-at-hand and “with drawing” from their experiences. When Aaliya uses the camera, it becomes an extension of her eye as she visualizes and captures the object. In the movie, Aaliya never finds it difficult to deal with tools/equipments such as camera and the software as she has prior experience in using the equipment. She experiences present-at-hand difficulties after she gets her eyesight back as it causes her to disconnect with the tools and also the mediated relations and perceptions. The return to ocular-centric perception of the world ruptures her routine.

Embodiment of technologised by bodies is neither considered to be not full nor not organic. (Deleuze, 1988) discounts organicity of a body and goes on to argue that bodies without organs are bodies that do not claim boundaries but keep moving around, shifting and flowing into other bodies. This also explains the fact that the spatiality of the body is not just the body but also its relation to the external environment. The body is located in *smooth* space (Deleuze, 1988) and not in *striated* space. But the social structure and norms, technological bias and spatial bias, reveal that a body is positioned within a striated space. There is nothing smooth about it and hence the body cannot move and shift from one to another. But even with such striated spatial conditions, tries to negotiate and overcome limitations through sheer expression of her agency to carry out her vital activities.



**Figure 12.** Audio aid feature in the camera which assists Aaliya uses audio aid feature in her camera.

## **Conclusion**

Aaliya is hit by the abnormal, with something that is unusual, exceptional, unconventional or unnatural (Steinbock, 1995). She perceives life, post the abnormality of the physiological and pathological rupture (loss of eyesight), not as deviation from the normal standards. Injury is not to be seen as a deviant normality than it is the creation of a new normality or a new way of life. As Durkheim (1982) said diseases are ways in which new bodily norms are created and produce new normalities (as cited in Steinbock, 1995). Aaliya, as a lived-body, on the other hand, embraces, embodies and experiences life through somatic, tactile and haptic technologies to engage with and perceive the world.

From phenomenological perspective, normality and abnormality can be understood in two ways of Husserlian (1898-1925/2005) concepts of *concordance* and *discordance* in order to infer the lived-body experiences. According to Steinbock (1995), experiences of normality (*concordance*) appear from a 'continuity, progressively connected and sense of unity' whereas abnormality (*discordance*) is fundamentally an 'alteration or modification' what Husserl calls an 'inhibition' or 'rupture' with respect to the world being experienced (p. 244). In this paper, Aliya's temporality of experiences, *with, without and acquired eyesight*, can be seen through Husserlian concepts of *concordance* and *discordance*. Before eye transplantation, Aaliya seeks to interact with the world and embody experiences through the mediated relations with technologies and artifacts when she was visually differently abled. The modalities through which Aaliya experiences the world in the post-abnormal times include the voice over mechanism in her camera that mediates her visual perception, Braille format embosser that mediates her tactile perception and audio aid in editing software that mediates her seeing through hearing.

In the second half of film, when Aaliya regains her eyesight through eye transplantation, she is glad that for one she could now see the world with her eyes and could enjoy photographs clicked by her. Surprisingly, Aaliya starts losing interest in clicking pictures because she finds it difficult to perceive the world through the act of *seeing normally*. Thus, in Husserlian terms, Aaliya, having got accustomed to engaging with the world without eyesight through her intersubjective interactions with the environment and technologies, finds it difficult to return to the normal. She has moved to new normal experiences and thus finds going back to old modes of seeing as regressive. In fact, this return to the old normal constitutes another abnormal phase. It ruptures her being-in the world and her temporality of experiences. Thus, she continues to live in several bouts of post-abnormal phases that characterise what Catherine Malabou (2007) calls 'plasticity'. Malabou (2007) theorises plasticity as limits and borders that are waiting to transition and unlike elasticity it does not return to its old form. Thus, Aaliya, as a lived-body, cannot be fixed into the normal-abnormal continuum. Instead, through different experiences, *with, without and acquired eyesight*, she coheres a new normality, as Husserl understands, in an asymmetric fashion, that allows her to experience the world through her creative potentials.

Anand Gandhi (2013), the Director of the film *Ship of Theseus*, through the use of assistive technologies implies that disability does not disrupt the smooth flow of life. Aaliya perceives and experiences sight as a sensory perception through the voice over mechanism installed in her camera. She embodies the audio mechanisms that give her directions to click images. Likewise, the embossed relief of photo printing technique used in the movie is an innovation to let Aaliya make sense of the images she clicks. Therefore, her seeing of the images and adjusting the light conditions accordingly, (setting the ISO) before and after she clicks pictures are not experienced through her eyes but through mediated modalities mainly the voice over and the printing technique; one of which requires an aural modality and the other tactile/haptic. However, the technologies in the film do not exist in real social life. The experimental technologies used in the film by the director are useful for the budding visually challenged photographers. It is also a suggestion for technology developers to design new innovations and technologies that enable the visually challenged to engage with photographs like others do. Aaliya's post-humanism is more pronounced than the non-disabled. Aaliya's interactions with technologies, her ability to make sense of sound as a spatial characteristic listening to instructions from the camera on various settings, interacting with her mom on skype and her eye transplant point to her subject that is co-constituted by organic and non-organic human and non-human entities.

To conclude, as the mythology surrounding the *Ship of Theseus* (Gandhi, 2013) goes, it is a ship whose parts have been replaced and still continue to be a ship, but one in new form although its semiotic

referentiality is tenable across time and space. But, the ship may not be the same. Likewise, life during eyesight, when replaced with life without eyesight for Aaliya, she continued to be a photographer with a few components in the environment occupying central role in her enactment of *being-in-the-world*. Subsequently, she regains her eyesight after eye transplantation further causing ruptures and replacements in her life. Her identity as Aaliya remains the same but her intersubjective experiences with the world are not. Every moment of change and abnormality led Aaliya to transgress challenges with hope.

### ***Life during post-abnormality***

What would be the possible lifeworld of people who survive infections? This question dealing with life that all of us are faced with during the pandemic of Covid-19 is analogous to the question that one can imaginatively ask about the new potentials that Aaliya might be endowed with or adapt herself to after she regains eyesight. Aaliya is feeling lost although she regains her eyesight. She has learnt to live without eyesight and enjoyed working in a new ecosystem that involved interactions with technologies. Looking ahead, she would continue to be a photographer, but would harness the skills that she accrued while she went around clicking pictures and setting apertures and ISOs without eyesight. She would help those artists, who are visually challenged, to become all the more prescient in using technologies. In other words, Aaliya would help in overcoming the ocular-centric notion associated with the profession of photography. Covid-19 pandemic has ruptured the temporality of life but people continue to live in their own alternative ways with new hope. Online classes that have emerged as the trend during the pandemic have integrated technologies into teaching and learning. Technologies promote multimodal communication wherein one could be present and listen to lectures, choose to see videos, or presentations all at once. Likewise, social media and Whatsapp, mainly used for social communication, have become popular for sharing information. Work from home, or teleworking, has emerged as a new culture of work pushing people to negotiate with space and time. Use of technology and software like Zoom, Team, Google meet, Webx, VPN have reconfigured how people could come together through video conferencing. Telework and gig work have made it all the more possible for globalization. Aaliya could now reach out to a larger audiences across the world through social media and other platform enterprises, a lot of which are getting customized for specific purposes.

As social distancing is one of the essential conditions to ward off the virus, Aaliya might want to use drones to take images, an instantiation of mediated-imaging practice. She would connect with her fellow artists through technological platforms and might collaborate on photography installations online. Her zeal to work with visually-challenged might reinforce the idea that one could experience

the world and the environment with multiple senses thereby according less primacy to eyes and more to technological mediations. Thereby, she would be able to oppose the unequal spectacles that disadvantage the disabled. Paradoxically, with more technologies wired to Aaliya's work and social interactions, apart from acquiring new digital literacy skills, she would become a caring person helping many who are in the abnormality phase cross the hurdles and launch into a life beyond that. Further, Aaliya would become a person crusading for inclusivity.

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