

**The Male Body as Vacillation:
Disability, Gender, and Discourse in *The Men*.**

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Abstract: This essay considers the representation of gendered disability in *The Men* (Fred Zinnemann, 1950), Marlon Brando's first film. A groundbreaking yet deeply ambiguous text, the film explores notions of normative and non-normative physicality through the lens of masculinity, sexuality, and their implications for human status. In the light of key works by disability scholars, and of Judith Butler's discussion of the cultural construction of the body, this essay examines the multiple and subversive meanings made available by the film, and the extent to which *The Men* allows for a different bodily identity based on dissent.

Keywords: body, masculinity, disability, representation, sexuality, Judith Butler, Marlon Brando.

In the 1950 drama *The Men*, two key sequences take place in a sport centre, showing the renewal of strength and willpower in the protagonist Ken (Marlon Brando). The first sees him training side by side with his friend Angel (Arthur Jurado): fast-edited shots and a triumphant soundtrack showcase the young, athletic bodies of the two men, as they engage in weight-lifting and rope-climbing. The second sequence is even more intense, as Ken, now shown with pumped-up biceps and an often bare chest, grits his teeth through a

strenuous exercise regime, culminating in his multiple scoring at basketball. While Ken is clearly linked to the other men training and playing sports around him, he is the focal point of both sequences: if the latter scenes emphasise his fast-moving, increasingly powerful body, closer camera shots in the earlier images highlight the perfection of his classical features. In his first screen appearance, twenty-six year old Brando brings no heart-throb baggage to his role, yet his unlined beauty and partial nudity infuse these scenes with erotic connotations. Indeed, Ken/Brando has already been presented as an object of desire, relentlessly pursued by his ex-girlfriend Ellen (Theresa Wright) despite his refusal to even talk to her. As the display of his physical attractions confirms Ken as a coveted prize, the presence of other young, muscular men corroborates a scenario of male prowess, of an ideal virility being cultivated and cherished.

These ingredients would make for an utterly conventional narrative, was it not for a single dissonant element, a clear break in postwar representations of attractive masculinity: Ken's legs are totally inert, and so are those of every other man exercising. The sport centre is in fact part of a hospital for paraplegic WWII veterans; Ken and his friends must crawl on the floor through some of the training, to carry the weight of their paralysed legs, and Ken's scores at team sports are achieved from a wheelchair. The presence of a glitch in the smooth running of traditional manliness, of a gap between physical achievements and ideal gender performance, is clearly acknowledged in the second gym sequence: as Ken holds himself upright by clutching a bar fixed to the wall, and tentatively lets go of it for a few seconds, he explains he is practising for his wedding, as he wants to 'get married standing up'. The question mark hanging over Ken's virility and that of the other veterans is specified in a previous scene, where his

now reconciled fiancée asks paraplegia expert Dr Brock (Everett Sloane) if Ken will ever be able to have children. Avoiding direct references to sex by euphemistically invoking the issue of ‘fertility’, Dr Brock answers ‘it isn’t very probable – but it is within the realm of possibility’, wearily adding ‘I don’t think – I’d rather say I don’t know’. This anxiety surrounding Ken’s sexual status, the uncertainty as to his capacity to fulfil a ‘normal’ masculine role, forms the core of the film’s representation of disability. Ken’s exercise regime is part of a broader ‘rehabilitation’ strategy, aimed not only at improving the veterans’ health but also at normalising them, at reinserting them in a social structure defined by heteronormativity. This reinsertion is presented as compulsory, even if nominally achieved by going through the motions of ‘normality’: the probably impotent Ken must go ahead and marry, even if the available meaning of ‘marriage’ assumes penetrative sex and procreation, and must attempt to stand on his paralysed legs as he is pronounced Ellen’s husband.

The Men thus posits a male body stranded by disability, separated from a socio-physical context to which it supposedly needs to return. In other words, the film foregrounds disability as a state of disconnection, to which reinsertion into an inflexible system provides the only re-connective route; this all-pervading notion, motivating the plot, also allows *The Men* to be usefully framed through past and recent disability scholarship. Martin Norden’s seminal work *The Cinema of Isolation: a History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (1994) argues that filmic representations of disability have been defined by an overarching rhetorical device, the suggestion of ‘a physical or symbolic separation of disabled characters from the rest of society.’ Norden sees this cinematic trope as a reflection of the social isolation inflicted on, and experienced by, the

disabled population over centuries. A historical treatment of disability relying on exclusion has been one of the motors keeping the established order running, enabling a non-disabled majority to ‘foster self-continuance’ by keeping a disabled minority in its allotted place. Especially interesting in relation to *The Men* is Morden’s reference to Sigmund Freud’s work on the Uncanny, which links social fears of disability to the fear of castration (1994: 1-6); Morden claims that filmmakers have exploited this essential link, and certainly Zinnemann’s film would not be conceivable without the not-so-veiled threat of emasculation underlying male paraplegia. The cultural association of disability with castration is also emphasised by Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli in their discussion of *The Men* (2015): pointing to a whole theoretical framework described as ‘symbolic castration’, they claim that this is applied equally to literary and filmic texts ‘especially when a disabled male figure is involved’ (236).

The inevitable spilling of dominant discourses of disability into sexual territory is at the core of *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (Robert McRuer, 2006). In this groundbreaking exploration of socially-constructed deviancy, McRuer explicitly links the able body to the heteronormative one, discussing ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ as a system which effectively produces disability, in mutual dependency to ‘the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness’. Operating through the coercive re-production of a specific set of attributes, compulsory able-bodiedness demands the attainment and preservation of ‘orderly, coherent (or managed) identities’ (2006: 2-5). However, precisely because they are performatively achieved, these identities are ultimately never permanent, therefore requiring constant, if futile, vigilance and reaffirmation. McRuer’s broader concept of an enforced ‘normality’ to which

individuals must belong or face ostracism, is clearly already present in Norden's text, and in his specific discussion of *The Men*, whose protagonist's trajectory towards 'rehabilitation' is read as an act of compliance: 'Bud has a difficult time containing his smoldering intensity [...] but [the film] shows him gradually accepting his new life as a post-rehabilitative person'. (1994: 178) If hegemonic notions of physical and sexual 'normality' affect the real and representative identities of any disabled person, orthodox constructions of masculinity place specific demands on the male disabled body. As outlined by Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgwood, and Nathan J. Wilson (2012), a fundamental conflict exists between accepted notions of maleness and those of disability. The autonomy and independence implied by conventional virility can only clash with the vision of helplessness, and of child-like dependency informing representations of the disabled. In the light of this consideration, it seems feasible to expect that in the case of a male subject who is also a soldier or ex-soldier, roles invested with hyper-virile connotations, the clash may be all the stronger. If one then considers the importance ascribed to sexual prowess in traditional models of masculinity, the anxiety associated with the disabled veteran's body could be devastating; indeed, this notion is supported by Linker and Laemmli, who argue that as social pressures on men's sexual performance increased after WWII, they generated fears that affected disabled veterans most severely (2015: 230).

All the authors cited above, therefore, highlight overlapping systems of beliefs, conventions, and practices, which may be collectively summarised as the discourse of heteronormative ableism. This discourse is crucially relevant to *The Men*, as it would seem to determine the film's primary meaning: the pursuit of physical ability and

successful virility motivates the plot, while resting on a counter narrative of pathology and gender dysfunction. These mutually dependent, yet mutually erosive visions inform the construction of Ken's body, caught in a normative system that alternately claims and rejects it. At the same time, however, this 'norm' contains its own undoing, as gender and bodily identities are shown to be sustained by an openly performative process. Just as the system's foundations are revealed as being unstable, Ken's characterisation and narrative role also disrupt the film's normative drive. As *The Men*'s chief erotic object and channel for audience desire, Ken/Brando unsettles prescriptive notions of desirability, through a plot that never sees him recover the use of his legs, while casting serious doubt on his capacity to have 'normal' sex. Likewise, Ken's ambiguous sexuality, defined by passivity, the absence of overt desire, and a perennially undefined potency, haunts the film's endorsement of orthodox masculinity. The result is a layered structure of meaning. In this sense, the following analysis of *The Men* expands on the work of Linker and Laemmli, who read the conflicting signs inscribed in the film as a permanent block on the veterans, described as 'stuck at the intersection of seemingly irreconcilable social roles: the successfully reintegrated soldier, the virile husband, and the asexual paraplegic.' (2015: 249) While this 'stuck' situation is of course very much part of the film's context, *The Men*'s treatment of Ken's body complicates it by ultimately subverting normative shaping, moving beyond 'normality' and 'anomaly' to posit an alternative, dissenting male identity.

The Men immediately spells out its twofold concern, the uneasy alliance of disability .with traditional virility: its first image is a lengthy dedication to those men who

‘fought twice’, on the battlefields first and later in mastering their war-disabled bodies. Respectful and admiring, the dedication fills the screen with words such as ‘battle’, ‘courage’, and ‘victory’. Next, to the sound of drums, Ken is shown in full combat outfit, leading a troop of soldiers into seemingly deserted fields, as the credits list ‘forty-five of the men of Birmingham Veterans Administration Hospital’. Advancing steadily while brandishing machine guns, the soldiers are however ambushed as they enter a village, and the camera focuses on Ken being shot in the back: this is the last image of the protagonist as able-bodied. Through a voiceover, he describes losing all feeling in his legs; the film then cuts to a hospital bed, where Ken lies paralysed from the waist down, talking of suicide. Brief as the war scenes are, they have established Ken’s ‘manly’ credentials; they have equally provided a testimony of his non-disabled past, a mnemonic body that will both haunt and shape Ken’s paraplegic legs. As the film now cuts to another hospital scene, Dr Brock is shown talking to the veterans’ wives, in a conversation centred on the men’s reproductive future. ‘Is it possible?’ ask the women anxiously, referring to their desire to have children. Dr Brock admits it is ‘difficult to say – in some cases...’, then announces that one of the nurses is marrying a patient. After this cryptic piece of information, the film moves on to Ken’s long-suffering girlfriend, Ellen, who also has a troubled exchange with Dr Brock. She explains that Ken has refused to see her since he is in hospital, and asks the doctor to intercede in her favour. The next sequence takes place in the hospital’s open ward, as Dr Brock does his rounds, stopping to talk to each veteran and enquire about his progress. A disciplinarian who clearly believes in tough love, the doctor alternately praises and scolds his patients, while urging them to take up further education and gym training. Reactions to these ‘rehabilitation’ plans vary from

acceptance to sulky defiance, as when one of the men says: ‘no, I don’t want to be rehabilitated, readjusted, reconditioned, re-anything. Don’t want to take my proper place in society’. This sarcastic yet good-humoured banter contrasts with Ken’s markedly hostile, wholly uncooperative attitude, which prompts the doctor’s stern declaration that he is ‘in much better shape than he deserves to be’. Dr Brock’s mention of Ellen provokes Ken’s furious screams, as he repeats he does not want to see her; the doctor responds by taking Ken off painkillers, despite acknowledging that he is still ‘in a lot of pain’.

The hospital’s draconian regime, controlling bodies through punitive measures to improve their functioning, is thus also implicitly targeting the men’s personal lives, encouraging their realignment with successful heterosexuality. The scenes in the sport centre, marking Ken’s recovery from depression, equally show his surrender to Dr Brock’s rule, as he embraces physical training after his reconciliation with Ellen, with marriage in view. From this point onwards, the film’s normalising trajectory propels the narrative, which however remains held in tension by the dichotomy of able/disabled, virile/non-virile. While Ken and Ellen go ahead with their wedding plans, they are surrounded by misgivings about their union, from her parents’ explicit disapproval (‘is it so wrong for us to want a grandchild?’) to one veterans’ bitter reflection that ‘normal is normal, and cripple is cripple, and never shall the twain meet’. Convinced one day that his legs are ‘coming back’, the ecstatic Ken gives Ellen the news, only to be crushingly disappointed when Dr Brock conducts some tests on him. Around the same time Angel, the body-builder and inspiration for Ken’s training, dies suddenly of meningitis caused by his spinal injuries. The exposure of the innate precariousness of ‘masculinity’ finds its

climax in the scene of Ken's wedding: his carefully rehearsed plan to stand on his legs fails, as he falters dramatically when he is about to recite his vows, and needs to be supported by best man Dr Brock. As the newlyweds arrive home, the mood between them is fraught and gloomy; they start to argue and Ken leaves abruptly to return to the hospital, turning his wedding night into a non-event. The plot then follows Ken's increasingly antisocial behaviour, as he picks fights with strangers in bars and gets arrested for drunk driving. Declared an undesirable element by the Paraplegics' Association, who join forces with Dr Brock in saying he must return to his wife, Ken capitulates again, and leaves the hospital to ask Ellen to take him back. The last scene sees him outside the house and welcomed by Ellen, yet facing another obstacle in the shape of some steps between the door and his wheelchair. 'Do you want me to help you up the steps?' she says with trepidation, and he calmly, agreeably replies 'please'. The film ends on this note of reconciliation, but with no hint of what the couple's married life and sex life will be; or, in the words of the film's director Fred Zinnemann, 'the end is a question mark'(1992: 80).

The Men was groundbreaking for its time. The casting of real-life paraplegics, who make up most of the characters on screen, literally places disability at the forefront of the narrative. Fred Zinnemann, who had joined independent scriptwriters and producers Stanley Kramer and Carl Foreman, knew they were pushing boundaries: 'the very idea would have provoked a corporate faint at any one of the major studios' (Zinnemann 1992: 78). A few years before, in 1946, William Wyler had directed *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a notable precedent featuring, in an otherwise stellar cast, the

veteran and amputee Harold Russell, who had lost both hands in WWII. Wyler's film, however, does not match the overwhelming presence of the disabled community in *The Men*; nor does it attempt to eroticise Russell, in his role as returning soldier Homer. As one of three men followed by the plot after the war, and the only disabled one, Homer is infused with dignity and courage; yet while he is eventually reunited with his former girlfriend, he is associated with love and nurture rather than desire, which is instead firmly directed onto Fred (Dana Andrews), cast in the dashing heartbreaker role. *The Best Years of Our Lives* remains an impressive achievement, and its portrayal of Homer encourages audience identification with him. *The Men*, however, navigates uncharted territory, not only through the screen and plot space it gives to disability, but through positioning Ken/Brando at the centre of a narrative of desire. The film goes beyond its explicit, already daring question 'can disabled men have sex?' to implicitly ask whether the disabled *should* have sex: and, by the unqualified eroticisation of its protagonist, it clearly replies that they should. In so doing, *The Men* places the disabled body in the erotic realm; yet this placement comes at a price, as it is mediated through oppressively normative concepts of masculinity and sexuality. The film's take on disability is gender-dependent, beginning from the 'men' of the title, and gender is in turn pervasively linked to sexual performance. Paraplegia is presented as the potential impairment of the veterans' male identity, by allegedly threatening their sexual function and, with it, their belonging to the 'normality' of the social order; this view of disability is dominant in the film, and the sole motivation for its plot. Ken's disabled male body, therefore, is initially understood in relation to specific gender markers; its intelligibility is firstly shaped by heteronormative discourse, by the extent to which it may fit it, and by the imperative that

it must be made to fit it. Yet Ken never fully obeys this command, as he negotiates and flaunts discursive categories, to finally posit a physicality of dissent.

In *The Men*, the contours of Ken's body are in constant fluctuation, as he alternately conforms to, exposes, and resists the forces shaping his male disabled identity; the primary vacillation between material and imaginary undergoes a shift, as physical matter is intermittently polarised to a vision of positive non-normativity. In order to analyse the morphological process informing Ken's body, it is useful to refer to the work of Judith Butler. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Butler expands on her previous discussion of gender-formation, addressing the inescapable issue of the objective materiality of the body. She argues that the material is always already bound to the cultural, and that the inscription of bodily identities in the field of the possible is dependent on their appropriate demarcation under dominant power structures. This delineation of matter creates and relies on a field of abjection, a sphere outside the thinkable where failed, unliveable bodies must lie, alienated by the boundary between 'bodies that matter' and bodies who don't. The contours, or boundaries, of the body are accordingly shaped by discourse, expressive of heterosexual hegemony and intimately linked to the physical; the body emerges as a 'vacillation' between 'materiality and the imaginary' (1993: xxv), that is to say between matter and normative fantasy.

In the film's dominant text, the protagonist's body is informed by a dream of sexual potency, a fantasy of ideal manhood that overtakes every other consideration. The sexual scenario is seamlessly established following the initial war scenes, when Ken's able-bodied presence is combined with his soldier valour (and indeed the film explains

that he was decorated for bravery); Ken's orthodox virility, that of a physically able warrior, persists as a memory in his new paraplegic body, as an imaginary of male power that is inextricably linked to sexuality. The capacity to be (hetero)sexually active and reproduce is not only assumed to be the shared aspiration of all men, regardless of ability, but also to be the definition of human life as they know it, a precondition for non-alienness and admission to the established social order. It is not a coincidence that one of the film's first scenes, Dr Brock's didactic lecture to his patients' wives, is set in the hospital chapel, where the doctor is flanked by an altar and a US flag: these markers of power are framing the issues being discussed, imparting an official finality to physical considerations. What is at stake is not only the veterans' health, but the potential disintegration of society. Indeed, in their discussion of the cultural context surrounding *The Men*, Linker and Laemmli explain that mid-centuries anxieties about disabled veterans were not simply about their threatened manhood, but also about 'their marriages, and thus the larger project of national rehabilitation' (2015: 230). Disability therefore threatens the men with the loss of what Tobin Siebers calls 'sexual citizenship' (2012: 47). According to Siebers, every disability is seen by default as sexual disability, in a dominant context where the recognisable presence of sex 'bestows human status'; the non-able body, therefore, is perceived as not being firmly human (2012: 41).

The consequence of a fall into non-humanity is chaos, and *The Men* is driven by the conflict between having to avert chaos and accommodate its potential value. The veterans' reversal of physical condition, from able-bodiedness to partial paralysis, is chiefly envisaged as the total loss of their sexual function, in a system of meaning where male sexuality is guaranteed only by an erection. The result of this perceived sexual loss

is not mere deviation, but a blank, a conspicuous void in the fabric of manhood. As a blank is ultimately impossible to conceive, the men's gender and sexual identity is poised on the brink of the unthinkable. It is no wonder, then, that the doctor's talk to the wives assumes such urgency, and occupies a key narrative place at the film's beginning: the veterans' human status is in danger. Translating into tangible, mentionable issues the socio-sexual crisis under way, Dr Brock introduces his patients, hardly glimpsed so far, through a dramatic medical speech. His words implicitly equate in importance the loss of sexual capacity with the loss of bowel and bladder function; sex, however, is given far more emphasis, through answering the women's questions about having children (queries recurring throughout the film, while bowel and bladder are dispensed with a single question, and a few brief comments in the doctor's first scene in the ward). Thus mainly defined as a violent rupture in 'normal' sexuality, disability is addressed as a social and personal threat, to combat by means of urgent heterosexualisation: the narrative precedence given to the men's wives, the absolute prominence of marriage in the plot, and the ongoing attention given to the veterans' contact with women, turn heterosexual relations into both test and cure for the (allegedly) worst consequences of paraplegia. Married life, or at least the wish for it, is clearly pivotal in Ken's road to health, and in the journey to self-recovery mapped out for all the veterans; it goes together with getting off painkillers, physical training, driving, and professional education.

It is interesting to note how Marlon Brando, recalling *The Men* in his memoirs, subscribes to the view that sexual performance was the paraplegics' main problem. Brando prepared for his role as Ken by spending three weeks in the veterans' company, day and night, living in the ward with them and taking part in their activities; he used a

wheelchair at all times. Years later, he reflected that ‘perhaps the saddest aspect of these men was that they believed they had let their wives down; in most cases, they had lost their capacity for sexual performance, and it ate at them. [...] Some of the friends I made at Birmingham killed themselves, unable to take it anymore’ (1991: 149-150). The implication of Brando’s words is that the men committed suicide because of their sexual inadequacy. A belief in the supreme value of sex in the veterans’ commitment to life, combined with the experience of their daily trials, clearly shapes Brando’s performance: his portrayal of Ken’s despair resonates with the loss of social identity, with shock and confusion as the markers of his masculinity are suddenly vulnerable. While Ken’s grief is obviously linked to his paraplegia, it is also caused by the vacuum threatening his formerly secure virility. This gender and sexual turmoil drives Ken’s inexorable, if constantly questioned progression towards married life with Ellen. At the same time, Ken’s role contains ambiguities and ambivalences that are strengthened by Brando’s performance, suggesting the protagonist’s awareness of the system’s normative clutches.

A defining characteristic of Ken/Brando is his anger. On screen, and indeed off it, Marlon Brando has often expressed violent rage, and *The Men* marks his film debut as much as his nascent star persona; his angry style had already been shown on stage, in the Broadway production of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where Brando’s impersonation of the brutal Stanley Kowalski had brought him to the critics’ attention, and to Zinnemann’s. The director remembers Brando on the set of *The Men* as ‘...a bit surly and very much on the defensive. [...] He was still very much the Stanley Kowalski of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, stuck in that character, and he brought some of him into his performance in *The Men*’ (Zinnemann 1992: 82). Shades of violence and

misogyny, Kowalski's main attributes, are indeed traceable in Ken's treatment of Ellen, who is made to endure his shouting, scornful hostility, and spiteful rejection. Ken's behaviour, however, is framed by the overarching presence of disability, and consequently bears on his position in regards to it. As a man devastated by his paralysis, who expresses his feelings mostly through bouts of fury, it is remarkable that Ken never directs his anger at his non-responding legs, at wheelchairs, or even at the war that has caused his predicament. The prime targets of his rage are the combined forces involved in his 'rehabilitation': the medical system, encompassing Dr Brock as much as the ultimately obedient patients, and the heterosexual structure that includes Ellen, wedding plans, and domestic life. These spheres of influence are merged in the hospital's world, where most of the veterans support the idea of marriage, flirt with female visitors, and may even marry one of the nurses; most significantly, the paraplegics unanimously decide to send Ken back to his wife at the end of the film.

On one hand, Brando's furious performance as Ken fits with established filmic stereotypes of the disabled: Norden mentions 'the embittered individual' who 'overcomes all odds', and the 'violence-prone beast' (1994: 3), as two stock representations of disability. Ken fits them both, as he combines terrible, violent rage with bitterness, while he also appears to overcome his obstacles: he becomes fit and strong in spite of his injury, while finally accepting married life with at least the semblance of good will. At the same time, however, in the face of the film's solid alliance of disability with heteronormativity, Ken's characterisation as a non-joiner, frequently aggressive or, at other times, passively seething with rage, posits a refusal of the normalising structure he is placed in.

Ken's defiance is forcefully shown in two scenes from early in the film. The first follows Ken's hostile interaction with the other patients, while the second sees Ellen finally managing to talk to him, with the help of Dr Brock. In the former scene Ken has been admitted to the open ward, but is still lying down on his bed, unlike the other men who are sitting up or moving around in wheelchairs. Ken steadily rejects the veterans' attempts at friendly communication, and his lack of civility provokes their taunting and sarcasm; one of them decides to harass him by playing his radio very loud. As his request to turn down the volume is ignored, Ken/Brando transforms his face into a ferocious mask of rage, grabs a beaker of water and hurls it, shouting, in the veterans' direction. Coming from a suicidal man who is unable to sit up in bed, it is an amazingly energetic expression of anger. The second scene is introduced by a talk between Ellen and Dr Brock, who agrees to organise her surprise visit to Ken; he instructs her to come to the hospital the following night, when a patient and a nurse are getting married. 'There's a wedding – he'll be alone in the ward' he says, highlighting Ken's non-participation in the marriage festivities, and thus also his essential condition of 'isolation', exactly as discussed in Norden's work. Ellen's arrival is preceded by a shot of Ken in the empty ward, which is plunged in almost total darkness: the only shafts of light come from distant corridors. Everyone has indeed gone to the wedding, and Ken is shown through a long shot, a formless bundle under the bed covers; he is conspicuously isolated, cut off from the hospital's communal life. The meeting that follows is extremely tense. Ken is distraught by the sight of Ellen, and reacts with fury, screaming 'get out' and calling her 'a stupid idiot'; with mounting rage, he removes the blankets to force on her a full view of his paralysed legs, then he breaks down in tears. Just at this moment cheerful voices

are heard, and the noise of people approaching: it is the wedding party, suitably raucous and, apart from the bride, Dr Brock, and a nurse, all using their wheelchairs.

Lights are switched on at the entrance of the ward, but Ken and Ellen remain shrouded in semi-darkness, as they watch unseen the party from a distance. Amid the cheers of the group, the bride opens their presents, which include a rolling pin; she jokingly threatens her husband with it, and then gives him a kiss. While this traditional display of married happiness takes place, Ken and Ellen stay silent; as the party departs for more celebrations, Ellen insists that she and Ken should renew their engagement. ‘Why not us?’ she asks her hostile and distressed man, in a faint echo of a previous scene when one of the veterans, exasperated by Ken’s gloom and antagonism, had asked him ‘what side were you on?’. Now waves of emotion rapidly pass over Ken’s face, and in a calmer tone he says ‘I don’t know, honey, I don’t know’. It is the beginning of Ken’s half-hearted acquiescence to the grand scheme pressed on him; a partial surrender, caused by his unexpressed terror of falling in an identity void. Equally, the enormous twin pressure of ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ and compulsory heteronormativity is informing that terror, weakening his resistance and facilitating his reluctant, limited obedience.

This narrative turn towards Ken’s hetero-compliant ‘rehabilitation’, however, cannot wipe out what his behaviour and presence have already initiated. As the audience’s main channel for both identification and desire, Ken/Brando has partly overshadowed external constructions of his identity, casting instead a personal, dissenting slant on his own representation. His opposition to normalising plans has torn the hegemonic imaginary that shapes his body, revealing a troubling vision of corporal disobedience, of non-rehabilitation. Against dominant fantasies of ideal masculinity,

ving for the mastery of his physical contours, Ken has evoked a counter imaginary, the idea of a body that will not be assimilated into the 'norm'; yet this body cannot be relegated to the field of abjection either, as it remains the erotic target of diegetic and non-diegetic desire, as well as the visible incarnation of the film's prime subjectivity. In the light of Butler's theory, this new vision constitutes the pole opposing Ken's materiality, and thus marks an alternative shaping, positing his body as the vacillation between matter and defiance.

The sheer dominance of Brando's physicality highlights the ever-present possibility of this fluctuation, at each stage of the narrative: whether bedridden and almost immobile, or revelling in his new-found strength at the gym, Brando foregrounds Ken as a physical presence. This is not only by virtue of his beauty, arguably unique among the film's male characters, or of his eroticised function, which *The Men* interestingly denies to Theresa/Wright; it is also because of the narrative significance attached to his body. In every single frame he appears, the presence of Ken/Brando is implicitly or explicitly mediated through his physical drama, and indeed the whole film rests on that single element, his paraplegia. Unsettling yet powerfully attractive, Ken's unruly bodily identity is haunted by chaos, a chaos however qualified by dissent; the alternative boundaries of his body suggest affirmative non-alignment, and a different, unknown system of signification. By exposing his paralysed legs to Ellen in the hospital, and by default to the audience, who cannot see them in this shot but can imagine them, Ken is forcing the unthinkable on the gaze turned on him: an aberrant yet eroticised body, whose own sexual dimension is, by the laws governing the meaning of 'sexual', incomprehensible.

Ken's awareness of his distance from normative aspirations, and his consequent exposure of the constructed nature of masculinity, occur intermittently in the film: they are gaps or tears in the fabric of the medical, social, and cultural discourses claiming his body, and in which he himself is partly complicit. His wavering between internalised hegemonic beliefs and mere compliance illustrates another key Butlerian concept, the notion of performative gender-formation. Judith Butler argues that gender, with its associated qualities, behaviours, and sexualities, is not innate or natural, but the result of cultural dogma. Fabricated identities for which there are no originals, 'femaleness' and 'maleness' are utopian patterns which endure through incessant repetition; the compulsion to repeat them is unconsciously enacted by the subject, in a context where non-compliance carries punishment and/or abjection. Gender is thus performatively formed, yet it is not a willed performance.(1991). As already mentioned, Robert McRuer argues that a similar performative process lies behind able-bodiedness, as bodies are in fact vulnerable, constantly ageing, and ultimately never perfect. In *The Men*, the performative nature of 'normal' maleness informs the film's dominant structure: Ken's decision to marry is an act of conformity with available gender models, an instinctive pursuit of the established life pattern for 'real men'. To those arguing he is not fit anymore for this pattern (such as Ellen's parents), he answers by siding with those who, like Dr Brock, do not know the extent of Ken's 'masculinity', yet favour a ritualised confirmation of his gender. Marriage here is a repetition of familiar practices for gender's sake, and therefore for Ken's sake. This repetition *becomes* the masculinity Ken has supposedly lost, and the ritual thus effects 'normality'; far from taking part in an intentional fake, Ken and his wedding party are prepared to see his virility restored.

Ken's wedding thus becomes the film's dramatic focal point, anticipated, discussed, and causing anxiety even before it takes place. If the bridal ceremony seems to promise familiar repetition, it is nonetheless already fractured by the presence of disability, with its powerful threat of ruined manhood. This threat is made tangible through Ken's decision to get married standing up, an attempt not to simulate his former able-bodiedness, but rather to re-shape his body through an imaginary of ideal male prowess. It is performativity being carried out, liable to turn into an open performance only if it should fail. In its explicit text, *The Men* does not highlight the common use of the word 'performance' in relation to men's sexual activity; however, Ken's pre-marriage training, its focus on keeping an erect position, and the stated unlikelihood of his ever having sex and children, all point to a carefully rehearsed act. Subtextually, the suggestion is that 'normal' male sexuality, defined by specific physical exploits, might be nothing more than a routine pretence.

The build-up to the wedding scene is a sequence showing Ken in the gym. He first appears bare-chested, with his legs encased in girdles, holding himself upright by clutching the bars at his sides: he is practising 'walking' by dragging his lower body behind him, and advances slowly this way. With a serious expression, he watches his reflection in a mirror, and sighs with relief as he stands up fully straight. His eyes look approvingly at his own image, on which the camera lingers: Brando's muscular chest and shoulders, beautiful face, and obvious youth, convey the image of a male god who just happens to wear leg braces. (Fig. 1). This shot, more than any other in the film, exemplifies the shaping of Ken's body between matter and hegemonic fantasy; the next image, however, re-inserts an element of doubt in this dream of gender perfection. Here

Ken is shown training for two related feats: standing on his legs without support, and learning his wedding vows. A fellow-patient lies on the floor near him, reading out loud the familiar words: ‘Do you take this woman to be your wedded wife...’, while Ken, standing in his leg braces, practises letting go of the bar. Suddenly his friend stops reading the vows, and asks him: ‘You’re sure you wanna go through with this?’, to which Ken sharply replies ‘Come on!’.

The film then cuts to the wedding ceremony, through a high long shot of the chapel, which appears mostly filled with men in wheelchairs; Ellen is walking the aisle towards Ken, who is also in his chair. The wedding march is being played. Ken and Ellen smile at each other, and Ken gets up to stand next to her, holding onto a table with both hands; a worried-looking Dr Brock pulls his wheelchair away. The anxious eyes of all the veterans are fixed on Ken; he continues to stand, and is then asked to join hands with his bride. Hesitantly, Ken takes one hand off the table, and holds Ellen’s; after this, however, he lifts up his other hand too, manages to stand up for a few seconds, (Fig. 2) and then he falls. Ellen and Dr Brock hold him up, as thunderous, non-diegetic music marks this moment, which is prolonged by a series of two-shots of Ken and Ellen in close-up: they stare at each other with a stunned and frightened gaze. An ominous soundtrack emphasises their mute exchange, and the interruption it has caused in the scene’s smooth linearity. While Ken’s fall may seem an all-too-obvious phallic metaphor, it is evidently presented as a major tragedy in his consecration as man and husband. The tension and anger of the following scenes, when Ken explodes with fury and flees his newlywed home, point to the strain of this self-normalising attempt. Forced to acknowledge the

performative aspect of his masculinity, Ken's reactions reveal gender to be a mere construction.

The uncertainty cloaking Ken's male identity is given a final emphasis by his apparent sexual detachment. While his body is eroticised by the film, and in a sense masculinised as the object of female desire, it is never explicitly shown as a desiring body. Not once in *The Men* does the protagonist express erotic interest in his girlfriend or anyone else; completely alien to the veterans' sexual banter, lacking any hint of desire in his personal interactions, Ken may be partly shaped as an ideal virile specimen, but his virile sexuality remains wholly unexplained. Marked by the absence or suspension of overt sexual feelings, his return home to Ellen completes the ambiguity of the film's ending. Far from representing domestic closure or a cosy heterosexual future, the reconciliation of husband and wife validates Ken's non-normative, non-guaranteed masculinity; in so doing, *The Men* allows the possibility of meaningful relationships beyond canonical sexual contracts. Through Ken's domination of audience desire and identification, Zinnemann's film suggests an alternative to oppressive systems of codification: an imaginary of dissent, an unstable yet defiant identity shaped by affirmative non-alignment.

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