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The Ethics of the Gaze

Representing (Dis)ability and Otherness in Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld's *Elefantmannen*

Abstract: This article examines the ethics of the gaze in disability representation in Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld's Elefantmannen (Elephant Man) from 2013, a Norwegian picturebook that recounts the life of Joseph Carey Merrick (1862–1890). Drawing on critical disability studies, Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, and Ato Quayson's concept of aesthetic nervousness, the analysis explores how the book stages five distinct gazes: the spectacle gaze of the freak show, the societal gaze of everyday encounters, the clinical gaze of medical professionals, the empathetic gaze of visitors, and Merrick's own gaze. The article argues that Elefantmannen deploys multiple gazes to implicate readers in the ethics of looking at disability, exposing how visibility is shaped by ableist norms while foregrounding the limits of empathy. By turning the gaze back on the reader and generating aesthetic nervousness, Elefantmannen challenges conventional disability narratives and invites reflection on how children's literature can move towards ethical representation based on recognition.

Keywords: Mariangela Di Fiore, Hilde Hodnefeld, Joseph Carey Merrick, disability, ableism, gaze, ethics, picturebooks, aesthetic nervousness, recognition, norms of disability

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Joseph Carey Merrick (1862–1890), the Englishman who became known as the “Elephant Man,” has long been the subject of public fascination and disability representation. Born in Leicester, Merrick developed significant physical differences in early childhood that led to his exhibition in Victorian-era freak shows and, subsequently, his long-term residence at the Royal London Hospital under the care of surgeon Frederick Treves. Merrick’s life has been represented across multiple media: Treves’s memoirs *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (1923) established the foundational narrative; clinical photographs taken during his residence remain widely circulated; Bernard Pomerance’s play (1977) and David Lynch’s film (1980) brought his story to international audiences. Each representation has shaped how Merrick is seen – Treves’s memoirs frame him as a grateful patient, Lynch’s film emphasises his humanity against Victorian cruelty, and the clinical photographs position him as an object of medical scrutiny.

While earlier representations often highlighted spectacle and bodily difference, Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeldt’s Norwegian picturebook *Elefantmannen* (*Elephant Man*, 2013)¹ offers a distinctive visual narrative that invites readers to reconsider how Merrick is seen and how he himself sees the world.² This picturebook traces Merrick’s life from childhood through the freak show to his residence at the Royal London Hospital, alternating between scenes where he is stared at and moments where he looks back, asserting his own perspective. *Elefantmannen* departs from Treves’s account by giving greater emphasis to Merrick’s interiority and agency, showing him as an agential subject rather than a passive recipient of care.

The ethics of disability representation lie at the heart of this picturebook. Although modern societies discourage staring at those who deviate from physical norms, *Elefantmannen* paradoxically positions readers as complicit in gazing at Merrick’s body while simultaneously being encouraged to empathise. By mirroring how audiences within the story consume Merrick’s image, the narrative exposes the tension between objectification and humanisation. The central research question of this article is: How does *Elefantmannen* use multiple gazes to implicate readers in the ethics of looking at disability, and to what extent does the picturebook medium transform looking from passive consumption into ethical reflection?

This article examines five distinct gazes in *Elefantmannen*: the spectacle gaze, the societal gaze, the clinical gaze, the empathetic gaze, and Merrick’s own gaze. Following a review of the existing scholarship on gaze theory and disability representation, the

analysis draws on Laura Mulvey's three looks, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theorisation of staring, and Ato Quayson's concept of aesthetic nervousness to examine how each gaze is constructed through the picturebook's visual and verbal strategies. The article argues that by turning the gaze back on the reader, *Elefantmannen* stages an ethical encounter with disability that challenges objectification and invites recognition. In doing so, the study contributes to children's literature research by extending existing applications of gaze theory in picturebook research to the representation of disability, and by foregrounding the ethical dilemmas of looking at disability.

Literature Review: Disability, Gaze, and Visual Representation

The concept of the gaze has been central to understanding how power operates through acts of looking. Michel Foucault's "clinical gaze," developed in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963), shows how medicine transforms individuals into objects of knowledge and regulation. Mulvey's influential theory of the "male gaze" extends this idea to visual culture, revealing how classical Hollywood cinema positions women as passive objects of erotic consumption for a presumed male spectator. Mulvey argues that cinema offers scopophilia – "pleasure in looking at another person as an object" (351) – and distinguishes between scopophilic pleasure (taking others as objects) and narcissistic identification (identifying with the image seen). Her attention to three looks – that of the camera, the audience, and the characters on the screen – provides a useful model for analysing picturebooks, where analogous structures operate.

Although developed in relation to gender, Mulvey's framework has significant implications for understanding how disability is framed within visual culture. The disabled body, like the female body in Mulvey's account, is frequently positioned as spectacle, subjected to a curious, controlling, and often objectifying gaze. Disability studies has developed these discussions through the lens of staring and spectatorship. Garland-Thomson distinguishes between the gaze, a regulated, institutionalised mode of looking, and the stare, a socially fraught act of looking that can marginalise disabled bodies but also open possibilities for recognition (*Staring* 9; "The Politics of Staring" 56). She argues that while the contradiction between curiosity about and social prohibition against staring at disability produces anxiety, it can also generate new insights when the

stare is acknowledged and negotiated ethically (*Staring* 6). Tobin Siebers advances the theory of disability aesthetics, arguing that non-normative bodies challenge traditional ideals of beauty (1).

Scholars have also examined specific gazes in visual media. Johnson Cheu shows how blind female protagonists are doubly marginalised (480). Elizabeth Donaldson analyses how disability is pathologised through the “psychiatric gaze” (31). Ash Gannicott develops the concept of the “able-gaze,” demonstrating how performance can both reproduce and resist normative expectations (213). These works collectively underline that disabled bodies in visual culture are never received neutrally: looking is always mediated by power and interpretive frameworks.

Gaze theory has informed previous picturebook research from different critical perspectives. Mia Österlund draws on gaze theory within a queer-feminist picturebook analysis, demonstrating how characters’ looking relations can contribute to the visual negotiation of gender, while Holly Johnson examines how a character’s direct gaze can position picturebook readers emotionally and cognitively. More specifically in relation to disability, Reham Almutairi’s study of Amy Webb’s *Awesomely Emma* (2020) identifies a “disability gaze” shaped by non-disabled perspectives, which the protagonist resists by “staring back” (163). Building on this scholarship, the present study examines how multiple forms of gaze operate together in a picturebook representation of disability and how they implicate readers in the ethics of looking.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on critical disability studies, Mulvey’s gaze theory, and Quayson’s concept of aesthetic nervousness. It mobilises these frameworks to examine how different gazes are constructed and negotiated in the picturebook. In particular, gaze theory provides a lens for analysing how looking relations are structured by power. Building on Mulvey’s concept of scopophilic looking, the analysis considers how readers may oscillate between objectifying Merrick and identifying with him, as well as how visual and narrative elements organise these dynamics within the text.

Quayson’s concept of aesthetic nervousness is central to this study, foregrounding the productive discomfort that emerges through encounters with difference. This discomfort operates not only between characters but also between the reader and the text, in-

viting critical reflection on how disability is perceived. In this article, ethics is understood not as a matter of fixed moral judgement but as a critical engagement with these looking relations, requiring readers to recognise their own position as viewers. The analysis also draws on picturebook scholarship, which emphasises how meaning is constructed through image-text interaction and how illustrations guide readers' attention through framing, scale, and focalisation (Elorza; Narančić Kovač; Nikolajeva and Scott; Painter et al.). Together, these frameworks inform the analysis of the five gazes examined in this article: the spectacle gaze, the societal gaze, the clinical gaze, the empathetic gaze, and Merrick's own gaze.

The Spectacle Gaze: Commodifying Disability

The spectacle gaze in *Elefantmannen* refers to the way Merrick is displayed as an object of curiosity, commodified for public entertainment. This gaze operates through the freak show, aligning with Garland-Thomson's observation that disabled bodies are framed as spectacles – simultaneously hyper-visible and socially marginalised ("The Politics of Staring" 56). *Elefantmannen* explicitly engages with this history, and its visual and verbal strategies implicate readers in the spectacle they are also invited to critique.

Merrick's introduction in *Elefantmannen* mirrors the historical freak show (image 1). The barker's promise of a sight "avskyelig" ("disgusting"), "ja så grusomt" ("so very gruesome") culminates in the announcement of "the Elephant Man!" (Di Fiore and Hodnefeld).³ These words reinforce the historical association between disability and monstrosity. The typography visually amplifies this: the words "Elefantmannen!" ("Elephant Man!") appear in a significantly larger font, echoing the booming voice of a showman. Here, Mulvey's scopophilic gaze is explicitly invited onto a body marked as extraordinary, positioning both the fictional audience and actual readers as spectators who derive pleasure from looking.

The use of sepia-toned photographs echoes the clinical images taken of Merrick. Yet by placing these photographs alongside cartoon figures, Di Fiore and Hodnefeld reclaim the images from their original context of medical documentation. The "ordinary" onlookers in the crowd are drawn in a cartoonish style, their features simplified, their expressions grotesque in their cruelty. On the same spread, Merrick and the other "extraordinary" figures – the bearded lady, the tattooed man – are presented through sepia-toned photographs.



Image 1. Spectacle gaze: Joseph Merrick (foreground, photographic) surrounded by the cartoon crowd. Spread from *Elefantmannen* by Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld (Cappelen Damm, 2013). © Cappelen Damm. Reproduced with permission.

This deliberate contrast highlights the asymmetry of power: the cartoonish crowd embodies the ridicule of the gawking public, while the photographic rendering underscores the performers' humanity.

Applying Mulvey's framework, this spread operates across three levels of looking: the illustrator's framing, the reader's act of looking, and the looks exchanged between characters. The crowd's shouted responses – "Udyr!" ("Monster!"; Di Fiore and Hodnefeld), "Avskyelig!" ("Hideous!") – enact the active, controlling dynamics of objectifying gazes. The reader is positioned in uneasy alignment with the crowd – they, too, are looking at Merrick – yet the visual contrast unsettles this alignment. These visual strategies exemplify Quayson's aesthetic nervousness. The photographic presence of Merrick's body invites a different kind of attention than the cartoon crowd, prompting readers to reflect on whether they, too, risk reducing him to spectacle. Crucially, *Elefantmannen* turns this gaze into an ethical dilemma: by making readers complicit in the very act of looking it critiques, this picturebook transforms looking from passive consumption into critical self-reflection – generating the kind of aesthetic nervousness that Quayson associates with disruptions in disability representation.

The Societal Gaze: Everyday Surveillance

After the freak show, *Elefantmannen* turns to Merrick's encounters with ordinary society, where the gaze of strangers is equally relentless. Unlike the spectacle gaze, this operates without institutional framing. It is the everyday staring of strangers who react with screams, whispers, and calls for police. It represents what Garland-Thomson describes as the stare that polices bodily difference where the disabled person cannot step offstage (*Staring*).

The verbal text in *Elefantmannen* conveys this hostility directly (image 2). Merrick wakes to find himself encircled: "Rundt ham står en ring av passasjerer med forferdete ansikter" ("All around him stood a ring of passengers, looking aghast"; Di Fiore and Hodnefeld). When his hood slips off, he hurriedly hides his face. A passenger cries, "Få tak i politiet, det er et monster på toget!" ("Call the police, there's a monster on board!"). By labelling Merrick a "monster," society places him outside ordinary humanity. Importantly, the passage emphasises his agency in managing this gaze: "Hetten har glidd av ham i løpet av natten. Han skynder seg å ta den på igjen og gjemmer ansiktet" ("His hood had slipped off during the night. He hurriedly pulls it back into place, hiding his face"). This demonstrates how the societal gaze has been internalised. He anticipates hostility and regulates his visibility – a double bind: if visible, he provokes screams; if hidden, he becomes suspicious.



Image 2. Societal gaze: Joseph Merrick encircled by hostile passengers on the railway platform. Spread from *Elefantmannen* by Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld (Cappelen Damm, 2013). © Cappelen Damm. Reproduced with permission.

The use of colour, light, positioning, posture, and size reinforces this exclusion and the violence. It is difficult to spot Merrick – he is small, dark, hunched at the centre of a hostile circle, his bright eyes glowing in stark contrast – visually echoing the accusation of “monster.” The composition directs attention to the surrounding onlookers: open mouths, pointing fingers, aghast expressions fill the frame. Even the train is given a face with blurry eyes, suggesting the environment itself participates in the staring.

Here, Mulvey’s framework illuminates how the book manipulates the three looks: the illustrator frames the gazers, not the gazed, as the focal point; the reader’s look is directed at the crowd’s cruelty; and the passengers’ hostile stares are presented for our ethical judgement. The implied reader is asked to witness the violence of looking rather than participate in it – a key ethical move that turns the gaze back on the gazers. Unlike the spectacle gaze, which frames Merrick’s visibility as entertainment with clear boundaries, the societal gaze operates without limits. Merrick cannot step off this stage; his daily life is saturated with such encounters. *Elefantmannen* thus underscores how ableist norms operate not only through institutions but through the everyday behaviours of strangers.

The Clinical Gaze: Medicine as Refuge and Control

The clinical gaze in *Elefantmannen* operates paradoxically, offering Merrick refuge while subjecting him to new forms of observation and control. Foucault’s clinical gaze transforms individuals into objects of knowledge, documented and managed within institutional structures. Yet in *Elefantmannen*, this gaze also intersects with Mulvey’s account of looking as a form of power: the patient becomes “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 346).

When Merrick arrives at the Royal London Hospital, he gains safety from the hostile streets, but this inclusion remains conditional upon his availability as a medical subject (image 3). Treves’s care is empathetic yet paternalistic: “sørger Frederick for at han får bade, ta på seg rene klær og spist et deilig måltid” (“Frederick made sure that Joseph could take a bath, change into some clean clothes, and enjoy a delicious meal”; Di Fiore and Hodnefeld). When Treves asks, “Vil du være med til London Hospital? Vi kan ordne et fint rom til deg der hvor du kan bo” (“Do you want to come with me to the London Hospital? We can arrange a pleasant room for you to live in”), the consultation occurs within a relationship already structured by medical authority.



Image 3. Clinical gaze: Joseph Merrick and Frederick Treves at the hospital threshold. Spread from *Elefantmannen* by Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld (Cappelen Damm, 2013). © Cappelen Damm. Reproduced with permission.

The clinical gaze becomes explicit in the hospital scenes. Treves studies Merrick's body while Merrick recites poetry – the same gaze that offers an audience for his creative work also objectifies him as a medical case. The imbalance is starker with medical students:

Da må Joseph stå naken foran dem, mens de tar notater, peker og diskuterer. Joseph liker det ikke, han føler seg dum og stygg der han står. (Di Fiore and Hodnefeld)

(Joseph had to stand naked before them as they took notes, pointed, and discussed things with one another. Joseph didn't like it very much; he felt stupid and ugly in front of them.)

Here, the clinical gaze replicates the voyeuristic spectacle of the freak show, now under the guise of scientific progress.

The dynamic exemplifies what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder term "narrative prosthesis" (8) – the use of disability as a narrative device (8–9). Treves's growing empathy, the medical students' education, and even the reader's engagement with Merrick's story all depend on his availability as a subject of observation. Merrick's disability thus facilitates the development of others while risking his reduction to a comparatively static object of their attention. Yet *Elefantmannen* complicates this prosthetic function by giving Merrick

his own voice and perspective, resisting complete absorption into others' narratives.

The book's endpapers reproduce the historical clinical photographs of Merrick's naked body, implicating readers in this gaze. Originally serving Treves's medical documentation, the photographs are recontextualised within a narrative that gives Merrick agency. This recontextualisation invites readers to question the clinical gaze itself. Are we participating in the same gaze where Merrick felt "dum og stygg" ("stupid and ugly")? Quayson's framework of aesthetic nervousness helps readers see this ambivalence as a productive feature rather than a flaw.

However, *Elefantmannen* also complicates any simple condemnation of the clinical gaze. For Merrick, the hospital represented genuine refuge from a society that treated him as monstrous. As Foucault argues, the clinical gaze transforms the patient into an object of observation through which medical knowledge is produced (83). Merrick appears to have internalised the belief that his bodily differences carried moral stigma; being classified as a patient rather than a monster offered a form of validation, however limited. The diagnosis, while objectifying, also removes blame. The clinical gaze is thus not simply oppressive but ambivalent.

The Empathetic Gaze: Recognition and Its Limits

The first genuine instance of empathetic engagement in *Elefantmannen* comes with Leila Maturin's visit and later Princess Alexandra of Wales. These encounters depart from the spectacle, societal, and clinical gazes, offering instead an empathetic gaze: a mode of looking that seeks to acknowledge the other as subject rather than object. However, as the following analysis shows, even genuine empathy can reinforce power differences.

The verbal text records Maturin's visit with notable simplicity. She approaches Merrick, "tar ham i hånden og hilser på ham som en venn" ("taking his hand and greeting him as a friend"; Di Fiore and Hodnefjeld). Merrick begins to cry. Maturin does not stare, study, or shrink away; she engages with him without the frameworks of spectacle or medicine mediating the encounter. Merrick's tears reflect relief and joy at being seen as an equal.

This moment is reinforced through compositional balance. Merrick and Maturin are positioned at eye level, their mutual gaze interrupting the hierarchical looking relations established earlier in the narrative. His face is uncovered, his posture open, and direct eye



Image 4. Empathetic gaze: Joseph Merrick and Princess Alexandra in a reciprocal visual encounter in the hospital. Spread from *Elefantmannen* by Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld (Cappelen Damm, 2013). © Cappelen Damm. Reproduced with permission.

contact is sustained – an arrangement that foregrounds reciprocity rather than asymmetry. In this sense, Maturin's visit approaches what Rita Felski terms "recognition": "Something that may have been sensed in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a distinct shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible" (25). The encounter thus opens up the possibility of recognition for both Maturin and the reader: an acknowledgement of Merrick's distinct personhood that exceeds pity and resists objectification.

Following Maturin's visit, members of London's high society begin to show interest in Merrick. Princess Alexandra of Wales' visit exemplifies this symbolic form of empathy (image 4). Her words – "Jeg har hørt om deg, Joseph. Jeg ville så gjerne møte deg selv" ("I have heard about you, Joseph. I very much wanted to meet you myself"; Di Fiore and Hodnefeld) – extend recognition. The visual composition partially mirrors the earlier scene: Alexandra is positioned slightly lower than Merrick, gazing up at him with a warm expression while holding his hands, a gesture that appears to invert conventional hierarchies.

However, this apparent symmetry is qualified by markers of status. Both Maturin's and Princess Alexandra's finely crafted hats signal their positions within the social hierarchy, in contrast to Joseph's hood. Their gazes, however empathetic, remain shaped

by their privilege. The scenes therefore generate a residual aesthetic nervousness. Although Merrick is addressed with warmth, this recognition is not entirely mutual but remains, to varying degrees, conferred from a position of social authority. The visual inversions – eye-level positioning and Alexandra’s slightly lowered stance – momentarily unsettle the hierarchy, but do not fully dissolve it. Instead, they expose the limits of empathetic looking, revealing how even well-intentioned encounters remain structured by broader relations of power.

Treves’s relationship with Merrick also evolves. His early interest combines clinical curiosity with genuine interpersonal engagement. When he later reassures Merrick – “Du har en veldig sjelden sykdom som heter Proteus syndrom. Sykdommen gjør at du er så stygg på utsiden. Inni deg er du like fin som alle andre mennesker” (“You have a very rare disease. It makes you disfigured on the outside, but inside you are like anyone else”; Di Fiore and Hodnefjeld) – the reassurance moves toward recognition, yet the framing remains diagnostic with a strong evaluative judgement. Anita Ghai associates the charity/pity model with representations of disabled people through dependency, care and protection, which can reinforce assumptions of helplessness rather than autonomy (xix–xx). Applied to the dynamics of looking in *Elefantmannen*, this model highlights how recognition can operate as benevolence rather than equality, positioning the disabled person as a recipient of kindness rather than as an equal participant. Treves’s reassurance risks reproducing this paternalistic dynamic even as it affirms Merrick’s humanity. His gaze therefore shifts from predominantly clinical observation towards empathy without entirely relinquishing the asymmetry of the doctor-patient relationship.

Merrick’s Own Gaze: Subjectivity and Resistance

In contrast to previously discussed scenes where Merrick is primarily the object of others’ gazes, several illustrations reposition him as a viewing subject. His own gaze is associated with resistance, self-definition, and the assertion of subjectivity. The verbal text gives access to his thoughts and self-perceptions, while the visual text shows us Merrick seeing – through his posture, his direction of gaze, his absorption in creative work. The perspective is thus external in the images (we watch him looking) and internal in the words (we hear what he thinks about what he sees). This division means that readers never fully occupy Merrick’s visual perspective but are always aware of him as a subject who looks, even as they continue

to look at him. Yet becoming a viewing subject does not remove the risks attached to being viewed. Julie-Ann Scott-Pollock et al., writing about disabled self-representation in performance, similarly emphasise that making one's body and story visible can be an act of agency while still leaving the disabled subject vulnerable to meanings produced by the audience (5).

Early in *Elefantmannen*, Merrick's gaze is already marked by the dehumanisation of others (image 5). Working in a cigar factory, he has internalised society's view of his body as grotesque. The verbal text records his hopeful internalisation: "Det vil nok bli bedre etter hvert, tenker han. Bare de lærer meg å kjenne" ("It won't be long before things get better, he thought. They just have to get to know me, that's all"; Di Fiore and Hodnefeldt). This verbal text shows Merrick looking at himself through imagined others' eyes, holding onto hope while recognising how difference defines him. The visual text reinforces this by depicting him alone, excluded – and crucially, Merrick looks directly out at the reader. This direct gaze functions as what picturebook scholars call a demand image: it creates an imaginary relationship with the viewer and requires a response (Painter et al. 19). The demand image enacts what Quayson describes as the disturbance "between the reader and the text." By looking directly at us, Merrick refuses to remain a passive spectacle.



Image 5. Joseph Merrick's own gaze (early): The young Merrick looks directly at the reader in the factory scene. Spread from *Elefantmannen* by Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeldt (Cappelen Damm, 2013). © Cappelen Damm. Reproduced with permission.

Later, abandoned in Europe, Merrick must navigate unfamiliar cities and endure the stares of strangers. Merrick's self-monitoring becomes clear when he finds his way back to England:

Joseph tar mot til seg. Han tar på seg frakken, hetta og hatten og går ut av vognen. Solen skinner skarpt, han myser mens han kikker nervøst rundt seg... En stund står han bare og kikker rådvill rundt seg. Så begynner han å gå gjennom gatene. Folk stirrer og peker på ham, men han later som ingenting. (Di Fiore and Hodnefeld)

(Joseph plucked up his courage. He pulled on his coat, hood, and hat and stepped out of the carriage... For a while he stood, gazing around in confusion. Then he started to make his way through the streets. People pointed and stared at him, but he ignored them.)

The illustration intensifies this tension through a striking detail: most of Merrick's body is rendered in cartoon form, but his eye alone is photographic (image 6). This disjuncture foregrounds vision as the locus of identity. Merrick is all at once the object of others' looking and granted agency through the eye that looks back. The photographic eye resists complete absorption into the cartoonish register, forcing readers to oscillate between recognising Merrick as a historical person and as a narrative construction.



Image 6. Joseph Merrick's own gaze (later): Merrick navigating the streets, his photographic eye looking back. Spread from *Elefantmannen* by Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld (Cappelen Damm, 2013). © Cappelen Damm. Reproduced with permission.

Merrick also shows agency through his construction of the cardboard cathedral. The verbal text emphasises his perseverance:

Det tar lang tid, for hendene hans er klumpete og tunge og gjør ikke alltid som han vil. Men Joseph er tålmodig. (Di Fiore and Hodnefeld)

(It took a long time to build with his lumpy, heavy hand, which didn't always do what he wanted it to. Nonetheless, Joseph was patient.)

Earlier accounts, particularly Treves's memoirs *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, frequently characterise Merrick as childlike, framing his imagination and creativity through comparisons with children. By contrast, Di Fiore and Hodnefeld present his construction of the cardboard cathedral as an act of self-definition. Merrick builds the cathedral not for others' entertainment but for his own purposes, as the visual text depicts him absorbed in his work, his gaze fixed on his mother's portrait rather than on any audience.

Merrick resists objectification most forcefully through verbal self-definition at the end of the story:

Han er ingen elefant. Han er et menneske! Et menneske med en sykdom! Han er ikke et udyr eller et beist, slik så mange har sagt til ham. (Di Fiore and Hodnefeld)

(He was not an elephant. He was a person! A person with an illness! He was not a monster or a beast, as so many people had told him.)

This declaration asserts an identity grounded in self-recognition rather than external labels.

At the same time, *Elefantmannen* underscores the limits of this gaze. Merrick's social position remains precarious, dependent on the benevolence of others. His gaze offers dignity and affirmation, but it cannot erase the structures of exclusion that confine him. The hospital walls remain; the stares continue. This tension – between agency and constraint – is precisely what Quayson identifies as the oscillation disability generates between “pure process of abstraction” and “material conditions.” The photographic eye encapsulates this ambivalence: it grants Merrick a gaze that meets the reader's, yet recalls the clinical photographs that rendered him an object of documentation. The eye is both the site of subjectivity and a trace of objectification. Readers cannot simply identify with Merrick or pity him; instead, the two positions remain in tension and coexist.

Conclusion: Recognition, Resistance, and the Ethics of Representation

Elefantmannen demonstrates how disability representation is constructed and contested through five distinct gazes. The spectacle gaze commodifies Merrick's body; the societal gaze subjects him to relentless surveillance; the clinical gaze offers refuge at the cost of objectification; the empathetic gaze provides recognition yet remains entangled with hierarchy; and Merrick's own gaze asserts agency but also reveals its constraints. While each gaze positions Merrick differently – spectacle, monster, patient, friend, charity subject, or creative agent – none fully escapes the asymmetries of power that structure his world.

Elefantmannen's most significant contribution lies in how it implicates the reader in these dynamics. Through its visual strategies – the contrast between photographic and cartoon registers, demand images, and the careful composition of gazes – *Elefantmannen* positions readers as participants in the acts of looking that it depicts. Drawing on Mulvey's three looks, the illustrator's framing, the reader's act of looking, and the looks exchanged between characters interact to produce an ethically unsettled position. This generates what Quayson terms aesthetic nervousness: a productive disturbance that opens ethical reflection.

What might more ethical engagement entail? Following Felski's recognition, it involves moving from objectification toward acknowledgement of the other as subject. Recognition means meeting Merrick's gaze rather than avoiding it, sitting with discomfort rather than resolving it through pity. For non-disabled readers, this requires confronting one's own position as viewer. For disabled readers, *Elefantmannen* may offer the affirmation of a gaze that looks back, reframing Garland-Thomson's dynamics of staring through an assertion of visual agency.

The clinical gaze's ambivalence offers a nuanced alternative to simplistic narratives of victimisation or heroic overcoming. As Mitchell and Snyder argue, disability often serves as "narrative prosthesis" (8) – a device that drives the plot while the disabled character remains flat. *Elefantmannen* both exemplifies and complicates this dynamic: Merrick's story enables Frederick's growth toward empathy, yet the book's visual strategies and Merrick's own gaze resist reducing him to a mere prosthetic function.

The narrative's interrogation of empathy carries particular weight for children's literature, which often mobilises empathy as a pedagogical goal. However, *Elefantmannen* also reveals the limitations of

empathy when it remains structured by pity or unequal relations between the gazer and the gazed. It suggests that empathy without equality does not constitute genuine inclusion. Ultimately, *Elefantmannen* insists that the ethics of representation cannot be separated from the ethics of reading. By turning the gaze back on the reader, it asks whether we can learn to look in ways that move from objectification toward recognition, from pity toward solidarity, from spectacle toward encounter.

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Notes

1 An English translation, *Elephant Man*, was published by Annick Press in 2015.

2 I would like to express my gratitude to Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefeld, and to Cappelen Damm, for granting permission to reproduce images from *Elefantmannen* in the present article. I am also grateful to Ida Amalie Svensson for her generous assistance in facilitating the permissions process and providing access to the Norwegian edition.

3 All quotations from the book are taken from the Norwegian original; translations are drawn from the English-language edition translated by Rosie Hedger. Both the Norwegian original and the translation are unpaginated.

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