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## **Like Everest: defamiliarization and uncanniness in media representations of inaccessibility**

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### **Abstract**

This paper uses phenomenology in order to explore recent representations of inaccessible architectural environment featured on major Bulgarian television channels. It is argued that by exposing the environmental restrictions faced by disabled people in their everyday activities, Bulgarian media unwittingly engage in an operation described by formalist literary critics as ‘defamiliarization’. As a result, familiar elements of the everyday, lived world are illuminated as strange. In phenomenological terms, this brings about the experience of ‘uncanniness’. The paper concludes by highlighting the transformative potential inherent in this experience, i.e., its power to illuminate as artificial and oppressive the taken-for-granted aspects of the world we inhabit.

**Keywords:** disability studies, accessibility, phenomenology, defamiliarization, uncanny

## Introduction

A mother assists her son, a wheelchair user, on his way to school in a Sofia neighbourhood. There is a staircase at the exit of the block of flats they live in. The woman takes pains to let the wheelchair down as smoothly as possible. Nevertheless, a banging noise indicates the concussions accompanying each step. The couple reaches the sidewalk and moves on. Soon they need to descend again, this time to the street. ‘Oh, this one here is dreadful, it is like Everest, it is just incredible’, exclaims the mother, while struggling to gently lower the wheelchair down the sidewalk curb. More obstacles lay ahead. (bTV, *This Morning*, 19 May 2011)

A young man bumps with the front wheels of his electric wheelchair against an uncut curb at the entrance to the Sofia City Library. His forward movement is interrupted and he is forced to stop. Motionless in front of the obstacle, he reflects on his situation: ‘Now, this curb, the 10 centimetre one, is for me the ceiling. Without a ramp or some other way, this, for me, is a wall – the Berlin Wall is this.’ A six-step staircase awaits him after the curb, impeding further his access to the library. More obstacles lay ahead. (bTV, *The Hounds*, 8 May 2011)

A woman drives her electric wheelchair parallel to the first step of an imposing flight of stairs in one of the Sofia Metro underground railway stations. She reaches the end, turns around and comes back, approaching the metal rails mounted directly upon the stairs at its other end. The rails are steep, narrow and

slippery – it is impossible for her to use them in order to go up. Her comment: ‘These are stations that are taboo for me – they do not figure in my thoughts at all’. More obstacles lay ahead. (Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011)

These three vignettes translate in writing highlights from recent media reports featured on the Bulgarian television. The topic is inaccessibility. The reports expose environmental restrictions faced by disabled people in their everyday living. More precisely, the audience is shown individuals who are impeded by external, built obstacles in their efforts to engage in meaningful activities that involve wheelchair-mediated action. The message is consistent with the British social model of disability (Oliver, 1996) – the major problems encountered by disabled people are caused by environmental inadequacy and not by their individual impairments, i.e., physical, sensory, or mental ‘deficits’. On the following pages I would like to explore the form and content of this message more closely, utilising but also going beyond the framework of the British social model. Within this framework, disability is defined as ‘all the things that impose restrictions on disabled people; ranging from individual prejudice to institutional discrimination, from inaccessible public buildings to unusable transport systems, from segregated education to excluding work arrangements’ (Oliver, 1996: 33). I would like to complement this understanding with the idea that disability also opens up possibilities for ‘a way of perceiving that awakens new perceptions’ (Titchkosky, 2005: 662). As Rod Michalko (2002: 166) puts it, ‘[t]he door to the arcane buried deeply in the ordinary is what is open to disability’. Hence disability incorporates both restrictions *and* possibilities.

In order to clarify this claim, I will explore media representations of inaccessibility. My methodological presumption is that a reflection on the *form* of the media message will eventually expand the understanding of its *content*. Such point of departure is intended as a way of entering the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1962: 194-5) and not as an argument about the priority of either ‘form’ or ‘content’. It also means that my investigation will be circular – taking as its clue the (explicit) ‘what’ of the media message, it will explore its (implicit) ‘how’ in order to gain insight into its (implicit) ‘what else’. In a nutshell: As far as the ‘what’ of the message is concerned, Bulgarian media expose *environmental restrictions* faced by disabled people in their everyday activities; in terms of ‘how’, the media (unwittingly) engage in *defamiliarization*; finally, in terms of ‘what else’ they (unwittingly again) illuminate the *uncanniness* of human being in general. The notions of ‘defamiliarization’ and ‘uncanniness’ will be clarified in the next section; for now it suffices to say that I will constantly go back and forth among these three levels of analysis. At that, I will be guided by the phenomenologically informed insight that the meaning of disability is inseparable from the meaning of human being in general (Mladenov, 2011).

Two more stipulations are needed before proceeding with the analysis. Firstly, I am myself not a wheelchair user and therefore I am not claiming any *experiential* knowledge of this practice. What I propose is primarily an investigation of media representations and not of wheelchair users’ experiences. Nevertheless, these experiences are somehow reflected in these representations, they inform them and are in turn shaped by them. So, occasionally, I may cross the boundary between ‘representations’ and ‘experiences’. When this is the case, I should concede the final word or the ‘epistemic privilege’ (Bar

On, 1993) to those who *are* experienced – i.e., wheelchair users themselves. Secondly, this is a text about representations of obstacles faced by *people who use wheelchairs* for moving about. Nevertheless, most of its arguments would apply to other types of technologically mediated human action and, accordingly, to (representations of) other types of bodily difference as well. The reason is that, albeit departing from the particularity of a specific impairment (to wit, the one related to non-walking), the text nevertheless touches upon issues concerning not only disability and its representations as such, but also human being in general. As already noted, it is impossible to say something about the meaning of disability without simultaneously saying something about the meaning of human being.

That said, I can now turn towards unpacking the methodological guidelines summarized in the penultimate paragraph. The next two sections focus on theoretical issues underpinning my approach. Afterwards, I explore in depth some aspects of eight media reports featured in the period 5 May, 2011 – 5 August, 2011, on five leading Bulgarian television channels.<sup>1</sup> Most of these reports were made in response to a public action of

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<sup>1</sup> Below is the list of the media reports analysed in the paper. All are available on the internet (accessed October 2011):

- BNT, *The Day Begins*, 5 May 2011 ([http://bnt.bg/bg/news/view/52298/za\\_nedostypnata\\_gradska\\_sreda](http://bnt.bg/bg/news/view/52298/za_nedostypnata_gradska_sreda));
- bTV, *The News*, 5 May 2011 ([http://www.btv.bg/news/bulgaria/obshtestvo/story/2087481388-S\\_kolichka\\_po\\_sofiyskite\\_ulitsi\\_misiya\\_nevazmojna](http://www.btv.bg/news/bulgaria/obshtestvo/story/2087481388-S_kolichka_po_sofiyskite_ulitsi_misiya_nevazmojna));
- TV7, *The News*, 5 May 2011, after the first 30.50 minutes (<http://tv7.bg/newsVideoArchive/video321662.html>);
- bTV, *The Hounds*, 8 May 2011, (<http://www.btv.bg/action/predavanja/hratkite/videos/video/631061484>);
- bTV, *This Morning*, 19 May 2011 (<http://www.btv.bg/shows/tazi-sutrin/reportazhi/story/1077580839>);
- Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011 (<http://novatv.bg/news/view/2011/06/08/17017> and <http://novatv.bg/news/view/2011/06/08/17018>);
- BBT, *The News*, 11 June 2011, after the first 5.40 minutes ([http://www.bbt.tv/video/section/2#video\\_6757](http://www.bbt.tv/video/section/2#video_6757));

disabled people who protested against inaccessibility in Sofia. The action was held on 5 May, 2011, on the streets of the Bulgarian capital, which explains the concentration of the reports in May and June. Although the link between cultural presence and civic activism will not be explored in this text, it is worth noting at the outset that without the resoluteness of the protesters neither media representations, nor analyses like the present one would have ever come into existence.

### **Defamiliarization and uncanniness**

The term ‘defamiliarization’ (in Russian – *остранение*) comes from literary criticism. It has been introduced a century ago by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky in his seminal essay ‘Art as technique’ (Shklovsky, 1965, first published in 1917). The idea is that in order to (re)gain a genuine perception of the world, one needs to detach oneself from the automatic, publicly sustained, habitual manner of perceiving it. ‘Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war’, writes Shklovsky (1965: 12). Art fights this tendency by *making familiar strange*. Thus it interrupts everyday automatisms and enables people to (re)gain perceptual access to essential but forgotten aspects of themselves and their worlds. One of Shklovsky’s (1965: 13-5) examples is Leo Tolstoy’s story ‘Kholstomer’. In it human relations are seen through the eyes of a horse, which defamiliarizes the institution of private property, illuminating its conventional and contingent character.

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• bTV, *The News*, 5 August 2011 (<http://www.btv.bg/news/bulgaria/story/2075937116>).

Existential phenomenology amplifies the significance of defamiliarization, extending it beyond perception and art towards human existence in general. From such a perspective, defamiliarization is a major condition for (re)gaining access not only to our deeper perceptions, but also to our basic state of being – that is, phenomenologically speaking, to ‘being-in-the-world’. Thus Martin Heidegger (1962: 233-5) argues that one needs to experience the world as uncanny (*unheimlich*, which also means ‘unhomely’) in order to be freed from the internalised and automatised clichés of the publicly accepted norms of conduct, thought, and perception – or what Heidegger calls ‘the “they”’ (*das Man*). This experience of ‘uncanniness’ comes with the mood of anxiety (*Angst*), which is a profoundly illuminating affective state of human being (*Dasein*). Before Heidegger, the intrinsic relationship between uncanniness, anxiety and the estrangement from the familiar had been influentially elaborated by Sigmund Freud (2001). But Freud studied these phenomena in individual-psychological terms, whereas Heidegger provided a broader, existential-ontological perspective. The latter argued that the experience of uncanniness wrests us from the tranquilising numbness of everyday automatisms we are socialized into, although ordinarily we tend to ‘flee’ from it:

When in falling we flee *into* the “at-home” of publicness, we flee in the face of the “not-at-home”; that is, we flee in *the face of* the uncanniness which lies in Dasein – in Dasein as thrown Being-in-the-world, which has been delivered over to itself in its Being. This uncanniness pursues Dasein constantly, and is a threat to its everyday lostness in the “they”, though not explicitly. (Heidegger, 1962: 234)



‘Fleeing’ from uncanniness is motivated by its disorienting, unsettling character. For example, in his essay ‘The uncanny valley’ the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori (1970) advises engineers to avoid making their robots too human-like. The reason is that this might lead the people interacting with these humanoid machines to a ‘fall’ into what Mori calls the ‘uncanny valley’ – a state of uneasiness, anxiety, even aversion. Yet from the phenomenological perspective outlined above such ‘fall’ is caused not by a *lack of likeness* (in what is otherwise similar), but by *hyper-likeness* – the humanoid robot causes anxiety because it resembles me more than I am immediately ready to admit. (Note that in this sense Mori’s ‘fall’ is opposite to Heidegger’s ‘falling’ as used in the block quotation above.) In other words, the real source of anxiety is the fact that at some point the human-machine hybrid becomes a truer representation of me than the one I adhere to in my everyday living.

This insight has been persuasively articulated by the feminist Donna Haraway (1991). For her, human being is more like a ‘cyborg’, constituted by both natural (given) as well as artificial (made) elements, than a purely organic entity or a ‘healthy person’, as Mori (1970) puts it. In other words, one is *constitutively* embedded in networks of non-human entities, assistive technologies, and infrastructures of support. Nevertheless, one tends to ‘flee’ from the awareness of this foundational existential-ontological state, for it causes anxiety. Therefore, the ‘uncanny valley’ is there where one gets back to one’s basic state of being – *it is the reality of being human that is uncanny*. This does not invalidate Mori’s conclusions – it just emphasizes that the uncanny, brought about through defamiliarization, harbours deep existential-ontological insights. Mori is right – if one wants to avoid anxiety, one is better advised to stay away from the ‘uncanny valley’. But

what about people who bump into uncanniness on an everyday basis in their encounters with the built environment?

### **Encounters with stairs**

What happens when a wheelchair user encounters a staircase? The tension between the traditional architectural solution (staircase) and the technologically mediated (through the wheelchair) human action (of overcoming spatial distances) *invites* defamiliarization. In making sense of what thus happens, one can either accept this invitation or decline it. In the first case, one brings about defamiliarization by illuminating the strangeness of the otherwise taken-for-granted, familiar architectural elements like flights of stairs. In the second case, one obscures defamiliarization by focusing on the non-walking ('impaired') body, whose strangeness (i.e., 'abnormality') is usually taken-for-granted anyway.

The last point suggests that, paradoxically, the familiarity of the impaired body consists in taking its 'strangeness' for granted – the impaired body is *familiar as strange*. Consequently, an attempt at defamiliarizing the body that departs from its 'abnormal' variants will require a procedure opposite to the one which defamiliarizes the familiar environment. What is needed is to highlight familiarity, not strangeness. In other words, one needs to show that the 'strange' body has always already been more familiar than the 'familiar' one; yet people have tended to disavow this more fundamental familiarity because of the anxiety it produces – a mechanism already alluded to with regard to Mori's (1970) humanoid robots. Within disability studies such an approach has been implied in the work of Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson (2001: 27), who have

argued that ‘*we are all impaired*. Impairment is not the core component of disability ..., it is the inherent nature of humanity.’ Yet to underline the originary familiarity of the strange body might backfire in unwittingly reaffirming the taken-for-granted negativity of strangeness. Thus Shakespeare and Watson have been criticised for ‘universaliz[ing] ontological lack and attribut[ing] deficit to us all’ (Hughes, 2007: 682). As an alternative, Bill Hughes has proposed to depart not from the ‘abnormal’ corporeality but from the ‘normal’ one in the attempt to defamiliarize the body. Thus instead of normalizing and/or universalizing impairment as Shakespeare and Watson have done, Hughes (2007: 681) has chosen to make the familiar body of the non-impaired people strange in the first place: ‘It is ... the normative, invulnerable body of disablist modernity that is the problem.’ In other words, ‘[t]he problem rests with the normative body that does not want to be reminded of its own vulnerability or to admit that abjection and death is its fate’.<sup>2</sup>

In brief, Shakespeare and Watson (2001) seek to defamiliarize the body by departing from the *materially given deficiency* of the impaired body and highlighting its *familiarity* – ‘we are all impaired’. Alternatively, Hughes (2007) seeks to defamiliarize the body by departing from the *cultural made completeness* of the non-impaired body and highlighting its *strangeness* – it is the norm of ‘invulnerable body’ which is the problem. A middle ground might be found in Lennard Davis’s (2002: 31) proposal of a ‘dismodernist ethics’, where ‘[i]mpairment is the rule, and normalcy is the fantasy’. In any case, the possibility for defamiliarizing the body has been opened up by

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, more than a decade earlier Tom Shakespeare (1994: 297) had defended a very similar position: ‘And it is not us, it is non-disabled people’s embodiment which is the issue: disabled people remind non-disabled people of their own vulnerability.’ At that time Shakespeare had been interested in cultural representations of disability. Consequently, his point of departure had been different, perhaps more akin to the one taken by Hughes in 2007.

defamiliarizing the enviroing world in the first place. In British disability studies, the latter has been brought about by the development of the ‘radical’ social model of disability during the 1980s and 1990s (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1996). Elsewhere, other versions of the social model have achieved similar results (for a North American overview see Davis, 2002: Ch. 2). They have *prepared the ground* for defamiliarizing the body, as exemplified by the aforementioned and many other attempts to ‘bring the body back’ into disability studies during the 1990s and the 2000s (for an overview see Thomas, 2007: Ch. 5).

So, what happens when a wheelchair user encounters a staircase? Such an event invites defamiliarization. Media representations of inaccessibility, featured recently on Bulgarian television, accept this invitation. They do so by eliciting the strangeness of the otherwise familiar architectural environment. This does not mean that they completely bracket the question concerning impairment though. Yet unlike disability scholars of the last two decades, Bulgarian media ‘bring the body in’ without defamiliarizing it. Thus they repeatedly reassure the audience about the taken-for-granted strangeness of ‘deficient’ bodies and with it, about the audience’s all too familiar fantasies of ‘carnal normalcy’, as Hughes (2007: 681) puts it. And this is not surprising, given the hegemony of the traditional understanding of disability in Bulgaria (International Disability Network, 2007: 64-5). Nevertheless, the media representations explored here do not simply reassert corporeal clichés but simultaneously transcend them.

### **Bodies and human activity**

In their recent reports on inaccessibility the Bulgarian media engage in a double process of (1) illuminating the impaired body in its taken-for granted strangeness (i.e., ‘abnormality’), while (2) transcending this traditional corporeal representation by defamiliarizing the familiar environment. Bodies *do* feature in these media materials and when the camera focuses on bodily parts, the image often slides into representing impairment in terms of lack, weakness, and impotence. It is as if in such cases the cameraman cannot resist the clichés of misfortune attached to what is usually taken-for-granted as ‘deficient’ corporeality. Consequently, we are presented with familiar shots of strange (‘abnormal’) organs, informed by the traditional view of disability – medicalized, individualized, and suggesting ‘personal tragedy’ (Oliver, 1996). For example, hands are shown *in their inability* to manipulate, legs – *in their inability* to move the body (on this tactic of representing ‘flawed’ bodily parts see Shakespeare, 1994: 288). Sometimes the camera juxtaposes, in two consecutive shots, the agility of walking feet to the stillness of the body ‘bound’ to a wheelchair (Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011). Such images have their verbal counterparts – time and again, disabled people are referred to as ‘invalids’ (*инвалиди*) (TV7, *The News*, 5 May 2011); medical diagnoses like ‘muscular dystrophy’ or ‘microcephaly’ are used to introduce personalities (Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011); journalists appeal to mutual support and ‘public tolerance’ as solution for inaccessibility issues (BNT, *The Day Begins*, 5 May 2011), etc.

At the same time though, the overall focus of the media reports is not on *bodies*, neither on *bodily* action, but on *acting people* with their wider concerns, wishes, and projects. Therefore, the aforementioned instances of representing corporeal ‘deficiencies’ should be put into perspective. For, overall, media representations of inaccessibility featured

recently on the Bulgarian television highlight bodily organs like hands, legs, and feet not as discreet entities, but *as elements of technologically mediated human activity*. Thus if we are shown a close-up of a hand, it eventually turns out to be a hand which controls the joystick steering the wheelchair towards going into the next room of an office building (BBT, *The News*, 11 June 2011). Similarly, if we are shown a close-up of feet, these are feet resting on the wheelchair's footrests just above the front wheels of the wheelchair bumping into obstacles on the person's way towards the city library (bTV, *The Hounds*, 8 May 2011). I will revisit this point in the next section.

Such approach reverses the traditional direction of disability-related questioning by going from the external towards the internal or from the context towards the entity (for the meaning of such reversal of questioning see Oliver, 1990: 6-9). It is the very *direction* of investigation that makes a difference here. This difference is consistent with the phenomenological insights about 'lived' corporeality. Phenomenologically speaking, the body and its organs are better understood within *meaningful human activity* rather than as discrete, occurrent entities. As Merleau-Ponty (2002: 94) puts it, '[t]he body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them'. Thus one needs to understand the 'projects' that involve walking in order to be able to understand what 'legs' mean. Conversely, one understands leg-lessness only by understanding restrictions in walking, which presupposes proficiency in its cultural meaning or in the wider existential projects that incorporate walking (see Oliver, 1996: Ch. 7).

To recapitulate, if the media reports explored here represent ‘deficient’ bodies, this is nevertheless done *in the wider context of meaningful human activity*. Firstly, such reading is suggested by the frequent use of action words – examples include recurring verbs of physical movement like ‘go out’, ‘overcome’, ‘walk’, ‘go down’, ‘leave’, ‘cross’, ‘move’, ‘walk round’, ‘come up’, ‘reach’, etc. Secondly, bodies’ engagement in action is depicted as technologically mediated. Thus whenever a corporeal deficit is illuminated, its ‘deficiency’ is subsequently shifted from the plane of corporeality to the plane of technology. Consequently, what shows up is not so much a bodily, but rather a *technological deficiency* – for example, the inability of *the wheelchair* to climb stairs. In one of the media reports the journalist asks: ‘How will *you* go through?’, to which the person, a wheelchair user, replies: ‘Well, *for the wheelchair* – it is impossible *for it* to go through.’ (BNT, *The Day Begins*, 5 May 2011, emphasis added) Another example: ‘In such a wheelchair the best you can do is injure you child.’ (bTV, *The News*, 5 May 2011) Thus the ‘deficiency’ of the given (body) is overshadowed by the ‘deficiency’ of the made (technology).

Nevertheless, thirdly, the overall focus of media reports is not on individual deficiency – be it corporeal or related to assistive technology – but on the environmental one. It is the inadequacy of the architectural environment that illuminates the inadequacy of the mobility aid and not the other way round. The headings of the media reports strongly suggest such reading. Two examples will suffice: ‘Sofia – a capital of obstacles for people with disabilities’ (Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011), and ‘The way to school – mission impossible for a mother of a child with cerebral palsy’ (bTV, *This Morning*, 19 May 2011). The point of departure is the enviroing world in its restrictive

character – Sofia as ‘a capital of obstacles’ or ‘the way to school’ as ‘mission impossible’. If we take a closer look at the second example, we will notice that: (1) the child is defined through his medical diagnosis, which illuminates his ‘deficient’ corporeality; (2) yet the attention is actually focused on his mother, who acts as the boy’s personal assistant, thus complementing the functionality of his mobility aid (as the report itself makes clear); (3) ultimately, all this happens within the general framework of pursuing a meaningful human activity – attending school.

### **Human activity and self-definition**

Phenomenology can help to clarify further this argument. The point is that every dealing with a piece of equipment (like a staircase) takes place within a hierarchy of involvements which goes up to taking a stand on what it means to be as a human being. Heidegger (1962: 120) unpacks the different layers of this structure, underlining their interconnectedness:

The “for-the-sake-of-which” signifies an “in-order-to”; this in turn, a “towards-this”; the latter, an “in-which” of letting something be involved, and that in turn, the “with-which” of an involvement. These relationships are bound up with one another as a primordial totality; they are what they are as this signifying in which Dasein gives itself beforehand its Being-in-the-world as something to be understood.

For example, I am *in* the underground railway station, facing the elevator *with which* I am able to reach the surface, *in order to* go to the office, being oriented *towards* coordinating



the activities of the project personnel, *for the sake of* being a reliable project manager (see Dreyfus, 1991: 92, for a similar example). The point is that the handling of equipment is implicated in taking a stand on *who* one is. It follows that if I cannot use the elevator, this is likely to have a negative impact on all the layers of the involvement structure, going up to my very self-understanding as a competent project manager. Human dignity itself is at stake in such situations. Recently, Bulgarian media showed the refusal of a wheelchair user to be pulled up the stairs in a Sofia Metro station (bTV, *The News*, 5 August 2011). The woman was going home after work. When she reached her neighbourhood station, she found out that the elevator had broken during the day. She was offered manual help, but she refused, declaring: ‘I am not a sack of potatoes’. The woman insisted for the elevator to be repaired and was determined to wait until after midnight for this to be done.

Thus in the media reports explored here the existential significance of the enviroing world is highlighted by showing how the inaccessibility (of sidewalks, exists/entrances, platforms, etc.) makes it extremely hard for the disabled people to be diligent workers, good parents, excelling students, active citizens – and, ultimately, full human beings. That is why the difficulties experienced by the wheelchair users and their assistants and denoted as ‘hard physical labour’, ‘inconceivable efforts’, ‘everyday hardships’, etc., resonate with existential meaning. When a mother is shown *struggling* with the combined *weight* of her son and his wheelchair, while taking him down the staircase at the exit of their home (bTV, *This Morning*, 19 May 2011), her *physical* effort shines in the light of the *existential* effort to be a good mother of an assiduous student. For a wheelchair user, a curb in front of the library is ‘the Berlin Wall’ (bTV, *The Hounds*, 8 May 2011) –

similarly to the actual wall which used to divide the German capital, the uncut curb does not simply interrupt spatial displacement, it *interrupts a way of being*. An underground railway stations can be perceived as ‘taboo’ (Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011) because its inaccessibility prohibits not only physical but also *symbolic* presence.

It is usually the case that this constitutive embeddedness of humans in their enviroing worlds remains *hidden* because it is too close, thus being covered up by habit or automatism. Heidegger (1962: 142) uses the example of the street as ‘equipment for walking’ in order to highlight this usual inconspicuousness:

One feels the touch of it at every step as one walks; it is seemingly the closest and Realest of all that is ready-to-hand, and it slides itself, as it were, along certain portions of one’s body – the soles of one’s feet. And yet it is farther remote than the acquaintance whom one encounters ‘on the street’ at a ‘remoteness’ of twenty paces when one is taking such a walk.

Typically, the street resides in the background of familiarity – that is why it is ‘remote’, despite being ‘the closest’. The same point can be made with regard to a flight of stairs – until the familiarity is *broken* by the use of a wheelchair. Such event invites defamiliarization and the attendant experience of uncanniness. In it, ‘[t]he context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself.’ (Heidegger, 1962: 105) In other words, the use of a wheelchair in the context of an inaccessible environment opens up the possibility to interrupt familiarity and thus to illuminate the enviroing world as a ‘totality’ in which human self-definition is

implicated. Such totality can then show up as always already encountered *before* encountering any single entity *in it* – including ourselves as discreet, corporeally circumscribed, naturally given (and not artificially made) individuals.

### **Illuminating the strangeness of the familiar**

This defamiliarization is (unwittingly) brought about within the media representations explored here by focusing on taken-for-granted details of our environing world. Firstly, details are visually emphasized. Media reports highlight different elements of inaccessibility impeding wheelchair users. Through repeated close-ups, attention is drawn to wheels meeting obstacles on disabled person's way – curbs, stairs (bTV, *This Morning*, 19 May 2011), steep ramps, the gap between the train and the platform edge (Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011), displaced shaft covers, misplaced sidewalk pegs (bTV, *The News*, 5 May 2011), etc. Thus details of the environing world are singled out and their power to exclude is exposed. They are decontextualised, which makes them strange – but not *too* strange, for their familiarity is immediately reasserted though recontextualisation with the next wide shot of the whole structure, the building or the transport vehicle. This e-strangement (*о-странение*) of what is familiar is also enhanced by the point of view – details are often shot from an unusual perspective, as though seen by the wheelchair itself. That way, the eyes of the audience are attached to the wheels or the footrests of the mobility aid.

Secondly, environing details are verbally highlighted. Elements of inaccessibility are spoken about, discussed, criticized, calculated. In one of the reports the journalist takes

out a roll-up tape measure in order to determine the elevation of a trolley-buss floor above the ground – it turns out to be 30 cm (BNT, *The Day Begins*, 5 May 2011). Details are described as ‘dreadful’ or ‘incredible’, they are compared to Everest (bTV, *This Morning*, 19 May 2011) or the Berlin Wall (bTV, *The Hounds*, 8 May 2011). Such comments elicit ‘disharmony’ in what is usually taken as a ‘harmonious context’ (Shklovsky, 1965: 21) – curbs and flights of stairs become ‘abnormal’, they do not fit any more, they *disturb* the order of movement instead of facilitating it. Taking the usual place of the impaired body, it is enviroing details which are subjected to diagnosing and enlisted for corrective interventions. It is no longer the non-walking body but the dysfunctional elevator which is identified as ‘vulnerable’ (bTV, *The News*, 5 August 2011).

Thirdly, details are temporally emphasized – their perception is prolonged. In media reports of inaccessibility the camera tends to linger over elements of our surroundings which most people systematically disregard. Such way of representing forces the audience to stop and remain *there* for a while – *there* where it ordinarily just passes by. Remember the young man who approaches the Sofia City Library: ‘His forward movement is interrupted and he is forced to stop. Motionless in front of the obstacle, he reflects on his situation...’ (bTV, *The Hounds*, 8 May 2011) The camera follows such interruptions, coming to a halt in front of obstacles, fixing the audience’s attention on them. Again, an enviroing detail takes the place usually reserved for the impairment. It becomes the object of an otherwise disablist gaze (Thomson, 1997: 60). Consequently, bits and pieces of our everyday world are stared at – attentively, insistently,

disapprovingly. The camera does violence – yet not by objectifying subjects (Shakespeare, 1994: 287), but by *objectifying objects*.

Fourthly, details are shown in a holistic perspective. Media reports illuminate totalities – complex networks of heterogeneous entities. The point is that ‘when something is partly accessible, it is [actually] not accessible’ because ‘there is a *whole totality of measures* that have to be implemented’ (Nova TV, *Hello Bulgaria*, 8 June 2011, emphasis added). It is not enough to cut a curb or to install a ramp. For example, a woman assists her son, pushing his wheelchair out of an elevator at the exit of an underground railway station. She stops, explaining: ‘I found myself on the other side of the road, which I cannot cross, because there is a fence blocking the way. And now I will go down with the elevator again and will have to climb those stairs in order to proceed in the desired direction.’ (TV7, *The News*, 5 May 2011) When there is no coordination among different architectural elements, no accessibility ensues. What is more, details tend to efface each other. The purchase of an electric wheelchair is subsidized by the Bulgarian state every ten years. Yet ‘in order to retain it for ten years, to be able to use it for ten years, I need very good driving conditions. And with these high curbs it will very easily break down as early as during the first year. Now my dread is how to preserve it for a longer period.’ (BBT, *The News*, 11 June 2011)

In summary, media reports of inaccessibility defamiliarize taken-for-granted environing details through visual, verbal, temporal and perspectival means. Visually, details are stared at; verbally, they are being hyperbolized, labelled, diagnosed; temporally, they are made to stay longer, to linger in the field of perception; perspectively, they are shown

from a holistic point of view – the audience’s attention is switched from the figure to its constitutive background.

### **Concluding remarks**

So far, I tried to address two interrelated questions. Firstly, how is the Bulgarian media message about environmental restrictions faced by disabled people constituted, what are the tactics employed in its articulation, what makes it work? Secondly, in *thus* illuminating restrictions, what else gets illuminated? In other words, what do such media representations (unwittingly) tell us *in addition to* the truth about the external, ‘manmade’ constitution of disabled people’s problems? Thus by recouring to ideas borrowed from phenomenology and literary criticism, I attempted to go beyond the British social model of disability while retaining a relationship with its core tenets.

If such analysis is critical, it is critical in a peculiar sense – it explains a mechanism of critique that is already happening. With the aim to strengthen this mechanism, to add to its momentum, I explained in terms of ‘defamiliarization’ the tactics of representing inaccessibility, employed by the Bulgarian media. These defamiliarizing representations illuminate the power of the closest items of our everyday environment – e.g., stair or curbs – over the lives of people who use wheelchairs for getting about. Yet there is an (unintended) consequence of rendering strange these otherwise familiar architectural details. Analyses of literary representations of disability have highlighted the potential of disability to disrupt taken-for-granted normative orders, bringing about the anxious experience of ‘aesthetic nervousness’ (Quayson, 2007). In literature, ‘the impairment is

often taken to be the physical manifestation of the exact opposite of order, thus forcing a reevaluation of that impulse [towards order], and indeed, of what it means to be human in a world governed by radical contingency' (Quayson, 2007, 17). Similarly, in media representations of inaccessibility, the defamiliarization of the entities which constitute our everyday, taken-for-granted world says something about the condition of being human in general. Phenomenologically speaking, it is our existential-ontological *finitude* which shows up in such cases. Consequently, we face anxiety. We enter the 'uncanny valley', where being human is revealed as decentred, extending beyond the taken-for-granted closure of its 'objective' body and/or 'subjective' mind.

When one enters the 'uncanny valley', one is reminded that one's existential projects are always already incorporated in the world one inhabits – I cannot be a diligent worker unless a space is opened up for people like me to be *as* workers. Thus when a wheelchair user encounters inaccessibility, s/he simultaneously encounters a *whole world* with its values, norms, and expectations (Paterson and Hughes, 1999). Three decades ago Vic Finkelstein (1980: 25-6) has made this point clear with regard to the activity of 'washing hands'. Similarly, the activity of walking is also 'created' and not given. A *whole world is there*, surrounding it, making it possible, sustaining it, and investing it with meaning and value. More recently, Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009: 56) has pointed out in her critique of ablism that 'there is no such thing as a purely human – *we are always* combined with non-humans wherein the environment is mediated through a layer of technologies'. This also means that 'the 'essence' of being human lies in our fundamental reliance on appendages, prosthesis and that which is 'outside' ourselves' (Campbell, 2009: 70). Usually, though, this 'fundamental reliance' remains invisible because it is all

too familiar to be noticed. In his analysis of disabled people's experience of their homes Imrie (2004: 753) cites a respondent who puts it thus: 'the detail was very minute and you couldn't see it, but it was very major to me'.

In the case of the media reports of inaccessibility, it was the presence of the (usually absent) disabled Bulgarians on the streets of Sofia which *interrupted the invisibility* of the environing world. The experience of uncanniness – the feeling of being not-at-home at the very heart of one's home, at the edge of the staircase or on the brink of the sidewalk curb – comes with the detachment from the clichés which make up what we regard as 'home' (see Michalko, 2002: 43-4). Such detachment reveals that our homes have profound power over our lives – what we regard as 'home' is comprised of myriad minute details that interact with our selves through the medium of our lived bodies. Each and every one of these minute details incorporates prescriptions on how to act, what to value, whom to be. Making our familiar world strange makes us unhomey, thus bringing about anxiety. Yet it also engenders the possibility for liberation from the iron grip of our habitual 'homes' that are capable of devouring human lives. Here lie the price and promise of following the wheels of a wheelchair through the uncanny valley.

Defamiliarization enables us to see how our habits of constructing the world cause suffering. When defamiliarized, these habits and these constructions become uncanny. The 'homey' world is illuminated in its oppressive artificiality. What we have taken as natural and/or given elements of our closest environment turns out to be conventional and contingent, like the private property for Tolstoy's horse in 'Kholstomer'. These conventions cause suffering. Perhaps, after accepting the invitation to perceive his or her



familiar, lived environment as strange, even a walking person will start approaching staircases and uncut curbs differently. Perhaps s/he will start experiencing certain unease when encountering these elements of his or her habitual surroundings. It is such uneasiness that opens up possibilities for changes in thinking. And, as the report about the woman who refused to be pulled up the stairs ‘like a sack of potatoes’ testifies (bTV, *The News*, 5 August 2011), it is such uneasiness that can also bring about resoluteness to change the world.

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