



# Sacha Polak's *Dirty God* and the Politics of Authenticity

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Dutch director Sacha Polak's *Dirty God* (2019) is the first narrative film with a female lead whose scars are real, and arguably the first to tackle the assumption that scars (especially on a woman's body) are shameful or tragic. Vicky Knight, who plays Jade, a young woman rebuilding her life after an acid attack, has talked about the revelation of seeing her body on screen after enduring years of abuse because of her appearance. Polak 'saved my life' she says, by enabling her to see her scarred body as beautiful, 'a piece of art.' Like any art form, film has the potential to be transformative, and in interviews both Knight and Polak have repeatedly spoken of their work in those terms. This article uses *Dirty God* to think about what is at stake in the dismantling of stereotypes and the reclamation of beauty – a goal shared by many disability rights campaigners. Made at a time when escalating cases of acid violence in London were making headlines around the world, Polak's film prompts comparisons with Katie Piper's *Beautiful* (2011) and other survivor memoirs. Privileging imperfection over repair and fragility over strength, it challenges existing portrayals of disfigurement and, in the process, offers a more radical understanding of beauty and authenticity.

*I am flesh, bones  
I am skin, soul  
I am human  
Nothing more than human*

*I am sweat, flaws  
I am veins, scars  
I am human  
Nothing more than human  
(Emmanuel Adjei, Human)*

The opening shots of Sacha Polka's *Dirty God* glide like a caress over an expanse of bare skin [Fig. 1].<sup>1</sup> A hand passes lightly across delicate tendrils of scar tissue and the strange, pale landscape resolves into the surface of a body. *Human*, by Iranian-Dutch singer Sevdaliza, completes the title sequence with a choric commentary.

We meet Jade as her mother Lisa (Katherine Kelly) is picking her up from

## Keywords

Disfigurement

Beauty

Burns

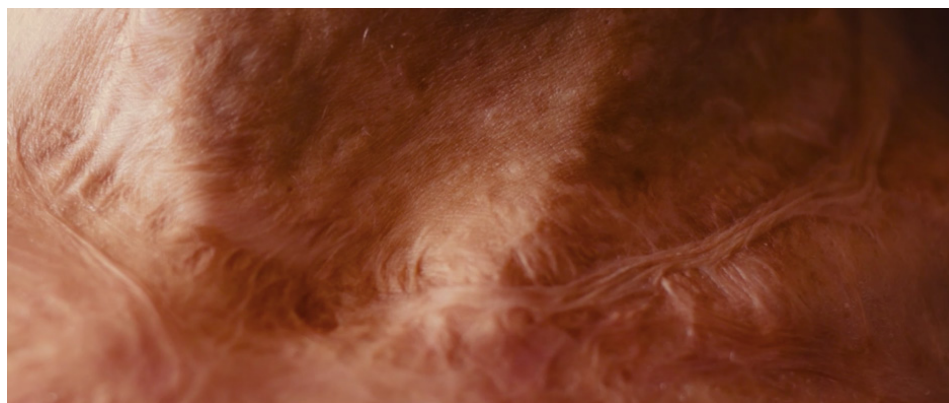
Stereotypes

Diversity

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Fig. 1  
'I am skin, soul': Title  
sequence from *Dirty God*  
(2019). Screenshot



the burns unit of an East London hospital. Their taxi drives past shuttered shop fronts, Victorian railway arches, pedestrians, bus stops: people going about their everyday lives. Jade looks silently out of the window, her face expressionless beneath the transparent facial orthosis (TFO) that she has been told to wear while her scars heal. At home she is greeted by the inconsolable screams of her tiny daughter Rae (two-year-old Eliza Brady-Girard). *Dirty God* is about the physical and emotional aftermath of an acid attack, but it is also a film about living on a Hackney council estate, going clubbing, falling in love, and the fragile, fallible bonds between mothers and daughters.

In interviews on the festival circuit and in the British press, first-time actor Vicky Knight talked openly about the impact of seeing her scars on screen. Having been seriously burned in an arson attack on her grandfather's pub in Hackney when she was eight, Knight had endured 'being called a monster' through her school years. Polak 'saved my life', she says, by enabling her to see her scarred body differently, as 'a piece of art' rather than something to hide.<sup>2</sup> Like any art form, film has the potential to be transformative – for the makers as well as for viewers – and both Knight and Polak have spoken of filmmaking as a way of working through difficult experiences.<sup>3</sup>

This article uses *Dirty God* to ask what is at stake in the dismantling of stereotypes and the aesthetic reclamation of the disfigured body – a goal shared by many disability rights campaigners, and a recurring theme in the Pride and body positivity movements.<sup>4</sup> From its overwhelmingly positive critical reception, it is clear that part of the answer to this question, for reviewers and funders, is the film's authenticity. *Dirty God* is the first feature-length drama with a female lead whose scars are real, and the first to tackle the pervasive assumption that scars (especially on the female body) are tragic or shameful. Covering the Rotterdam Film Festival for *Screen* in January 2019, Fionnuala Halligan called it 'a giant move forward in terms of representation'.<sup>5</sup> For Changing Faces campaigner Ryan Foal, who was born with a cleft lip and palate, it is 'the finest cinematic portrayal of life with disfigurement to date'.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its presence in mainstream cinema since the 1920s,<sup>7</sup> facial disfigurement has been largely neglected by film scholars, who have focused instead on the filmic significance of 'the face' in general.<sup>8</sup> The most recent

example of this tendency, Noa Steimatsky's *The Face on Film* (2017), approaches the face as 'a privileged locus, as a measure — even as essence — of the cinema'.<sup>9</sup> The non-beautiful is not part of her critical lexicon, and most of the faces she analyses are conspicuously normative (if not luminously beautiful). While there are passing references to the faces of the suffering, maimed, and dead of two world wars, visible in newsreels and documentaries, they 'demand a separate enquiry'.<sup>10</sup> As a historian rather than a film theorist, my aims are different from Steimatsky's. This article is part of a larger project that examines the stigma of facial difference through cultural tropes that are so familiar that they have become invisible. Rather than asking what the face means for film, I am using film — and its contexts and legacies — as a way of thinking about the cultural mechanisms of stigma.<sup>11</sup>

Disfigurement (facial and otherwise) is also under-researched within disability studies: a significant omission given the inclusion of disfigurement in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act and the 1995 UK Disability Discrimination Act — legal recognition of the fact that having an appearance at odds with conventional standards of attractiveness makes it likely that you will experience (often daily) prejudice and discrimination.<sup>12</sup> The major studies of film and disability, including Martin Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, focus on sensory and motor disabilities,<sup>13</sup> a tendency mirrored in the disability studies literature and in database and collections projects like the British Film Institute's Disabled Britain on Film and Vanderbilt's Films: Portrayal of People with Disabilities search tool.<sup>14</sup> Norden, whose study is the most ambitious of these sources, limits his remit to 'severe visual, auditory, or orthopaedic impairment'.<sup>15</sup> Disfigurement — as a *social* disability often unaccompanied by physical impairment — is neither defined nor historicized.

In November 2018 the British charity Changing Faces launched a campaign to end negative stereotypes of people with disfigurements in the media and entertainment.<sup>16</sup> In the *#IAmNotYourVillain* campaign video, five young people talk about their earliest memories of being bullied because of their appearance. Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series (2001-11), DC's Joker, and Scar from *The Lion King* top the list of hurtful names. 'It would be quite nice to have a hero or a good person with a visible difference', says one of the young contributors. As a direct result of the campaign, the British Film Institute (BFI) no longer funds films through the National Lottery that include negative depictions of visible difference.

When *Dirty God* was released in early 2019, the BFI's Film Fund director Ben Roberts welcomed it as 'a fantastic example of [an] authentic, empathetic and positive portrayal'.<sup>17</sup> But what, exactly, does it mean to call Knight's performance 'utterly authentic' as Mark Kermode does in his review for the *Observer*?<sup>18</sup> Authenticity is one of those concepts — like beauty and realism — that seems to operate on an intuitive level, but in fact rests on a host of assumptions and conventions that change over time. One of the challenges taken up here is thinking about authenticity more contextually, as a value that reflects particular historical coordinates. For Polak and her collaborators, these coordinates include a new

interest in imperfection as an aesthetic value, and a changing funding landscape in the UK in which questions of representation are explicitly linked to policies of diversity and inclusion.

In *On Being Authentic* (2004), the philosopher Charles Guignon identifies two main components of the Romantic conception of authenticity.<sup>19</sup> The first is the assumption that there is an essential self, deep within each of us, which can be discovered through self-reflection, introspection or contemplation. The second assumption is that once we find this authentic self, it is possible to live in a way that gives it full expression. Asked in a BFI interview if she had any advice for other young people, Knight put it this way: 'You want to be like everyone else, and it doesn't work. Just be yourself. There's only one of you'.<sup>20</sup> These convictions rest, in turn, upon a modern, western understanding of the self as something *bounded* and *self-encapsulated* – very different from the more porous and fractured *inner* and *outer* selves that one finds in early Christian and medieval texts, for example.<sup>21</sup> Authenticity, then, is not a new ideal. What is new, as Guignon and others have observed, is the 'burgeoning industry' that has 'grown up in recent years with the aim of reforming and transforming people in order to make them authentic'.<sup>22</sup>

Most formulations of authenticity – from Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) to Phillip C. McGraw, or 'Dr Phil' as he is known to viewers of his television chat show – share an emphasis on the personal: self-knowledge, self-actualisation, self-expression.<sup>23</sup> In his concluding chapter Guignon asks, instead, what authenticity might look like as a 'social virtue'.<sup>24</sup> This article can be read as a response to his question. It is not about the film itself – as a cultural text to be interpreted – so much as the social, institutional and political spaces around it: the historical moment in which Jade's story coalesces and is embodied, and the factors that shape the film's reception. I map some of the discourses and tropes surrounding acid violence and disfigurement in the early decades of 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain and locate *Dirty God* in a cultural sphere that is shared with media representations and autobiographical 'survivor' narratives. Although I argue that authenticity is negotiated, constructed and performed in these spaces rather than given and innate, this is not meant to imply that that it can't also be a meaningful personal goal. In the final part of the article I trace Polak's interest in disfigurement through her previous film, the documentary *Nieuwe Tieten* (*New Boobs*, 2013), which chronicles her experience of risk-reducing surgery when genetic testing reveals that she is carrying the BRCA1 gene mutation. Both films touch on the medicalisation of disfigurement while illuminating the practical ways in which visible difference is negotiated on a daily basis.

Like all creative projects, *Dirty God* has several beginnings. Asked in interviews how she came up with the idea for Jade's story, Polak describes an incident that took place at Lowlands, a music festival held every summer near Amsterdam. She noticed a young woman with burns scars in the crowd: 'I looked at her and I flinched, and I saw everybody around her doing the same thing' she recalls.<sup>25</sup> Everyone was watching and it struck her that it must always be like that: 'I realised you're never allowed to forget having such an injury'.<sup>26</sup> Jade's story

started to take shape several years later, in 2014, while Polak was living and working in London.<sup>27</sup> With co-writer Susie Farrell she began interviewing young female burns survivors. Jaf Shah, the director of ASTI (Acid Survivors Trust International) put them in contact with Katie Gee, who in 2013 had battery acid thrown at her while working as a volunteer in Zanzibar. They talked to Gee and women who'd had similar experiences 'about how they felt about themselves, if they thought they would find a new partner in life, what the hurdles were.'<sup>28</sup>

Wanting to cast someone who could relate to the story, Polak and Farrell approached Lucy Pardee, the agent who found Katie Jarvis for Andrea Arnold's 2009 film *Fish Tank*. Pardee sent them a video that Knight had posted on social media when she was eighteen: made on her iPad, the five minutes film had gone viral, attracting the attention of producers at Betty, a small UK production company that had been acquired by the Discovery network. Knight had accepted their invitation to take part in a documentary, only finding out when the filming was over that the series would be called *Too Ugly for Love?* The experience was 'humiliating' and when it was broadcast in 2014, Knight ended up being targeted on the virulently antifeminist website Sluthate.<sup>29</sup>

It took Pardee a full year to persuade Knight to audition for *Dirty God*.<sup>30</sup> By then, people were starting to talk about the alarming rise in attacks involving corrosive substances in the UK. London Metropolitan Police data record an increase of more than 500% between 2012 and 2016, from 73 reports up to 469.<sup>31</sup> Although the victims (and perpetrators) were mostly male, it was the stories of young female victims that dominated the popular press.<sup>32</sup> As the public faces of the epidemic of acid violence, their scars became signifiers of a pathologized masculinity and its devastating effects. *Dirty God* shares the news media's focus on the disfigured female body, but unlike the tabloids — which detail exactly what happened, and what it felt like — Jade's story is told without flashbacks. Nor is the perpetrator, Jade's ex-boyfriend, fleshed out for us. He has a symbolic, hallucinatory presence in the film, appearing to her as a totemic birdman, plumed in raven's feathers, but Polak denies us the voyeuristic thrill of watching the attack or seeing its immediate aftermath.

*Dirty God* diverges in other significant ways from media representations of acid violence, providing an alternative to their narratives of pain and isolation. Jacob Johanssen and Diana Garrisi have shown that the tabloid newspapers, in particular, focused on the victim's experience and feelings rather than on the wider contexts of acid violence, or society's response to it.<sup>33</sup> There was little discussion of the mediating roles of social relationships and community, or the institutional contexts of healthcare and policing. The British tabloids are known for their sensationalism, but in these articles we see sensation itself becoming a kind of currency.<sup>34</sup> Their actual subject is not violence, but pain: indescribable, unprecedented pain.<sup>35</sup>

*Dirty God* is not about pain; it is a closely observed study of human relationships — between friends and lovers, mothers and daughters. The tabloid accounts, by contrast, 'create a scenario of loneliness'.<sup>36</sup> A typical article in *The Mirror* from June 2015 features an interview with Becky, whose partner paid another man

to carry out the attack that left her with burns to 40% of her body. 'I couldn't bear the way I looked', says Becky of her scars. 'I knew they would never fade. I thought, "Who will want me now?"'.<sup>37</sup> This tendency to subjectify emotional and physical pain — to see it as personal and private rather than social or structural — conforms to portrayals of domestic violence in popular culture, which either blame women for being victims (for making bad choices, for provoking abuse), or present male violence as 'natural'.<sup>38</sup> Jade, however, is neither an archetypal 'victim' nor a conventional 'survivor'.

In July 2017, the *Guardian* columnist Deborah Orr wrote an article responding to reports of five acid attacks in East London the previous night. The Home Office had convened a joint summit with the National Police Chiefs' Council earlier that month and a petition calling for greater regulation of corrosive substances was gathering signatures online. Orr's piece reflects on the collective anxiety provoked by attacks that felt both extreme and symbolic: 'In a culture of individuality and identity', she writes, 'this is a crime that attacks individuality and identity. It changes people — how they look, how they feel — for the rest of their lives'.<sup>39</sup> At that point, the lack of a consistent pattern was particularly bewildering, with statistics indicating that people over 75 made up a significant proportion of the victims. 'Who would throw acid at an elderly man or woman?' she asks. 'Or at anyone?' Throwing acid, Orr concludes, is a 'narcissistic crime [...]. The perpetrator gets to feel powerful [and] at the same time they irreparably devalue the victim'.<sup>40</sup>

Understanding these crimes as symbolic acts — as a symptom of cultural narcissism or pathologized masculinity — helps to contain the generalized fear they provoke. The attention to young, attractive, female victims in the news media has also meant that healing is likely to be seen in terms of the restoration or reclamation of female beauty. Survivor narratives have played a significant role in voicing these themes. There have been several widely publicised accounts,<sup>41</sup> but Katie Piper's memoirs and television documentaries have had the widest reach in the UK: Channel 4's four-part documentary series *Katie: My Beautiful Face* was watched by 3.3 million people in October 2009, and 2011's follow-up series *Katie: My Beautiful Friends* attracted 1.7 million viewers.<sup>42</sup> In her 2011 autobiography *Beautiful (A beautiful girl. An evil man. One inspiring true story of courage)* and the sequel *Beautiful Ever After* (2014), beauty and the unbeautiful are dichotomous but unstable concepts, tethered to physical appearance as well as the state of the soul.<sup>43</sup>

*Beautiful* opens with a description of a mirror. Piper hasn't seen her face since the surgery for her burn injuries and her psychologist hands her a small plastic mirror with the advice to take her time. 'That normal little mirror became a window into hell', she writes. Instead of seeing a scarred but recognizable version of herself, she is confronted with something that doesn't cohere into a whole. Her skin is 'like meat hanging in a butcher's window', or 'like candle wax'; her eyes 'like two cartoonish globes'; her lips 'like sausages'. 'Where's my face?' she screams inside her head, 'my beautiful, stolen face'.<sup>44</sup>

Before her modelling and television career Piper trained as a hair and beauty



therapist and her vocational investment in physical beauty is a sustaining source of optimism. 'Helping other women feel good about themselves' was something she took to instinctively.<sup>45</sup> But she was also aware that self-improvement was a fool's game: 'surrounded by beautiful people' she became 'more and more obsessed' with how she looked.<sup>46</sup> Piper's writing is shot through with ambivalence: beauty is a source of power, solidarity, self-care and affirmation, and at the same time an unobtainable, oppressive ideal. Founded in 2009, the Katie Piper Foundation has provided make-up support as well as advice on hair replacement for people whose injuries have caused permanent hair loss. This is not just about camouflage or 'passing' as non-disfigured; it is about learning 'how to look and feel great with hair styling, manicures and false eyelashes'.<sup>47</sup> The (re)construction of beauty, in this context, is a therapeutic process rather than a fixed ideal. Sometimes it is simply about feeling 'a little bit less ugly'.<sup>48</sup> Familiar rituals of beautification — depilating her legs, painting her toenails — allow Piper to reclaim her body. She starts a photo diary and calls it 'My Pictorial Journal to Recovery'.<sup>49</sup>

Sacha Polak visited Piper's charity when she was developing the screenplay for *Dirty God* and there are points of overlap between Jade's story and Katie's. Young, blond and attractive, both women are the victims of pathologically jealous and controlling partners. And for both, acquired disfigurement prompts filmic comparisons. Piper likens her appearance to the *Phantom of the Opera* and Hannibal Lecter.<sup>50</sup> One night, while she is painting her nails, she catches sight of 'something' in the little mirror on her manicure box. With its 'puckered skin and dead eyes' it looks back at her like 'the face of a character from a Hammer Horror movie'.<sup>51</sup> Polak addresses the legacy of cinematic monstrosity more indirectly, by evoking the innocent gaze of Jade's daughter. 'Monster', says Rae when she visits her mum in the burns unit for the first time. Wiping away a tear as she tells her friend, Jade remembers her mother's attempt to reassure the frightened child: 'She's a nice monster Rae. Like *In the Night Garden*'.<sup>52</sup> You can look like Quasimodo, says Jade's Polish friend later, 'but what a kid sees is a knockout. That's what a mum is to a kid'.<sup>53</sup> Beauty, she implies, is simply unconditional love.

There are other, more significant, differences between the two accounts. Piper's surgeon is her guardian angel, presiding over her morphine dreams and guiding her towards hope and 'new beginnings'.<sup>54</sup> For Jade there are no guardian angels, no surgical fixes. 'So I'm left with this fucking dog's dinner' is Jade's angry retort when her female surgeon says she is healing well and they don't need to consider further surgery.<sup>55</sup> Later, at home, she finds an ad on Google for 'cheap plastic surgery in Morocco'.<sup>56</sup> Phoning the number on the website, she sets in train an inevitable sequence of betrayals and disappointments. Morocco is a turning point, not just because there is (of course) no surgeon, but because it brings Jade and Naz (Bluey Robinson) together. Their mutual attraction has a history that is left mostly unspoken, and as they stand together on the balcony of the hotel room they are sharing with Jade's best friend (and Naz's girlfriend) Shami (Rebecca Stone), the conversation turns existential. 'My god's different



Fig. 2  
Leaving hospital: Vicky Knight as Jade in *Dirty God*. Screenshot

to your god', Jade confides quietly. 'My god's a dirty god'.<sup>57</sup> It's hot. Shami is sunbathing by the hotel pool way below, they kiss, and he strokes her scarred breast and arm.

Healing, for Jade (and arguably for Knight and Polak) means learning to see beauty in imperfection and fragility. This is different from Piper's rituals of beautification, which have more in common with psychoanalytic accounts of femininity as a masquerade.<sup>58</sup> Recent attempts to promote a more diverse image of beauty — Rick Guidotti's 'Positive Exposure' project in the US, for example, and Rankin's 'Portrait Positive' campaign for Changing Faces in the UK — have shown that glamour and attractiveness are remarkably versatile and pliable commodities, particularly in the hands of professional stylists and fashion photographers.<sup>59</sup> While these campaigns are empowering and valuable, one of the critiques of body positivity has been that it makes individuals responsible for 'self-care,' rather than society. It is, in other words, a typical neoliberal solution to a systemic problem. Self-esteem is not just a personal quality, insists Sarah Banet-Weiser, it is a 'cultural and economic currency' inflected by class, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, and also of course an extremely lucrative market.<sup>60</sup> Like beauty, it is something you are expected to work at, invest in and perform.

But for Knight — who is gay and from a working-class background — beauty is not about conforming to a middle-class, heteronormative ideal.<sup>61</sup> Knight herself rarely wears makeup and in extreme close-up the haptic sense of seeing/touching bare skin creates an intimacy that would be difficult to achieve with cosmetics. It is hard to think of another film that treats real scars as so aesthetically interesting. In his review on the Changing Faces website, Ryan Foal describes the title sequence as 'beautifully lit and shot like an intricate landscape', inviting the audience to look closely at Jade's scars and to 'recognize [their] beauty'.<sup>62</sup> And because we see her body at such close range, there is no moment of shock when we encounter Jade sitting on the edge of her hospital bed in a leopard print sweatshirt and TFO, her hair tied back neatly in a ponytail,



waiting to go home [Fig. 2]. The absence of a delayed reveal sets *Dirty God* apart from virtually every other filmic portrayal of facial disfigurement. As Kermode remarks in his review, Belgian cinematographer Ruben Impens' slow close-ups of Knight offer an 'arrestingly tactile' alternative to the conventions of cinematic disfiguration.<sup>63</sup>

Jade's appearance is also partly the creation of award-winning Danish make-up effects designer Morten Jacobsen (who was nominated for a British Independent Film Award for his work on *Dirty God*). Jacobsen extended Knight's scars, which come up to her right cheekbone, so that they would cover the right side of her face [Fig. 3]. The result is an amplification of reality, a prosthetic augmentation that blurs the line between fact and fabrication. This has not discouraged critics and industry professionals from welcoming the film's honesty. In her review for *Sight & Sound*, Nikki Baughan called it 'bitingly authentic'.<sup>64</sup> Foal, who has written eloquently about his own experiences of prejudice, shame and the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' observes:

*In an industry where disfigurement marginalisation is commonplace, casting an actor with burns to play a character with burns feels oddly radical. [...] As someone with a facial disfigurement, there is often a sense that our stories don't belong to us, and that our faces and bodies only exist as tropes in movies to elicit fear or pity.*<sup>65</sup>

Fig. 3  
*Dirty God* quad poster, 40 inches x 30 inches (UK)



Like beauty, authenticity is a term that has become politically inflected in recent decades, ritually invoked in discussions of literature, film, theatre, visual art, political populism, and social media (where being outed as 'fake' can end a career). In *Authentic™* (2012) Banet-Weiser links the rise of authenticity as a dominant cultural value to the expansion of brand culture in 21<sup>st</sup> century America (although many of the trends she identifies are global). 'In a culture that is increasingly understood and experienced through the logic and strategies of commercial branding', she writes, 'in a culture characterized by the postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial, the concept of authenticity seems to carry even more weight'.<sup>66</sup> Her account is useful for the attention it gives to the myriad ways in which contemporary authenticity is materialised and embodied.

Ogilvy & Mather's campaign for Dove soap exemplifies the ambivalence that Banet-Weiser identifies as part of brand culture. 'Evolution', the first in a series of viral videos, was released in October 2006 and shows a young, conventionally attractive but unremarkable white woman being transformed by make-up artists and stylists, then photographed and her image digitally enhanced to create an image of airbrushed perfection. 'No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted', runs the tagline. 'A catalyst for widening the definition and discussion of beauty' according to the Dove website, the 95 second video got millions of hits on YouTube and won awards in the Viral and Film categories at Cannes Lions 2007.<sup>67</sup> Banet-Weiser uses Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty as a case study of 'commodity activism', a form of activism that promises empowerment through personal transformation rather than through civic participation or collective struggle. She is not saying that authenticity™ is inauthentic — just a myth pedalled by the advertising industry, a product of economic determinism. Rather, she sees consumer capitalism in more complex terms, as a 'nuanced, multilayered context for identity formation' and 'an explicitly *cultural space*'.<sup>68</sup> Brand managers, designers, and creative producers are part of this culture, and so too are consumers.

Like Banet-Weiser, I want to question the traditional idea of authenticity as something given — a quality that some people (or some images or performances) possess, and others lack. Performative, stylistic, and rhetorical, authenticity is negotiated at every stage of the creative process, from script development and funding applications to lighting and makeup. Even the prosthetic scars on Jade's upper cheek confound the usual binary opposition of the authentic vs. the inauthentic. 'I felt like for the film you need to exaggerate a bit', Polak says, explaining that Jacobsen used prints of Knight's lower face, so the fabricated scars are real too, in a way. She adds that the makeup truck — where Knight spent an hour, sometimes longer, at the beginning and end of each day of shooting — was a 'sort of her little world', where she could listen to music, relax, joke around.<sup>69</sup>

Authenticity is also not without risk or cost. Knight has talked about how hard it was being the centre of attention on set after so many years of trying to hide her scars. She has described her distress at the camera 'being so close'.<sup>70</sup> The vulnerability that comes through in her performance is genuine,

but this emotional labour is also a form of capital. It adds value by converting 'experience' into a commodity. The authenticity of Knight's performance also made it necessary for everyone else on set to navigate the risk of exploitation. When they were filming in Morocco some of the crew members asked Polak what she planned on doing with Vicky afterwards, whether she was going to pay for her therapy. If you work with someone who is vulnerable, who has been hurt in the past, Polak told me, 'you make a promise to take care of them afterwards. It's not only for the shoot, it's really a lifetime promise'.<sup>71</sup>

*Dirty God*, which received export and distribution funding through the BFI Film Fund in 2018 and 2019, reflects a new strategic focus on diversity and inclusion in British film and television production. Launched in June 2016, the BFI's Diversity Standards address issues of underrepresentation both on screen and behind the camera, primarily (though not exclusively) in relation to the protected characteristics named in the UK Equality Act 2010, which makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the grounds of race, disability, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief, age, pregnancy or maternity, marriage/civil partnership or sex/gender. Film funding applications now need to meet at least two out of four criteria: one relating to on-screen representation, another addressing diversity in the context of recruitment and creative leadership, the third focusing on training opportunities, and the fourth concerned with audience development. Envisaged as a flexible framework that could be used for feature films, television and online content, film festivals and other audience-facing activities, the Standards are a contractual requirement for all BFI funding. At the time of writing they have been adopted by Film4, BBC Films, BAFTA, BIFA and Paramount Studios, and all producers working in the UK are being encouraged to voluntarily adopt the Standards by the end of 2022.<sup>72</sup>

Jennifer Smith, the BFI's Head of Diversity since 2017, insists that the Diversity Standards are not a tick-box exercise or a rulebook. She sees them as a catalyst, an 'agent of change', with the potential 'to make behaviours different, to make people think about portrayal and representation'.<sup>73</sup> She also acknowledges that 'there is a nuance around portrayal that often gets lost' in public discourse. This is where stakeholder consultation — in forums like the BFI's Disability Screen Advisory Group — can play a valuable role in initiating a discussion about what a 'good' portrayal looks like. I asked Smith if consensus was likely. She immediately said no, 'there won't be consensus. There will be huge debate, but the point about visible difference is that it's [currently] a hidden debate' rather than a public conversation.<sup>74</sup> While the practice of 'cripping up' — where nondisabled actors play disabled characters — has been spotlighted in the media, the Diversity Standards articulate a more nuanced understanding of authenticity. Applicants for funding have to reflect on their casting choices, storylines, locations, themes and narratives, and are invited to 'describe where there are complex and non-stereotypical representations of characters, talent or contributors who are normally relegated to two-dimensional roles'.<sup>75</sup>

Authenticity, then, is the result of countless creative, pragmatic and ethical

decisions. It is also, I have suggested, a form of capital, requiring investment and entailing risk. If we want to know how a film like *Dirty God* challenges disfigurement tropes, authenticity in casting is certainly part of the answer, but so is the way the film aligns with changing cultural values and funding priorities, and with Polak's own trajectory as a filmmaker. When I asked her if *Dirty God* was a personal project, she told me that in the Netherlands, journalists would often bring up the film that preceded it, *Nieuwe Tieten* (2013). Documenting her experience of testing positive for the BRCA1 gene mutation associated with hereditary breast and ovarian cancer, there are obvious parallels with *Dirty God*. Talking to her, one senses that Polak grasps the existential weight of Jade's situation: her refusal to accept the surgeon's decision that this is a 'good result', her compulsive search for another opinion. Both are intimate portraits of scarred female bodies, and in both films mothers and daughters are a central axis. Polak's mother died of breast cancer when she was eleven months old, but she comes to life on screen in family photos and videos, and in the journal entries she wrote after her diagnosis. Yet when I ask Polak about the connection between the two films, she replies briefly, 'it's not like 1 + 1 is 2. It's more complicated'.<sup>76</sup> Jade is not Sacha, but arguably Polak's own experiences make *Dirty God* a more nuanced, more direct, and also less grim film than it might otherwise have been.

*Nieuwe Tieten* shows us that weighing abstract calculations about life and death against the physical immediacy of mutilation (the term is used several times) is not straightforward. Polak's fear of disfigurement is as visceral as her fear of dying. Filmed partly by her stepmother, who is also a confidante and interlocutor, Polak involves us in the agonizing process of reaching a decision. In one consultation with a surgeon, she and her boyfriend are shown a ring-binder of post-operative images. The first patient has had a mastectomy without reconstruction ('we want to avoid this' says the consultant, briskly turning the page); the next image is 'not the prettiest', but a reasonable outcome using prosthetic implants. Another photograph shows fabricated nipples: buds of skin and scar tissue colored by a tattoo artist. Still undecided, she goes to meet other women who have had breast surgery; one lets her feel the firm dome of silicone implant beneath her skin.

In the end, Polak opts for a procedure that uses tissue from her abdomen to form new breasts. After the first six-hour operation, she films herself in the bathroom mirror. Incision lines run across her newly constructed nipples. The horizontal wound that bisects the skin of her abdomen is surprisingly large. 'I look as if I floated in the canal for a few months', she says dryly. Loss runs through both films like a current, but so does humor, and an instinctive avoidance of sentimentality. Making films, Polak says at the start of *Nieuwe Tieten*, is simply something she can do. It is a way of figuring things out, a way of coping. The experience is similar for Knight: acting — and seeing herself on screen — is a process of clarification, of working through. Pointing out that her family was never offered counselling after the fire (in which her two cousins died), Knight says making *Dirty God* was a necessarily difficult but healing experience. 'It's

given me another window to look out. I see myself as human now, and not as a monster. I love my scars. [...] I think they tell a story'.<sup>77</sup>

There is an awkward moment at the end of a *Dirty God* Q&A where Polak interrupts the host as she is winding up the event. 'Can I say something?' she asks, leaning into the microphone. Indicating that she is speaking for Knight and her co-star Bluey Robinson, who sit next to her on the platform, she says 'we've all worked really hard on this film, and it took us a long time. This film is very fragile and vulnerable'.<sup>78</sup> Her comment does more than signal authenticity: it claims fragility and vulnerability as ethical and aesthetic values. This is not just a harrowing or inspirational or realistic portrayal of an acid attack survivor; it is a film that makes demands on us because, like *Nieuwe Tieten*, it documents an unpredictable, risky process in a way that is unusually honest. In complicated ways, it reflects Polak's experience of mortality and mutilation as well as Knight's, while creating a compelling fictional world in which the membrane between fantasy and reality is always porous. It is a film that challenges the available cultural representations of disfigurement and tells a new story about what it is like to live with visible scars. But it also reflects very particular anxieties about acid violence and — like the British tabloids and Katie Piper's memoirs — uses a woman's body to explore them.



# Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Dirty God* (Sacha Polak, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Ellie Harrison, 'Vicky Knight: "My First Film Saved My Life – I Don't Want to Die Anymore, I Want to Outlive My Bullies"', *Independent*, 23 November 2019 <[www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/vicky-knight-dirty-god-interview-fire-burns-survivor-a9213661.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/vicky-knight-dirty-god-interview-fire-burns-survivor-a9213661.html)> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>3</sup> *New Boobs* (*Nieuwe Tieten*, Sacha Polak, 2013); Tom Seymour, 'Interview', *Guardian*, 17 May 2019 <[www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/17/i-hid-my-scars-for-years-i-thought-i-was-only-good-for-horror-movies](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/17/i-hid-my-scars-for-years-i-thought-i-was-only-good-for-horror-movies)> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, 'Beauty, Ugliness and Ideas of Difference: The Politics of the Personal', in *A Cultural History of Beauty in the Modern Age*, ed. by Paul Deslandes (forthcoming, New York: Bloomsbury, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Fionnuala Halligan, "'Dirty God': Rotterdam Review', *Screen Daily*, 24 January 2019 <<http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/dirty-god-rotterdam-review/5135749.article>> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Foal, 'Campaigner Ryan reviews Dirty God', *Changing Faces*, 1 December 2020 <[www.changingfaces.org.uk/story/campaigner-ryan-reviews-dirty-god/](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk/story/campaigner-ryan-reviews-dirty-god/)> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>7</sup> The American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog lists 16 movies with plastic surgery themes between 1922 and 1930. Unlike the disfigured villains of classic horror cinema, films like *Skin Deep* (Lambert Hillyer, 1922), *Back to Life* (Whitman Bennett, 1925) and *Face Value* (Robert Florey, 1927) use plastic surgery as a vehicle for social restitution, often following the return to domestic and civilian life of facially wounded First World War veterans. Joe Kember, 'Face Value: The Rhetoric of Facial Disfigurement in American Film and Popular Culture, 1917-1927', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 10.1 (2017), 43-65.

<sup>8</sup> The notable exceptions are Angela M. Smith, *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), which includes a discussion of disfigurement in classic horror cinema; Fran Pheasant-Kelly, 'Facial disfigurement on screen: James Bond and the politics of portraying the post-9/11 terrorist', in *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. by Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun M. Grabher (London: Routledge, 2022); Karen Randell, 'Masking the Horror of Trauma: The Hysterical Body of Lon Chaney', *Screen*, 44.2 (2003), 216-221, and 'Mad Love: The Anxiety of Difference in the Films of Lon Chaney Sr', in *Screening the Dark Side of Love*, ed. by Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Karen Randell (London: Palgrave, 2012), 69-81; Joe Kember, 'Face Value'; Philip Kirby, 'Battle scars: Wonder Woman, aesthetic geopolitics and disfigurement in Hollywood film', *Geopolitics* (2018), 1-22, and Suzannah Biernoff, 'Theatres of surgery: The cultural pre-history of the face transplant', *Wellcome Open Research*, 3.54 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.14558.1>>.

<sup>9</sup> Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, 'Loving the monster: The Elephant Man as modern fable,' in *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. by Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun M. Grabher (London: Routledge, 2022), 133-150. See also Biernoff, 'Theatres of surgery'.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob K. Dey, et al., 'The social penalty of facial lesions: new evidence supporting high-quality reconstruction', *JAMA facial plastic surgery*, 17.2 (2015), 90-96; Frances Cooke Macgregor, 'Facial disfigurement: problems and management of social interaction and implications for mental health', *Aesthetic plastic surgery*, 14.1 (1990), 249-257; Nichola Rumsey, Ray Bull, and Denis Gahagan, 'The Effect of Facial Disfigurement on the Proxemic Behavior of the General Public', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 12.2 (1982), 137-150; Clifford I. Workman, et al., 'Morality is in the eye of the beholder: the neurocognitive basis of the "anomalous-is-bad" stereotype', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1494.1 (2021), 3-17.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (Rutgers University Press, 1994); *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, ed. by Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns (University Press of America, 2001); Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić, *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film* (Ohio State University Press, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> *Disabled Britain on Film*, BFI Player <<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/disabled-britain-on-film>> [accessed 20 July 2022]; 'Films: Portrayal of People with Disabilities,' Iris Centre, Vanderbilt University <<https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources/films/>> [accessed 20 July 2022].

<sup>15</sup> Norden, xi.

<sup>16</sup> 'I Am Not Your Villain', *Changing Faces*, 16 November 2018, <<https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/get->



[involved/campaign-with-us/i-am-not-your-villain/](#)> [accessed 20 July 2022]. Co-developed with members of the Changing Faces community, the video was runner-up in the 'amplifying unheard voices' category in the 2019 National Campaigner Awards, <<https://smk.org.uk/what-we-do/awards>> [accessed 20 July 2022].

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Pulver, 'BFI to Refuse Funding for Films with Facially-Scarred Villains', *Guardian*, 29 November 2018 <[www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/29/bfi-to-refuse-funding-for-films-with-facially-scarred-villains](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/29/bfi-to-refuse-funding-for-films-with-facially-scarred-villains)> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>18</sup> Mark Kermode, 'Dirty God review – stirring story of an acid-attack survivor', *Observer*, 9 June 2019, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 146.

<sup>20</sup> Dirty God star Vicky Knight and director Sacha Polak, 'BFI Interview', 5 June 2019, *YouTube* <[youtu.be/Klem1QBHQU](https://youtu.be/Klem1QBHQU)> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>21</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (London: Palgrave, 2002). Guignon, 12-15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 5. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Guignon, 151.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 151.

<sup>25</sup> Harrison.

<sup>26</sup> Seymour.

<sup>27</sup> Sacha Polak, BFI interview, 'Dirty God'.

<sup>28</sup> Harrison.

<sup>29</sup> Stefan Pape, 'Vicky Knight on Her Acting Debut in Dirty God', *HotCorn*, 7 June 2019 <<https://hotcorn.com/en/movies/news/dirty-god-interview-vicky-knight-sacha-polak/>> [accessed 27 July 2021]. Debbie Ging, 'Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere', *Men and Masculinities*, 22.4 (2019), 638-57.

<sup>30</sup> 'Dirty God', BFI Interview.

<sup>31</sup> The MPS data obtained by the BBC provides a breakdown of recorded acid attacks in the capital over a 15 year period by age, gender, ethnicity, borough, hate crime and outcome. 74% of the suspects and 67% of the victims were male. 'Everything You Know about Acid Attacks Is Wrong', BBC Three, 17 November 2017 <[www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/5d38c003-c54a-4513-a369-f9eae0d52f91](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/5d38c003-c54a-4513-a369-f9eae0d52f91)> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>32</sup> Jacob Johanssen and Diana Garrisi, "'I Am Burning, I Am Burning.'" Affect, Acid Attacks and British Tabloid Newspapers', *Journalism Studies*, 20.4 (2019), 463-79 (464).

<sup>33</sup> Johanssen and Garrisi.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community through Language* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 15.

<sup>35</sup> Johanssen and Garrisi, 463.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, 471.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, 471.

<sup>38</sup> Pamela Hill Nettleton, 'Domestic Violence in Men's and Women's Magazines: Women are Guilty of Choosing the Wrong Men, Men are not Guilty of Hitting Women,' *Women's Studies in Communication*, 34.2 (2011), 139-60 (144-45, 148).

<sup>39</sup> Deborah Orr, 'Acid attacks are a crime without pity, and a mirror on our unforgiving times', *Guardian*, 14 July 2017 <[www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/14/acid-attacks-capital-london-crime-anger](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/14/acid-attacks-capital-london-crime-anger)> [accessed 27 July 2021].

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>41</sup> Katie Gee, 'Setting The Beauty Standard After An Acid Attack', *Newsweek*, 20 September 2018 <[youtu.be/nYzvu6QimLg](https://youtu.be/nYzvu6QimLg)> [accessed 27 July 2021]; Reshma Qureshi and Tania Sing, *Being Reshma* (New Delhi: Pan MacMillan India, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Kate McMahon, 'Katie's Face Brings 3.3m to C4', *Broadcast*, 30 October 2009 <[www.broadcastnow.co.uk/katies-face-brings-33m-to-c4/5007516.article](http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/katies-face-brings-33m-to-c4/5007516.article)> [accessed 27 July 2021];

<sup>43</sup> Katie Piper, *Beautiful* (London: Ebury Press, 2011) and *Beautiful Ever After* (London: Quercus, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Piper, *Beautiful*, 1-2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, 313.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, 145.

- <sup>49</sup> Ibidem, 144-45.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibidem, 129, 243.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibidem, 145.
- <sup>52</sup> 00:47:22-00:47:56. Created by Andrew Davenport and narrated by Derek Jacobi, *In the Night Garden* was first broadcast on the BBC children's channel CBeebies in 2007. Combining live action, puppetry and animation, the daily episodes introduced a generation of British pre-schoolers to Iggle Piggle, Upsy Daisy, Makka Pakka and their friends in the magic forest.
- <sup>53</sup> 01:29:08-01:29:25.
- <sup>54</sup> Piper, *Beautiful*, 87, 281.
- <sup>55</sup> 00:22:50
- <sup>56</sup> 00:27:27
- <sup>57</sup> 01:09:29
- <sup>58</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator', *Screen*, 23.3-4 (1982), 74-88 and 'Masquerade reconsidered: Further thoughts on the female spectator', *Discourse*, 11.1 (1988), 42-54.
- <sup>59</sup> 'Portrait Positive', *Changing Faces* <[www.changingfaces.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/previous-campaigns/portrait-positive/](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/previous-campaigns/portrait-positive/)> [accessed 27 July 2021]; Positive Exposure <<https://positiveexposure.org/>> [accessed 27 July 2021].
- <sup>60</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, 'Am I Pretty or Ugly? Girls and the Market for Self-Esteem', *Girlhood Studies*, 7.1 (2014), 83-101 (85).
- <sup>61</sup> Polak, BFI interview.
- <sup>62</sup> Foal, 'Campaigner Ryan'.
- <sup>63</sup> Kermode, 32.
- <sup>64</sup> Nikki Baughan, 'Dirty God', *Sight & Sound*, June 2019, 56.
- <sup>65</sup> Ryan Foal, 'Ryan's Story: "Learn To Question The Ideas That Cause You Shame"', *Changing Faces*, 29 September 2020 <[www.changingfaces.org.uk/story/ryans-story-question-ideas-that-cause-shame/](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk/story/ryans-story-question-ideas-that-cause-shame/)> [accessed 27 July 2021] and Foal, 'Campaigner Ryan.'
- <sup>66</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Authentic*, 10.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibidem, 215.
- <sup>69</sup> Polak, BFI interview.
- <sup>70</sup> 'Actor Vicky Knight, Breakthrough Brits 2019,' BAFTA, 7 November 2019 <[www.bafta.org/supporting-talent/breakthrough/vicky-knight](http://www.bafta.org/supporting-talent/breakthrough/vicky-knight)> [accessed 27 July 2021].
- <sup>71</sup> Polak, BFI interview.
- <sup>72</sup> 'BFI publishes initial findings on Diversity Standards', BFI press release, 21 January 2020 <[www2.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-press-release-bfi-publishes-initial-findings-on-diversity-standards-2020-01-21-v1.pdf](http://www2.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-press-release-bfi-publishes-initial-findings-on-diversity-standards-2020-01-21-v1.pdf)> [accessed 27 July 2021].
- <sup>73</sup> Jennifer Smith, personal interview, 22 October 2021.
- <sup>74</sup> Smith, personal interview.
- <sup>75</sup> BFI Diversity Standards, July 2019 <[www.bfi.org.uk/inclusion-film-industry/bfi-diversity-standards](http://www.bfi.org.uk/inclusion-film-industry/bfi-diversity-standards)> [accessed 27 July 2021].
- <sup>76</sup> Polak, BFI interview.
- <sup>77</sup> Seymour.
- <sup>78</sup> Polak, BFI interview.