

Representation of Physical Disability in Mainstream Film

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In the field of cinema studies there is constant discussion and reminder that film and television can be used as tools for change. An important factor in using mainstream film for change is representation of minority groups. This has been a huge topic of discussion in the past few years due to social media drawing attention to the overwhelming whiteness of Hollywood films and the Academy Awards. However, one aspect of representation is frequently ignored and misunderstood: physical disability. As such, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the depiction of physical disability in mainstream film and dissect the inherent problems in the tradition stereotypes attached to disabled characters. I will focus on physical disability because mental and intellectual disabilities are their own separate and equally complex issues that should be addressed individually. For clarification, the definition of disability this paper will utilize is anything that causes an individual to have problems functioning and moving within established societal norms. As an example, our society views walking as a societal norm so an inability to walk, without assistance, is a disability. In order to understand how the representation of disability has progressed I decided to use disability activist Paul Hunt's 1966 essay *Discrimination: Disabled People in the Media* from the book *Stigma* which collected the experiences of disabled individuals in the 1960s.

To simplify his essay, he identifies ten stereotypes that are used to portray disabled individuals:

1. Disabled people as pitiable and pathetic: they lack self-esteem and strength to stand up for themselves
2. An object of curiosity or violence: their bodies are so strange and fascinating yet there's something so repugnant it must be squashed
3. Sinister or evil: their disability makes them bitter and spiteful which makes immoral
4. The super cripple: they have some extraordinary ability that essentially cancels out their disability

5. As atmosphere: a prop in the background to create a certain tone
6. Laughable: the comedic character, typically at their own expense
7. Their own worst enemy: they hold themselves back from success
8. As a burden: the amount of care they require burdens their loved ones
9. As non-sexual: disabled individuals cannot and do not have romantic or sexual relationships
10. Being unable to participate in regular life: their disability prevents them from doing everyday things like grocery shopping or getting a job¹

During my research, I realized it would be beneficial to simplify it even further into three forms of disability that occur most often: feeble disability, monstrous disability, and inspiration porn. In addition, the effect of these stereotypes on disabled identity is important because the majority of disabled people feel that media does not represent them properly.² To understand the problems in disabled representation these three stereotypes will be explained utilizing Paul Hunt's essay and examples from past and present will be brought up, and their negative impact on disabled identity and self-esteem addressed.

First, Feeble disability is the disabled character who is completely helpless and weak. This type of character needs to be rescued by a strong able-bodied character and they lack agency, usually in all aspects of their life. In terms of Paul Hunt's essay, they are burdens, non-sexual, pitiable and pathetic, and atmosphere; this character exists to make the main character look like a sympathetic caring person.³ A stereotype like this one functions to portray disabled people as useless, a burden on society and constantly requiring extra assistance, not just accommodations, to function in society. The distinction between assistance and accommodations is important because accommodations are changes that are made with a person's disability in mind, such as adding a ramp to a home

¹ Hunt, Paul. "Discrimination: Disabled People and the Media." In *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, edited by Paul Hunt. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966.

² Zhang, Lingling, and Beth Haller. 2013. *Consuming Image: How Mass Media Impact the Identity of People with Disabilities*. *Communication Quarterly*. 61, no. 3: 319-334.

³ Hunt, Paul. "Discrimination: Disabled People and the Media." In *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, edited by Paul Hunt. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966.

for a wheelchair user. Examples include both *Total Recall* films (1990, 2012) and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). *Total Recall* is particularly guilty of this as it contains a plethora of disabled side characters, whose disabilities are a result of radiation, that are at the mercy of a large corporation and without the assistance of the tough action hero they would have died. Interestingly, they are the ones leading the rebel group but in terms of agency in the film, they do very little aside from hide and wait. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* relies very heavily on this stereotype, especially in terms of the disabled character being pitiable and pathetic. The audience is meant to sympathize with Quasimodo yet he cannot be portrayed in a romantic relationship with a beautiful able bodied woman that he desires because that would clash with the standard idea of disability and for many his deformity places him in an abject space. For the disabled person, this characterization poses many problems for self-esteem and identity. Many disabled individuals struggle with feeling helpless, not because they are mentally weak, but due to the enormous institutional difficulties they face in a society built for the able-bodied. Our society had a very individualistic and medical way of understanding disability, as Paul Darke notes, "In the medical model, the body is a machine with a physiological norm to which the body either does or does not conform; if it does not fit the norm, all subsequent problems are due to its corporeal deviance, not to the social perception of deformity and disease."⁴ Essentially, the problems disabled people have are inherently tied to the body itself as opposed to societal norms. This perpetuates the flawed idea that disabled people do not work hard enough or are not strong enough. The fact is that disabled individuals have no choice but to build

⁴ Darke, Paul. "No Life Anyway: Pathologizing Disability on Film." In *Problem body: projecting disability on film*, edited by Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ Press, 2015) 97.

mental and emotional strength because they navigate a space that is not meant for them. There is no choice to but to harden emotionally and psychologically to survive Even when a person needs assistance or care from another individual they are meant to be in control. Films that utilize this stereotype add to the societal concept that disabled individuals cannot make their own decisions. This leads to problems where caretakers and family of disabled individuals do not respect their autonomy and agency as a human being. Another pressing issue is that when disabled characters are given agency the behavior they exhibit is violent.

This leads to the monstrous disability idea. The monstrous disability character is a manifestation of able-bodied fears of disabled people. With the oppression of a minority comes anger, and in majority minds a fear of the return of the oppressed. This character is ultimately a vile, vicious and bitter person, usually with a physical deformity that would lead to ostracization. Story lines for these characters revolve around them striving for revenge against a society that wronged them. Using Paul Hunt's stereotype list this type of character is usually sinister, and object of violence, unable to participate in regular life, and pitiable.⁵ Pitiable seems unusual for an evil character, but these characters are pitiable because the audience sees that they have been victimized by certain sections of society. Yet, there is a clear message of punishment for their desire for revenge as these characters usually die at the end of the film. A franchise that is particularly guilty of this is the James Bond films. From its very first film, *Dr. No* (1962), James Bond establishes the trope of evil disabled characters. Dr. No, the film's namesake, has two bionic hands that possess

⁵ Hunt, Paul. "Discrimination: Disabled People and the Media." In *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, edited by Paul Hunt. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966.

great strength but little dexterity. Dexterity, or lack of it, becomes his downfall when he is unable to climb a ladder and is boiled to death. No seeks revenge due to what he feels is unwarranted rejection by the American and USSR governments. More recently, *Skyfall* (2012) featured a villain, Silva, that seeks revenge on the spy agency that abandoned him and left him with a severed damaged bottom jaw. Silva is particularly evil, as he kills Bond's boss and conducts several terrorist attacks on London. He too, is killed by the finale. Yet another example is the wildly popular *300* (2006). Ephialtes, though not the main villain, betrays the Spartan warriors after he is rejected from the Spartan army. He gives the Persian leader information about the Spartan's battle plan and places the group of men at risk. He is different, however, because he does not die like most monstrous disabled characters. Much like the gay coded villain trope, this functions to reinforce the established social norm of difference being evil or bad in some fashion. Far more unpleasant is the fact that it situates disabled people who criticize ableism both, institutionally and personally, as a possible threat to the very fabric of society. Stereotypes such as this are a tool of mainstream society that block marginalized groups from addressing the oppression they face.

Last but not least, is the inspiration porn narrative. The term inspiration porn is borrowed from the disabled community on the internet who use it to describe what happens when able-bodied fitness focused individuals use the achievements of disabled people to inspire themselves and others by implying if a disabled person can do it everyone else has no excuse. For the sake of film analysis this term will be used to describe films where an awe inspiring disabled person "overcomes" their disability in some fashion. In

general, the films that use this stereotype are centered on the disabled person and their life. The stereotypes inspiration porn utilizes are the super cripple, their own worst enemy, as a burden, and as non-sexual.⁶ Examples include, *The Theory of Everything* (2014), *My Left Foot* (1989), and *Me Before You* (2016). *The Theory of Everything* touts itself as the love story of Stephen Hawking and Jane Wilde, and for a good portion it is, unfortunately the film chooses to portray Wilde as a hero for loving Hawking and ignores the institutional barriers the Hawking faced. One such incident is how casually the film addresses his tracheotomy, where the filmmakers brush over how hard Swiss doctors try to push Wilde to allow Hawking to pass away, insisting that he would have no quality of life after the surgery. The film tragically ignores the ableist ideology that almost cost Hawking his life. *Me Before You* presents a fictional love story between an able-bodied woman and a paralyzed young man. Essentially, the woman enters the man's life to try and convince him that living life is worth it regardless of disability. The man feels like a burden and cannot bear to be in a wheelchair. At the end of the film, the man decides to go through with euthanasia, leaves everything to the woman, and says he does not want her to live "half a life" with him. Vile in every sense, the film positions a disabled person dying for an able-bodied person and perpetuates the idea that a disabled life is not worth living. Darke states, "I argue that the "good cripple" for culture comes across on film as the cripple who does their utmost to overcome their abnormality of body, in contrast to the "bad cripple" who is happy to be a cripple."⁷ In the case of *Me Before You*, the way he overcomes his

⁶ Hunt, Paul. "Discrimination: Disabled People and the Media." In *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, edited by Paul Hunt. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966.

⁷ Darke, Paul. "No Life Anyway: Pathologizing Disability on Film." In *Problem body: projecting disability on film*, edited by Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ Press, 2015) 106.

disability is by dying, and in the case of *The Theory of Everything* the only reason the film was made is due to Stephen Hawking's intelligence and contributions to science. Almost every film that centers on a disabled person is an inspiration porn film. They must overcome their disability, and often in extreme ways. This biggest problem with films like this is the flawed concept of "overcoming" disability. First, it assumes that the biggest issue about disability is personal drive and strength to work past it as opposed to the social construction of normative physical disability position disabled people as "abnormal." Second, there is no such thing as "overcoming" a disability. When a disabled person achieves beyond what able bodied people assume they can it is because the person has learned to work around and with their disability. Although this type of character is the one disabled people enjoy the most because these characters have positive attributes, it cannot be ignored that these films were made with an able-bodied audience in mind.⁸ These films are made to inspire able-bodied people to reach for their dreams. Inner strength and internal problems are portrayed as the biggest thing holding disabled people from achieving in society as opposed to institutional discrimination. If these films were made with disabled people in mind they would focus more on the struggle against external forces that work to hold disabled individuals in the margins. Due to ableism, it is difficult for most able-bodied individuals to understand how someone could be happy or content with their disability. For them disability is a lack of ability instead of difference in ability, and because they see it as 'lacking' it is always negative. Tragically, this character works to send the message that disabled people must be extraordinary to be worth the space they

⁸ Zhang, Lingling, and Beth Haller. 2013. Consuming Image: How Mass Media Impact the Identity of People with Disabilities. *Communication Quarterly*. 61, no. 3: 319-334.

occupy. It is exceptionally rare to see a disabled main character that is just disabled without it being the single most important part of their existence. It also perpetuates the idea that disabled individuals who request accommodations are either weak or greedy, trying to take advantage of people's pity to get something. There is also an emphasis on people desiring death when they become disabled. To a disabled person, this says that able-bodied people would rather die than become disabled, which further suggests that they do not value disabled lives, that a disabled life is not worth living.

Fortunately, there are some examples of positive representation for disabled people. One such example is the television show *Speechless* (2016-) which follows the DiMeo family whose eldest son has cerebral palsy. The show quite accurately depicts the struggles of a family dealing with both disabled and able bodied children, in terms of accessibility, education, and family dynamics. The child with cerebral palsy, JJ, has a prominent role and is a well-developed three-dimensional character instead of a stereotype. The actor playing him, Micah Fowler, actually has cerebral palsy and proves that regardless of his disability he is a very capable actor. Even with a humorous base the show does not shy away from serious issues and manages the delicate balance between funny and serious scenes. The one issue that I find is that the show has a low production value that can make it frustrating to watch at times. Pleasantly, it has been renewed for a second season and I have hope for a larger budget. Another good example, is Nemo from *Finding Nemo* (2003). Perhaps it is a little odd to list a non-human character from an animated film, but characters like Nemo provide an important message about embracing differences for children. Nemo has one shortened fin that impairs his ability to swim and is initially made bullied by other children

for it. However, he proves his intelligence and leadership skills throughout the film and manages to escape captivity. At the end of the film, Nemo has a more positive outlook on his disability and has formed more positive bonds with his father and friends. In a more mature space, Peter Dinklage as Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones* (2011-). Tyrion is a remarkably complex character, who is not only one of the most intelligent of the character but also prominently displays his sexuality. It is beyond rare to see a disabled character who has sexual desires, let alone one who flaunts it. His disability is brought up in the show but it is addressed from a societal lens that critiques the behavior of those who abuse him. He has agency and goes through his own character arcs. Tyrion is an excellent example of physical disability done properly. In fact, this role propelled Peter Dinklage into stardom, as a result he has been given more roles that are not demeaning to a little person. *The Ringer* (2005) is another good example of disabled representation. This is also surprise when you consider the film's star, Johnny Knoxville is known for his offensive crude behavior, but the film treats all its disabled characters with considerable respect. Indeed, it shows that athletes at the Special Olympics are just as fit as their able-bodied counterparts. The film was actually endorsed by the official Special Olympics committee.⁹ It does focus on intellectual and developmental disabilities instead of physical disabilities, but I will include it because many developmental disabilities have comorbid physical disabilities.

⁹ Special Olympics. "Grab your popcorn and head to your local theater for *The Ringer* on 23 December." News release, October 13, 2005. Special Olympics. Accessed May 5, 2017. [http://www.specialolympics.org/Special Olympics Public Website/English/Press_Room/Global_news/The Ringer opens 23 December.htm](http://www.specialolympics.org/Special%20Olympics%20Public%20Website/English/Press_Room/Global_news/The_Ringer_opens_23_December.htm).

The simple truth is that disabled people are represented so poorly because people are ignorant. As a society, we need more comprehensive education but disabilities that isn't just telling kids not to stare. Ignorance leads to caricatures of people instead of properly fleshed out characters. Another change that needs to be made, we need to include more disabled people in the film and television industries. It is difficult to properly represent people if they are never involved in the creation process. Problems arise when the industries forget that disability is just one aspect of a person's identity, regardless of how big a part it is. A disability is not the be all end all of a person's existence, or at least it shouldn't be. Able-bodied individuals need to understand that a disability is not a lack of ability or a loss of something, but a change. I am of the belief that any author needs to do research if they are going to be writing about something they have no personal experience with, including disability and other marginalized groups. Media must take responsibility for the impact it has on how our society views minority groups, whether it be race, gender, sexuality, or otherwise. For many, film and television are the only interaction that have with obvious physical disability, and as such they form their understanding of disability based upon the stereotypes present in media. Aside from this, the disabled community deserves better. The community has suffered and struggle from the beginning, and really only made strong strides in the 1970s when the fight for curb cuts was won. As Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic point out, "Disability activists frequently point out that those who live long enough eventually become disabled; the statistical probability that a portion of life will be lived with a disability increases with age."¹⁰ As human life expectancy

¹⁰ Chivers, Sally, and Nicole Markotic. "Introduction" in *Problem body: projecting disability on film*. Edited by Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Univ Press, 2015) 4.

continues to grow in many places we must learn to accept those among us with disabilities, whether they are acquired or not.

Important to note as well, this paper is certainly not a completely comprehensive look at disability in film a whole. I have purposely left out films that depict blind and hard of hearing/deaf individuals because those are significantly more complex and unique issues that have their own set of terminology and disability studies concerns. Additionally, I find it important to press the sheer lack of disability in film and television to begin with. Entire groups of disabilities are not shown in film at all. More specifically, disabilities such as chronic pain syndrome, fibromyalgia, lupus, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, and immunodeficiency disorders are rarely or never shown, despite the large group of individuals living with them. Lastly, film does not depict or understand comorbidity in disability. The reality is people often have multiple conditions at the same time due to the level of stress disability places on an individual. For example, autism often comes comorbid with anxiety and depression or a physical disability like chronic pain. Another example, fibromyalgia is often comorbid with myofascial pain syndrome. I found that this was completely absent from media presentation.

In closing, our mainstream film relies heavily on stereotypes of physically disabled people. There are three primary character types feeble, monstrous and inspiration porn. Of course, more exist but they are not used as frequently as the main three. These stereotypes are gross mischaracterizations of disability and perpetuate harmful ideologies that protect the established norms of ableism in society. Films that utilize them question the value of a disabled life and more often than not answer it with it death. These attitudes are an

extension of eugenics and programs that took the lives of countless disabled individuals and people of color. Indeed, these films buy into the concept that disability is an internal problem and ignored the social construct of disability. They perpetuate the idea of disability as something to be eradicated, removed from the body and society. In their discussion of disability in film as a body genre Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell point out, “Disabled bodies were at the forefront of modern innovation: on the frontlines in their experience of how intervention upon the body has become a primary means of redress in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (hence the proliferation of a vast array of therapies and social services).”¹¹ Instead of addressing a larger problem, society portrays disability as an individual’s unique concern. By choosing to depict the struggles of disabled individuals as a personal failure films become an extension of this ideology. That is not to say that therapy and social services are bad, because they are important and they should be represented too. The problem is that is the only aspect of disabled life that gets representation. We need more films about disabled individuals navigating the institutional barriers they face.

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¹¹ Snyder, Sharon, and David Mitchell. "Body Genres: An Anatomy of Disability on Film." In *Problem body: projecting disability on film*, edited by Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Univ Press, 2015.) 201.

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