

The Image of Disability in the Film Industry and its Sociocultural Implications.

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ABSTRACT

This research will investigate how disability is portrayed in the film and television industry and what the sociocultural and psychological implications are of such portrayal. It will discuss why it is important that the entertainment industry stops exploiting disability for shock value and as a means of earning profit. First, data provided by World Health Organization and the Black Doll study will be presented in order to determine how environmental factors such as film contribute to discrimination and lowering self-esteem. Then, the article will explore how disability can be read in film by making references to Paul Hunt's theory of stereotypes and data provided by researchers from the University of Southern California. Next, three films — *Freaks* (1932), *Me Before You* (2016) and *The Shape of Water* (2017) — will be compared in order to determine the degree to which they promote the inclusion of disability in our society. Finally, the article will examine why television programs are the best medium to standardize the appearance of disability on-screen and in real lives.

INTRODUCTION

Representations of diverse experience in film and television are widely acknowledged to play an important part in both maintaining and, in some cases, challenging social inequality (Ryan 2017). Moreover, the entertainment industry's lack of diversity among its creative workforce (from writers to actors and producers) has been argued by analysts such as George Gerbner (1976) to make film and television complicit in the very societal inequalities it seeks to represent and, in some cases, critique. Mostly, such debates have centred around the way Hollywood portrays ethnic and racial minorities as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community, with accusations of whitewashing, i.e. casting white actors to play ethnic characters, as well as promoting and supporting stereotypical, homogenous portrayals of minorities. Yet, while the inequalities of ethnic minorities in the industry are widely discussed, those experienced by people with disabilities have been largely ignored (Lopez 2018).

According to the recent research carried out by the World Health Organization, people with disabilities constitute about 15% of the world population, making them the largest minority group in the world (World Health Organization, 2011). Additionally, the aging of society's populations and global increase in chronic conditions causes the number of people with disabilities to rise every year, meaning most people will be disabled at some point in their lives (World Health Organization, 2011). Yet, despite the prevalence of disability in the real world, characters with disabilities appear on screen in only a handful of productions, and they are even less frequently portrayed by actors who have a disability themselves.

In this paper, I will investigate the portrayal of disability in the entertainment industry with the aim of demonstrating that by creating a certain idea of what it means to have a physical or mental impairment, media can have a negative impact on the life and treatment of people with disabilities. Firstly, with reference to the Black Doll experiment and *World Report on Disability*, I will explain why films and television are more than just entertainment but are an important sociocultural tool. Then, I will explore how the media industry contributes to the creation of disability stereotypes categorised by Paul Hunt. Finally, I

will analyse on-screen representation in three films about disability in the light of their social, cultural, and economic aspects: *Freaks* (1932), *Me Before You* (2016) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). With this research, I hope to start a conversation about the importance of representation and explain how and why people with disabilities have to start reclaiming their status in the film industry.

WHY FILMS ARE MORE THAN JUST ENTERTAINMENT

As argued by the World Health Organization (2011), the concept of disability is to a large extent a social construct caused by environmental factors. People with impairments do not necessarily perceive themselves as disabled; it is the interaction with other people — their attitudes, looks, language and behaviour — that labels them with this term and isolates them from the rest of the society via the dichotomy of the disabled vs. non-disabled social discourse.

The way in which people with disabilities are perceived by society is crucial for ensuring their safety and inclusivity. Historically, the concept of disability has been used by non-disabled people as a justification for discrimination and marginalization, e.g. during World War II, the Nazi's infamous eugenics program sought to cleanse the Aryan race by murdering or making infertile people with disabilities (*Disability in the Early 20th century 1914-1915* n.d.). Discrimination can also lead to situations which affect mental well-being of individuals; people with disabilities often report being afraid of confirming stereotypes which are associated with their impairments (Steele & Aronson 1995). As a result, people with disabilities are more likely to suffer from unemployment, live in poverty and experience a variety of health problems because of their inability to afford proper health care (World Health Organization 2011). For this reason, it is important that all societies stop viewing disability in solely negative ways, and that stereotypes and associated stigma start being challenged.

The entertainment industry could be said to be one of the aforementioned environmental factors which contribute to how minorities, in this case people with disabilities, are widely

perceived by society. Throughout decades, film and media have become 'one of the principal influences of the modern world' (Quigley, 1947, p.65). As argued by Bandura (2001), they constitute 'a symbolic environment' that creates certain 'images of reality' which have the power to influence one's thinking and behaviour (Bandura 2001, p. 271). Hence, the way in which the entertainment industry portrays the concept of disability has the potential to shape one's attitude towards people who have such an impairment. Therefore, it could be asserted that the film and television industry is not solely about entertaining people, but also about educating them about 'social reality' (Bandura, 2001, p. 271).

However, the issue of representation does not solely pertain to the way in which minorities are portrayed on-screen; lack of disabled actors on screen can be equally harmful. This is important because people have an innate need for media representation as a means of self-validation (Gerbner & Gross 1976) and because of their natural 'aptitude' 'for imitation of screen personalities whom they admire' (Quigley, 1947, p.65). If people with disabilities do not see people like themselves portrayed on-screen, it may cause them to feel unimportant to the society, or even excluded from it (Gerbner & Gross 1976).

Lack of proper representation and its effect on the society can be seen in the series of experiments — subsequently known as the Black Doll experiments — carried out by Kenneth and Mamie Clarke in the 1940s, who investigated the impact of racism and segregation on self-esteem (Beschloss 2014). In the experiment, black children aged 6-9 were given two dolls, one black and one white, and they were asked a series of questions such as: which one they would like to play with, which one is the 'nice' doll, and which one is 'bad'. It was found that the children had an overall preference for the white dolls and assigned them many positive characteristics, whereas the black dolls were considered to be ugly and bad (Beschloss 2014). It was concluded that discrimination and segregation caused children to internalise racism, therefore lowering their self-esteem based on the colour of their skin. This study demonstrates how profoundly the society's attitude and media representation (or lack thereof) can influence one's self-esteem. It helps to understand how negative or scarce portrayal of disability can provide people with a misrepresented reality (Miller 1999) and highlights the emotional and psychological toll it takes on people who have physical or mental impairments.

The issue of representation and its potential impact becomes even more important when considering the pervasiveness of the entertainment industry in the 21st century. Nowadays, television and film no longer pertain solely to the television set or cinema theatre and they are not limited by programming schedules. With the rise of social media, globalization of the Internet and the development of tie-in merchandise, entertainment has been liberated from such constraints and has now become 'spreadable media', i.e. media spread across various platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and video-on-demand platforms like Netflix or HBOGo (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013).

With such a broad range of platforms, which allow the audience to access film and television productions from anywhere and at any time, the entertainment industry ceases to be solely a cultural entity meant to entertain people but rather, with its pervasiveness, becomes an important socio-cultural tool which promotes the creation of fan communities and kindles conversations on an everyday basis and across geographical borders. Hence, it is now easier for the entertainment industry to influence the audience by promoting a certain image of

reality and therefore it is even more important that stereotypes associated with disability start being challenged.

HOW WE CAN READ DISABILITY IN FILM

The entertainment industry is arguably guilty of creating and reinforcing a plethora of negative stereotypes associated with disability which have the potential to transcend the fictional world into reality and affect real lives of individuals by promoting simplistic views on having an impairment. Activist for disability equality Paul Hunt suggests that there is a prevalence of 10 stereotypes which are notoriously promoted by the film and media industry (Holder 2013). These stereotypes frequently depict people with disabilities as:

1. *Pitiable and Pathetic*
2. *Victim or an object of violence*
3. *Sinister or Evil*
4. *The Super Cripple*
5. *As Atmosphere, curious or exotic ('freak shows')*
6. *Laughable*
7. *His or her worst enemy*
8. *A burden*
9. *Non-sexual*
10. *Unable to partake in everyday life*

Additionally, when it comes to the frequency with which disability appears on-screen, the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative from the University of Southern California found out that 'only 2.5% of all characters were depicted with a disability across the 100 most popular movies of 2017' (Smith et al., 2018, p.3). It could be said that such scarce representation of disability does not reflect the diversity and complexity of physical and mental impairments sustained by over 15% of the world population. Furthermore, not enough representation on-screen can have a variety of negative effects on the public. Firstly, it has the potential to make people with disabilities feel unimportant (Gerbner & Gross 1976). Secondly, it can create a feeling of strangeness and surprise when a character with a disability eventually appears in a production. Thirdly, it can enhance the focus on the impairment rather than on the character per se and make it a defining feature of their identity, therefore denouncing their other qualities. As asserted by Miller (1999), all of the above have the power to shape the audience's perception of disability because they craft certain images of reality. Considering the pervasiveness of the entertainment industry in the 21st century, this feeling of exoticism — a fetishization of those perceived to be different — can easily transcend the barrier between fiction and reality, seeping into the everyday life and dynamics of our society.

This scarcity in on-screen representation and the exoticism which ensues become even more disturbing considering that 'workforce disability (...) across the film sector' has been estimated to be at only '0.3 per cent' (CAMEo, 2018, p. 26). This means that a large part of the stories about disability is told without the actual participation of disabled people; that they are told by people who have no idea what it means to have an impairment. This is arguably another way in which the entertainment industry both marginalises and exploits disability at the same time.

Films about disabilities have been popular with Hollywood virtually since the rise of the industry. Often, they utilise the disabilities of their characters to reflect contemporary social issues, e.g. war trauma, the Cold War and the impending nuclear apocalypse, as well as advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities. Such films tend to focus on the struggle of

being disabled and isolated from the world and depict disability as an abnormality, frequently pitting it against the popularised concept of normality.

Some of them romanticise suicide as a way of dealing with one's impairment, while others incorporate disability as an element for comedic relief or as a defining characteristic of a villain, e.g. the Joker's facial disfigurement or Captain Hook's crude prosthetic. Such portrayals of disability pose a serious threat not only to how people with disabilities view themselves, but also to how they are perceived by the rest of the world. By examining films which have received mixed receptions regarding their depictions of disability — specifically, *Freaks* (1932), *Me Before You* (2016), and *The Shape of Water* (2017) — it becomes clear that their sociocultural impact is located at both the levels of dramatic representation and of practical inclusion in the mechanisms of such representation.

Case Study 0: *Freaks* (1932)

First, before I delve into the analysis of the recent portrayal of disability, I will look at an older example to better demonstrate a film's ability to influence the audience. *Freaks* (1932), directed by Tom Browning, was a highly controversial film because of its appropriation of disability for shock and horror value. It tells a story of a group of disabled circus performers who, because of their physicality, are discriminated against, patronised, and manipulated by their non-disabled colleagues, Hercules and Cleopatra. The film culminates in a scene in which the 'freaks' take their revenge on their tormentors and turn them into 'one of [them]'.

When creating the film, Browning was inspired by his own experience of living in a circus and working with such performers. He wanted to make a film which would somehow pay homage to this part of his life and 'humanise' people with disabilities (Eggert 2011); however, he also 'sought to surpass the horrors of *Dracula*', a horror film he directed the year before (Eggert 2011). These 'clashing [...] ambitions' led Browning to create a film which many people deemed to be an offence against human decency (Eggert 2011).

Allegedly, the original version of the film was so disturbing in its portrayal of disability that the production studio faced a tremendous backlash from the audience, with one woman purportedly accusing the film of causing her miscarriage (Patterson 2015). As a result, Browning was forced to cut out scenes which were considered too disturbing or graphic, e.g. a scene in which 'the Human Torso' rolls his own cigar. Nevertheless, despite his attempts to make the film more acceptable, it was still considered to be 'too graphic' in its 'display of humans with the severest of physical disabilities' and was banned in many countries, including the UK for 30 years (Malcolm 1999).

The scale of the backlash the production received from the audience shows how unaccustomed people were (and still are) to seeing real cases of disability on screen. The fact that the production was a horror film which relied on the characters' impairments as a source of fear certainly did not help to make the audience more sympathetic towards people with disabilities. Rather, the film employed various cinematic techniques to make the characters even more scary and repulsive, particularly in the culminating scene in which the 'freaks' take their revenge on their persecutors. Throughout this scene, the camerawork and editing are utilised in a way which emphasises the terror felt by Hercules and Cleopatra; this way, the audience is manipulated into experiencing the same emotions as the villains and rooting for them rather than for the 'freaks'. As a result, the characters with disabilities morph into the embodiment of evil and a tool used by the filmmakers to create an atmosphere.

To conclude, *Freaks* was a remarkable film in terms of propagating the inclusion of actors with disabilities in the film industry. However, when it comes to its portrayal of disability, it was a film which, instead of humanising people with disabilities, showed them as something 'exotic', 'aggressive', and somewhat 'sinister'. As the British Board of Film Classification put it, the film 'exploited for commercial reasons the deformed people that it claimed to dignify'; as a result, Browning failed in his attempt to create a poignant social commentary which could have changed the way disabled people were perceived by the society.

Case Study 1: *Me Before You* (2016)

Me Before You (2016), an adaptation of a novel by Jojo Moyes, provides a good example of a film which failed to propagate the inclusion of actors with disabilities in the industry. It tells a story of a young millionaire with quadriplegia — Will Traynor — who decides to undergo euthanasia because of the excruciating pain caused by his degenerative condition and his inability to enjoy life the way he did before he became disabled. However, before he undergoes the procedure, his parents ask him to wait six months, hoping that with time he will change his mind. For this period, they hire a young woman named Louisa Clark to keep him company and take care of him, and slowly, the two fall in love. Nevertheless, despite Louisa's attempt to change his mind, Will decides to go through with the procedure, justifying his decision by telling her that he doesn't want to deprive her of all the 'things that someone else could give' her.

The film received mixed reactions from the audience in terms of its portrayal of disability. It kindled an ardent campaign in which some protesters 'reclaimed the movie's promotional hashtag #LiveBoldly as a 'blatant rejection (...) about the movie's message' (Wanshel 2016), with disability activists arguing that the movie reinforced the stereotype in which 'life with disability is not worth living' (Wanshel 2016). On the other hand, a lot of non-disabled people didn't understand 'why there [was] outrage' about the film's portrayal of disability (Wanshel 2016), especially because it might have set a positive example of having the right to decide about one's own life.

Depending on an individual's own experience (Miller 1999), the film may resonate differently with different members of the audience meaning its portrayal of disability cannot be denounced in terms of storyline alone. However, when considering other aspects, such as casting choices, it could be argued that the film exploited disability and the pressing social discourse of the right to undergo euthanasia, with the sole aim of capitalising on it. What may look like an honest attempt to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities to decide about their own lives falls short when considering that no actor with a disability actually appeared in the production; rather, the producers opted to cast a well-known, able-bodied actor Sam Claflin, who would have a better chance at encouraging the public to buy tickets to watch the film; unlike a less-known, but disabled actor. Consequently, the film arguably ended up exploiting a pressing social issue without doing anything that would help propagate the inclusion of people with disabilities in the film industry.

Case Study 2: *The Shape of Water* (2017)

The Shape of Water (2017), directed by Guillermo del Toro, is another film which in its ambiguous portrayal of disability and bodily otherness could be said to have failed in its attempt to advocate for social change. It tells the story of Elisa, a mute cleaner who works at a secret government laboratory in the 1960s. Throughout the film, the audience sees her somewhat

separated from the people around her because of her inability to communicate verbally with them. Gradually, she falls in love with an unintelligible amphibian humanoid who has been the object of gruesome experiments taking place at the laboratory. As the film draws to an end, with Elisa getting shot while trying to help the Amphibian Man escape, she gets revived by him and develops gills which allow her to live with him under water, far away from the society which ostracised them both.

The Shape of Water was controversial in the way it deals with the disabled protagonist and her love interest, especially considering the existing 'taboo around sex and disability' (Pepper 2016). Some argue that by showing Elisa engage in a sexual activity, the film challenges the stereotype of a person with disability being asexual, while others argue that this attempt falls short because the protagonist falls in love with a 'fish' (Tassi 2018). Conversely, it could be said that the film portrayed the bodily 'otherness' of the Amphibian Man as an allegory for bodily 'otherness' of people with physical impairments. The aim might have been to raise awareness of the discrimination and hostility both of them experience from the society.

Nevertheless, when Elisa explains why she cares about the Amphibian Man she stresses that it is because he 'does not know' that because of her muteness she is considered 'incomplete'. She loves the idea that 'he sees' her 'for what' she is, and as she is. With this in mind, it could be asserted that the film not only dehumanises people with disabilities by having Elisa fall in love with a humanoid but also that it reinforces the notion that disabled people can only be with someone who doesn't 'know any better' (Sjunneson-Henry 2018) or with someone of their own kind, i.e. other disabled people. This interpretation further points toward the argument that *The Shape of Water* reinforces the stereotype of a person with a disability being unworthy of a human love.

In Elisa's transition into an underwater creature, it also adds to the idea of her being somewhat exotic because of her impairment. Furthermore, by highlighting that the connection between Elisa and the Amphibian Man is a product of their 'otherness', the film seems to place her muteness at the same level as being a completely different species. This further contributes to the idea that people with disabilities are inherently different than the rest of the society, that they are a somewhat different species as well.

The Shape of Water is yet another Oscar-winning film which comments on the separation of people with disabilities from the rest of the society but makes no effort to actually contribute to promoting the inclusion of disabled actors in the entertainment industry. Rather, it features well-known, able-bodied actors who help ensure a greater turnout and employs disability of its character to drive the plot and make the audience more emotionally involved. This pattern could be seen among many other Oscar-winning films, such as *Rain Man*, *My Left Foot* and *The Sessions*, all featuring able-bodied actors in disabled roles.

HOW REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY CAN BE IMPROVED

As demonstrated in the above case studies, the most prominent issue with the current portrayal of disability seems to be the hypocrisy of the film industry, evident in its exploitation of disability as a plot device and to enhance its emotional impact, as well as in its continuing disregard for actors with disabilities. However, this is not to suggest that films such as *The Shape of Water* should stop being produced. To say this would be to constraint the creative process of filmmaking and further the

discrimination against people with disabilities by censoring certain stories. The real issue is that the moment such films are the only representation of disability on-screen, they are neglecting their responsibility of representing 15% of the world population. Furthermore, they simplify the diversity of the human condition and provide the audience with a highly reductive view on disabilities. Therefore, in order for the entertainment industry to start promoting a more realistic notion of what it means to have a physical or mental impairment, the nature and frequency with which disabled characters appear in productions have to be changed, e.g. by diversifying their appearance on-screen.

An effective way to achieve this would be by casting actors with disabilities on a regular basis and for roles which are not based solely on their disability. There is evidence that suggests television programmes are the best way to popularise the inclusion of disability in the entertainment industry. One reason for this is because of the longevity and serialisation of television programmes, which foster an unprecedented form of intimacy between the audience and the characters (Creeber 2004).

Television programmes often span for a number of years and become part of our daily, weekly or even annual routine (Creeber 2004). The development of stories and characters often parallels the development of the audience in terms of personality characteristics, beliefs and relationships (Creeber 2004). As a result, the audience tends to identify with characters which resonate particularly strongly with their own personality. Such emotional bonds between people and fictional characters pose a perfect opportunity for the better inclusion of disability on-screen and in real life. Hence, television may be more effective than other media at normalising disability.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, despite the fact that disability is more present on-screen than ever, there are many stories about disability but not enough stories *with* disability. Above case studies suggest that the entertainment industry keeps making films about isolation of people with disabilities but does nothing to bridge that gap between the disabled and non-disabled people, e.g. by including more actors and workers with disabilities in the productions. Rather, the concept of disability has been exploited as an easy, or rather lazy, way of winning the audience and maximizing profit.

Lack of representation can have serious consequences such as self-imposed isolation stemming from the fear of confirming negative stereotypes associated with one's impairment, which can subsequently lead to lower economic status, health problems or even experiencing direct acts of discrimination. For this reason, it is important that people with disabilities start telling their own stories, that they start challenging the way in which they have been portrayed in the entertainment industry, and that they increase the frequency with which they appear on-screen.

Initially, achieving this objective may be a challenge, considering that only 0.3 % of the workforce in the film sector identifies as disabled (CAMEo 2018). However, as the filmmaking environment becomes more diverse, the productions will also become more representative of the diversity of the human condition, thus fostering a better understanding of what it means to have an impairment. This will also help to increase the visibility of disabilities in film and in real life, therefore challenging stigma and stereotypes associated with it.

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