

**Notes on SCREENING DISABILITY:  
A Conference on Film and Disability  
(March 26-28, 1999, University of Iowa)**

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The process of organizing SCREENING DISABILITY, which would eventually become the first conference of its kind, included several theoretical, political, and academic dilemmas. However, rather than include every struggle and conflict the planning committee encountered, I have instead decided to offer a sort of framework from which to understand why the event was created, and the suspected outcomes of its completion.

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I had expressed my interest in organizing a day-long symposium on the topic of film and disability to Dudley Andrew, who chairs the Institute for Cinema and Culture at the University of Iowa. Having taught and written on the subject for quite some time, I realized that film and disability scholarship needed such an event to establish itself and its goals. A general concern with contemporary methodologies of looking at cinematic portrayals of disability also led me to sell my symposium as an alternative, more filmic, approach to these movies.

Some explanation is necessary to explain what is meant by a more 'filmic' approach to disability cinema. As more disciplines in the humanities were coagulating into the now amorphous field of cultural studies, scholars were beginning to forward a new interest in disability-centered scholarship. As its own corpus of study, Disability Studies gained status in the Academy in the mid to late eighties, when the cultural landscape was just beginning to blossom in terms of disability rights and awareness. While direct correlation may be hard to identify, a case can be made that sees the politically correct movement of the late eighties, and the passage of the ADA in 1990, as catalysts for the advancement of disability studies in the Academy.

The implications of the political atmosphere just mentioned has been to stabilize disability studies within a political framework; the issues being addressed by disability scholars, in a variety of fields (history, English, sociology, education, etc.), could not escape the political implications of their work, due to the historical/cultural/political moment from which it emerged. Disability studies has embraced this condition for the most part, and some scholars have used it as their theoretical lens. As Leonard Davis has stated, 'The exciting thing about disability studies is that it is both an academic field of inquiry and an area of political inquiry.' (1)

The study of cinema's portrayal of disability followed suit, and its initial contributions attacked film makers for creating what they saw as derogatory and discriminating images of people with disabilities. Paul K. Longmore, who pioneered the field when he published his influential essay 'Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disability,' offered a detailed schematic to understand the negative imagery seen in Hollywood films that dealt with disability. (2) Like Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' had done for feminist film theory in the mid-seventies, Longmore's 'Screening Stereotypes' set the theoretical, and thus political tone of film and disability studies. (3)

The film and disability scholarship following Longmore, and to a great extent today, has offered the same politicization of cinematic terms; people writing on disability cinema have consistently focused on the cultural implications of movies. For example, Martin Norden, who published 'Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability In The Movies,' attempted to create a complete documentation of physical disability in American cinema. (4) While his work should be applauded for providing a much needed historical perimeter to disability portrayal, its title alone points to the book's

rhetorical framework.

As I have noted, Longmore's initial influence on film and disability scholarship resembles that of Mulvey's contribution to feminist film theory in the nineteen-seventies. The political tone of Mulvey's article is hard to miss: 'It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article.' (5)

Her essay was written at a time when psychoanalytic work was emerging in the field of film theory. Mulvey's use of psychoanalysis within a feminist theory of the cinema thrust her work to the cutting edge. By using Freud's ideas of male and female sexual desires, the theoretical implications of the female lack, scopophilia, etc., Mulvey contemplated the act of viewing cinema itself, interrogating the male gaze (viewer and character), and thus exposing years of patriarchal cinematic practices in film history. Even though Longmore's 'Screening Stereotypes' does not utilize psychoanalysis, its thesis remains the same as Mulvey's: film history proves the presence of a constructed mistreatment, and manipulation of the disabled individual (for Mulvey, the woman) as spectacle for the visual pleasure of the able-bodied (for Mulvey, male) viewer.

While the writing that immediately followed Mulvey supported her articulation of women in film, and subsequent theories of the male gaze in narrative film, feminist film theory grew to critique her stance. Exploring the intricate notions of Lacanian psychoanalysis, scholars like Jacqueline Rose (6) and Constance Penley (7), among others, challenged the assumptions Mulvey was making about cinema itself. For example, many critics of Apparatus Theory asserted that by focusing primarily on the character and sexuality in female portrayal, Mulvey and others were denying the narrative film its own cohesive structure.

As feminist film theory has developed, it has fragmented the focus of Mulvey's original work, creating several new theories regarding minorities in cinema. Gender, race, sexuality, and disability in cinema have been explored, due in no small part to the achievements of feminist film theory. Furthermore, such projects have influenced the plethora of cultural studies occurring in film studies today. As the shift to cultural studies begins to mature in the study of cinema, however, it has become more apparent that films are losing the attention they deserve as cinematic art. A significant proportion of contemporary film scholars are content to explore the cinema in terms of what it offers as cultural indication, cultural influence, and a definer of social behavior. Portrayals of disability in cinema have consistently followed this methodology. Like feminist film theory has shown, in order to progress as a discipline, film and disability must reexamine its cinematic assumptions; SCREENING DISABILITY was created to initiate that process.

Furthermore, as disability studies has flourished as a discipline, its influence in several different areas of the humanities has proven its mutability and applicability to a great deal of scholarship. However, when disability studies gains recognition in a particular field, like film studies in particular, a comprehensive moment of reflection on what the co-opted discipline may be able to offer to the development of disability studies, itself, is often ignored. As noted, disability studies entered the film world via feminist film theory. What has been ignored by a great deal of those who study cinema and disability, are the theories, movements, and trends that precede that moment in film theory; years of thinking about film have gone virtually untouched by individuals studying film and disability. Subsequently, the postulations about filmic portrayals of disability have suffered from a distinct imbalance between cultural studies and film studies.

My interest in disability cinema, as a film student, has always been centered around the idea of film as art. Much more than stereotypes, narrative tropes, etc., the artistic essence and construction of these films has held great importance in my work. (8) Undoubtedly, my ideas regarding film and disability played a part in the symposium's inception. However, like any academic conference, SCREENING DISABILITY was not created to solve a problem; rather, it was created to bring a dilemma to the theoretical surface of academia, wherein interested scholars could identify and debate the issues at stake. SCREENING DISABILITY was thus created to provide film studies and disability studies a space to exchange ideas on how to better facilitate an understanding of cinema and disability,

and its potential as a discipline.

Along with the submissions from film studies and disability studies, scholars from the fields of English, philosophy, history, cultural studies, and education responded to the Cinema and Disability Group's (CDG) call for papers. (9) Those proposals came from universities in North America, Canada, Europe, South Africa and Morocco. Furthermore, both documentary and fictional (Hollywood) film makers were invited to attend, show their films, and participate in discussions. Our hope was that this multi-faceted approach to disability and film would facilitate the emergence of new perspectives, not only on the films and theories that would be addressed that weekend, but also on film production as well.

The impending issue in January, however, was to select which abstracts the CDG wanted to invite to present in March. Added to these decisions, and essentially the tone of the conference, were the keynote speaker selections. Martin Norden, Paul K. Longmore, Thomas Walz (author of *The Unlikely Celebrity: Bill Sackter's Triumph Over Disability*), Billy Golfus (director of the documentary *When Billy Broke His Head...and Other Wonders*), and Barry Morrow (screenwriter of *Bill, Bill On His Own*, and *Rain Man*) had all been contacted by that time, and all except Morrow did present. In a real way, however, the panel presentations were even more important for the CDG to consider.

The CDG realized that Norden, Longmore, and Walz, had established their space within the study of disability and film. As explained earlier, Longmore's work spans a wide range of political and ideological landscapes, one of which happens to be media portrayal. Norden, as well as Walz, have also maintained consistent personas in their respective fields, and have included film and disability as parts of larger collections of scholarly work. The panel presentations reflected a different type of commitment to film and disability. While over a third of the presenters were professors, the remaining respondents were Ph.D. students, working to establish their space in a new and exciting field. Knowing this, the CDG selected presentations that offered fresh, and original scholarship; the combination of established theories and younger ideas would provide a lucrative atmosphere, wherein new theoretical ground could be broken.

Summarizing an event like SCREENING DISABILITY is rather difficult, due to the wide variety of experiences, events, and theories that were shared by presenters, interested scholars from around the country, and audience members. (10) The impact of the event will not likely be felt until its work is published, and deciphering the academic progress made at the conference will be easier to pinpoint as the CDG collects various types of evaluations. However, it is possible to isolate three major themes that encapsulate the findings of SCREENING DISABILITY.

First, because scholars from both film studies and disability studies were present, progress was made towards fusing the two fields into a more unified system of inquiry. Papers and panels at the conference were intentionally balanced to give attention to issues being dealt with in each field, and the discussions often urged a vitally important combination of artistic and cultural theory.

Second, presentations, on the whole, attempted to move beyond a political/advocacy posture. While such work has been advantageous for disability studies in the past, as mentioned earlier, the study of disability cinema needs to move further into the aesthetics of cinema. SCREENING DISABILITY did just that; accomplished professors and graduate students challenged all of the conference participants and attendees to understand that film has an artistic essence, which enables culture to understand itself through the mirrored images of moving pictures. One example of such a presentation came from Anthony Enns (University of Iowa) entitled 'The Spectacle of Disabled Masculinity in John Woo's Heroic Bloodshed Films.' Enns analyzed, quite closely, the *mise en scene* of Woo's work, paying close attention to the scenic constructions of the camera angles used to picture disabled bodies. Reluctant to fall into a political argument, Enns resisted including disability history of Hong Kong or any possible cultural reading of the portrayals his presentation focused on. Allowing films a non-political critique, SCREENING DISABILITY undoubtedly urged the study of film and disability to move beyond portrayal and into a new phase of disability-film criticism.

Third, and most importantly, SCREENING DISABILITY looked ahead. It was understood

from the first event of the weekend that part of our goal, as a group, was to articulate the future of studying these films. The CDG sees the study of cinema and disability as its own field of study, independent from disability studies as well as from film studies. The combination of both fields added to the independent construction of theories, methodologies, and aesthetic principles that fuse several concerns in one, allows cinema and disability studies to gain the status it requires to remain a contribution in the humanities. By participating in SCREENING DISABILITY, scholars brought that goal closer to a reality. Calling for a new type of understanding in disability cinema, SCREENING DISABILITY proved that more attention needs to be given to the cinematic, artistic, and structural elements of disability films.

## Notes

1. *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 1.
2. Paul K. Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disability," *Social Policy* (Summer 1985), 31-8.
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975).
4. Martin Norden, *Cinema of Isolation: a History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).
5. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975) reprinted in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 59.
6. See Jacqueline Rose, "Paranoia and the Film System," *Screen* 17 (Winter 1976-77).
7. See *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988).
8. Many of the theories and methodologies in my work on film and disability, some of which have been hinted at here, have been developed with Thomas B. Hoeksema of Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Hoeksema and I have collaborated on several projects in the past, including co-teaching the class Film and Disability at Calvin College. His part in my work here is that of an advisor, colleague, and friend.
9. The Cinema and Disability Group is made up of members with diverse interests, backgrounds and professional experiences. Areas such as English, philosophy, film studies, creative writing, film production and education all contribute to The Cinema and Disability Group's mission of approaching disability films from a wide spectrum of interests in order to allow a complete understanding of this phenomenon in American and international cinema. Committed to understanding film as a powerful cultural force, The Cinema and Disability Group is searching to understand the portrayal, depiction and use of disabled individuals in cinema. The Cinema and Disability Group has also sought out the help and input of community groups such as the Evert Conner Rights and Resources Center for Independent Living, the Iowa City chapter of The Council for Exceptional Children, the Special Education program at The University of Iowa, as well as the special education communities of Iowa City and Coralville, Iowa. (For information write <crvsm@iowa.uiowa.edu>.)
10. SCREENING DISABILITY: A Conference On Cinema And Disability (26-28 March 1999: University of Iowa); PANELS: Perspectives On Tod Browning: "Tod Browning" by Oliver Gaycken (University of Chicago), "Disabling the Viewer: Perceptions of Disability in Tod Browning's Freaks" by Sally Chivers (McGill University), Meira Cook (University of British Columbia), and Nicole Markotic (University of Calgary); Historicizing The Hunchback of Notre Dame: "Lost and Found in Translation: Adaptions of Victor Hugo's Notre Dame de Paris" by Laurie E. Harnick (University of Western Ontario), "The Image of Physical Disability in American Film: The Case of The Hunchback of Notre Dame" by Patrick J. Devlieger and Carlos Drazen (University of Illinois at Chicago); Disability In World Cinema: "Representations of the Disabled in Moroccan Cinema" by Dr. El Alami (Al Akahawayn University, Morocco), "Disability and the Films of John Woo" by Anthony Enns (University of Iowa); Representing Vietnam "From Horror to Healing: Dealing With Vietnam Through Film and Photography" by Jennifer Tiernan (University of Iowa), "Trapped in the

Affection-Image: American Cinema's Post-Traumatic Cycle (1967-76)" by Christian Keathley (University of Iowa), "Vietnam Films and the Disabled" by Lisa Y. Kamitaki (San Francisco, CA); Sexuality And Gaze Theory: "It's Not Polite to Stare: The Gaze, Disability, and Film" by Johnson Cheu (Ohio State University), "Sexy Cyborgs: Disability and Erotic Politics in Cronenberg's Crash" by James L. Cherney (Indiana University), "Pathways to Power: Disability Imagery and Passion Fish" by Leslie Harris (South Africa); Pedagogical Perspectives: "Disability Imagery in the Movies: Teaching Critical Viewing Skills" by Stephen Safran (Ohio University), "The Fusion of Film Studies and Disability Studies" by Thomas B. Hoeksema (Calvin College) and Christopher R. Smit (University of Iowa); Mental Illness As Metaphor: "Disability and the Dysfunctional Family in Wayne Wang's Smoke" by Lou Ann Thompson (Texas Woman's University), "The Inner Life of Ordinary People" by Patrick E. Horrigan (Long Island University, Brooklyn), "Damaged Whiteness: Disabled Male Bodies in Contemporary Melodramas" by Martti Lahti (University of Iowa); Perceptual Modes: Deafness and Blindness In Film: "Deafness in American Cinema, or Why is There So Much Music in Movies About Deaf People?" by Douglas Baynton (The University of Iowa), "The Noble Ruined Body: Blindness and Visual Prosthetics in Three Science Fiction Films" by Susan Crutchfield (Macalester College), "Boundaries and Separateness Between Deaf and Hearing People in Children of a Lesser God" by Nadezhda V. Shapkina (University of Tennessee); SCREENINGS: Bill followed by "A Case Study in Docu-Drama Film Treatment of a Person Challenged By Mental Retardation: The Movie Bill" presented by Tom Walz; When Billy Broke His Head followed by a presentation by film maker Billy Golfus. KEYNOTE ADDRESSES: "American Dreams, American Nightmares: Some Reflections on Motion Picture Portrayals of People With Disabilities" by Professor Paul K. Longmore (San Francisco State University); "Hollywood, Politics, and Physical Disability" by Professor Martin Norden (University of Massachusetts-Amherst).