

Film Studies and Disability Studies

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Extant critical studies of disability representation in film have chronicled the medium's perpetuation of repressive social attitudes toward the disabled. Taxonomies of the formulaic plots and characterizations of disability on celluloid list types similar to those found in literature. The crucial differences of film - and these differences have important ramifications for disability studies, as I will discuss - are its performative and visual form, and its nature as an industry of mass culture. On film, disability stereotypes comprise a condensed language of visual symbols upon which film narratives draw, and which the film industry markets to the public as images of "human interest", "personal achievement", "abject horror", or "slapstick comedy". As critics have pointed out, these stereotypical representations repress the social and political dimensions of disability as minority experience. (1)

Film's tendency to individualize the experience of disability raises questions about how the cult of the star functions to further isolate and heroicize its disabled characters. Related to this issue are questions of performance. How does the public's thirst for disabled performances by popular stars perpetuate a cycle of disability discrimination, creating ironically able-bodied "disabled poster-children"? Just since 1987, over twenty Oscar nominations for leading actors and actresses have gone to thespians portraying disabled characters. Throughout film history, disabled leading roles have been played by nondisabled actors with only rare exceptions, such as Marlee Matlin's Academy Award winning role in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986, d. Randa Haines). As the Oscar record attests, public interest in these films is not restricted to the melodramatic emotionalism of their stories alone, but also to the pathos and virtuosity accorded their leading performances. (2) A disabled character is considered the ultimate challenge for a nondisabled actor because disability is considered one of the last outposts of "Otherness".

The continuation of this discriminatory casting practice - efforts of disabled actors' unions aside - bespeaks a pressing need to study the performance of disability as an institutionalized phenomenon. To this end, Eric Lott's study of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, is an adaptable theoretical template. (3) Lott foregrounds the complex social formations, interactions, and transgressions reflected in dominant culture's forged representation of minority identity. His approach might shed light on the practice of casting the non-disabled as disabled. Kaja Silverman's work on *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946, d. William Wyler), a film tracing the post-World War II resocialization of three variously "disabled" soldiers, provocatively outlines some of the representational issues involved in casting a disabled actor in the role of a

disabled veteran. (4) Gaylyn Studlar offers a model approach to disability performances in her analysis of Lon Chaney's "freakish" star persona in her recent book, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age*. (5) This essay considers Chaney's disability performances in its particular historical moment, filtering his career through the lenses of Hollywood's cult of the star and of cultural constructions of masculinity, as well as through early film's formal relationship with the popular live "freak show." We need more of such studies which strive to contextualize disability representations within the intersecting discourses that molded them and that they helped to shape.

Disability as performance has been a subject of film since the entertainment form's beginnings. Silent film shorts depict beggars who fake a variety of disabilities in order to make a quicker dime. Contemporary performances of disability occur in films as diverse as *Sirens* (1994, d. John Duigan), in which a male artist's model pretends to be blind, and *The Usual Suspects* (1995, d. Bryan Singer) in which an underworld kingpin, Keyser Soze, masquerades as a mobility impaired criminal underling. Film studies has yet to fully account for the place of disability within contemporary audiences' seemingly inexhaustible obsession with the mutability of the physical and mental self. Science fiction and horror genres offer extreme examples of this preoccupation with alternate bodies, reminding us that even in less spectacular genres, representing disability often becomes an exercise in special effects and makeup artistry. Effects technology can make a convincing double-leg amputee of *Forrest Gump*'s able-bodied Gary Sinese (1994, d. Robert Zemeckis); makeup artists can make visually realistic the craniodiaphyseal dysplasia of Eric Stolz in *Mask* (1985, d. Peter Bogdanovich), and the severely scarred skin of Ralph Fiennes in *The English Patient* (1996, d. Anthony Minghella). But special effects, like the medical discourse's climactic cure, render disability a temporary phenomenon - a bodily crisis or performance that evaporates at the end of the movie, rather than a continuing condition of life, a source of identity and community. What is the dissonance between audience pleasure at watching these technologically generated bodies and the social dis-ease that greets prosthetic technologies in the everyday?

Thus far, my remarks have presumed a non-disabled spectator as the hypothetical, ideal addressee of popular films. The narrow treatment of disability within popular film narratives is not the sole item persuading me that this presumption is warranted. Many movie theaters have yet to offer equal access: accessible entrances and restrooms, equable seating arrangements, the availability of open-captioning and audio-description, and so on. The cinema industry as a whole has yet to seriously approach the disabled community as a consumer group. This is just one reason why the most provocative and astute films about disability are most often documentaries. Generally not under the same economic pressures as big-

budget fiction films, documentaries' goals are to educate and record as much as to entertain. Here, the disabled are more likely to be in control of not only the film's subject matter, but also its production. While these films do not enjoy the advertising budget and wide theatrical distribution of a blockbuster picture, several have garnered critical recognition and praise. Nicholas Philibert's French film *In the Land of the Deaf* (1992), Billy Golfus and David E. Simpson's *When Billy Broke His Head . . . And Other Tales of Wonder* (1994), and Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back* (1996) are just a few recent award-winning documentaries.

Spectator theory's increased concern with the material conditions of spectatorship, as well as with the specificity of real spectator identities located in real socio-historical moments, makes it well suited to disability studies. This and other established film theories and studies (as those of Lott and Studlar mentioned earlier) should be borrowed from and adapted in the effort to theorize disability representation. What, for example, can disability theorists learn from feminist film theory's discussion of the gendered division of power in classical film? Feminist theorists' recuperation of female subjectivity in the face of the controlling male gaze may offer a map to help disability theorists restore, or at least uncover the traces of, a disabled subjectivity within film's able-ist discourses. (6) Burgeoning studies of racial and sexual minority spectatorship and representation offer disability scholars models for analyzing the oppositional film practices of cultures outside the mainstream. (7) Humanities scholarship on medical imaging and medical institutions' use of film will provide a touchstone for analyses of medical-model disability representation in popular film. (8) Studies of other related visual entertainment and representational forms - such as virtual reality, computerized animation, digital imaging, and architecture - will also bring insights to disability scholarship.

Because disability stereotypes fit so seamlessly into film's image-, individual-, and body-centered ideology, to arrive at a "disabled" film practice and theory will require rethinking the functions and possibilities of film language. This project circumscribes exciting potential for the expansion and accessibility of film expression, art and entertainment. What could it mean to represent paralysis in "moving pictures"? To depict blindness in a visual medium such as film? In what way must the "talkies" be transformed in order to faithfully represent deafness or muteness? Film came of age with the modern industrial revolution; it is a product of technological and scientific innovation, of human "progress" and a desire to control, manipulate, and reconstitute reality. As such, traditional ideologies of film stand in opposition to traditional ideologies (stereotypes) of disability. The disability film scholar must work to bridge that gap, discovering or reinventing the "disability" in film, as well as the filmic qualities of disability.

Notes

1. Book-length studies of disability in film include Lauri E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1988) and Martin Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994). Norden's book includes a useful selected bibliography. For an article-length overview of disability stereotypes in film, see Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Images of the Disabled: Disabling Images*, ed. Alan Gartner and Tom Joe (New York: Praeger, 1987).

2. Shine (1996, d. Scott Hicks) is a fascinating case study. The film generated as much popular attention for its Oscar-winning leading actor, Geoffrey Rush, as it did for the real, psychologically disabled man he portrayed in the film, David Helfgott. Furthermore, the public's embrace of Rush's performance has oddly penetrated, perhaps even prefigured, the public's enthusiastic reception of Helfgott's international piano concert tour, despite its being deemed an artistic failure.

3. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

4. Kaja Silverman, "Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity", in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 52-121.

5. Gaylyn Studlar, "Sideshow Oedipus: Lon Chaney and Film's Freak Possibilities," in *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 199-248.

6. See, for example, Kaja Silverman (cited above); Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (New York: Verso, 1991); Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Mary Ann Doane's chapter on the melodramatic "medical film", "Clinical Eyes: The Medical Discourse," in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 38-69.

7. See, for example, bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1992); Peter Feng, "In Search of Asian American Cinema," *Cineaste*, 21: 1-2 (1995) 32-36; and Martha Gever, John Greyson and Pratibha Parmar, eds., *Queer Looks* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

8. See, for example, Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Paula A. Treichler and Lisa Cartwright, eds., *Imaging Technologies, Inscribing Science*, special issue of *Camera Obscura* 28-29 (1992); and Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).