

Equality, Culture and Representation: Considerations on the Film Industry

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Abstract

The film industry is complicit in the composition of cultural 'norms', contributing to the social construction of disability and buttressing traditional notions of disabled bodies. The Hollywood film, in particular, a key component in the western cultural system, reflects an ableist social structure. This paper attempts to contribute to disability studies via an examination of the cultural industry of popular film, by reflecting on the Hollywood film as a cultural construct and as a site of interrelating social systems. Baker et al's (2009) egalitarian framework of four key social systems is employed. The critical relationship between disabling stereotypes and Hollywood's 'rent-seeking practices' is examined. The fusion of the often disparate fields of academic research; film, disability and equality, provides a unique opportunity to investigate some ideological elements involved in the construction of disability on screen.

Keywords/terms

Disability, Hollywood film, culture, equality, representation, social systems.

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Introduction

This paper reflects on the relevance of an equality studies framework for disability studies and the continuing project of fair representation in film. As the disabled body in popular film continues to provide narrative fodder, serving as a 'crutch upon which disability narratives lean for their representational power' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000), its investigation is a crucial contribution to disability discourse. Popular depictions of disability, though often created by non-disabled people, affect popular notions of what it means to be disabled. Hollywood is an ableist industrial complex and a global transmitter of cultural pedagogy and purveyor of images (Frymer et al, 2010), creating images of persons with disabilities as dependent, isolated, unemployable and in search of intervention and 'cure'. In this way, disability is created not just by material discrimination but also by prejudice which is implicit in cultural representation (Shakespeare, 1994). While equality of respect and recognition is a core concern of disability scholars and activists, it is nestled within a broader set of social relations. To begin, I discuss this paper's position within the Social Model paradigm, then turn to disability as an equality issue in general terms before looking to this paper's particular concern; the film industry as a component of the cultural system. Much recent scholarship in disability studies recognizes that persons with disabilities experience cultural, social and political oppression (Shakespeare, 1998; Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Baker et al, 2009). Within the cultural system, the film industry's concern with profit is a key reason for the reconstitution of ableist stereotypes which diminish the prospects for fair and equal representation. This, in turn, has consequences at multiple sites of inequality.

Theoretical framework

The contention that disability is socially created invokes the theoretical framework of the Social Model, which claims that disability can be accounted for in terms of social relations and material processes rather than as any essentialist reality (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 1998; Gleeson, 1999). Such an approach focuses on how society includes or excludes persons with disabilities. The Social Model of disability is fundamentally a social constructionist model, which identifies and explains the ideologies that contribute to the creation of disability. It has, however, been criticized for failing to fully engage with the question of representation, largely overlooking the issues of culture and meaning-making (Shakespeare, 1994). The Social Model has been accused of failing to engage with the call for social realism; based on the premise that disability will continue to be misconstrued if the able-bodied continue to construct the images of disability (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). There remains a need to engage with the insights of cultural theorists; investigating both the discourses circulating in the media and the cultural superstructure (Thomas, 2004).

Theorists are therefore becoming aware of the need of disability studies to

recognize the body as well as the cultural forces which shape it and their relationship to each other. "Thus disability has to be understood as the product of multiple bio-psychological forces" (Thomas, 2004, p.574). Much recent scholarship has therefore become attuned to the need for reform of the binary distinctions between impairment and disability, individual and social; seeking instead to show that they are intertwined. To this end, tensions have developed within the disability studies community, particularly in Britain (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009). Goodley (2013) recognizes these tensions, while illustrating that critical disability studies are being developed in other social science disciplines; psychology, education and the humanities. Goodley stresses the need to develop the analysis of cultural locations of disability; the ways that representations of disability are constructed by popular culture.

This 'second wave' of Social Model theory attends to the complexities of lived disability in modern life, while attempting to deconstruct traditional medicalized views of disability with socio-cultural conceptions of disablism. Hughes (2009) warns against the universalizing of disability which results from the notion that we will all one day be disabled in some form, as this minimizes the oppression of disability. Hughes is concerned more with the 'specific forms of invalidation' experienced by persons with disabilities (p.399), seeking to foreground the personal experience of disability without reverting to 'able' subject positions. Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2013) also investigate the difficulty of linking the private accounts of the experience of disability with the public discourse of disability, deconstructing scholarly work to expose instances of privileging certain bodies' viewpoints over others. All of these theorists recognize the need to attend to the evolving subtleties that late modern societies create in relation to disability and address the ever more complex nuances created by disability in relation to other spheres such as biotechnology. The early Social Model's purported failure to adequately factor in the physical difficulties of persons with disabilities and the attendant pain, discomfort or fear, however, has not detracted from the consensus that society creates disability. This more advanced way of examining disability is concerned with these lived experiences and the versions of identity which are created around disability today. Disability scholars have been increasingly addressing what Davis calls the 'hegemony of normalcy' (Davis, 1997; Hughes, 1999; Campbell, 2009; McRuer, 2010), a hegemony which is played out in Hollywood films' depiction of disabled experiences.

The cultural system supports this hegemony by circulating images of persons with disabilities in need of assistance, financial or otherwise, and by reconstituting notions of such persons as isolated, inactive recipients of care who long for miracle cures. These images are largely created by normate elite, interested in preserving the status quo.

"Those who control the dominant codes of information and communication networks exercise considerable influence over our thought processes, our tastes

and our interpretation of events. They provide us with the operational codes, the formal rules and knowledge systems whereby we understand and evaluate the world.” (Baker et al, 2009, p.213)

Symbolic representations are critical to the construction of the disabled experience and cultural outlooks such as those created in popular film play a part in the construction of disability (Gleeson, 1999, p. 25). Social constructionism posits that dominant ideas and customs influence the perception of bodies in any given society; the media function as a socializing agency by reinforcing hegemonic beliefs (Dunn, 1998). Viewing film with a social constructionist lens illustrates how persons within any society victimize persons who are different to them and makes it possible to view disability as the effect of a society which celebrates certain body types while excluding others, thus showing that disability is a field which requires advances in social justice rather than in medicine (Siebers, 2006).

A framework for examining inequality

Now in the age of mass media, we are bombarded with images and representations which are created for our consumption (Couser, 2006). Studies have shown that mass media have a substantial impact on public attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Safran, 1998), while negative images perpetrated by mass media constitute victimization and social discrimination (Hahn, 1988a; 1988b). People with disabilities are a diverse group who nonetheless largely share some experience of exclusion and inequality as a result of a social environment which privileges people without impairments (Baker et al, 2009). Persons with disabilities experience inequality in interrelated ways: through poverty, non-recognition, powerlessness, oppressive forms of dependency, lack of control and autonomy in interpersonal relationships and absence from key policy and decision making arenas (McDonnell, 2007).

We live in an information era in which our grasp of social issues is mediated through communication networks and mass media. Power is exercised not only through politics and economics, but also through symbolic systems; popular media creates and legitimates ideas and values which in turn have an effect on the social creation of disability. In this way, popular film affects political, cultural, economic and affective social systems.

Baker et al (2009) provide an egalitarian framework for analysis of the key social systems where equality or inequality may be produced. These social systems are economic, cultural, political and affective. Firstly, the economic system’s central function is the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services. The private sector, state economic activity, the voluntary sector, cooperatives and trade unions all have prominent roles in this economic system. Secondly, the cultural system’s central function is the production,

transmission and legitimation of cultural practices and products. Mass media, religions, the education system and other cultural institutions such as museums, theatres and galleries have a prominent role in this system. Thirdly, the political system's central function is making and enforcing decisions for the public. Systems and institutions with prominent roles in the political system include the parliaments, the legal system, administrative bureaucracies, political parties, campaigning organizations and civil society organizations. Finally, the affective system's function is providing and sustaining caring relationships and belonging. Institutions in this system include families, friendship networks, care giving networks and care giving institutions. The four social systems are interconnected. For example, the economic social system is complicit in the continued economic marginalization of persons with disabilities. The private sector producers and service providers, cooperatives, trade unions, voluntary sector service providers all enjoy prominent roles in the economic system, while failing to adequately consider or include disabled citizens. A disproportionate number of persons with disabilities live in poverty (McDonnell, 2007). The cultural system's continued representation of persons with disabilities as unable or unwilling to work may contribute to unequal opportunities for training or employment. This may lead in turn to unequal representation in the political system while also affecting the opportunities to socialize that financial freedom brings, thus limiting the scope in the affective system. It is therefore impractical to examine the misrepresentation of persons with disabilities in film without recognizing that such a cultural inequality has far reaching effects across the key social systems.

Different aspects of life are affected by one's position in the various social systems. Baker et al conceptualise five different dimensions of equality which operate in and around the social systems. These dimensions are some of the key factors that affect nearly everyone's well-being or quality of life and therefore the application of this framework provides an egalitarian lens for the analysis of disability relations in society today.

Social Systems	Dimensions
Economic	Respect and Recognition
Cultural	Resources
Political	Love, Care and Solidarity
Affective	Power Relations
	Working and Learning

I will firstly discuss the five dimensions with particular relevance to their relationship with popular film, before going on to extrapolate some of the crucial elements of the Hollywood film industry and its creation of disability. The first dimension, respect and recognition, is concerned with recognising the equal status of every individual or group and tolerating their differences. We

should deal with each other as equals; however, while legislation now purports to prohibit discrimination, the dynamics of respect and recognition are related to financial circumstances (Mc Donnell, 2007). The culture industries continue to reconstitute traditional notions of disability which medicalize and patronize persons with disabilities, diminishing their prospects for respect and recognition. Popular Hollywood film repeatedly contains 'nuanced' discrimination when it portrays disability as a personal problem requiring the intervention of scientific 'experts' to find a cure (*The Eye*, 2008; *At First Sight*, 1999; *Extreme Measures*, 1996). This preoccupation with cure, expertise and rehabilitation place persons with disabilities in the role of victim and patient; negating their rights to full and equal participation in society by representing them as helpless and in need of care and cure.

The second dimension, resources, concerns income and wealth, which should provide equal prospects for well-being to all individuals. Studies have shown that despite legislative changes, economic marginalisation continues; persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty (Mc Donnell, 2007; Baker et al, 2009). Discourses that circulate in the social systems inform notions of the ability to work. Respect and recognition comes into play here as the notion of persons with disabilities being unfit for employment is underscored by popular media depictions of disability. For example, *Avatar* (2009), *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) all feature wheelchair users whose disability brings damaged psyches, isolation, unemployment and despondency. Through fortuitous events brought about by 'able' characters, these persons with disabilities are transformed into active members of society. The dimension of resources, thus, is interrelated with other dimensions.

The third dimension, love, care and solidarity concerns the prospects for relationships which would provide emotional support, stability and a sense of belonging. This is related to the other dimensions as love, care and solidarity are harder to achieve when faced with struggles for respect and recognition, while economic hardship may make it difficult to sustain relationships as it problematizes opportunities to travel or socialise. Furthermore, popular depictions of persons with disabilities which are negative may create internalized oppression which shapes what people can be and can do; "being made to feel of lesser value, worthless, unattractive" (Thomas, 2004). The discourses that circulate in the media may in this way affect the possibilities for love, care and solidarity.

The fourth dimension, power relations, concerns the protection against inhuman or degrading treatment, and civil and personal rights. Freedom of movement, thought, opinion, expression and freedom of association are included in these civil and personal rights. Every citizen, regardless of their abilities should have an equal 'say'. Rarely, however, are persons with disabilities involved with the creation of disabled images in popular media; disenfranchised from creating

their own images they are denied freedom of expression. The manner in which persons with disabilities are represented in popular media is effectively a form of symbolic treatment; their experiences are often narrated by the normate 'able', moulded into tales of 'overcoming' their disabilities, (At First Sight, 1999; Extreme Measures, 1996.) The depictions of their lives by non-disabled persons inculcate a form of cultural oppression which resonates throughout all of the five dimensions.

The fifth dimension, working and learning, concerns educational and occupational rights; the option of which would give everyone the prospect of self-development and satisfying work. Equal opportunity to work and to learn may be fraught with issues for persons with disabilities; as a result of power systems, economics and culture, persons with disabilities are not equally included in the education system (Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson, 2004) and thus suffer diminished prospects for satisfying employment.

Although persons with disabilities' situation in the economic system are intricately related with their position in the cultural, political and affective systems, this paper is concerned particularly with the cultural system and the role of 'culture industries'. Culture industries are institutions that take the form of classic corporations and produce cultural goods and services (Garnham, 1987). Although some persons have forged their own cultures as acts of resistance in certain instances, the socially dominant culture shapes the way in which disability is viewed (Riddell and Watson, 2003, p. 1).

The merger of capital and disability in Hollywood film

An analysis of the relationship between capital and disability in Hollywood film reveals the interconnectedness of the four social systems; economic, cultural, political and affective. The use of capital in the medical field is portrayed as inherently political in that it exacerbates issues of control and domination, for example in *Repo Men*, (2010), while clearly having an effect on relationships of love and solidarity and on the cultural worth of the disabled character. When *Repo Men* and *Elysium* (2013) depict disabled persons frantically attempting to raise the funds for their 'cure', the films discriminate by suggesting that the realities of the disabled are based on an attempt to be another 'cured' self. At the same time, these films feature disability as a metaphor for social collapse, where only capital can provide a solution to personal and social ills. In *Avatar* (2009) the unnaturalness of modern medicine with its machines and highly interventionist tactics necessitate the portrayal of the disabled character as an un-ideal human requiring intervention; unemployable, despondent and isolated from peers at the outset of the narrative. Capital and disability merge as modern consumer culture and the need for consumers to buy health-affirming products have become explicit in disability related films; this is extrapolated to include the purchase of cloned bodies in *Never Let Me Go* (2010), *Surrogates* (2009) and *The Island* (2005). Consumer culture requires the display of decay

and disability in order to stimulate consumers to invest in body maintenance. By depicting characters that do not have full control over their bodily functions, films collude with capitalist consumerism by instilling fear of incapacity or fear of being unable to obtain necessary drugs. One such film, *Love and Other Drugs* (2010), dramatizes Parkinson's disease and the difficulty of obtaining expensive prescription drugs. Jamie (Jake Gyllenhaal) is a pharmaceutical sales representative whose professional exploits highlight the breadth of the pharmaceutical market. He hopes to find a cure for Maggie's Parkinson's, while Maggie helps ill and disabled people to get to Canada where the drugs are more cheaply available. Consumerism's relationship to care of the body is highlighted against a backdrop of neoliberalism. Care of the body is now a paramount requisite for existence in a consumer society (Davis, 2006). The body in consumer society is expected to appear 'normal', with the help of whatever products are necessary and whatever care of the body is necessary including medical or technological intervention (ibid, p.240). Disabled bodies represent a threat to the self-conception of western humanity (Shakespeare, 1994) but film reminds us that cash can diminish this threat.

McRuer (2010) critiques the neoliberalist agenda of contemporary film, exposing this link between capital and disability, while also seeing disability's representation as a tool for exposing or interrupting the fallacy of the normate. Using *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) to critique neoliberalism, McRuer explores propriety, respectability and normalcy, showing that they are in fact fallacies, which ultimately need to be exposed as such. In much of his work we are reminded that human differences cannot and should not be shoe-horned into a homogenizing of human beings, the dangerous hetero-normativity and compulsory able-bodiedness that is constantly reaffirmed in film. *Million Dollar Baby's* call for personal responsibility is disparaging of physically disabled people; the personal responsibility lets society neatly off the hook. The economic, cultural, political and affective system can all be seen to have influenced the fate of Maggie (Hilary Swank), both in choosing to become a boxer and in her final choice to end her life. All four social systems conspire in Maggie's fate; her choice to become a boxer is influenced by her poverty, her wish for fame and notoriety, and her poor relationships with her family. Finally she has a choice to make: she must now be cared for by the coffers of the Boxing Federation or end her own life. The 'problem' of the newly disabled Maggie is dealt with, and order is restored. Crip theory as used by McRuer thus investigates the current cultural, economic and political hegemonic circumstances and shows how portrayals of disability like that of Maggie are used to enforce dominant neoliberal ideologies, ultimately having an effect on the affective system.

The industrial component of the Hollywood film

The neoliberalism which McRuer exposes alludes to the economic backdrop and the industrial manner of the Hollywood film industry. We must bear in mind

not just film's cultural component but also its industrial component in order to properly grasp the nature of its power. The Hollywood film industry is subject to "exactly the same rent-seeking practices and exclusionary representational protocols that characterize liaisons between state and capital." (Miller, 2001, p. 308) The Hollywood film industry has been America's most consistently successful industry in the last hundred years and in export dollars it is second only to the aerospace industry (Smith, 2001). Before it is made, every movie has to be accepted by a production company, developed, financed and produced. Long before blockbusters begin production they are sold for DVD distribution and to television networks (Kolker, 1998). This advance selling is dependent on a recognizable 'blurb'; a sound bite which will easily evoke the theme or genre and its new 'angle'. The content is thus largely predictable; networks and their ilk require the greatest ease of accessibility for the greatest number of people. In this way the hegemonic belief system is strengthened as conformity is promoted to the detriment of diversity. Disability is used as a narrative device; with attendant meanings (Longmore, 1987; Garland Thomson, 1997; Darke, 1998). As a consequence, films make disabled characters 'abnormal'; their single stigmatic trait is displayed and their social status is dependent upon this stigmatic trait. As film is a visual art, it is particularly susceptible to suggestions about how people look; this interest in the materiality of form has made disability a useful narrative device (Barnes, 1992a; Longmore, 1987; Darke, 1998; Mitchell and Snyder, 2000). Any complexity in the disabled character is avoided, they are rarely active agents.

Film makers, working in a system that is specific to its time and place and contemporary ideologies, make certain choices about how to represent characters based on the code and genre of the film. Gleeson (1999) identifies 'cultural outlooks' as a component of the 'structural dynamics' which socially construct disability. Symbolic representations are critical to the construction of disability and the production and consumption relations are implicated in the construction and reproduction of disability (ibid, p. 25). The practices of popular cinema, therefore, are complicit in the formation of disabling ideologies. Individualism has been identified as one of the key ideologies which underpins the power of the Medical Model of disability and assists in its perpetuation (Oliver, 1990). The portrayal of disability as a personal tragedy in popular film relies on this ideology. Consequently, disability is seen as a personal problem which has little to do with society at large, while society does not have any responsibility toward the disabled character and they are left to 'help themselves', awaiting whatever transformative potential the narrative affords, such as love (Lieutenant Dan in *Forrest Gump*), vengeance (Elijah in *Unbreakable*) or biotechnical intervention (Stark in *Iron Man 1, 2 & 3*).

How Hollywood depicts persons with disabilities

An examination of the ways that Hollywood has depicted people with disabilities must investigate the cinematic tools that film-makers use. These micro factors

of cinema, elements of 'mise-en-scene' such as spacing, lighting, movement, etc. provide a range of choices to film makers; choices that affect representations and reinforce dominant ideologies by their specific placing the disabled characters; the codified spaces which disabled characters inhabit and the range of diegetic choices available to them. The dependence on recognizable plot and character types is a symptom of the economic agenda of the Hollywood film industry.

[A]ny deviation from the conventional ideologies of individualism, free enterprise, and equal opportunity for all members of society to better themselves is considered not so much subversive as unseemly and the expression of an alternative, analytical political discourse is therefore made very difficult. In current commercial cinema (in America and to a growing extent in Europe and elsewhere) a simple economic censorship operates to keep dissenting voices unheard. (Kolker, 1983, p.271)

More than most media, film depends on complex technology, on machines and on collaboration among many participants who follow well-proven work routines, and importantly, they are tied to their social and economic context (Miller, 2001; Alford, 2010; Frymer et al, 2010). Film makers, like other artists, work within constraints of time and money. Decisions made by film makers during the production process are usually bound to these constraints. Thus, during pre-production, at the stage of screenwriting, the characters created conform to stereotypes that reinforce disabling ideologies. In post-production, the editing of the film colludes in this reinforcement by the specific editing decisions that chose certain frames over others. At each stage of production then, strategies, techniques and choices by film makers collude in the constitution and reconstitution of stereotypes like that of the disabled character in need of help or 'fixing'. Hollywood film in this way provides a critical nexus in which the four key social systems collide; economic determinants influence the production and transmission of these cultural products, reinforcing political ideas and having a profound effect on the affective system. Popular film has a significant effect on the affective system, creating often impossible scenarios of 'redemption', 'rehabilitation' and 'cure'. Thomas (2004) alludes to the psycho-emotional dimensions of disability; oppression that operates on the 'inside', making people feel of lesser value. The affective system in this way is bound up with the economic system and the reconstitution of ideologies. The Hollywood film industry is positioned within capitalism, in the Marxist sense, in two areas; determination and effectivity (Hill, 2000). The film industry may be investigated firstly in terms of its social and economic determinants; its technology, its drive to generate profit, its division of labor. Secondly, it may be investigated within the formation of society, "in its ideological clothes, its complicity with a continuing system of domination" (ibid, p. 565). Necessarily, these foci merge; the effect of the dominant ideology is visible in the ownership and control of the industry.

The Hollywood film industry is a large-scale employer and profit generator. Largely considered an oligopoly, the small number of hugely profitable organizations it comprises has come to dominate the production and distribution of films throughout the Western world. Because of the huge expense involved, big-budget Hollywood films conform to expected conventions; they 'play it safe' because the cost of the film prohibits experimentation; shareholders of production companies and distributors are primarily interested in profit. Hollywood dictates the parameters within which aesthetics, ideology, and reception must operate (Gomery, 1998; Alford, 2010). As an industry, Hollywood has continually reinvigorated itself by seizing technological advances and using those innovations to further engage with audiences, from the advent of sound, to color, special effects and now digital animation. Despite technological innovations such as these, the processes of making films have remained relatively unchanged because the underlying ideology of narrative production has remained unchanged (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008). The corporations operating in the Hollywood film industry are now media conglomerates, with interests in television, theme parks, merchandising and other related fields. The power of such corporations is intensified by their involvement in other media. Such conglomerates have an interest in preserving the status quo and the dominant ideologies which have permitted them to achieve perpetual growth. Politically, economically and culturally therefore, media conglomerates perpetuate ideologies of disability that subsequently impinge on the affective system, affecting the self-worth, respect and recognition of the disabled in society. These ideologies of disability situate the disabled character in an unequal position, as isolated from peers, a recipient of care or medical intervention.

The representation of disability is a construct (Davis, 1995), and, as such, it is incumbent on disability researchers to investigate its 'ideological clothes'. Contemporary dominant ideologies are implicated in the construction of disability as "[c]haracters with disabilities are always marked with ideological meaning" (Davis, 2006, p.15). Traditionally, film studies theorists have been interested in film's aesthetics, its narrative structure, its authorship and its genre, with a view to exploring the artistic, cultural, economic and political implications of the film in society. Film theory is interested in the language of film; its signs and syntax, along with the form and function of film and so it attempts to form conclusions not just about the quality of the film as art, but about its place within culture, as a product of culture and ideology. Mass media, particularly popular film, is complicit in the exclusion of those defined as 'other', as "the oppression of disabled people has rested, in large part, on the imposition of negative and stigmatizing cultural identities" (Riddell and Watson, 2003). The cultural system is responsible for the creation and legitimation of ideas and beliefs which are implicated in many of the inequalities experienced by persons with disabilities.

[F]ocusing on cultural representations of disability reveals a politics of appearance in which some traits, configurations, and functions become the stigmata of a vividly embodied inferiority or deviance, while others fade into a neutral, disembodied, nomical system that distributes status, privilege, and material goods according to a hierarchy anchored by visible human physical variation. (Garland-Thomson, 1997)

Oliver (1990) states that cultural images support the ideology of individualism, an ideology which is implicated in the creation of disability in the Medical Model, and as such, as an ideology which defines disability as a personal tragedy. Professional intervention is thus legitimated and so the power of the medical profession is reconstituted. Underpinning much social policy is an ideology which reveres the all-seeing, all-knowing power of medicine and science, a reverence for 'professional' opinion, and so medicalization is positioned as the obvious and intelligent solution. The individualization of bodily anomalies and the supposed solution of medical intervention are frequently displayed in film, thus reconstituting these ideologies. Popular films such as *Transcendence* (2014), *Robocop* (2014), *Elysium* (2013) and *Avatar* (2009) celebrate personalized 'solutions' for disabled protagonists rather than tackle the injustices suffered at the hands of a disabling culture. In these narratives, the disabled characters' bodies are repaired or optimized; a feat that incurs narrative closure and the return to the supposed natural state of equilibrium. The rise of medical science has contributed to the ideology of disability that is in turn linked to the power structures and mechanisms of political power. Inequality is thus reinforced at the junctures of the key social systems. "Hollywood is often actively engaged in supporting the dominant ideological positions of our epoch" (Frymer et al, 2010, p.3) and since Hollywood film has such a global reach, its power to disseminate those ideologies is huge. Frequently Hollywood buttresses ideologies of disability that represent disability as a pathological state, dramatizing and glamorizing the intervention of the medical and scientific professions. Contemporary Hollywood film repeatedly serves up characters whose bodies (and psyches) are 'repaired' by biotechnology's solutions; Murphy in *Robocop* (2014), Max Da Costa in *Elysium* (2013), Remy in *Repo Men* (2010), Sully in *Avatar* (2009), Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (2008) and the ragged queue of physically disabled persons who file into the data station in *Transcendence* (2014) to be 'fixed'.

"These [disabled] people are suffering. They have no hope. And I'm able to fix them." Transcendence (2014).

"I'll help you get your legs back; your REAL legs." Avatar (2009).

In these filmic intersections of biotechnology and physiology we can gaze at the troubling ambiguity of (dis)abled bodies and at the paternalistic treatment they are given. Portrayed as 'broken' bodies, the disabled bodies are held up as items open for intrusion and intervention; personalized cures are sought and found, the scientific world provides the miracles of medical advances to 'cure'.

Hollywood's blockbuster stereotypes can be seen to reveal some of the era's dominant ideologies at play. Together with disability, biotechnology features increasingly in Hollywood narratives; the disabled body is now represented as a site of potential repair, sustaining what Davis (1997) terms the 'hegemony of normalcy'. "Many films represent the problem of disability as caused by impairment rather than as socially oriented or constructed. Thus the medical model of disability has almost total hegemony" (Darke, 2010). The commodification of body parts, mechanical intervention and computerised diagnostics are all played out on the Big Screen; giving us the opportunity to see the purported (neoliberal) benefits of scientific advances. The breakdown of traditional binaries of organic and technological is complicated by issues of control; who controls and owns the science that provides 'optimization'? The new biotechnologies, which Rose (2007, p.17) calls "hybrid assemblages oriented toward the goal of optimization", include cloning, stem-cell research, transplantation, and a host of other previously unimaginable procedures. These biotechnologies capture the public imagination and provide fodder for entertaining narratives, while at the same time ushering in a plethora of concerns and fears for the future of humanity. It is this state of humanity and its frontiers which finds articulation in the current popular film narratives; the biotechnologies of the future and how they will affect disabled bodies is now a popular theme in Hollywood blockbusters, such as the plight of Max da Costa (Matt Damon) in *Elysium* (2013). Film in this way is effective at "giving the culture a way of looking at itself, articulating its ideology, reflecting and creating its physical appearances and gestures, teaching and confirming its shared myths" (Kolker, 1988, p.vii). The conspicuous largesse of science and technology is purportedly available to those who pursue the 'American dream' and work hard to succeed in these narratives of 'repair'; yet in reality biomedical 'advances' are unavailable to most of the world's disabled. In this way, the capitalist economies of the west inure the cinema-going public to the fact that hard work and determination are not enough to give every person equality, inclusion, comfort and success. The past few decades have witnessed the enactment of laws and policies that prohibit discrimination and promote the human rights of disabled people, but structural inequalities persist alongside such benign developments. While overt displays of prejudice are no longer socially acceptable, I contend that ableism endures in the film industry, in the nuances of filmic representation which often suggest that 'repair' and/or a financially successful life is possible to those work hard and endeavor to improve themselves (*Elysium*, 2014; *Avatar*, 2009; *Source Code*, 2011; *The Eye*, 2008; *Forrest Gump*, 1994).

Audiences' role in 'reading' a film

Contemporary cultural studies approaches recognize that there is a complex negotiation at play when an audience member 'reads' a media text. Cultural studies, then, include the reactions of audiences to the text, allowing for different readings of the text (Ferguson and Golding, 1997).

[A]udiences do not simply read and absorb messages, but interpret them in the light of their existing social and individual schemata, rejecting some, reorganizing others and readily accepting those which reinforce their existing world-view. For these reasons, it is important to understand the way in which the media construe disability, because this will have an important effect on the creation of wider cultural understandings. (Sweeney and Riddell, 2003, p.146)

Alternative meanings may mediate, rather than undermine, media power (Kitzinger, 1999, p.4). For instance, Adamson (2012) cites the example of Evo Morales, Aymara President of Bolivia, who issues a positive response to the film *Avatar* and its subject matter of stripping natural resources. However, Rieder (2011) reads the film as a 'race and revenge fantasy', concerned more with the right to violence than with the right to protect natural resources. Ideological reproduction, then, is seen as somewhat unstable, because of the multiple meanings that can be taken from texts and the multiple social positions of audiences. As such, ideology is continually being reconstituted and reshaped. Popular culture is increasingly seen as demanding of its audience's interpretative activity (Cartmell et al, 1997, p.2). Rather than being seen as a jaded group of idle spectators, media audiences are implored by the media to make associations and connections; to compute the intertextuality and understand the parody and pastiche that imbue popular media texts. In this sense, the cultural studies approach accepts the post-structuralist insight that readers construct rather than simply receive meaning (ibid). All filmic representations rely on cultural assumptions to fill in the missing details (Garland-Thomson, 1997 p.11). Media representations rely on triggers; recognizable character types and plots that 'make sense' to us, according to our cultural background.

The associations which we, as a cultural group, have almost subliminally acquired; the suggestions of certain colors, costumes, and mannerisms; form meanings which are difficult to annotate in relation to an entire narrative and its progression. We may look at freeze-frames and attempt to unpack the layers of meanings and suggestions in the image but it is a never-ending project, as the audience is always changing and the times in which we watch the film are constantly changing, hence the interpretation is never fixed. As films are products of culture, their resonances go beyond the films' diegesis, their story worlds.

In this sense, film analysis eschews any meta-narrative of film, it is necessarily a post-modern project in which we may deconstruct in relation to ourselves, right now, but must realize that any interpretation is fluid and open to change. As audiences are made up of individuals who use their own cultural background to interpret texts, the messages they receive may be fluid, changing over time, as social and cultural experiences mutate. Multiple differing interpretations are thus possible, but when the cultural background of the director and the social economic world in which s/he operates are similar to that of the audience,

a 'preferred meaning' will be encoded therein (Hall, 1973). Audiences and film makers together produce and consume culture at the same time, thus propagating ideologies. For Hall, culture is a site of social action where power relations may be established or disturbed. Therefore, should audiences reject the preferred meaning, the film may potentially operate to disturb the dominant ideology encoded within the film. Such alternative readings may provide the terrain on which dominant ideologies may be contested; greater education in minority rights and equality among the general public may potentially lead to more subversive readings which may be more inclusive. Social action then may be conceived when preferred readings become less popular and/or when films which privilege disability rights gain greater visibility and imbue intertextuality with more positive threads.

The reproduction of ideologies in film

Ideology, in this context, is a worldview, belief system and set of values, beyond the Marxist interpretation of it as a tool of the capitalist system to buttress 'false consciousness'; preserving identities and group assimilations, it also legitimates power and authority (Chiapello, 2003). The way of being in the world, and the way in which people think of themselves, constitute their ideology. In every culture a dominant ideology exists which reflects the ideas of the majority, and this is reflected in popular media, most particularly in blockbusters which are designed to appeal to the masses. It is agreed by scholars that the public itself realizes that the media is a purveyor of ideology, although they may not use the term per se; there is a growing acceptance that mass media products and cultural values are intertwined (ibid). The ideologies are reproduced in movies by this representation of apparently real situations and real places and behaviors; "the complex of images and ideas individuals have of themselves, the ways they assent to or deny their place in time, place, class, the political structure of their society" (Kolker, 1998, p.13). The nature of Hollywood film and its espousal of 'realism' suggest that film has a mimetic relation to real life and thus it further shapes our perceptions of the world. Hollywood big-budget films have a specific code known as the Hollywood continuity system which attempts at all times to replicate reality as much as possible; to make the stories believable (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008). Hollywood's espousal of this fabricated realism suggests to audiences that what they see is a true representation. Rather than scrutinize, audiences are seduced into accepting that the isolation and dependency of disabled characters are real.

An audience is quick to assign traits to characters onscreen and most characters wear their traits far more openly than a person in real life would (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008). A film 'shows' rather than 'tells' by assigning recognizable traits to characters and the audience expects certain types of films to have certain types of characters. Disabled characters' lived realities are overlooked, their problems trivialized and so it is no surprise that the cultural inequality is

mirrored in the political representation (Baker et al, p.63). The wider political system which keeps finances and power in the status quo thus operates alongside the cultural system which produces mass media. The creation of recognizable images and scenarios reflects the deeper political system; not just the formal political system of government, but the wider conception of the political system under which every social institution has a political aspect (Baker et al, 2009).

Conclusion

Operated by largely 'normate' profit-centered oligopolies, Hollywood produces characters with disabilities that are marked by that one stigmatic trait, who enact a metaphor of social ills and who seek at all costs to be 'repaired'. Attempting to appeal to the concerns and the tastes of the largest number of people, Hollywood continues to create stories that have recognizable plot lines featuring characters with obvious traits. The new is always a version of something we have seen before, not just in the endless barrage of remakes, but in the themes, conventions and metaphors which film makers use. In this way the hegemonic belief system is strengthened and conformity is promoted to the detriment of diversity.

A key question for disability activists and egalitarians is how can we incorporate our principles into the structures and processes of the society in which we live? In a world of serious inequalities, how do we approach the project of social transformation? By considering the interrelatedness of the four key social systems, we can more successfully grasp the breadth of the task. In order to tackle inequality, we must first understand how privileged groups participate more at every level of image-making. Disability-film studies have thus far been concerned with the cultural mediation of disability, but it must now aim to incorporate not just the images of disability but also the interrelated economic, political and affective elements.

We live in an intensely capitalistic society where representations of normalcy aim to secure status quo economic ideals; where Hollywood reproduces the dominant neoliberal paradigm that promotes ableism and sameness (Kashani and Nocella, 2010). The industrial nature of the film business does not foster freedom or democracy of representation and so the task ahead is to identify the transformative possibilities that film offers. Seizing the transformative possibilities of media will raise awareness and therefore political mobilisation. Reclaiming impairment away from a social flaw and shifting disability representation from the body to the interface between people with impairments and socially disabling conditions is the cultural task at hand (Hevey, 1993, p. 426). Disability needs to be a larger area of investigation and concern in academic research, incorporating equality studies and film studies, so that one-dimensional images and representations of disability are problematized and

the drive toward the 'norm' questioned. By contesting the images of disability, we may become more self-reflexive, questioning the normative position. In this way we may seize the potential of disability studies; its radical potential; we may create space for alternative representations of embodied experience.

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