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Analyzing the Portrayal of Disabilities in Film

Film has long been regarded as a powerful medium for storytelling, capable of captivating audiences and evoking emotions through visual imagery and narrative. Within the realm of cinema, the portrayal of disability has been a subject of both fascination and controversy, reflecting societal attitudes and perceptions towards individuals with disabilities. From classic Hollywood films to contemporary blockbusters, depictions of disability have varied widely, ranging from stereotypical tropes to nuanced representations that challenge conventional narratives. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from disability studies, film theory, and cultural studies, we will interrogate the ways in which disability is constructed, commodified, and contested within the cinematic landscape. By deconstructing cinematic representations of disability, we hope to uncover underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and discourses that inform and perpetuate societal attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, we will examine the impact of cinematic portrayals of disability on viewers' perceptions, attitudes, and empathetic responses towards individuals with disabilities. I will explore the ways in which cinematic representations shape public discourse, influence policymaking, and contribute to broader social movements aimed at disability rights and inclusion. By critically engaging with the complexities of this topic, we hope to foster dialogue, reflection, and advocacy for more authentic, diverse, and empowering portrayals of disability in cinema.

In order to analyze the portrayal of disability in film, I watched three movies: *Peanut Butter Falcon*, *I Am Sam* and *Forrest Gump*. While watching these movies, I considered whether

the actor playing the disabled character is disabled in real life, how critics responded to the movie, how the actor prepared for the role if they did not have a disability, what model of disability was displayed in the movie, how the non-disabled characters treated the character(s) with disabilities, how the portrayal of disability changes over time, and whether or not the movie portrayed intersectionality. I was able to come up with adequate information about these films and compare their similarities and differences in their portrayals of people with disabilities. Additionally, I referred to disability studies journals, the disability press, disability-focused reference work, and our readings from this semester to supplement my research and gain further points of view on this topic of disabilities in film.

Forrest Gump is a movie about a man who has an intellectual disability. He has an IQ of 75 but is still able to accomplish amazing feats. The main reason why he is able to accomplish so many things is because the people around him do not treat him differently due to his disability. Aside from running in with a few bullies as he grows up, the people around him are very supportive. He was able to obtain a full-ride scholarship to a local college for their football team because of how fast he could run. Later, he is drafted into the army. He is consistently praised by his drill sergeant for listening to instructions and doing tasks quickly. Then, during the Vietnam War, he becomes a war hero for saving multiple men from being caught in a nuclear strike. While he is carrying these people out of the jungle, his lieutenant tells him he is “dumb” for trying to save these men instead of staying in the clear and saving his own life. However, Forrest is only focused on helping his fellow men. Due to the numerous accomplishments Forrest is able to obtain, this movie portrays the social model of disability. Forrest’s environment does not keep him from being able to do whatever he desires, despite having an intellectual disability.

I Am Sam has quite a different storyline. In this film, Sam is a father who also has an intellectual disability. It is said that he has the mind of a seven-year-old child. A homeless woman moves in with him and pretends to care about him and then becomes pregnant. After she gave birth, she left Sam and her daughter because she did not want to raise a child; she was only looking for a place to stay. As a result, Sam is forced to raise his child on his own. He gets a lot of help from his neighbor, Annie, who tells him to feed Lucy when certain shows are airing on Nickelodeon so that he can easily keep track of time. He also has a lot of friends who help him with Lucy whenever they can. Unfortunately, once Lucy starts school, as her books get harder for her father to read, she starts pretending like she can't understand certain words to make Sam feel better. This prompts Lucy's teacher to set a meeting with Sam and contact social services. After discussing how smart Lucy is and how she is seemingly holding herself back, social services begins to keep an eye on her. After she runs away from her birthday party that year, she is taken out of her home and sent into foster care. The rest of the movie is focused on Sam and the court system. He struggles to find a lawyer who will support him. Once he does find a lawyer and character witnesses to account for his ability to raise his daughter, he is still not taken seriously. The prosecution lawyer constantly uses Sam's disability to say that he is unfit to raise a child. Despite the amount of support he has, all the court is focused on is his disability. Due to this, *I Am Sam* portrays the medical model of disability. Sam is not offered any support or programs that could help him be with his daughter. Social services admits that Lucy's foster family wants to adopt her and that they will support it. It is saddening to watch so many people go against reuniting a man with his daughter, simply because he has an intellectual disability.

Peanut Butter Falcon is an inspiring movie, but it starts off a bit rocky. Zak is an adult with Down's Syndrome. He is put into a retirement home for elderly people even though he does

not want to be. He has big dreams; he loves watching wrestling tapes, and he hopes to become a pro wrestler someday. After several attempts, Zak manages to escape the facility with the help of his roommate. While on the run, he meets a man named Tyler, who is also on the run. Tyler feels lost after the death of his brother, which results in him illegally poaching crabs to make money on the side. At first, Tyler wants nothing to do with Zak, but after talking about their journeys, Tyler decides to take Zak under his wing and become his mentor/coach. He teaches Zak some life skills, such as how to shoot a gun, and promises to get him to North Carolina, where the wrestling school is located, that Zak always saw on the tapes he watched. While this is going on, Zak's caretaker, Eleanor, vows to find him on her own and is searching for Zak to bring him back to the facility. She finds Zak and Tyler after some time, but after learning her boss plans on sending Zak to a more strictly confined place, she decides to join the boys on their journey. To summarize, the three of them eventually make it to North Carolina and convince the owner of the wrestling school, Clint, to train Zak and arrange for him to be in a fight. Clint trains Zak and arranges the fight but believes to have rigged it so that Zak wins and does not get hurt. However, Zak's opponent does not go lightly on him and begins brutally beating him. It looks as though Zak is going to lose, but when he spots Tyler in some trouble of his own on the sidelines, he gains enormous strength and throws his opponent out of the ring, resulting in a win. This movie also portrays the social model of disability because Zak is able to achieve his dreams despite his disability. He does not let people tell him that something can't be done; he always believes in himself.

Now that we have gone over the synopses of each of these movies, it is time to dive into the analysis of the portrayal of disability and the connections to the course. Many authors have argued that disability is wildly misrepresented in the media. This is why there have been many

blogs, magazines, and websites that are created by people with disabilities: to give people with disabilities proper representation, allow them to have a voice, and to show people without disabilities what it is truly like to live with a disability. An article written by Gary L. Albrecht states that “Disability in film has been disproportionately underrepresented at the same time that it has been excessively displayed.” (2006). There have been countless amounts of films that portray disabilities, yet not many actors with disabilities get the chance to star in these films. Sure, it is nice that Box Office movies offer some insight into the world of disability, but why not allow them to be represented by those who *have* disabilities? A magazine entry goes into detail about the short list of disability movies that portray disabilities correctly or don’t make the characters “sad” people who need to be saved. However, these movies still don’t employ actors with a disability. The author of this article expresses her disappointment about the movie Notting Hill, where the actress in a wheelchair was so in sync with her wheelchair that it was hard to believe that she wasn’t actually wheelchair-bound. She enjoys the fact that the character is portrayed as a “normal” human being stating, “Which is why, I guess, I can forgive the unfortunate fact that an actress with a disability wasn't cast in this role.” (LoTempio, 2005). Furthermore, she included statistics from a study from the Screen Actors Guild, “disabled performers in the entertainment industry found that not only do they lack the chance to play "non-traditional roles" (such as a mother or father), they also aren't given the chance to play roles written for characters with disabilities, which is outrageous.” People in the filmmaking industry and movie audiences need to be brought to attention on this matter. It is ridiculous that people with disabilities who aspire to be actors and actresses cannot be given that opportunity because the industry is so exclusive. Aside from adult entertainment, it is also important to show people with disabilities in children’s movies. An article written about Disney and disability states,

“Given the opportunity that children's film presents, it is important to consider how disability is presented through this medium.” (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022). A lot of children with disabilities can suffer from bullying in school due to children being ignorant or not understanding what other children go through. Children’s movies have the power to change the perspective on disability and eventually change the world. If all children grew up respecting those with disabilities, the world would be a much better place.

Of course, some people will have arguments that working with people with disabilities would be considerably more difficult than working with a person who is acting like they have disabilities. But how can we be sure of this? Films have not employed enough actors with disabilities to show whether it would be harder or not. People with disabilities are just as deserving as people without disabilities, and they should be offered all of the same chances, especially when it comes to playing a character with their exact disability. Overall, I would not say that the portrayal of disability in film has changed much over time. All of these films employ white males as the main characters, so they do not offer much intersectionality and in *I Am Sam* and *Forrest Gump*, the actors are not disabled. I will say that *I Am Sam* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon* came out more recently than *Forrest Gump* and those two movies do employ some actors with disabilities, but all in all, they could do a better job at giving characters lead roles or not making them seem “lost.” In a way, these films show “inspiration porn” by making it seem like these people with disabilities overcame amazing obstacles, but they do not portray the everyday struggles of people with disabilities.

Disability representation in film still has a long way to come and I believe the best way to begin fixing this is by employing those with disabilities. Not only as actors and actresses, but also as writers, consultants, and co-directors. The film industry has come a long way in movies

altogether, but there is still a lot of work to be done to give people with disabilities adequate representation.

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