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Disabling Discourses

Contemporary Cinematic Representations of Acquired Physical Disability

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A Research Report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Faculty of the Humanities

University of the Witwatersrand

2019

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Abstract

Film is a powerful publicising agent of knowledge which has detrimental ideological and material implications that contribute towards the systematic exclusion of disabled people. This qualitative research study set out to investigate how acquired physical disability is constructed within three contemporary films. Using theoretical disability models and a compilation of stereotypic representations of disability in film as guidelines (adapted from Barns, 1992; Longmore, 1987; Norden,1994), the study sought to assess the discourses that are perpetuated, challenged or omitted within contemporary cinematic portrayals of disability. Further, the study aimed to address how these discourses contribute to the maintenance or subversion of ableist power. The data underwent a critical discourse analysis (CDA) guided by a broad social constructionist and critical disability theory framework. In order to investigate discursive constructions in film effectively, a multi-modal lens was adopted. The findings suggest that while steps towards more nuanced and diverse representations of acquired physical disability are evident, the films continue to perpetuate hegemonic discourses, emotionally provocative and caricatured portrayals of disability. The thesis argues that contemporary disability films are still largely produced for and consumed by abled audiences. Subsequently, recommendations for transforming cinematic representations are addressed.

Keywords: *disabling representations; film; acquired physical disability; critical discourse analysis; multimodal*

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Rational

Research Problem: The Missing Minority

Disability has traditionally been regarded as a field of study best left to the inquisition of the medical sciences (Grue, 2011). Subsequently, social science research into disability has lagged behind in comparison to research on other minority groups, such as gender, sexuality and race (Ellis, 2004; Grue, 2011; Harnett, 2000; Zhang & Haller, 2013). The same can be said for research into disability from specific disciplines, including Psychology (Reeve, 2004; Watermeyer, 2012). This paucity of research is surprising given that disabled individuals constitute one of the world's largest minority groups accounting for approximately 15% of the population, which translates into about one billion lives (The World Bank Group, 2017). However, with the introduction of the social model and the re-conceptualisation of disability as a social, cultural and spatial construct, new avenues have been opened up to explore through research (Grue, 2011). Thus the current project aims to contribute theoretically to this growing body of knowledge about the socially produced nature of disability by conducting critical discourse analysis (CDA) into the way disability is constructed in films.

As a consequence of the limited research into disability, it can be argued that distinct areas of focus have been under-explored (Black & Pretes, 2007; Darling, 2003; Johnstone, 2004; Murugami, 2009). Following this, the present study has chosen to narrow its scope and investigate filmic representations of a particular form of disability, namely acquired[1] physical[2] disability. Representations of this sub-group are of interest to analyse cinematically given the heightened corporeality of physical disabilities and their alignment to the visual modality of film. Further, acquired disability represents a shift in social standing, given the transition from the abled to the disabled group status. Therefore, cinematic constructions of this transition were assumed to better address shifts in power, status and agency important to analyse from CDA perspective. Moreover, the change in subject positioning that acquired

[1] 'Acquired' disability refers to an impairment that has developed during the person's lifetime as a result of an accident or illness rather than being present at birth (Employer Disability Information, 2018).
[2] "Physical disabilities are impairments that significantly impact physical performance in daily life activities" (Science Direct, n.d.).

disability connotes speaks back to, and helped identify the ableist[3] ideologies that uphold the oppressive relations between the abled and disabled groups more generally. Therefore, concentrating on this sub-population helped answer Campbell's (2009, p.4) call for a shift in our analytic gaze to "concentrate on what the study of disability tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism".

Moreover, the importance of conducting a CDA into disability was twofold. Firstly, there is a need to expand on critical methodologies in disability research, as an incidence study found discursive analyses into disability are considerably lacking (Grue, 2011). Therefore, a CDA has merit in that it could serve the theoretical advancement of disability studies. However, practically it can also assist in aiding the discipline's goals of furthering political change. Therefore, a CDA was undertaken in this research to promote social justice and help bridge the identified methodological gap in disability literature. Additionally, conducting a CDA into film is an important avenue to explore in contemporary society, given that technological advances have thrust modernity into what has been termed the 'Information Age' (Flynn, 2016). Therefore through mass media, individuals are now more than ever bombarded with images created for their consumption (Flynn, 2016). However, it has been proposed by scholars (Ellis, 2004; Flynn, 2016; Stadler, 2006) that such representations are not neutral, due to the media functioning as a socialising agent, simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing hegemonic values and beliefs. Thus, film is a largely untapped data pool which necessitates critical examination, given its' potential to reach many viewers and widely disseminate and omit certain discourses about the disabled experience (Safran, 1998; Stadler, 2006).

In extant literature, discourses presented in films have been shown to have far-reaching implications in both micro and macro arenas (Flynn, 2016; Safran, 1998). Regarding the impact at an individual level, several studies have reported findings which suggest that the negative discourses in the media are internalised by disabled people, impacting on their self-image, self-esteem and identity (Campbell, 2009; Flynn, 2016; Haller, Dorries & Rahn, 2006). Consequently, disabling discourses presented in film need to be identified, challenged and dismantled to help combat their micro level implications. Conducting a CDA into film can thus serve as a useful tool to help achieve this. Furthermore, a study conducted by Zhang

[3]Ableism refers to the oppressive "ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume abled-bodiedness, and by doing so, construct disabled people as marginalised" (Chouinard, 1997, p. 380). Thus ableism's function is to inaugurate the norm (Campbell, 2009).

and Haller (2013) found that negative discourses in the media led to negative self-perceptions by the participants. However, upon critical examination it was discovered that their sample was primarily comprised of persons who acquired disabilities (70.3%) (Zhang & Haller, 2013). Therefore, given the psychological adjustment that persons with acquired disabilities are said to undergo (Dziura, 2015), it can be hypothesised that this population is particularly vulnerable to the negative portrayals in the media. Subsequently, the findings of this previous research give further credence to the need to critically assess this particular representation of acquired disability in contemporary film.

At a macro level, an analysis into societal constructions of disability is an important research endeavour because, as Barns (1992) notes, discrimination does not only operate at the level of the individual but rather is institutionalised in the very social, cultural, political and economic fabric of society. He further goes on to note that disabling representations in the media form: "the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily, and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion" (Barns, 1992, p. 39). Moreover, given the socially marginalised position the disabled occupy in society, films serve as one of the main points of interaction and exposure that the abled have to the disabled group (Black & Pretes, 2007; Harnett, 2000; Stadler, 2006). Therefore, film can have a significant effect on how the abled majority conceptualise and interact with the disabled minority. Berube (1997, p.4) reiterates this in his claims about the potential widespread power of disabling representations in film:

> In the broadest possible sense, it [representation of disability in film] affects our understanding of what it means to be human; in more practical terms, it affects public policy, the allocation of social resources, and the meaning of 'civil rights' … Every representation of disability has the potential to shape the way 'disability' is understood in the general culture, and some of those representations can in fact do extraordinarily powerful – or harmful – cultural and political work.

The above two quotations validate the need for research to move beyond individual experiences of disability and engage with it at a societal level. The current study aimed to achieve this through engaging with how disability is constructed at an institutional level, through film. Moreover, Safran (1998) asserts that films solidify ableist social order, and as a consequence they need to be investigated through a political lens. Flynn (2016) echoes this and asserts that it is incumbent that research interrogates the ideologies cloaked within disabled representations. Therefore, the aim of this research was to critically examine contemporary films and their representations of acquired physical disability in order to identify the prevailing discourses, stereotypes and socio-cultural norms surrounding disability. However, it was important that this analysis was modernised and engaged with representations in contemporary films, given the dated nature of the films analysed in previous research (Darke, 1994; Shakespeare, 1999; Whittington-Walsh, 2002).

Overall, this study hoped to make the following practical, theoretical and methodological contributions: Through analysing the disabling discourses perpetuated or omitted about the disabled experience, this study hoped to contribute politically to the advancement of disability civil rights, by calling for more nuanced, inclusive and accurate filmic representations. In addition to practical utility, this study also has potential theoretical significance. Shakespeare (1994) criticises the social model of disability for failing to significantly address oppressive barriers erected by cultural representations in the same depth as it has for structural barriers. As such, through conducting a film analysis into disability representation, this research hoped to expand on the scope of the social model by emphasising the ableist architecture of cultural imagery, as opposed to structural barriers of buildings. Further, with the increasing awareness of the complexity of disability as a bio-psycho-social construct, this study answered calls for interdisciplinary research (Flynn, 2016;Loeser, Pini & Crowley, 2018; Safran, 1998) through intersecting the disciplines of Psychology, Film and Disability Studies. Lastly, this study hoped to contribute methodologically by adapting and drawing on different techniques and theorists to better understand the multimodal nature of the discourse presented in film.

Lastly, there is a need to develop and expand on research into disability in South Africa. Particularly it is important to explore representations of acquired physical disability, given the social landscape of high rates of crime, motor vehicle accidents and diabetes, which make this sub-population of disability more common (Ngwena, Grobbelaar-du Plessis,

Combrinck & Kamga, 2016). Although the films sampled for analysis in the current project are Hollywood productions, and thus represent Western socio-cultural norms and stereotypes about disability, they still have relevance in the South African context. Firstly, Western films were sampled due to a lack of film production in South Africa (Perrier, 2017). Perrier (2017) acknowledges that local productions occupy less than ten percent of the cinema releases in South Africa. Thus, there were no South African films available which adequately met the sampling criteria of this study. Hollywood films were sampled, and not European films, given that BoxOfficeMojo (1999) statistics demonstrate that American films have produced the most income in South Africa over the last five year period (Mayet, 2017). Therefore, South Africans are primarily exposed to Hollywood films and the narratives and discourses they disseminate or omit about disability, making this research relevant in the context of South Africa.

Research Aims

Through the use of a broad social constructionist framework, this study aimed to explore how disability is constructed in three contemporary films. Specifically, the project aimed to investigate the construction of a particular type of disabled experience in film, namely, acquired physical disability. Additionally, using disability models and a compilation of stereotypic representations of disability in film as guidelines (adapted from Barns, 1992; Longmore, 1987; Norden,1994), this study sought to assess the discourses that are perpetuated, challenged or omitted within contemporary cinematic representations of disability. Lastly, this study aimed to address how these discourses contribute to the maintenance or subversion of ableist power.

Structure of Thesis

This research report will now turn to a literature review undertaken in Chapter two, followed by a delineation of the methodology employed in Chapter three and detailed exploration of discursive themes in the discussion presented in Chapter four. It will close with conclusions, strengths and limitations and recommendations for future research in Chapter five.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature review will begin with an introductory outline of the different theoretical models conceptualising disability and the impact of these models on the representation of disability in the media. Following this, various debates concerning the politics of representation will be engaged. Under this section, issues related to the exploitation, misrepresentation and under-representation of disability in film will be explored. Thereafter, seminal authors in this field and the stereotypes and discourses identified in previous work will be discussed to help situate the current study in the literature and motivate the need for an inquisition into contemporary films. This chapter will end by detailing the research questions guiding this study. However, it must be acknowledged that due to the infancy of disability film studies, nuanced and distinct areas of focus pertaining to particular sub-populations of disability have been under-explored (Black & Pretes, 2007; Johnstone, 2004). Therefore, this literature review contains research which focuses on disability categories more broadly, as opposed to specific investigations and theorisations about acquired physical disability in film.

Disability: Impairment or Construct?

Some of the most contentious debates within the disability discipline centre around a seemingly simplistic concern: What constitutes disability? (Thomas, 2004). Disability is a contested construct and is re-configured from a number of models and their accompanying paradigmatic assumptions. For example, different models include the charity model which postulates that the disabled are dependent on the state or abled institutions for economic and material support (Stadler, 2006). However, they are not entitled to this support, it is a benevolent act of their abled benefactors. Alternatively, the affirmation model by Swain and French (2000) posits that disability is increasingly being normalised and celebrated as a form of human diversity. Similarly, the cultural model of disability positively reframes the disabled experience by foregrounding the benefits of belonging to a cultural group that shares collective values and experiences (Stadler, 2006). Further, the minority group model positions disability as a form of social identity attributed to minority population (Grue, 2011). However, the most prevalent conceptualisations of disability within the literature arise from two opposing powerhouse paradigms. The first is the medical model, which equates disability with impairment. Therefore, this model locates the cause of disability firmly within the

individual and their resulting functional limitations (Office of the Deputy President (ODP), 1997). Within this model, disability is construed negatively, as it is regarded as a deviance which requires curative intervention to achieve 'normalcy' and corporal wholeness (Nario-Redmond, Noel, & Fern, 2013). In opposition, the social model postulates that disability, and the discrimination accompanying it are socially constructed phenomena, emerging from oppressive structural and attitudinal barriers erected by society (Barns & Mercer, 2005). Therefore, the social model externalises and de-individualises disability by suggesting that it is a consequence of inaccessible built environments and discrimination (Shakespeare, 2010). Thus the remedial focus shifts from individual deficits to societal disablement. As such, this repositioning of disability as a social construct has presented an alternative and liberating narrative to the disabled collective which has helped emancipate disabled people from the ideologies of the medical establishment (Shakespeare, 2010). It has also provided a political lens through which ableist and oppressive barriers can be challenged.

The models through which disability is understood are important, since they come to affect how disability is represented to the general public, and more specifically in film. According to disability scholars, the medical model has dominated cinematic portrayals of disability (Darke, 2010; Haller & Zhang, 2014; Schwartz & Lutfiyya, 2009). Thus, narrative tropes involving hospitalisation, rehabilitation, scientific advances and cures have taken centre stage (Flynn, 2016). It can be argued, such tropes confound disability with illness, which serves to construct disabled people as 'limited' or 'deficient' and subsequently justifies the marginalised position disabled people are assigned to in society. Stadler (2006, p. 374) reiterates how the medical model contributes to discourses that are "disabling" when she suggests that these representations "naturalise perceptions of disabled people as victims who require help, treatment and rehabilitation".

Alternatively, Stadler (2006) suggests that media can operate as a powerful educational tool, given its potential to incite understanding and tolerance for diversity. For example, Farnall and Smith (1999) found that after watching positive representations of disability in film, respondents were more likely to recognise discrimination against the disabled group. Thus, depicting disability through a social model lens in film has the potential to educate mass viewership about disability as a form of social identity attributed to a minority group (Stadler, 2006). In this way, focus could move away from the objectification and medicalisation of bodily impairments and shift toward promoting an understanding of societal disablement. Societal disablement refers to the social disadvantages which arise due

to structures which fail to account for the bodily diversity (Hosking, 2008). As such, it becomes apparent that films can serve as cultural reservoirs of disabling or potentially enabling models of representation and therefore should be subject to academic inquiry.

Recently, Haller and Zhang (2014) conducted an international survey assessing what disabled people think about the representation of disability in the media. The respondents indicated that framings within the medical model were still rife and that progressive model representations (social model, minority group model) were few, or absent. However, while empirical studies such as Haller and Zhang's (2014) are useful to establish trends, it is equally important to apply a critical lens to uncover the potential agendas which underlie these trends. For example, frequently framing disability in film as a medical and thus personal tragedy, arguably allows abled society to be absolved of the role they play in constructing societal disablement (Flynn, 2016; Shakespeare, 1994). This interpretation is supported by the following quotation:

> The history of oppression of disabled people is unknown to most people, and so they see disability as an individual tragedy, worthy of being turned into a movie, and not as the political oppression which makes for complex movies and even more difficult legal, social, and political battles. It's a lot easier to make a movie in which we weep for the personal defeat … or cry with joy for the triumph of [disabled people], than it is to change the whole way we as a society envision, think about, and deal with people who are disabled (Davis , 2005, para. 12).

Consequently, conducting research within a paradigm which moves beyond physical and individual impairment and acknowledges the constructed nature of disability is important. This is because a critical approach can help elucidate the mechanisms which uphold the disenfranchisement of the disabled population. This research study aimed to contribute towards this endeavour through assessing one of the main institutions responsible for masking the constructed nature of disability, namely film.

The Politics of Representation

A Troubling History

"People with physical disabilities have been displayed for entertainment and profit as human oddities or freaks for hundreds of years, and the exhibition has been a lucrative business" (Whittington-Walsh, 2002, p.696).

As this opening quotation suggests, disability and its representation have long since shared a troubled relationship, by which there has been an exploitation and exhibition of difference. Historically, a prominent example of this troubling relationship can be traced back to freak shows, where the 'exoticism', 'bestiality' and 'queerness' of disabled persons was emphasised and showcased for profit (Bogdan, 1988). Whittington-Walsh (2002) suggests that modern films have subsequently taken over this role as the chief exhibitors, stigmatising disabled characters as freaks, savants, violent psychopaths, objects of pity or child-like innocents. Arguably, the film industry has done so to great profits, as the movies listed on Internet Movie Database's (IMDb) (2013) "Top 30 films about disability" have brought in millions of dollars collectively.

In theorising about the abled audience's fascination with disability and its exhibition, it is useful to enlist the concept of the 'ableist gaze'. Drawing on feminist literature and the 'male gaze', the 'ableist gaze' functions to ensure power relations play out on the surface of the body (Boyd, 2016; Loja, Costa, Hughes & Menezes, 2013). According to Garland-Thomson (1997), staring serves to enfreak, other and invalidate the disabled body while simultaneously validating the abled body as 'normal' and thus superior. Subsequently, the 'ableist gaze' renders disabled people as public spectacles, who incite curiosity and intrusions by abled-bodied persons (Loja et al., 2013). However, society has been de-conditioned to stare publically and therefore film operates as a more private space to carry out such forbidden desires. Thus, it is arguable that films about disability are made for abled audiences. Norden (1994) points out that disabled people are isolated cinematically due to the camera angles which construct the spectator as abled and the disabled character as object. Therefore, the 'ableist gaze' problematises the relationship between film and audience by suggesting that it is not one of passive content ingestion, but rather introduces power dynamics which need to be empirically and critically assessed through an analysis of film.

“Nothing About Us, Without Us”

In this information age, mass media is one of the main sources through which information is disseminated publicly (Black & Pretes, 2007; Flynn, 2016; Safran, 1998). Yet, a review of the literature has shown that disabled characters and actors are notoriously under-represented in film and it is claimed that this absence is akin to prejudice (Safran, 1998). Huntemann and Morgan (2001, p. 316) reiterate this by suggesting that when minority group members do not see “images like themselves” in the media, it sends a “loud and clear message” about their group’s importance in society. Arguably then, disabled persons’ marginalisation within society is echoed in their under-representation in film. To date, this has been the focus of much quantitative research. For example, Byrd and Pipes (1981) found that out of 287 films, only 8.7% included a disabled character. Similarly, Byrd and Elliot (1985) found that out of 1051 films reviewed, only 11.4% represented a disabled character. Additionally, a content analysis of physical disability in Disney films across the decades revealed that for the 2000’s decade only 15% of the films contained characters with disabilities (Sherman, 2008). Despite media policies such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) firmly put in place, more recent estimates do not indicate transformation. This is supported by the findings of an inclusion group for disabled actors. I AM PWD (2010) reported that across five of the major broadcasting networks in the United States of America, only six of the 587 characters had a disability. Moreover, supporting roles such as friends, family members or working professionals are consecutively characterised as abled society members in the media sphere (Davis, 2013; Hartnett, 2000). Thus, these missing, incidental representations present disability as uncommon and reinforce the marginalised position this group occupies in society.

In addition to being under-represented, there is consensus within the literature that disabled people are misrepresented (Black & Pretes, 2007; Darke, 2010; Haller & Zhang, 2014; Norden, 1994; Stadler, 2006). Subsequently, a debate has been ignited over the right to self-representation as encapsulated by the slogan: “Nothing about us, without us” (Goggin & Newell, 2003, p. 20). The issue of self-representation has come to the forefront because much of the current representation of disabled people has been scripted, produced and portrayed by abled persons and their conceptualisations about the disabled experience (Stewart, 2018). This becomes problematic because it can result in what Davis (2014, p.10) terms a “hegemony of normalcy” which arguably plays out through film (Flynn, 2016). The quotation

by Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh to follow (2009, p. 213) speaks to the power afforded to those who are allowed to construct and disseminate cultural representations in the media: "Those who control the dominant codes of information and communication networks exercise considerable influence over our thought processes… [as] they provide us with the operational codes, formal rules and knowledge systems whereby we understand and evaluate the world".

Therefore given the power embedded in self-representation, the lack of opportunities for disabled actors evident in the current statistics is alarming. For example, of the six disabled characters aforementioned in I AM PWD's (2010) findings, only one was a disabled actor. This is indicative of the greater trends in Hollywood, as Stewart (2018) purports that Oscar nominated movies about disability share an important commonality: They do not include any disabled actors. Whilst many movies about disability have garnered awards and have received critical acclaim (e.g. *Rain Man* (1988); *My Left Foot* (1989); *Forest Gump* (1994); *Million Dollar Baby* (2004); *Theory of Everything* (2014) and recently *The Shape of Water* (2018)) disabled actors have not shared in this favour (Stewart, 2018). This is evidenced by only two disabled actors receiving Oscars in a span of ninety years (Stewart, 2018). In theorising about why disabled actors have been excluded from portraying their population in film, Davis (2013, p.41) argues that allowing abled actors to transform into disabled characters through theatricality and cinematic technology provides comfort to abled audiences; as "the fear of fragmentation and destruction of the ego is compensated for by the notion that 'it's only a movie'". Nonetheless, controversy has arisen over the 'performance' of disability, as activist groups have taken offense to abled portrayals of disabled people, likening the mimicking of disability to drag or blackface, or what disability scholars have termed 'cripface' (Harris, 2014; Norden, 1994; Whittington-Walsh, 2002).

While assessing the quantification of disabled characters and actors in films has been an important endeavour, there is a need to provide greater insight into the politics of representation surrounding disability. Therefore, this study supports Norden's (1994) assertion that change is more likely to be brought about through shifting how disability is represented, as opposed to how frequently we are exposed to disability in the media. Thus, the current research aims to move away from quantitative questions which ask 'how much' disability has appeared in film, toward a qualitative investigation and critical analysis of 'how' disabled people have been represented in contemporary films.

Screening Stereotypes

A review of the literature suggests that a number of film and disability scholars have attempted to answer the question of how disability has been represented in film. Seminal works include the likes of Longmore (1987) who drew the conclusion that there are three main stereotypes presented in disability films because narratives centre on criminality, adjustment and asexuality. Barnes (1992) later added to this list by including eleven prominent and overlapping stereotypes which he argues emerged from less enlightened times, but still contribute to the cultural oppression of disabled people. These stereotypes include the representation of disabled people as objects of violence; as sinister and evil; as an atmosphere or curio[4]; as a *supercrip*; as an object of ridicule; as their own worst enemy; as a burden; as sexually abnormal; as unable to participate fully in community life and as 'normal'. Additionally, Norden (1994) links certain historical periods with aligning stereotypes (e.g., Pre-WWII (Freakish), Post-WWII (rehabilitative), 1950's (return to freakish) and mid 1970's (more enlightened)). Therefore, a comprehensive list of the stereotypical representations of disability in film compiled by Norden (1994) include: human novelties; comic misadventures; less than marriage material; freak show fascination; tragic victim; noble warrior; able to make audiences feel good; objectification of evil; sweet innocent; miracle cure; fake disability; elderly dupe; and lastly, abled bodied persons rescuing the disabled. However, the aforementioned stereotypes offer highly caricatured and one-dimensional representations of disabled lives. This is because these stereotypes are easily recognisable depictions created for mass audiences or what Valentine (2001, p.707) terms "mainstream representations of marginality". Thus following Norden (1994), it is arguable that disabled people experience a cinema of isolation, as these representations portray a limited personhood which lacks the depth and nuance that animates the human experience.

Since the work of these seminal authors, a number of studies have critically analysed films and have brought these stereotypes into their analysis. However, much of this work has been based on older films. For example, films prominently analysed within the literature include: *Freaks* (1932) (Whittington-Walsh, 2002); *Elephant Man* (1980) (Boyd, 2016; Darke, 1994); *Rain Man* (1988) (Hayes & Black, 2003; Whittington-Walsh, 2002); *My Left Foot* (1989) (Black & Pretes, 2007) and *Breaking the Waves* (1996) (Black & Pretes, 2007; Shakespeare,

[4]According to Barnes (1992) disabled people function in film to enhance a certain atmosphere, usually one of menace, mystery or deprivation. However, including disability as an allegory or for metaphorical significance is considered reductive and dehumanising.

1999). Therefore, an analysis of more contemporary films is needed to expand on, and update this existing body of knowledge. Arguably, the context surrounding disability has shifted since these films were made, given the traction gained and progress made by the social model and disability rights movements since their political height in the 1990's (Grue, 2011). Additionally, important developments in policy and legislation have occurred. For example, The American with Disabilities Act (1990) and The Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS) (ODP, 1997) protects disabled people from many forms of discrimination, including those in the media. Thus the aforementioned political and legal leaps, taken in conjunction with academic developments such as the expansion of disability models to include affirmation and cultural models, has potentially led to shifts in public attitudes towards disability which may be reflected in film. However, it remains to be empirically explored whether or not the proposed political, academic and public attitudinal shifts have filtered through into representations within contemporary films. Therefore, this research aimed to investigate how contemporary films construct disability. Further, it aimed to address if these films do so in ways which perpetuate or challenge prevailing discourses and stereotypes about disability.

Additionally, analysing contemporary films was necessary because there appears to be a lack of consensus within the literature about whether progress in representation of disability has been made. For example, Black and Pretes (2007) concluded that filmmakers are moving towards depicting more nuanced disabled characters, emphasising the 'human qualities' (emotions, motivations and desires) which underlie both abled and disabled persons' experiences. However, Ljuslinder (2014, p.275) asserts that prejudices have survived despite "international conventions, declarations, policy documents and laws [advocating for] much more nuanced interpretations and images" of disability. This claim is echoed by Flynn (2016) who contends that the implementation of such policies and laws have changed the site of oppression. Since overt displays of prejudice are no longer socially accepted, Flynn (2016) argues that ableism endures covertly in film. Furthermore, Haller and Zhang (2014) suggest that although there have been 'ups and downs' in Hollywood's portrayals of disability in recent years, filmmakers are unable to let go of stigmatising stereotypes. Lastly, Darke (2004, p. 100) argues that contemporary disability films are falsely progressive as "popular depictions of disability, although more frequent and diverse, remain clichéd and stereotypical". Two of these stereotypes from the above seminal works, form the

predominant representations of disability in film and thus will be elaborated on below (Haller & Zhang, 2014; Hayes & Black, 2003; Ljuslinder, 2014; McDougall, 2006).

Stereotypes: Tales of the Disabled Victor or Victim

According to Pointon and Davis (1997), disability narratives are relentlessly repetitive. This repetition manifests in the binary representation of the extraordinary *supercrip* and the helpless and pitiful victim. A *supercrip* is a term used to describe a disabled person whose achievements are considered remarkable precisely because of their disabled status (Grue, 2016; Haller & Zhang, 2014). Therefore in the media, this manifests in grandiose representations of disabled individuals' accomplishments (Barnes, 1992).The findings of a South African study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) attest to the aforementioned repetition in disability narratives, as participants interviewed expressed their frustrations about disability being reduced to heroic status or a symbol of tragedy in the media (McDougall, 2006). McDougall (2006, p. 387) coins the latter reduction the "Ag shame syndrome"[5]. However, it is important to note that both portrayals are considered reductions of the disabled experience. This is because the 'inspirational' and 'empowering' propensity of the *supercrip* narrative has come under academic scrutiny. For example, Ljuslinder (2014) states that the *supercrip* perpetuates the notion that in order to succeed, individuals must supersede their impairments and strive to achieve by abled standards. Haller and Zhang (2014) also interrogate the message this stereotype sends to the general public, since it reinforces the idea that disabled people's achievements are a rarity through valorising only small number of individual success stories.

Continually and repetitively representing the same stereotypical images and discourses about disability in film to the exclusion of more dynamic and versatile portrayals is problematic. This is because one-dimensional narratives render unrepresented aspects of the disabled experience unfamiliar and thus threatening (Branston & Stafford, 2003). The idea of disability as threatening to abled bodied society is important as it provides insight into the phenomenon of this binary representation of disability in film. Through applying a psychological lens, several authors have suggested that the discrimination faced by disabled society is a consequence of the intense emotional reactions and fear that the disabled evoke in

[5]The "Ag Shame Syndrome" originates from the South African idiom which relays an expression of sympathy which may be used in a patronising or demeaning manner (McDougall, 2006).

abled persons (Harvey, 2015; Shakespeare, 1994; Watermeyer, 2006). Arguably, this fear arises because disability serves as an embodied reminder of abled societies own potential bodily fragility and mortality (Harvey, 2015). Consequently, this corporeal and existential angst triggers a range of responses such as passing judgement, stigmatisation, shunning or hostility that occurs in reaction to fear (Watermeyer, 2006). This interpretation is supported by the following quotations which succinctly encapsulate the range of responses to the fear disability conjures up:

"The world of the disabled is strange and dark, and it is held up to judgement by those who live in fear of it" (Kreigel, 1987, p. 33).

"What we fear, we often stigmatise and shun and sometimes seek to destroy. Popular entertainment's depiction of disabled characters allude to these fears and prejudices or address them obliquely or fragmentarily, seeking to reassure us about ourselves" (Longmore, 1987, p. 66).

Moreover, this angst triggers psychic defenses that help keep the threat of disability from conscious awareness (Watermeyer, 2006). In this regard, abled society is afforded an opportunity to disown and expel their fears of deficiency, dependency and rejection by projecting these characteristics onto disabled characters. Therefore, Shakespeare (1994, p. 283) argues that disabled people operate as "dustbins for disavowal". Moreover, Harvey (2015) argues that disability is often approached in an ambivalent and polarising manner because this anxiety activates the defence mechanism of splitting in abled individuals, which helps impose control through categorisation. Thus, disability is viewed in either a highly positive or negative light. Therefore as the above quotation by Longmore (1987) implies, abled society desires "reassurance", which film makers exploit, given the overwhelming corporeal or existential anxiety that disability evokes.

In applying these psychoanalytic insights to film, they offer an explanation as to why popular depictions of disabled characters are split into victor or victim narratives. This is because plots where characters triumph over their disability can help soothe the aforementioned anxiety, as abled persons come to view the disabled character as capable or independent in spite of their disability. Thus, abled individuals are no longer challenged by their own potential bodily fragility (Watermeyer, 2006). Additionally, neo-liberal principles of independence and autonomy remain unchallenged when characters triumph over their

disability (Davis, 2013). However, if the character is unable to overcome their disability, they must succumb to it, thereby evoking pity and re-establishing abled positioning as 'fortunate' and thus superior (Hayes & Black, 2003).Thus, disabled characters act as ciphers in film and are exploited for their comforting or cathartic symbolism to the detriment of the recognition of their full personhood.

Furthermore, Watermeyer (2006, p. 39) addresses the negative repercussions of these binary representations of disability in film by arguing that caricatured portrayals lead to the perceptions of disabled people as the personifications of their film stereotypes, which subsequently renders them "unknown" and "unrecognised". McDougall (2006, p. 388) reiterates this when she suggests that "to be perceived in mythic proportions is not really to be perceived" at all. Through these stereotypical representations, we fail to conceive of the 'other' in all the complexity, nuance and diversity that comprise the human experience (Watermeyer, 2006). Therefore, in addition to assessing how contemporary films construct disability in ways that perpetuate and challenge prevailing stereotypes, this current research also aims to assess some of the discourses that are missing from the chosen films' portrayals of the disabled experience. This is important because it is not only the presence of certain discourses which construct our perceptions of disability, but also the absences of others (Sutherland, Catalano & Kendall, 2009).

Research Questions

1. How is the acquisition of a physical disability constructed within, and through contemporary films?
2. What discourses are perpetuated, challenged or omitted in contemporary cinematic representations of disability?
3. How do discourses of acquired physical disability within film link to the systematic oppression experienced by disabled people?

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter opens with an exploration of the epistemological, methodological and value positions this research study is embedded in. It then outlines the characteristics of the sampled films and provides a brief synopsis of their plot. Subsequently, it details the procedure through which the data was generated and analysed. Moreover, a justification is provided for the innovative multi-modal approach this study employed. The chapter then closes with a reflective exploration into the researcher's subject position and its impact on the results found as well as delineates the ethical challenges and rigorous strengths of this study.

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

Given the study's focus on meaning-making agents such as discourses, stereotypes and representivity, this research was embedded within a qualitative paradigm. A qualitative approach prioritises interpretation at the level of human experience and social action (Babbie & Mouton, 2014). Specifically, this research was situated within a critical qualitative paradigm which focuses on "the critique and transformation of current structures that shape and constrain the development of social beings and practices" by examining them through their "historical, social, cultural and political contexts" (Fossey, Harvey, Mc Dermott,& Davidson, 2002, p. 720). A powerful structure that "shapes and constrains" (Fossey et al., 2002, p.720) individual subjectivities and social practices is the media (Flynn, 2016). Therefore, this critical approach invited the researcher to investigate how film discursively constructs societal conceptions of disability.

Moreover, a critical approach was well aligned with the methodological framework guiding this study, given that a CDA was employed. A CDA is primarily an analysis of power, dominance and inequality (Van Dijk, 1998) and therefore concerns itself with the "critiquing and transforming" of societal structures aforementioned (Fossey et al., 2002, p.720). According to Fairclough (1993, p. 135) a CDA is a conscientisation tool used to investigate how "practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power". However, Grue's (2011) incidence study found that disability has been sparsely covered from a discursive perspective. This is surprising given that the disabled have been socially, politically and economically disenfranchised (Flynn, 2016). Therefore, this study conducted a CDA as a means of contributing to growing body of knowledge concerned

with making explicit the discourses and cultural representations that reproduce disability as an under-privileged minority (Grue, 2011). Yet, what is unique about the research design of this study is that it aimed to expand upon the conventional application of a CDA through an analysis of multi-model discourses. Therefore, it investigated the integrated role of language and cinematic discourses in constructing representations of disability within film.

Additionally, operating within the epistemology of a broad social constructionist framework, lends itself well to this form of methodological inquiry, given the conceptual overlaps these two approaches share. The central tenets of social constructionism posit that knowledge or ideological "Truths" about the world and the groups of people who inhabit it, are constructed and sustained through social, cultural, and institutional practices (Burr, 2015). Therefore, both the methodological and epistemological paradigms this research was embedded in were geared towards investigating how film acts as a powerful publicising agent of knowledge, which can be used to transmit or resist ableist ideologies (Flynn, 2016). Moreover, the current study adopted a social constructionist view of disability, to make its political positioning within the social model of disability and critical disability theory explicit. Critical disability theory (CDT) is a perspective utilised to challenge ableist supremacy through prioritising social justice (Gillies, 2014). Therefore, Grue (2011, p. 533) contends that critical disability studies are concerned with "opening up new fields of inquiry, producing new knowledge about the human experience and altering, refining and subverting old 'truths'". Consequently, the CDT and CDA are well aligned, as they both have their origins in activism and are engaged in similar political pursuits.

Choosing the Corpus of Film Texts

This research employed a homogenous sampling strategy because it focused on films which depicted one form of disability, namely acquired physical disability. Moreover it employed a purposive sampling strategy which targets characteristics that are of particular interest to answering the research questions (Marshall, 1996). These characteristics need to fulfill predetermined criteria which help the researcher gain insight into the phenomena under investigation (Marshall, 1996). Conditions for a film to be included in the study were predetermined by the following inclusion criteria:

1. The film had to have a disabled protagonist who acquires a physical disability during the course of the film. Acquired disability was purposefully selected given that it represents a shift in power from abled to disabled group status and therefore is

assumed to speak to the maintenance or subversion of the stereotypes and discourses which construct power relations between the abled and disabled groups more generally. Furthermore, visible physical disabilities were sampled specifically given their heightened visibility. Thus the physical and corporeal nature of this disability type was well suited to the visual modality and the performative nature of film.

2. The films had to be a contemporary representation of disability, as premised by the need to expand upon and update knowledge within this field. Merriam-Webster (2018) defines the term contemporary as "being marked by the characteristics of the present period". Given the academic, political and civil rights advances that have taken place regarding disability since the mid-1990's, assessing the discourses present in more contemporary representations of disabled experience is important (Grue, 2011). Therefore, this study sampled films released in the last decade, or more specifically, it searched for films between the period of 2008-2018. Preference was given to more recently produced films.
3. In order to produce a more meaningful analysis of power, it was important that the films had reached large audiences through wide distribution. This is due to the emphasis on the constructed nature of disability in this study, and the role film plays in promulgating hegemonic ideologies and discourses in society (Stadler, 2006).Thus, wide distribution was determined by the film's international revenue, where selected films generated a minimum worldwide gross profit of $500 000 according to IMBd's (n.d.) and The Numbers (n.d.) web listings. These indicators were selected to ensure creditability given their prominence amongst web listing sites.
4. The films selected were in English, given the focus on analysing language and discourse in the current study.

The overall corpus of data was comprised of three films. Given that the films centre on disability throughout the narrative, this number was considered sufficient to produce a rich and detailed corpus of data for analysis. The films chosen include *You're Not You* (2014), *Me Before You* (2016) and *Stronger* (2017). All the films are Hollywood productions. This industry was selected due to the South African Box Office estimates revealing that Hollywood films have generated the most revenue across the country over the past decade (BoxOfficeMojo, 1999). Consequently, this suggests that most South Africans are exposed to the discourses presented within Western films, despite potential cultural and contextual differences between these regions. It also suggests that these are

the most popularly watched films and therefore may be more influential to the constructions of disability.

Synopses of Films

You're Not You follows the story of concert pianist named Kate (Hilary Swank), who acquires Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) at the age of 35 years. ALS is a progressive motor neuron condition which affects voluntary muscle movements such as breathing, speaking and walking (The ALS Association, 2019). The story depicts Kate's 'decent' into disability until she ultimately decides to refuse treatment and succumbs to her 'affliction'. The story also explores what the film constructs as an unlikely friendship between Kate and an unqualified and brash collegian named Bec (Emily Rossum), who becomes the primary carer following Kate's husband's affair. *You're Not You* was released in 2014 and gathered an international revenue of $921, 741 (The Numbers, n.d.).

Me Before You tells the story of Will Traynor (Sam Caflin), a larger than life character, who seeks out adventure. However, Will acquires quadriplegia[6]and at the same time loses his lust for life. That is until his new care worker, Louisa (Emilia Clarke), a cheerful and eccentric character, tries to make him fall in love with the prospect of life again. However, it is not his life but rather Louisa whom Will falls in love with. Despite this, Will decides that he cannot 'live boldly' with his impairment and longs for his former life. Subsequently, he opts for what is portrayed as the 'noble' act of euthanasia. The film was well received by the larger public, as it won a MTV Movie award (2017) for best 'tearjerker' and the People's Choice Awards USA (2017) for favourite romantic drama as well as raked in $208,314,186 collectively in revenue (IMBd, n.d.).

Stronger is a biographical film which portrays the life of Jeff Bauman (Jake Gyllenhaal), who underwent a double leg amputation above the knee following the 2011 Boston Marathon bombings. The plot details both his physical and psychological adaptations to his new disabled life and the dynamics it introduces into his relationships. It also follows his rehabilitation journey and his 'heroic' quest to walk again. The film received a number of award nominations, particularly for Best Actor for Jake Gyllenhaal's portrayal of a disabled character (IMBd, n.d.). The film's worldwide box office revenue amounted to $7,888,867 (The Numbers, n.d.).

[6]Quadriplegia is a form of "paralysis caused by illness or jury that results in partial or total loss of function in all four limbs and torso" (Disabled World, 2010, para. 1).

Data Generation and Procedure

The data was generated through the legal purchasing of the copyright versions of the three chosen films on digital versatile disc (DVD)[7]. The films were chosen through online searches on *Google,* for contemporary films produced in the last decade about acquired physical disability. Boolean search terms such as "acquired AND physical disability in films OR movies" were utilised. The three films identified were assessed against the aforementioned sampling criteria before selection. The data corpus collected from these films was informed by the research questions guiding this study. Thus the films were watched repeatedly, with an emphasis placed on extracting pertinent scenes that spoke to how disability is constructed within and through film. These scenes were also chosen if they perpetuated, challenged or omitted prevailing discourses about disability in society. Therefore, the data is based on scripted dialogue, where important quotations were accessed via an online website[8]. Additionally, data also took the form of observations noted about cinematic discourses which included the way that disability was constructed through the use of camera angles, editing, music, props and other cinematic techniques (Janney, 2012). Therefore, the data generated took a multimodal, audio-visual form.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed through a CDA. According to Van Dijk (2015, p. 352), a CDA interrogates "the way social power, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted" and therefore, conducting a CDA was valuable to the purpose of the current study. However up to this point, research has predominantly been conducted at a monomodal level of analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), which has meant that the nuances of meaning co-created through multi-modality have largely been under-explored. Within discourse analysis, this tendency towards monomodality has been accounted for by the emphasis placed on the mode of language (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Thus, there was a need for methodology to move beyond language and consider other modes through which discourses are constructed (Cheng &Lui, 2014). This need was considered even more important for the current study specifically, given that the data was collected through film, an audio-visual form of representation which requires analysis at multiple levels. Subsequently, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) concept of multimodal discourse informed the analysis of this study. Multimodal discourse can be conceptualised as a medium which addresses language, but in

[7]A DVD is a compact disc used to store high resolution audiovisual data (TechTerms, 2014).
[8]The scripts for the films can be accessed at https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/moviescript.

combination with critical analyses of other representational modes (O'Halloran, 2011). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) modes are socially and culturally produced resources, whereby meaning is made material. Therefore, discourse is defined broadly in this study to encompass the representational manner in which subjectivities are constituted and circumscribed in symbolic relations of power (Stadler, 2006).

Therefore, the non-linguistic modes which make meaning in film are best understood as cinematic discourse. Janney (2012, p. 85) conceptualises cinematic discourse as the "filmmakers' main expressive vehicle and primary form of communication with, and influence over film viewers". This form of discourse includes: "staging, camera work, editing, and other conventional cinematic depictive practices that are used to shape perspectives" (Janney, 2012, p. 85). It is important to note that the current study was not concerned with the aesthetics of the aforementioned film techniques and only drew on and analysed these techniques when they functioned to discursively construct disability in certain ways. Thus, this study drew from and adapted the work of multiple theorists (including Fairclough 1995a, 1995b; Janney, 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Van Dijk, 2015) in order to create an integrated analysis of various modalities. This was done in the hopes of conducting a more nuanced account of how disability is constructed within and through film. Therefore, a methodological aim of this research was to create a more integrated analytic method. Particularly, this was important given the power of representivity and the need to analyse this power and its operational effects through a more dynamic and comprehensive semiotic lens.

The data was analysed broadly through Fairclough's (1995a, 1995b) framework of CDA, given the convergence between Fairclough's (1995b) emphasis on the media and the current study's emphasis on film. Although Fairclough's (1989) earlier accounts prioritised language, he does acknowledge that discourse can also be semiotic in so far as his claim that CDA is "a theory as much as method, or rather, it is a theoretical perspective on language and more generally on semiosis" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 121). Therefore, he allows for the possibility of discursive constructions beyond language which was well suited to the multimodal emphasis of this study. Additionally, Fairclough's (1995b) emphasis on presence as well as absence in representations was important for this research and its' emphasis on the role missing discourses can play in forming particular constructions of disability through exclusion or silencing of alternative representations. Further, Fairclough (1995b) provided a layered framework which addressed: text; discursive practice (the process of production and

consumption); and socio-cultural practice (the social and cultural backdrops which gave rise to the communicative event). Thus the chosen framework allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the audiences that contemporary films are produced for and consumed by. It also brings into question who has access to the media and thus who has agency to construct and portray media representations. Through including the third layer concerning socio-cultural practice, Fairclough's (1995b) framework allowed for an exploration into how these issues speak back to power relations between abled and disabled positioning.

In performing the analysis, the discursive patterns which emerged recurrently across the films were identified and coded. This process was done iteratively by reading and rereading the transcripts produced and observations noted while repeatedly watching the films. Additionally, this process was done with the understanding that meaning within films is co-constructed linguistically through scripted dialogues and semiotically through cinematic discourses. Thereafter, the analysis considered how these discourses function to construct disability, by asking whether or not (and in what specific ways) the discourses presented in contemporary films reflected or challenged stereotypes already identified by seminal authors in this field[9] (i.e. Barns, 1992; Longman, 1987; Norden, 1994). Following this, connections were made between the multimodal discourses, the discursive practice (the process of production and consumption of films), and socio-cultural practices of power (dominance, subversion and inequality between abled and disabled groups) in line with an adaptation of Fairclough's (1995b) layered framework.

Ethical Considerations, Reflexivity and Rigour

Given that the research data exists within the public domain and was not generated through contact with human participants, this study did not require ethical clearance from an Ethics Research Committee. However, this is not to suggest that it did not pose ethical challenges which needed to be navigated accordingly. These challenges arose in so far as the films had to be acquired through legal means and therefore were bought and rented as opposed to having viewed pirated copies. Additionally it must be acknowledged that pre-transcribed scripts were freely accessed via an online website, as mentioned above. These scripts were read while watching the films, to attest to the accuracy of the data provided.

[9]For a comprehensive description of the stereotypes identified by these seminal authors please see the section entitled screening stereotypes on page 17 of the literature review.

Given the subjective nature of the qualitative design, the researcher is rendered the research instrument (Chambliss & Schutt, 2010). Inevitably, this can lead to biases in the analysis as the onus of interpretation lies with the researcher (Shaw, 2010). Consequently, given ethical challenges of personal bias, it was imperative to foreground how my subjectivities impacted on the analytic process, and make these transparent. This was especially important as I am an abled researcher investigating disability. As such, a reflexivity journal was kept throughout the research process. It was used to keep stock of any personal biases, emotions and value positions which I felt impacted on the way the data was collected and analysed (Shenton, 2004).Therefore, in the interest of transparency, the discussion to follow pertains to issues I felt are relevant and valuable to the reader to provide a better understanding of the context in which the analysis was produced. These issues were also discussed with my supervisor and addressed where possible, in order to better navigate the potential biases my subjectivities posed to the research project.

My Abled Body

First and foremost, it is incumbent for me to outline my subject position, particularly with respect to the ways in which I construct and understand my identity as a member of abled-bodied society. How I understand my identity has become interlinked with my training as a future research psychologist. This training has exposed me to certain knowledge paradigms which have been integral in how I conceptualise the process of identity formation. For example, I am a white, female, middle class, abled-bodied researcher. However, my training has encouraged me to interrogate the socially constructed nature of the aforementioned subject positions and the power dynamics attached to them. Therefore, I understand that my abled position is not merely about bodily classification but that it has afforded me certain privileges, agency and access in society, which disabled persons may have been unfairly denied (Shakespeare, 2010).

As such my abled subject positioning poses potential ethical challenges to this research project, specifically regarding issues such as voice, authorship and embodiment. These challenges manifest in a politics of representation or what Shakespeare (1996) terms the traditional domination of the disabled by abled professionals and academics, who speak over or on behalf of the disabled. Similar critiques have been made about film, given that abled-bodied producers and actors have been heavily criticised for the ableist lens through which they construct disability and ultimately misrepresent the disabled experience (Harris,

2014; Stewart, 2018). Thus, I am aware that as an abled researcher investigating disability, the research claims I have produced may be critiqued in a similar vein. Moreover, I am equally aware that by conducting an analysis into the representation of disability in film, I too am reproducing discursive constructions about the disabled experience via the process of re-representation. However, in offering a potential counter-claim, it can be proposed that by actively seeking to interrogate ableist representations of disability, this study is less likely to reproduce knowledge about disability through an ableist lens. Thus, this study hoped to adopt a more critical stance towards research by embedding it within the chosen epistemological (the social model of disability, social constructionism and critical disability theory) and methodological (CDA) frameworks. Furthermore, the social constructionist framework challenges traditional notions of expert authorship and objectivity of knowledge claims (Blurr, 2015), which may help distinguish this research from the above critiques. Moreover, it was hoped that these precautions would uphold the ethical principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (American Psychological Association (APA), 2010) as the emancipatory agenda of this study was to identify and subvert, as opposed to reproduce, disabling representations which cause harm to the disabled public.

The above counterclaim is not to suggest that the position I hold as the researcher is rendered value-free. In this regard, it was important to note the ways that I have been socialised into certain beliefs about disability, not least as an abled-bodied individual. Consequently, there was a need for me to critically reflect on the stereotypes, discourses and personal experiences which have shaped my understanding of what the disabled experience entails. This was an important endeavour as these understandings arguably impacted on the data collection process, by making certain aspects of the films more salient to me. An example of this could be found in my emotional reactions to all three films, which initially manifested in me being saddened by the victim narrative or feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable at deliberately grotesque imagery that hyperbolised the ‘indignity’ of disabled care. Arguably, my affective responses revealed how I have been conditioned by ableist ideologies and positioning of disability as a ‘tragedy’. Self-reflecting about these affective responses was integral to the analysis produced, as it prompted me to search for literature such as Watermeyer’s (2006) psychoanalytic account of disabling media representations and Ahmed’s (2004) affective economies. Notably, these authors played an important role in the theorisations offered about the intended political messages and reception of disability films in this study. A further example of how my heightened awareness of my abled bodied status

impacted on the analytic process is that I became hesitant about making any claims which prioritised normalisation or abled grouping as a standard. When these discourses arose, I ensured that it was the characters' claims and not merely my own interpretation of these claims, which could be constructing it in this light.

Admittedly, I also experienced some difficulty in discerning whether or not certain discourses presented within the films were being challenged or perpetuated. Arguably this could be attributed to a process of interpellation, whereby I, as an abled audience member, recognised someone of my own prejudicial attitudes and behaviours reflected in the films and thus become uncertain of the intended reception. However, this difficulty may equally have been a result of my psychic defense of splitting and the tension brought up within me while investigating acquired disability. Harvey (2015) proclaims that when a subject is particularly anxiety provoking, the defense of splitting can be used to manage these overwhelming feelings through dichotomous thinking. Therefore, a difficulty I initially faced was that I was looking for discrete patterns of either challenged or perpetuated discourses and had not considered the possibility of paradoxical findings whereby these mechanisms occurred simultaneously. Thus through introspection, a significant finding of this research was that contemporary films can simultaneously challenge and perpetuate competing constructions of the disabled experience. This ambivalence and contradiction provides a more nuanced interpretation which is important to document amidst one-dimensional constructions popular in disability representations. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that Shakespeare's (1999) article regarding the simplistic, overly censorious and politically correct readings of disability films further aided in me reaching this conclusion. Particularly, Shakespeare's (1999) calls for a more sophisticated and balanced review of disability films resonated with me and led me to engage with the data in a more critical and meaningful way.

Lastly, a disclaimer needs to be made concerning my ideological positioning with the social model of disability and a critical disability theory framework; both of which are concerned with challenging ableist supremacy and the oppressive and exclusionary barriers this upholds for the disabled public (Hosking, 2008). As such these positions informed my research agenda which predisposed me towards certain interpretations of the data. Most notably this manifested in the interpretation of a number of discourses as serving individualising and depoliticising agendas. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that as part of my affinity to these value positions certain language choices were deliberately made throughout this study. For example, this research employed the terminology of 'disabled

people' as opposed to 'persons with disabilities', as the former implies that persons with impairments are disabled by oppressive societal forces, while the latter individualises disability (Barnes, 1992; Ellis, 2004).

Further, a power nexus exists between the terms 'impairment' and 'disability'. Impairment has a genealogical association to the medical establishment and connotes an individual deficiency (Linton, 2010), while disability has been distinguished from impairment as politicised stratagem of the social model to connate systematic oppression and societal disablement (Shakespeare, 2010). Therefore, this study similarly employs the term 'disability' as a political strategy. Lastly, the term 'abled' was used over 'non-disabled', to deliberately label and demystify the forces of ableism (Campbell, 2009). Collectively, the above terminology was utilised to handle the ethical dilemma of re-representation of discursive constructions of disability with sensitivity.

Analytic Rigour

Lincoln's and Guba's (1985) criteria were adhered to in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the results. Specifically, transferability of the findings was enhanced through a detailed description of the methodology and a purposefully defined sample, ensured by strict inclusion criteria. This was included for the readers to discern if the findings of this study can be understood within, and applied to, similar research contexts (Shenton, 2004). The dependability of the data was supported by using multiple quotations from the different films, to help address the issue of consistency. Conformability was achieved through the use of saturation during the analysis (Shenton, 2004), with discursive themes being identified by their patterned nature and supported by verbatim quotations to lessen the bias of the researcher.

Additionally, credibility was established through a number of techniques. Firstly, this study was strongly embedded within an existing body of knowledge, as the findings were guided by previously identified stereotypes and discourses compiled by seminal authors in this field (i.e., Barns, 1992; Longman, 1987; Norden, 1994). Secondly, credibility was ensured through a process of free association, whereby alternative interpretations of the data were discussed and at times debunked (Parker, 1992). Moreover, this research relied on crystallisation techniques to help affirm the credibility of the findings. Tracey (2010) uses the term crystallisation in place of triangulation, in order to move away from positivist assumptions that connote a singular and definitive 'Truth'. Therefore, the data was gathered

through varying modalities to help create a more comprehensive understanding of the discursive constructions of disability presented. The findings of the analysis were also subjected to peer scrutiny, specifically by my research supervisor, who watched the films independently to me and challenged or confirmed particular interpretations of the data. It was hoped that these precautions offered a more trustworthy, ethical and analytically rigorous study.

Chapter 4:

Results and Discussion

The chapter opens with an exploration into the most prevalent portrayal of disability in the films, namely the medicalisation of disability. Here, it is argued that the medical model depictions of disability discursively operate to individualise and depoliticise disability. The discussion then turns to the ramifications of these medicalised constructions, as it unpacks the dynamics of impairment/disability nexus and its intersection with the politics of care. Further, following Parker's (1992) concept of intertextuality, the analysis details how medicalised portrayals in film equate disability with discourses of loss, deficiency, adjustment and assimilation. However, the adjustment stereotype was found to manifest at two levels: physical and psychological. Therefore, the discussion also includes an analysis into narratives of psychological maladjustment presented in the films. Following this, a psychological lens provides insight into the binary representations of disability in film. In the final section, the discussion engages with the politics of representation and cinematic discourses more explicitly and investigates how camera angles, theatrics and narrative sequencing work to reinforce stereotypical constructions of disability within and through film.

1. Perpetuating Medical Model Discourses

Disability as a Medical Tragedy

Disability is a dynamic construct that can be reconfigured through numerous paradigms and models (Haller & Zhang, 2014). However former research has identified that one particular model, namely the medical model, has dominated cinematic portrayals of disability, with a number of authors arguing that it has done so to political ends (Darke, 2010; Haller & Zhang, 2014; Schwartz & Lutfiyya, 2009). The findings of this study concur with previous research, as all three film narratives rely on a series of medical tropes, jargon, props and settings to foreground medical constructions of disability. For example, large portions of the three narratives take place in hospital settings, with numerous scenes in which the disabled characters lay bed-ridden in dressing gowns. Family members hover around their bedsides, shedding tears or expressing concern. This imagery is also coupled with melancholic background music or with the sounds of beeping heart monitors and strained breath, as all three characters are shown to be using oxygen masks or ventilators at some point in their narrative. Taken together, these hospitalised portrayals of disability construct

the characters as victims of medical tragedies. Notably, this is reiterated in the dialogue of *Me Before You*, in a scene where Will is admitted to hospital. Here his physiotherapist explains to Louisa the difficulties Will faces in relation to his quadriplegia:

Physiotherapist: *He has a check up every six months.*
Louisa: *To see if he is getting better?*
Physiotherapist: *It's a spinal cord injury. He's not going to get better.*
Louisa: *But you do all those exercises with him.*
Physiotherapist:*Yes, to stop his muscles atrophying.*
Louisa: *But you're still trying, right?*
Physiotherapist: *He threw everything into physio in the first year. And all we got was slight movement from his thumb and finger. And then the first bout of pneumonia hit*
- and then autonomic dysreflexia.
Louisa: *And what's that mean?*
Physiotherapist: *His blood pressure goes up and down?*
And he's constantly open to infection.

In the above dialogue the ideology of disability as a medical tragedy is heightened by the juxtaposition set up between Will's efforts, as signified in the phrase "*he threw everything into physio*", and an underwhelming prognosis: "*all we got was a slight movement*". Moreover, Louisa's incredulous reaction to the revelation that Will is *"not going to get better*" speaks to this senseless medical tragedy, as her question resounds as a plea "*But you're still trying, right*?" Therefore, spinal cord injuries come to symbolise the ultimate medical tragedy, as they defy medical advances or curative intervention (Deal, 2003). Moreover, the discursive strategy of listing multiple medical ailments in quick succession such as "*muscle atrophy", "pneumonia"* and "*autonomic dysreflexia*" aids in this construction of disability as tragic, since it depicts the disabled experience as a never-ending onslaught of afflictions and misery (Schwartz & Lutfiyya, 2009). This is reiterated by the word choices such as "*constantly*" coupled with the repetition of the phrase "*and then*", which works to suggest that Will is never free from the possibility of illness and infection as a result of his disability. Therefore, through invoking extremes and absolutes the above extract strategically works to confound disability with illness and in doing so situates disability firmly within the body. Consequently the struggles and difficulties faced by Will, and by extension the disabled group, are medical and/or physical as opposed to social. Thus,

medicalising disability and constructing it as an individual tragedy works to obscure its social origin and political ramifications identified by the social model such as exclusion, inaccessibility, inequity and discrimination (Flynn, 2016; Linton, 2010; Longmore, 1987; Shakespeare, 1994).

In free associating and offering an alternative interpretation of these findings, it can be argued that medical care may be a reality of living with a disability and thus films include these hospitalisation scenes in order to remain 'true' to the disabled experience. However, in providing a counter claim, it can be argued that film functions as a powerful publishing agent of knowledge that both reflects and transmits hegemonic discourses in society. Thus frequently and repetitively conveying the same medical model representations of disability, arguably works to delegitimise alternative conceptualisations put forth by opposing paradigms and disability rights advocates such as the social, cultural or affirmation models. The following quotation speaks to the political functions of medicalising disability:

> Society, in agreeing to assign medical meaning to disability colludes to keep the issue within the preview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and to 'treat' the person with the condition rather than 'treating' the social processes and policies that constrict disabled lives (Linton, 2010, p.224).

Therefore, it can be suggested that perpetuating medical model portrayals of disability in film serves a depoliticising agenda by representing disability as an individual problem and not one of societal oppression of a minority group. Thus contemporary films may continue to perpetuate medical conceptions of disability despite advances in policy and disability civil rights movements precisely because these advances pose a significantly higher threat to ableist social order than before. This is explained by Shakespeare (1994, p.294): "when boundaries are breeched and power seems threatened, actions are devoted to re-establishing these fixities, by reinforcing categories and power relations". As such, it is argued that contemporary films, and the medical discourses they disseminate, function to uphold the status quo and help police the boundaries between abled and disabled groups. Therefore, films are still largely produced for abled bodied audiences as a means of reaffirming this threatened stake to power. This argument finds credence if one considers Norden's (1994, p. X) assertion that film is a "politically charged commodity" and as such one needs to

interrogate the representations films are asking audiences to 'buy into'. Moreover, this argument finds further support if one applies Fairclough's (1995b) second layer of analysis, which concerns itself with the discursive functioning of the production and consumption of text and images.

In analysing the cinematic discourse of the films it was found that at the level of production, hospitalisation scenes are filmed through top shot camera angles that position the spectator in the vantage point of looking down on the disabled character and body (Norden, 1994). They are also commonly filmed through wide angle or full camera shots, the purpose of which is to capture the subject while clearly situating them in their surroundings (Freer, 2018). As such, both *Stronger* and *You're Not You* use wide angle shots in hospital scenes to clearly situate disability in a medical context. However, it can be argued that this cinematic technique is also used to create an outsider perspective, because in both films the audience is looking into the hospital ward from behind glass doors. Arguably, this erects a barrier between the audience and the disabled character and works to associate disability with confinement and separation. Moreover, hospitalisation scenes are often filmed through long takes that works to solidify the association between disability and dependency by emphasising the extent of time-consuming needs and care disabled persons require (Drake, 2010). Therefore, the findings of this research hold with Norden's (1994) assertion that disabled people are isolated cinematically through positions of spectatorship, as an analysis of the camera work reveals that films are still predominantly produced for abled bodied audiences. Thus the messages they transmit may convey certain ableist assumptions and agendas concerning disability (Flynn, 2016). The politics of which will be discussed in greater detail under the theme of Freak Show Fascination: Fetishising of the Disabled Body in Film.

Lastly, at the level of consumption, I argue that the presentation of disabled characters as victims of medical tragedies in both the dialogue and the cinematic discourses analysed is glorified for emotional appeal. Thus, it operates to illicit and exploit the emotional reaction of pity from the audience through portraying the disabled as sickly and confined. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that contemporary films continue to perpetuate the long-standing stereotypical representation of disabled persons as "pitiful and pathetic" (Barnes, 1992). However, this research holds with Shakespeare's (1994, p. 287) claim that "pity is an expression of superiority" as well as Hayes and Black's (2003, p. 114) argument that "pity

confines life possibilities and pity oppresses" and thus is always situated in networks of power that better serve the pitying that the pitied. Therefore, pity operates emotionally and discursively to reaffirm the "paternalistic relationship of subordination" of minority groups (Hayes & Black, 2003, p. 114). Thus, invoking pitiful hospitalised portrayals of disability works to suggest that the confinement and marginalisation the disabled group experience, is due to the severity of their impairments (Longmore, 1987). As such, abled audiences may pity disabled characters while simultaneously validate institutionalising disabled individuals and barring them from the same privileges and freedoms offered to abled individuals as a necessary act of medical benevolence (Hayes & Black, 2003).

2. The Impairment/Disability Nexus

The 'Mask of Benevolence' and the Politics of Care

Notably, this process of medicalisation also works to reconfigure disability into impairment. However the nexus between these two seemingly similar terms is important to unpack. A genealogical investigation of the term 'impairment' suggests that it is commonly associated with medical objects of knowledge about disability and denotes the physical or bodily condition (Linton, 2010). In contradistinction, 'disability' is associated with the social model and therefore is defined as the social, political and economic disparities which give rise to the disabling conditions in society (Barnes & Mercer, 2005). As such, promoting conceptions of disability as impairment arguably serves political functions and perpetuates medical model discourses (Darke, 2010; Linton, 2010). Within the films analysed, the understanding of disability as impairment works to establish abled professionals in positions of power, domination and surveillance. This allows them to act over or in the 'best interests' of disabled persons, given their medical expertise and knowledge of impairment (McDougall, 2006; Shakespeare, 1996). The films perpetuated these power dynamics in the following scenes:

Doctor: *And did you already pre-medicate him?*
Nurse: - *for the dressing change?*
- *Yep.*
He's already gotten his oxy and his dilaudid PO.
He has a PR in fentanyl for breakthrough. (*Stronger*)

During this hospital scene in *Stronger*, abled professionals speak in mumbled voices in the background, mentioning a slew of drugs such as *"oxy"* and "*fetanyl"*. They also discuss medical paraphernalia such as *"bandages"* alongside medical jargon like *"pre-medicate"* and "*dressing change*"; all of which serve a pathologising role that firmly construct Jeff's disability as a medical impairment. However, what is noteworthy about this scene is the power dynamics at play, as the medical staff talk to each other and over Jeff. He is not initially addressed by the doctors, who talk amongst themselves. This is indicated by these professionals addressing him in third person pronouns such as *"he"*. Therefore, in this scene Jeff's impairment works to objectify him as a medical case or specimen, allowing his impairment to function as a reifying and thus dehumanising force (Boyd, 2016; Shakespeare, 1994). Relations of power between medical professionals and *"patient"* also played out in *Me Before You*. The following scene occurs on Louisa's first day as Will's carer when she is being shown around the annex by his physiotherapist:

Physiotherapist: *There's a time table here to see what he has, when.*
Louisa: *I have to handle drugs?*
Physiotherapist: *Blood pressure meds to raise it in the morning when he gets up.*
Tablets for nerve pain. Anti-spasm tablets four times a day, to control muscle spasms.

The above dialogue is accompanied by the imagery of cupboards filled with drugs and occurs in the setting of Wills' annex, which has been adapted to look like a hospital ward. Notably, this extract adds support to the earlier argument made that disability is constructed as a life of unrelenting pain, misery and ailments in *Me Before You*. However, the above scene goes beyond this representation and beckons one to unpack the politics of care. It does so by constructing Will as a passive recipient of medical care and strips him of his agency and bodily autonomy (Davis, 2013). This is because his carers schedule his daily tasks through timetables and drug regiments, deciding *"what he has, when"*. Thus his abled medical professionals are granted authority over him, as signified in the following claim by Will's physiotherapist: *"Now, you can give him pain killers, if he asks, just try to resist giving him sleeping pills, because they tend make him a little…well, irritable. Like 'more irritable'"*.

The use of the phrases *"can give him"* and *"resist giving him"* suggest that abled professionals are in control over Will's medical decisions and daily functioning. It also implies that they play a gate keeping role in this regard. However, it is orchestrated to appear

as if it is in Will's 'best interest', as they are merely ensuring that he does not become *"more irritable"* by withholding the sleeping pills from him. As such, this scene suggests that his carers are only acting in his 'best interests' which works to disguise that they are nonetheless acting on his behalf. Therefore, constructing disability as an impairment positions disabled characters in the recipient role of *"patient"*. This interpretation is supported by Linton (2010), who argues that 'patientifying' disability works to convey passivity, victimisation and possession by the medical establishment. This process of 'patientifying' disability is expressed in the findings as both *Me Before You* and *You're not You* have dialogue in which abled carers refer to disabled characters as *"patients"*: *"Most of my other patients live nearby"* (*Me Before You*) and *"Kate, the patient friend I take care of"* (*You're not You*).

This deliberate word choice of patient over client not only shows affinity to medical model conceptualisations of disability but entrenches power dynamics through establishing active and passive roles (Linton, 2010). The active role of the abled carer is noticeable in Bec's active pronoun and verb usage in the following sentence: *"I take care of"*. Moreover, the way in which Bec has constructed the dynamics of her relationship with Kate speaks to the inequality within interactions between abled carers and disabled *"patients"*. This is because Bec does not merely describe Kate as a friend but rather creates a combined term, namely *"patient friend"* that foregrounds Kate's role as her patient first and friend second given the syntax. Therefore, this construction works to temper the degree of their friendship and re-situate it in hierarchical relations of power. However, there are also points in the films where the 'abled knows best' narrative is challenged and resisted by the disabled characters through assertions of self determination and independent living (Davis, 2013). This finds expression in *You're not You* where Kate resists the imposition of the patient identity by firing her former carer. She also declares her agency to her abled husband by hiring a new carer whom he does not approve of:

Kate: *She made me feel like… a patient. I'm not a patient.*
Evan: *Alright, but this woman is a nightmare. She's not a nurse. How can I trust you'll be okay with her?*
Kate: *Maybe she'll actually listen to me. Look, will you please let me take care of this? I promise you I'll make it work. Okay?*

Arguably, Kate's intentions for hiring non-medical staff can be seen as an attempt to equalise the power dynamics in the politics of care. This is evidenced by her reasoning that perhaps her new carer will *"actually listen to* [her]*"*. The use of the word *"actually"* connotes that she had not been afforded this respect by her past carers or nurse. They made her *"feel like a patient"*, which implies she felt invalidated and subordinated (Linton, 2010). According to McDougall (2006), repositioning disability as an impairment works to silence and discredit disabled voices by pronouncing them as less qualified and thus less authoritative than that of the medical establishment. However, this scene occurs at the start of the film and as such the audience sees that Kate is still hesitant in asserting herself. This is evidenced by her asking for permission to *"take care of this"* on her own as signified by the words *"let"* and *"please"*. She also feels she needs to provide justifications and reassurances for her ability to do so: *"I promise you I'll make it work. Okay?"* However, as the film progresses Kate begins to find her independence and declares her bodily autonomy more assertively. This is noteworthy in a scene where Kate is experiencing a coughing fit and Bec decides to call for emergency services on her own accord. Kate reprimands Bec for this action and reasserts that she has executive control over her own medical care:

Kate: *Don't ever do that again, without asking me.*
Bec: - *Hey, I thought that you…*
Kate: - *I don't care. It's my decision to make, not yours. You understand? Say it.*
Bec: I understand.

Therefore a noticeable shift occurs in this exchange as Kate constructs her sentence as a command as opposed to asking for permission: *"Don't ever do that again, without asking me"*. Moreover, she no longer feels the need to justify her choice as she cuts Bec short by interjecting with the claim: *"I don't care"*. Additionally, there is the repetitive use of personal pronouns such as *"I"* and *"my"*, suggesting Kate is exerting authority over her medical decisions. This juxtaposition between pronouns is clearly stated in the following sentence: *"It's **my** decision to make, not **yours**"* (author's emphasis). Similarly, *Me Before You* challenges the discourse that 'abled know best'(Shakespeare, 1996), an assumption Will explicitly questions in a scene where Louisa is trying to piece together the broken photo frames that held the pictures of Will's former life:

Louisa: *I just thought if I could see if I could fix some of these. Or um, y'know, If you wanted to get new ones, I could go into town at lunch time. Or we could both go?*
Will: *You know what, Louisa, me smashing those was not an accident.*
Louisa: *Sorry, aright, I didn't think-*
Will: -***You thought you knew best*** (author's emphasis).

Furthermore, Will challenges homogenising discourses and the singular conception of disability that works to conflate physical disability with mental incapacity (McDougall, 2006). Arguably, this conflation aids in the narrative that abled '*know best'* by undermining and invalidating physically disabled persons' capacity for decision making, agency and autonomy (Zola, 1993). *Me Before You* challenges these discourses when Will is introduced to his new carer Louisa for the first time and he attempts to subvert the power dynamics between them by playing into her preconceived assumptions about disabled people as mentally 'incapacitated'. During the interaction Louisa smiles awkwardly and expectantly at Will, who proceeds to pull a funny face and make crude noises, feigning a mental disability at Louisa's expense. Moreover, Will explicitly addresses this assumption and the power dynamics that it permits, such as speaking about disabled people as if they are not present, when he confronts his mother for confusing his quadriplegia with mental paralysis: *"You don't have to talk across me, mother. My brain isn't paralysed yet"*. Therefore, Will challenges the relationship dynamics that relegate him as a bystander in his own narrative (McDougall, 2006).

Thus, it is argued that contemporary cinematic portrayals of the disabled experience can be contradictory as both *Me Before You* and *You're not You* simultaneously perpetuate and challenge the hegemonic narrative that 'abled know best' or abled professionals have medical knowledge that allows them to exert authority over disabled lives (McDougall, 2006; Shakespeare, 1996). Therefore, some transformation may have occurred regarding the discrimination disabled persons face in film based on the movies sampled in this study. This is because more nuanced and agentic characterisations of the disabled are included through their challenging of the stereotypical 'abled know best' narrative. However, discrimination may still operate more insidiously in contemporary films through the implicit messages promoted by the continued positioning of these representations of care in relationships of power, domination and surveillance.

3. Disability: Synonymous with Loss, Limitations, Deficiency and Normalisation?

"Being seen as an object of medical treatment evokes the image of many ascribed traits such as weakness, helplessness, dependency, regression, abnormality and depreciation." (Zola, 1993, p.168)

As the above quotation suggests, reconfiguring disability into impairment in film perpetuates other disabling discourses associated with the medical model. This occurs because of a process Parker (1992) terms 'intertextuality', which suggests that an ongoing dialogue occurs between available discourses. Therefore, discourses can speak back to or call upon similar discourses in their presentation (Parker, 1992). Notably this finds expression in the films analysed because the medicalisation of disability draws on hegemonic discourses of loss, limitations, deficiencies and normalisation.

Loss and Limitations

According to Watermeyer (2008), discourses of loss have had a ubiquitous and resilient presence in the world of disability, as he proclaims that disabled people have been singled out as the custodians of loss in society. Loss discourses can be seen in the way both disabled characters and audience members are introduced to disability in film, as demonstrated through the following dialogue in *Stronger*:

Mr Bauman: *You know our son lost his legs, right?*
Jeff's Boss: - *I know.*
Mr Bauman: *And you brought breakfast?*

Media Report: *Jeff Bauman was standing next to one of the bombs when it detonated, obliterating his legs.*

Holy shit. Are you awake, bro? You hear me?
Okay. Okay, okay.
Uh, so I gotta tell ya ,there was an explosion.
And your fuckin' legs … They're gone, bro. (Jeff's brother).

Literature has identified that loss discourses and coming to accept loss through adjustment narratives are recurrent plot devices in filmic representations of acquired

disability (Balck & Pretes, 2007; Longmore, 1987). The above extracts speak to the initial shock and loss that the acquisition of disability can bring. However, it is argued that loss discourses are heightened and sensationalised for dramatic appeal in the films analysed. This finds expression in the first quotation, as Jeff's amputation is prefaced in loss: "*our son lost his legs*". However this loss is presented as inconsolable tragedy through the rhetoric of sarcasm: *"and you brought breakfast?"* Moreover, the manner in which the second quotation is set up is largely sensationalised, as evidenced by the use of the word *"obliterated"*. Similarly, this occurs in the third quotation as the repetition of word "*okay*" implies that Jeff's brother is bracing himself to deliver difficult news. The ellipsis creates a pause that works to heighten this suspense while the use of profanity hyperbolises the extent of the loss *"And your fuckin' legs … They're gone, bro"*. Lastly in an effort to further dramatise this loss, once these lines are said the camera zooms in on an extreme close up shot of Jeff's face, as he winces in pain at this realisation. Similarly, discourses of loss manifest in *Me Before You* and are sensationalised through highlighting the severity of Will's impairment. Notably this occurs from the outset when the audience is introduced to disabled Will through conversation between two abled individuals:

Mrs Traynor: *Do you have any experience of care giving?*
Louisa: *Um, I've never done it, but I'm sure I could learn.*
Mrs Traynor: *And do you have experience with quadriplegia?*
Louisa: *eh, no.*
Mrs Traynor: *We are talking about* ***complete loss*** *of the legs and* ***very limited*** *use of the arms and hands.* ***Would that bother you?*** (Author's emphasis)

By constructing the disabled experience in terms of losses and limitations, the above quotation reveals how medical discourses position disability on a spectrum of wholeness that promotes culturally revered "in-group bodily and performance ideals" (Watermeyer, 2008, p. 92). This works to define disability in opposition as incomplete or lacking. Moreover, the use of the adjectives *"very"* and *"complete"* in describing the degree and intensity of these losses and limitations, functions to situate Will's quadriplegia lower down on this spectrum or what Deal (2003) terms 'the hierarchy of impairment'. The higher one places on this hierarchy or the more whole a person is perceived to be, the greater privileges, inclusion and accessibility one is offered in society (Deal, 2003). Therefore, biological essentialism has been used as a powerful ideological weapon to legitimate societal, economic and political

structures and divisions in society (Campbell, 2009). Arguably then the power of wholeness discourse is that it works to promote a hegemony of normalcy that sub-humanises those with bodies who do not meet its' ideals (Loeser et al., 2018). This also functions to legitimise a life of second class citizenry for those with more severe impairments. The perpetuation of these discourses through film is particularly concerning as a life with quadriplegia is already widely devalued in public perceptions. This is evidenced in Room's and colleagues' (Room, Rehm, Trotter, Paglis & Ustun, 2001) study which found quadriplegia to be perceived and ranked the most disabling condition across 14 countries.

Furthermore, in the extract Will's disability is sensationalised by its severity and is framed in a way that it should somehow register as problematic for Louisa, as evidenced by the question: *"would that bother you?"*.This implies that Will's disability is not something that is common but rather tragic and potentially traumatising to encounter. Similarly, our introduction to Kate and her experience of disability is through ableist assumptions and medical conceptualisations implicit in her husband's descriptions of her condition. The extract below provides further evidence of the way films dramatise disability by introducing it as an uncommon, severe or *"major"* condition that is overwhelming to manage as suggested by: *"have you ever seen, let alone cared for".* Moreover, deliberate word choices heighten this dramatisation. For example, the phrase *"suffering from"* suggests that disability is a negative experience that must be endured. Moreover, this is compounded by using the terms *"major", "degenerative"* and *"illness"* together, which works to construct disability as all-consuming: *"Tell me, Bec, have you ever seen, let alone cared for, someone suffering from a major degenerative illness?"*

Lastly, discourses of loss extend beyond physical losses to include a metaphysical loss of self and a change in social identity (Dziura, 2015). This is evident in *You're Not You* as the title foreshadows the discourses of loss of self which the narrative will centre on. Moreover, the title constructs the lead character in negative terms through the use of the word *"Not"* which implies that her character has taken on an alternative identity to her 'original' self. This is reiterated in the cinematic discourse of the film during the audiences' introduction to Kate's and her new disabled lifestyle. During this scene Kate is looking at herself in the mirror, however, she is depicted as perplexed by her reflection which is unrecognisable to herself. These cinematic constructions of disabled selves speak to

McRuer's (2006) argument that dominant identities are presented as the normal order. Thus alternative identities are othered through a naturalisation process that legitimates dominant identities, in this case abled identities, as normal. This naturalisation of abled selves is reiterated in the dialogue of *You're Not You*: *"I miss … me."* and *Me Before You: "You don't get it, Clark. I want to be in Paris,* ***as me.*** *The old me."*

Here both lead characters confess to missing their former abled selves. However, they naturalise their former selves by using the pronoun *"me"*, which suggests their true or original self. Arguably, this kind of construction typical in acquired disability narratives reinforces the view of the disabled as otherly and works to devalue disabled life by associating the loss of ability with a loss of something quintessentially human – the self. The loss of self narrative portrayed in these films aligns with Goffman's (1963) theorisations on stigma and the spoiling process or 'spread effect' that ensues when a stigmatised trait, such as disability, pervasively taints an individual's entire social identity.

Deficiency and Normalisation

A medical conceptualisation of disability suggests that the disabled body is deficient or 'broken' and thus requires curative intervention and restoration through rehabilitation (Anspach, 1979; Linton, 2010). The findings of this study suggest that both *Me Before You* and *Stronger* present narratives infused with discourses of deficiency and normalisation. This can be seen in the way Will's physiotherapist describes his quadriplegia as *"a body which no longer works"* and as a defect that is in need of *"fixing"*. Moreover, the constant presence and close proximity of Will's physiotherapist throughout the film (as he accompanies him on all his outings and on holiday) works to align disability with the institution of rehabilitation.

As part of the medical establishment, rehabilitation has vested interests in promoting an ideology of normalisation by promulgating the rhetoric of wholeness, adjustment and assimilation (Anspach, 1979). Arguably the representation of rehabilitation in film similarly propagates these ideologies. For example, *Stronger* speaks back to wholeness discourses in a lengthily scene where Jeff is taken to get his prostheses fitted. During this scene a number of artificial legs hang in the background, working to foreground the absence of Jeff's limbs. This is aided cinematically as the camera zooms in on his 'stumps', while abled professionals pour a mould over them that will be used to help restore his 'incomplete' body. Additionally, the ideologies of adjustment and assimilation play out in *Stronger* as the film includes various

scenes of Jeff's rehabilitation is coupled with a number of other disabled individuals engaging in physiotherapy tasks in the background. Including this imagery creates an atmosphere of normalisation and speaks back to McRuer's (2006) concept of 'compulsory able-bodiedness'. According to McRuer (2006) dominant identities impose their abled-bodied norms onto marginalised, disabled identities thereby creating a 'passing' pressure in society. As such, there exists a great social pressure for the disabled to behave in accordance with the dominant abled cultural norms (Vertoont, 2018). This manifests in the rehabilitation scenes in *Stronger* and in a scene in *Me Before You* which emphasise the pressure for restoration through the repetition of the terms *"improve"* and *"improvement"*:

Friend: *So how's the Physio and stuff, all coming on, is there any* ***improvement****?*
Will: *No.*
Friend: *Because you look good. We really do hope things* ***improve*** *for you.* (*Me Before You*) (Author's emphasis)

Patty: *Jeffie. You're up!*
Physiotherapist: *Chest up, okay? Chest up.*
Patty: *My God!*
Physiotherapist*: Chest up. Chest up. Good, good. Okay? Good.*
Patty: *That's amazing. Wow.*
Physiotherapist*: You okay?*
Patty: *God, you are so tall.*
Jeff: *It's a little sore there. Nah, it's like needles in my legs.*
Patty: - *Yeah, but you look awesome.*
Erin: *Good job, Jeff.*
Patty: *Oh, you're amazing, Jeffie. Looks amazing.*

The above scenes highlight how the disabled are pressurised or praised by medical professionals and family members to emulate abled ways of being. This is supported by: "*God, you're so tall*", "*you look amazing*" and *"we really do hope things improve for you"*. As such, this pressure creates a desire to normalise as seen in the message Jeff sends in his final monologue at the end of the film; during which he states that he wants to see the world from an abled vantage point as implied by the terms "*walk again*" and "*stand up*".

Now I just wanna … I just wanna walk.
Y'know, I just wanna stand up.
I wanna see the world from higher up, y'know?
I just … I just wanna be normal.

Additionally, this statement is notably hierarchicalised as evidenced by the phrase "*I wanna see the world from* ***higher up***" and "*I just wanna****be normal***" (author's emphasis), which naturalises ability as the dominant way of being. Arguably, this desire to normalise arises out of hegemonic discourses and oppressive power relations which devalue disability and idealise ability (Vaahtera, 2012).

4. Narratives of Maladjustment

Psychologising Disability

One of the most prevalent and stereotypical constructions of disability, particularly acquired disability in film, has been the depiction of disabled characters as maladjusted or 'their own worst enemy' (Barnes, 1992; Black & Pretes, 2007; Longmore, 1987; Nelson, 1994). Therefore, the disabled have been represented as embittered and self-pitying, which causes them to either isolate themselves or act with hostility towards abled others (Barnes, 1992). Arguably this stereotype has endured because the results of this study indicate that two of the films portrayed narratives of psychological maladjustment. For example, the following scene in *Me Before You* displays Will's maladjustment through his animosity and antagonistic responses to Louisa's kind gestures:

Louisa: *So I thought we could go out this afternoon.*
Will: *Where do you have in mind?*
Louisa: *Well, I was told you have a car that was adapted, for wheelchairs.*
Will: *And you thought a drive would be good for me? A breath of fresh air?*
Louisa: *What do you usually do?*
Will: *I don't do anything, Miss Clark. I sit. And just about exist.*
Louisa: *Okay, well I could get you your computer?*
Will: *Did you find a good quad support group I could join?'Quads-R-Us? The 'Tin Wheels' club?*
Louisa: *Or perhaps we could get to know each other a bit. You know, because then you could tell me, what you DO like to do.*

Will: *Maybe. Here's what I know about you, Miss Clark. My mother says that you're chatty. Could we strike a deal? Whereby you are very 'unchatty' around me?*
Louisa: *Okay.*

The above scene works to construct and reinforce representations of persons with acquired disability as abrasive, aloof and socially awkward (Barnes, 1992; Black &Pretes, 2007). However, disseminating portrayals of the disabled as psychologically maladjusted is problematic, given the socially marginalised position this minority group currently occupies in society and the limited interaction between abled and disabled groups (Black &Pretes, 2007; Harnett, 2000; Stadler, 2006).This is because these portrayals come to associate disability with fear and contempt, due to the hostile attitudes and malicious behaviours the disabled are portrayed to have in film (Longmore, 1987). Therefore, these distorted representations can further contribute to the alienation the disabled experience socially as well as fortify the stigmatisation processes that uphold society divisions between abled and disabled groups. Moreover, the message conveyed in the above scene is that Will is his 'own worst enemy', as he is dismissive of Louisa's attempts to befriend him or try and include him in his community. As such, discourses of maladjustment imply that it is the disabled themselves who are responsible for the ostracism and prejudice they experience in society. This is because their isolation is frequently represented as a choice, arising from their emotional distress, lack of self-acceptance and their personal failure to adequately adjust to their impairments (Longmore, 1987).

Additionally in *Stronger*, Jeff's journey towards psychological adjustment is used as both a plot device and character arch, as the narrative details his emotional difficulties with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and subsequently his problems with anger, alcoholism and self-destruction. However, it can be suggested that by psychologising Jeff's emotional struggles and labelling them under the banner of psychopathology, the film similarly promotes individualising constructions of disability (Black & Pretes, 2007). Therefore, the findings of this research concur with disability scholars who argue that narratives of psychological maladjustment delegitimise the anger and resentment disabled groups experience due to their systematic exclusion, by repositioning it as self-pitying or self-destructive behaviour (Barnes, 1992; Longmore, 1987).

Abled Saviours and Saints

Two films analysed relied on a narrative of psychological maladjustment as an impetus to another common stereotype identified in disability films: that of the abled-bodied saviour. According to Black and Pretes (2007) the disabled are frequently represented as needing some form of psychological insight, enlightenment or new perspective from 'wiser' and benevolent abled bodied saviours to help propel them along their narratives of adjustment. Specifically, this was a discursive strategy that played out in the plot of *Me Before You*, as Louisa is hired solely with the intention of helping Will rediscover happiness and find meaning in his new disabled life. This is supported by the following dialogue in which Louisa asks for clarity regarding her job description: *"What am I here for? To cheer him up, I guess"*. Moreover, this is reiterated in the cinematic discourse through Louisa's characterisation, whereby she is described as *"warm, chatty with a life-enhancing presence"*. It also manifests in her wardrobe which works to depict her as the embodiment of cheerfulness through colourful and eccentric attire. As such, Louisa comes to take on the role of abled bodied saviour as she helps Will with his attitude adjustment and with boosting his morale. This results in a noticeable change in his demeanour and is supported by the following claim directed at Louisa by Will's physiotherapist: *"He's in a good mood. It's a long time since he's laughed at anything"*.

However, it is argued that the stereotype of the abled saviour feeds into charitable discourses and reinforces the message that disabled individuals are dependent upon the benevolence and good will of the abled for personal insight and happiness. Further, the focus of the narrative becomes centred on the kindness and charity shown by the abled which obscures and sidelines the widespread prejudice the disabled still experience in society as a consequence of ableism. Moreover according to Barnes (1992), charitable constructions in the media serve a confirmatory role because they affirm the superiority of the abled public by allowing them to bountiful. This stereotypical representation of the abled bodied saviour manifests in the following scene in *You're Not You*, in which Kate's friends praise her husband, Evan, and adulate the kindness and care he provides her with:

Friend: *Isn't he incredible? I mean, ladies, if I have so much as the flu, Bill is ready to put me out with the trash.*
Kate: *I don't know what I'd do without that man.*
Friend: *I mean, a saint that one.*

In this exchange, Evan is positioned as Kate's saviour as she does not know *"what she would do without that man"*. Interestingly, the use of the word *"without"* dually highlights Evan's benevolence while simultaneously constructing Kate's dependency on it. Additionally, Evan's efforts of common courtesy and care are repositioned as *"incredible"* actions for which he surpasses the abled saviour stereotype and is anointed saint-like status. Therefore following Black and Pretes (2007) and Hartnett (2000), it is argued that the persistence of the abled saviour stereotype in disability films provides further evidence that these films are still largely produced for abled audiences. This is because narratives which exalt chartable actions encourage audience members to identify with the abled lead characters and allow them to perceive of the abled group as benefactors and not as discriminators.

Conversely, there is also evidence that *You're Not You* inverted the narrative of the abled bodied saviour in that caring for Kate helped Bec along her path of self-discovery, propelling her to leave an affair she was having with her married professor and seek out a healthier relationship. It also equipped her with a sense of mastery by providing her with new life skills: "*Thanks for the Manolos … and for teaching me how to cook*". However beyond these tangible skills, their relationship helped Bec rediscover her sense of self worth and gave new meaning to her life. Bec's final words to Kate emphasise this sense of accomplishment and thereby construct Kate as her 'disabled saviour':

I'm gonna pay you a compliment...and you just gotta lay there and take it.
Thanks for the Manolos …and for teaching me how to cook.
But the biggest thing… that I have to say thank you for… is that you didn't let me fuck this up, because no-one in my life has ever done that for me.

Similarly, there is also evidence that *Me Before You* inverts the trope of the abled bodied saviour. Will reveals to Louisa the way in which her life is stagnated, as she is remaining in a town that is described as *"the kind of place people come to when they got tired of actually living"*, in part time jobs and in a loveless relationship. However, at the end of the film Louisa is depicted as living a more 'bold' and fulfilling life as she is shown travelling. Therefore, as the title *Me Before You* implies, Will changes Louisa's outlook on life as she admits *"I have become a whole new person these last six months, because of you"*.
Moreover, *Stronger* inverts the stereotype of the abled bodied saviour by challenging how

this trope is frequently used as a catalyst for psychological adjustment for disabled characters who acquire disability in film. Jeff only begins to adjust by shedding his victim identity and taking initiative for his own self-care when he feels a sense of reciprocity from Carlos, the man who helped rescue him in the bombing:

Carlos: *Helping you made me feel … like I had helped my son. And for that, I am grateful.*
Jeff: *You're grateful?*
Carlos: *Yeah. You help me as much as I help you. And I came here to say, "Thank you."*

An analysis of the chosen films reveals that narratives of maladjustment are still largely prevalent in contemporary constructions of the disabled experience, as this trope was centred in both *Me Before You* and *Stronger*. However, its' frequent pairing with the stereotype of the abled bodied saviour is problematised by paradoxical results found in this study. Arguably, this paradox manifests in contradictory findings of competing discourses presented in the films, creating narratives which simultaneously perpetuate, invert and challenge the abled bodied saviour stereotype. Both *Me Before You* and *You're Not You* perpetuate charitable discourses through their representations of reliance on or exaltation of abled carers as saviours and saints. However, there is also evidence that all three films challenge this stereotype by inverting it and including discourses of reciprocity. Arguably, these discourses of reciprocity function to destabilise the traditional power dynamics of top-down relationships between abled and disabled groups (Shakespeare, 1996) through bidirectional and mutually beneficial narratives of character growth. Therefore, it is argued that including this level of complexity and reciprocity in the representations of disability in film marks the promise of progression from unidirectional and caricatured depictions of disabled lives previously represented.

5. Binary Representations

The Victor/Victim Narrative: Overcoming or Succumbing to Disability

Arguably Hollywood depictions of disability in film continue to construct the disabled experience through the binary and stereotypical lens of the victor/victim narrative which centres on tropes of either overcoming disability through remarkable feats (*Stronger*) or succumbing to it and being positioned in the role of the pitiful victim (*Me Before you*, *You're Not You*) (McDougall, 2006). A number of authors argue (Harnett, 2000;McDougall, 2006; Shakespeare, 1994; Vertoont, 2018) that this dichotomous representation has dominated

cinematic portrayals of disability. The findings from this study concur, as traces of this narrative could be found in all three contemporary films sampled. It is argued that these stereotypical representations of disability have prevailed because of the subliminal messages they transmit, the psychic defenses they help sooth in abled bodied society and the political functions they serve herein. This will be unpacked in the two sections to follow.

The Inspirational Narrative: Overcoming Disability

Both *You're Not You* and *Stronger* perpetuate the discourse that disability is a 'struggle' which can be either managed (*You're Not You*) or overcome (*Stronger*) with a positive attitude, will power and perseverance:

Kate: *I'm now in the chair, and it's harder to breathe.*
Doctor: *Well, that's to be expected. This process only moves in one direction, but attitude goes a long way.* (*You're Not You*)
Jeff: *You know, I'm gonna walk with you again someday.*
Erin: *Read them (fortune cookies)*
Both: - *"Determination is … the wake-up call … to the human will." (Stronger*)

Media Report: *Jeff's continued strength and perseverance in the face of adversity represents all that is … Boston Strong! Go, Jeffrey!* (*Stronger*)

Physio: *You have to keep your appointments, and you have to come in ready to work.*
I mean, look at everybody around here, Jeff.
They're recovering because they put the time and the energy into it.
And they make it a priority. And you have to do that, too. (*Stronger*)

The above extracts discursively function to situate the 'problem' of disability in the individual through listing personal qualities abled society considers necessary to overcome disability such as *"attitude"*, *"time and energy"*, *"determination"*, *"human will"* and *"continued strength and perseverance in the face of adversity"*. The dialogue suggests that possessing these qualities is supposed to help Jeff recover and *"walk again"* or assist Kate with the *"one* [way] *direction"* of ALS. However, these personal qualities individualise the struggle of disability and shift the emphasis away from the social problems the disabled collective face as a minority group. It also sets up what Longmore (1987) describes as a

‘blame the victim’ mentality, as it suggests that the difficulties that disabled individuals face are a consequence of their personal moral failings and not of systematic oppression. Thus the inspirational narrative serves a political agenda, as it helps dissimulate the origins of ableist oppression under the guise of a ‘feel good’ or uplifting narrative.

This dissimulation can be seen in *Stronger,* as the film’s portrayal as a biography or ‘true’ story colludes in concealing the political undertones of the inspirational narrative by presenting Jeff’s experiences as a matter of fact. Therefore, the power of the biographical narrative is in its’ verisimilitude, in so far as it feigns authenticity and grants authority to the presentation of disability as a personal struggle. Further *Stronger*, as alluded to in its very title, exemplifies the *supercrip* or inspirational narrative as the plot centres on Jeff’s strength and tenacity in overcoming his disability to walk again. Thus, in his attempt to achieve by ableist standards of normalcy and bodily functioning, Jeff is continuously constructed as a *“hero”* and praised for supporting the dominant social order by the press and by abled-bodied society. This interpretation is in line with previous literature on the functioning of *supercrip* discourses, as Ljuslinder (2014, p. 268) proclaims that “the endeavour to live in accordance with what is considered culturally normal is rewarded and assigned heroic status”. This interpretation is also supported by the following quotations from *Stronger*:

Fuckin' miracle.
My boy. Fuckin' hero.

He's a real hero, my son.
He's helpin' this city heal.
Be Boston Strong.

You're a national fuckin' hero, kiddo.
You wave, Jeff.
They're all out for ya.
You're a real hero

After the bomb blastat the Boston Marathon took most of his legs, 28-year-old Chelmsford resident, Jeff Bauman, is lucky to be alive, but his real strugglehas just begun. Bauman told reportersthat he will one day walk again. After multiple surgeries and endless painful

rehabilitation, many people would give up. But with the support of his family, friends and supporters all over the world, Jeff Bauman has found something amazing here at Spaulding Hospital. That something is called hope.

In the final quotation Jeff's *"real struggle"* is presented as one of successfully normalising and assimilating through *"multiple surgeries"* and *"endless, painful rehabilitation*". This struggle garners the love and "*support*" of abled society as it maintains their status quo. Consequently, the above dialogue can be read as supporting the argument that films about disability are produced and marketed for abled audiences because they construct disability narratives around individual struggles and inspirational plots as opposed to the politicised struggles of disability groups against ableist oppression. Thus, perpetuating the stereotypical victor narrative allows abled audiences to enjoy feel good films and vindicates as opposed to challenges their privileged positioning in society through valorising ableist standards.

Moreover beyond its political significance, the victor narrative also helps sooth psychological fears and anxieties that disability invokes in abled audiences. This is because disability represents a threat not just to ableist order but to abled bodied individuals' self-conceptions (Shakespeare, 1994). As previously mentioned, disability scholars have suggested that the discrimination the disabled face is a consequence of them acting as ciphers, or what Shakespeare (1994, p. 283) terms "dustbins of disavowal". Through this process, abled society's overwhelming psychic conflicts concerning life's unpredictability and human fragility or mortality can be projected onto the disabled and subsequently disowned. Morris (1991) uses this psychological explanation to account for the disabled community's continued marginalisation in society, as disability and the anxieties it solicits are kept at a distance. In a similar vein, it is argued that inspirational narrative presented in disability films implies that disability can be overcome and offers abled audiences some respite from the anxiety over their own vulnerabilities because despite the inevitable *"pain"* one can still *"just live"*. Moreover, *Stronger* transmits the message that Jeff's triumph over tragedy paves the way for others to overcome their own personal struggles as it *"gives* [them] *a little hope"* to "*feel a little better*" and not "*let stuff hold them down*":

Jeff: *It's gonna be all right.*
Stranger: *Yeah?*

Jeff: *I'm gonna be okay, right? So you're gonna be okay*.

And now it's just about healing, getting better and showin' the world I'm fine and that, y'know?
I'm not gonna let this hold me down, y'know?
'Cause then maybe if they see that, then maybe they won't let stuff hold them down, either.
And, y'know, there's always gonna be pain, y'know?
But, I dunno, I just wanna, like...live (Jeff).

But seein' you out there today, throwin' that fuckin' pitch, you showed the world that they can't fuckin' break us no matter what the hell they do.
Y'know, it... it gave me a little hope, made me feel a little better, and I just wanna say fuckin' thank you for that, man, that's all (*crowd cheers)* (Stranger).

Therefore, the inspirational narrative also operates symbolically to represent a generalised struggle to overcome life's obstacles (Harnett, 2000). This is reiterated in cinematic discourse of *Stronger* and arguably is presented as the take home message of the film. This is because the end of the film switches to a documentary style and includes real life footage of Jeff Bauman standing tall and walking again on his prostheses. The setting is one of triumph and hope and he is has *"shown up"* for his wife, Erin, and awaits her at the finish line of Boston Marathon; a race she never got to complete due to the bombing. Including this imagery at the end of the film works to legitimate the inspirational fictional narrative presented as a 'true account' of the disabled experience.

In conclusion, the victor narrative is deceptive in that it is falsely considered a more positive portrayal of disability in the media (McDougall, 2006). However, as demonstrated in the above analysis, the affective and psychological impact of the *supercrip* stereotype is nonetheless reductive. This claim is supported by the literature, as Barnes (1992) asserts that inspirational narratives are exploited for their sentimentality which discourages genuine reactions from audiences, such as an understanding and compassion for the difficulties the disabled public face. Moreover, this caricatured portrayal omits the full personhood of disabled individuals (McDougall, 2006; Watermeyer, 2006). Further, the victor narrative is politically reductive and dissimulative in so far as it individualises disability while

simultaneously valourising ableist ideologies as superior under the smokescreen of a 'feel good film'.

Succumbing to Disability: Rather Dead than Disabled

> The logic of euthanasia is that we celebrate curing, repairing and improving disabled bodies. Yet if medicine and science cannot accomplish this, we support eradicating disabled bodies through practices directed at individuals such as assisted suicide and mercy killing (Garland-Thomson, 2004, p. 779).

As the opening quotation suggests, if disability cannot be overcome or cured then in order to efface the problems and anxieties disability poses to abled society, the disabled must succumb to their impairments. Presenting this victim narrative in film allows abled audiences to pity the disabled character and reaffirms their positioning as fortunate and superior (Hayes & Black, 2003). It is argued that whether a character's journey will follow the overcoming (victor) or succumbing (victim) narrative is largely dependent upon where their disability is ranked in the hierarchy of impairment. This is because "in Hollywood some impairments are more acceptable than others" (Barnes, 1992, p. 15). In the films analysed, Jeff's double above the knee amputation offers the possibility for redemption through rehabilitation and the prospect of walking again on prostheses. As such, *Stronger* is concerned with overcoming disability. This is echoed by Hayes and Black (2003) who contend that the hope for rehabilitation is paramount if the audience is to identify with the disabled character. However, these authors' also argue that this is the reason more severe disabilities are absent from the silver screen (Hayes & Black, 2003). Conversely, the results of this study indicate that severe impairments are still portrayed in film, yet, without this hope for rehabilitation the characters must be killed off. This message is expressed in *Me Before You* by Will who suggests that without the possibility of "*getting better*", euthanasia is his only available option: "*It's not going to get better than this. The doctors know it and I know it. When we get back, I am going to go to Switzerland*[10]*"*.

Will's quadriplegia and Kate's ALS position them lower down on the hierarchy of impairment. Therefore, throughout their narratives this lower positioning and 'poorer quality

[10]This location is allegorical as it serves to connote a place in which the euthanasia is decriminalised (SBS World News, 2018).

of life' it connotes, serves as justification for why the characters must ultimately succumb to their impairments (Deal, 2003). Further, the 'bucket list' plot of *Me Before You* and the difficulties Will faces in participating in events such as dinning at the horse racing or his wheelchair getting stuck in the mud, works to set up his decision of euthanasia as logical and suggests that a life with limited mobility is not worth living as it is one of a second-class citizenship. Notably, this representation is deliberately depoliticised as it highlights the severity of Will's impairment as opposed to the severity of the discrimination and inaccessibility disabled people face in a society built around ability (Linton, 2010; Longmore, 1987; Shakespeare, 1994). Moreover, an attempted suicide scene from *You're not You* and the following dialogue from *Me Before You* perpetuate the discourse that a disabled life is a lesser form of existence:

Bec: *Last night …*
Kate:- *I don't wanna talk about it.*
Bec: *Last night, what were you doing at the top of the stairs?*
Kate: *I just thought it'd be easier …* (*You're not You*)

I need it to end here. No more pain and exhaustion and waking up every morning already wishing it was over. (Will, *Me Before You*)

His life is hard. He hides his pain, when he's with you.
But there have been times when I've stayed over and I hear him screaming.
In his dreams he's still running or skiing, still doing things and..
Then he wakes up … .
And there is nothing I can say to him (Physiotherapist, *Me Before You*)

You never saw me, before
I loved my life. I really loved it.
I can't be the kind of man, who just accepts this. (Will, *Me Before You*)

Collectively, these extracts promote the ideology that a life with disability is an inconsolable reality: *"there is nothing I can say to him"* and is one of *"pain, exhaustion"* and misery (Black & Pretes, 2007; Schwartz & Lutfiyya, 2009). Additionally, Will's repetition and emphasis on the past tense principle *"loved"* works to suggest that disabled life cannot

be ‘accepted’ or enjoyed. Thus death is presented as preferable or as Kate and Will suggest its’ the *“easier”* option to enduring a life of misery and *“waking up wishing it was already over”*. Therefore, the above extracts discursively function to devalue disabled life and legitimate Will’s decision for euthanasia or Kate’s refusal of treatment, by situating their disabled experiences in despair, desperation and defeat. The ideology that death is preferable to a life with disability has a long standing history in film. For example, Black and Pretes’ (2007) study found that 8 out of 18 films perpetuated the discourse that it is better to be dead than disabled. Moreover, in her study of media portrayals of disability two decades ago, Janz (1998, p.70) came to a similar conclusion about devaluation discourses:

> It becomes painfully evident that the mass media is at once mirroring and perpetuating the common public perception of people with severe disabilities as somehow less than human, condemned to a burdensome and painful existence. The lives of people with severe disabilities are thus being subtly and systematically devalued by our society.

Situating this discussion in literature suggests that in some areas of disabled representation in film transformation has been absent. The continued presence of this devaluation discourse in contemporary films is particularly alarming as Disaboom’s public perception poll found that over half (52%) of the one thousand Americans sampled would rather die than acquire a disability (Reuters, 2008). Therefore, contemporary films may be reinforcing existing ableist assumptions through repetitively portraying this victim narrative. Moreover, what is even more alarming is that even with all the resources at Will’s disposal, given his family’s money and the love of a beautiful women, he still declares that a “*good life*” with disability would not be fulfilling or enough for him as it does not *“come close”* to what a life of ability can offer him:

Louisa: *Listen, I know that this is not how you would have chosen it.*
But I … I can make you happy!
Will: - *No.*
Louisa: - *What?*
Will: *No, Clark. I get that this could be a good life.*
But it's not, "My life", it’s not even close.

Arguably Will rejects a disabled life because he considers ability to afford future prospects and therefore abled life is the only life worth living. This notion is encapsulated in a letter Will leaves for Louisa following his euthanasia: *"Knowing you still have possibilities is a luxury. Live well … Just live".* It also finds expression in *You're Not You* during Kate's husband's birthday speech to her prior to the onset of her disability. He proclaims that their life together is: "*just getting started*" which ironically is juxtaposed with the death sentence the acquisition of her disability implies. Further, it manifests in the message that *Me Before You* promotes to audiences, in so far as it suggests that only the abled can 'live boldly' and the disabled should not live at all. Therefore, what is implicit is the idea that ability is equated with full personhood and thus functions as a barometer determining how much dignity, worth and respect is attributed to human life (Davis, 2013).

Furthermore, because abled society sees little value in disabled life (Pavlides, 2005; Schwartz & Lutfiyya, 2009), suicide is encouraged as the final act of independence and bodily autonomy that one can exert over disability. Therefore, the eradication of disability in films is presented under the guise of the 'right to die' rhetoric. This finds expression in *Me Before You* as the ethical debate of the 'right to die' is engaged with at numerous points in the narrative. However the extract below strongly works to position the audience on the pro side of this debate:

Mrs Traynor: *Freedom?! You call this 'freedom'?!*
Mr Traynor: *We all agreed to it.*
Mrs Traynor: *Not the specifics, Jesus! If I hadn't noticed the Swiss postmark.*
Mr Traynor: *We made an agreement with Will. Six months.*
Mrs Traynor: *No, I only agreed so that we had six months, to change his mind. I cannot believe That you are willing to help our son end his life!*
Mr Traynor: *I'd rather that, than risk him trying it again, alone. It wasn't a cry for help, Camilla, he meant it and you know that. And this way we can be with him, supporting him.*
Mrs Traynor: *He's my son!*
Mrs Traynor: *Yes, he's my son, too!! It's his choice and this is what he wants. You know how much pain he's in.*

Opening the above conversation with the word "*freedom*" serves to remind viewers that Will's euthanasia is not to be *"judged"* because he is merely exercising his right to *"freedom"* of choice. Therefore from the outset, Mr Traynor's argument appeals to democratic societal values of individual rights and the expression of independence (Davis, 2013). This is stated by both his physiotherapist: *"I can't judge what he wants to do. That's his choice"* and his father:*"It's his choice and this is what he wants. You know how much pain he's in".* Moreover, the narrative frames death positively by suggesting that it offers release from the *"pain"* and entrapment that Will's disability has come to represent in the film. This positive reframing of death as euthanasia advances the pro 'right to die' agenda by appealing to abled audiences' sense of mercy. However, the ideology of the 'right to die' encases within it a double standard. Pepper (2016, para. 3) critiques this double standard surrounding suicide in the following quotation which speaks back to how disabled lives are considered less valuable. Thus psychological resources are not expended to help save them:

> When non-disabled people talk of suicide, they're discouraged and offered prevention. Even though it's legal, it's not seen as desirable. When a disabled person talks of it, though, suddenly the conversation is overtaken with words like 'choice' and 'autonomy' and people are rushing to uphold these prized principles whilst talk of prevention and mental health support are rare.

Lastly, a comparison into the reception of the film by abled and disabled audiences provides some interesting insights into the politics at play in *Me Before You*. It can be suggested that abled audiences indulge in the catharsis of their emotions and anxieties as evidence by the film winning the MTV award (2016) for best 'tear jerker', while the disabled community raged against the harmful messages they believe the film transmits. Consequently, social media campaigns started: #MeBeforeEuthanasia and #MeBeforeAbleism as well as protests to boycott the film and donate the movie fare to disability organisations such as Not Dead Yet or Euthanasia Prevention Coalition (Schadenberg, 2016). The response to *Me Before You* by the disabled community is noteworthy as it illuminates the dangers and potential real world implications that film can have in perpetuating discourses of rather dead than disabled and pro-euthanasia. The message these discourses send can be exploited by institutions to help pass assisted suicide legislation,

which is a movement that is gaining support internationally (SBS World News, 2018). For example, assisted suicide has been decriminalised in the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and a number of states in the United States of America such as Washington DC, California, Colorado, Oregon and Vermont (SBS World News, 2018).

Precluding Sexual Subjectivities: The 'Un-desiring' and the 'Undesirable'

The 'Un-desiring'

The disabled have been precluded from sexual citizenry as they have continuously been conceptualised as either un-desiring or undesirable in lay consciousness, cultural imagery and public policy (Loeser, Pini & Crowley, 2018; Malinowska, 2018; Shildrick, 2007). Arguably desexualisation of disabled subjectivities can be attributed to the predominant alignment of disability with freak and medical model discourses. The medicalisation of disability has resulted in what Goggin (2009) terms the 'vulnerability doctrine', whereby the disabled are inconceivable beyond the confines of tragedy and pity. Moreover, the enfreakment of disability has repositioned physical difference as socially deviant, morally corrupting or dangerous (Church, 2011; Garland-Thomson, 1997). Therefore, these constructions of impairment have disqualified the disabled from being conceived of as functional sexual beings and have promulgated polarising stereotypical representations of disabled sexuality as either asexual or sexually deviant (Barnes, 1992; Loeser et al., 2018; Longmore, 1987; Shildrick, 2007).

These dichotomous representations were found in all three of the contemporary films analysed. Asexual representations manifested in *Me Before You* and *You're Not You*, as both films open with sexual scenes between the lead abled characters and their romantic partners. However, once the characters acquire their disabilities there is a noticeable and deliberate absence of portrayed sex lives. This silence around disabled sexuality and missing discourses of desirability and pleasure de-eroticise disabled corporeality and actively construct disability as an asexual subjectivity through omission. This finding holds with Foucault's (1979, p.27) position that " silence itself, the things which one declines to say or is forbidden to name, is less the absolute limit of discourse than an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses". Thus, this cultural imagery promoted in film works to position disability and sexuality as antithetical and incongruous through a process of non-recognition (Malinowska, 2018).

Cinematically, sexuality was also disassociated from disability in *You're Not You* through crosscutting, a technique in which the film switches back and forth between activities taking place in two separate locations to heighten comparisons and create a sense of parallel action (Evans, 2012). The film presents comparative scenes of Kate's and Bec's night time activities. The camera follows Kate as her husband assists her with brushing her teeth and propping up her pillows. He then cautiously positions her in bed like a fragile patient; working to construct disabled life as routine, rigid, insipid and importantly asexual. Additionally, both characters lie separately in bed and Kate looks longingly at her husband, calling out his name in want of intimacy. However he quickly dismisses her by saying goodnight: *"You wake me up if you need anything. Alright? Goodnight"*. Additionally, this line foregrounds how their relationship has become one of fulfilling *"needs"* and not wants or desires. The scene then crosscuts to Bec's bedroom activity which depicts her engaged in sexual relations with a man whom she has recently met at a bar. Therefore, in contradistinction abled sexuality is represented as spontaneous, exciting and promiscuous. Moreover, these comparisons are heightened through the use of an uncomfortable silence and stillness in Kate's bedroom while rebellious rock music plays in the background during Bec's sexual encounter. Similarly, *Me Before You* perpetuates discourses of sexual impotence when the prospects of disabled sexual experiences are discussed between Louisa and Patrick:

Patrick: *Think of all the things you couldn't do. No more running, no more cycling. Hey, no more sex.*
Louisa: *Of course he could have sex! It's just the girl'd have to be on top.*

In free associating about the message proliferated in the first extract, it can be suggested that Louisa's contestations about Will's inability to engage in sex: *"Of course he could have sex!",* can be read as a form of resistance to the hegemonic construction of disabled subjectivities as asexual. However, when read in relation to her subsequent line: *"It's just the girl'd have to be on top"*, the message conveyed arguably takes on new meaning, as it perpetuates assimilative rather than transgressive representations of disabled sexuality. Louisa's construction of Will's sexual ability continues to privilege corporeal wholeness by subscribing to mainstream ideologies that regulate the permissible forms of sex (Darke, 2004; Malinowska, 2018; Tepper, 2000). Therefore, it positions Will's sexual expression within these normative boundaries. However, this positioning only works to highlight Will's inability to perform normed sexual roles for males and in turn this renders

him impotent, subordinated and emasculated. Moreover, the way in which Louisa tempers her claim by beginning it with the words *"its' just"*, reveals how she has constructed Will's sexuality as falling short of normative standards. Shakespeare (2000) addresses the politics embedded in assimilative representations of sexuality: "Are we trying to win access for disabled people to mainstream sexuality or are we trying to challenge the way in which sex and sexuality are convinced, expressed and limited in modern society?"

Furthermore, a second extract supports the former interpretation that *Me Before You* promotes rather than challenges ableist notions of sexuality, as Will alludes to his sexual impotence while talking to Louisa: *"I can't watch you wandering around the annex in your crazy dresses or see you naked and not … not be able to … Oh God, Clark! If you had an idea of what I want to do to you right now I cannot live like this".* As such, Will reinforces stereotypical assumptions about asexuality for men with spinal cord injuries. Additionally he implies that this loss of sexual ability has influenced his decision to euthanise himself: *"I can't live like this"*. This representation has had a long standing history in film as Longmore (1987) argued that quadriplegic characters in films such as *Whose Life is it, Anyway?, An Act of Love* and *Nevis Mountain Dew*, opt for suicide partly out of deflated sense of self-worth due to a loss of sexual functioning. Therefore following Hops, Linton and Mercado (2017), this discussion indicates that there is a pervasive and persistent construction of disability as asexual in film. On the other end of the continuum, *Stronger* perpetuates discourses of sexual deviancy as evidenced when Jeff is moaning because he has fallen out of his bed. However, his mother is under the impression that he is masturbating:

Patty: *I don't know what he's doing. What do you think is going on?*
Aunt: *Jesus, Patty, what do you think boys do in their room when they lock their door?*
- *Yeah, I think he's doin' it.*
Patty: - *You think he …*
Aunt: *The kid's got no legs, and he's blowin' loads. Dirty fucking …*

This scene highlights how disability is automatically associated with asexuality as it perpetuates the ableist assumption that a loss of limb equates to a loss of libido, as evidenced by the claim: *"The kid's got no legs, and he's blowin' loads"*. Therefore, given this master narrative that renders disabled groups asexual, when they do engage in sexual acts, they are constructed as hypersexual or sexually deviant. In the above dialogue, this manifests through

deliberately crass language choices such as *"blowing loads"* and *"dirty fucking ..."* which constructs Jeff's expression of his sexuality as abhorrent. However, what is noteworthy about *Stronger* is that out of the three films, it was the only film which included a sex scene between Jeff and his girlfriend, Erin, after the acquisition of his disability. Following this, Jeff's mother confronts Erin: *"Did you just have sex with my son?"* to which she blatantly responds "*Yup*" and walks away. Thus, Erin's reaction destabilises the taboo surrounding disabled sexuality, as her response does not sensationalise their sexual encounter but rather brushes it off as commonplace. Arguably, the inclusion of a disabled sex scene coupled with Erin's blasé reaction signifies a progressive leap in the representation of disabled sex in film.

Tepper (2000, p. 283) proclaims that disseminating inclusive and healthy depictions of disabled sexual expressions in cultural imagery is incumbent and has the potential to empower disabled individuals as "sexual agents, entitled to pleasure and therefore responsible for their own sexual identities". This is important because the disabled group are not only excluded from their sexuality discursively but also materially (Loeser et al., 2018). Shildrick (2007) argues that despite the abolishment of more overt displays of discrimination such as the eugenics movements, disabled groups still experience more insidious forms of prejudice regarding their sexuality in public policy. They are excluded from sexual education in schools and sexual healthcare facilities are inaccessible to them (Shildrick, 2007). Thus their reproductive rights remain compromised. As such, given the role film plays in forming public perceptions (Flynn, 2016; Hartnett, 2000; Safran, 1998; Stadler, 2006), the absent and stereotypical representations of disabled sexuality found to be perpetuated in the contemporary films in this study is alarming and may be contributing to the maintenance, control and repression of disabled sexuality in society.

The 'Undesirable'

In popular imagination, the disabled have been conceptualised as undesirable and unworthy romantic partners (Loeser et al., 2018; Malinowska, 2018). Vertoont's (2018) recent study found that discourses and prejudices surrounding the disabled and their dating prospects, as identified by Morris (1991) over two decades ago, are still circulating in the media. Specifically these discourses promote the ideologies that disabled individuals are unworthy of the same love and commitment as abled individuals; that the disabled are undeserving of abled partners; and that relationships fail for the disabled solely because of their impairments. This study uncovers evidence of these discourses being promoted in one of

the films analysed. In *Me Before You* discourses of the disabled as unworthy life partners intersected with, and are upheld by, discourses of pity and burden. The following exchange is between Louisa and Patrick concerning Will's former love interest leaving him for his best friend:

Louisa: *It was awful! It's his girlfriend and his best friend!*
Patrick: *You can't blame her. Are you really saying that you'd stick around with me if I was paralysed from the neck down?*
Louisa: *of course I would!*
Patrick: *Well, I don't want someone to stay with me out of pity.*

The interaction details how the acquisition of disability diminishes one's desirability as a romantic partner. This is portrayed in Patrick's assertion that even though Will's former girlfriend's actions are "*awful*", she is to be absolved of the "*blame*" because the alternative would mean she would have to *"stick around"* for a lifetime with a quadriplegic as a partner. Further he proclaims that even if one were to stay with their disabled partner, the only plausible explanation would be that it is out of "*pity*". This response re-establishes the hierarchical position which implies that the disabled are undeserving of the love and commitment of an abled partner. Additionally later on in the film, Will echoes similar sentiments as he constructs himself as an unworthy life partner for Louisa:

Will: *I can't be the kind of man, who just accepts this.*
Louisa: *Yes, but you're not giving it a chance. You're not giving ME a chance. I, have become a whole new person these last six months, because of you.*
Will: *I know and that is why I can't have you tied to me. I don't want you to miss out on all the things that someone else could give you. And selfishly, I don't want you to look at me one day and feel even the tiniest big of regret or pity.*
Louisa: *I would never think that!*
Will: *You don't know that.*

This scene demonstrates how the construction of the disabled as unworthy romantic partners is prefaced on discourses of burden and pity. Evidence of this can be found in Will's description of a life with him as one of stagnation and burden for his partner, which is highlighted in the verb choice of: *"tied to me"*. Additionally, he suggests staying in a

relationship with him would result in missed opportunities for Louisa that someone else could afford her: *"I don't want you to miss out on all the things that someone else could give you"*. Implicit in this assertion, however, is the notion that abled others are more deserving of her affections and could offer her more. This extract also works to associate disability with a deflated sense of self-worth as reiterated in Will's confession that he fears that she would *"regret"* her decision or stay with him out of *"pity"*. Additionally, it is important to address that in both scenes Louisa is depicted rather uncritically, as she appears to have no hesitations regarding pursuing someone with a disability as a romantic partner. Longmore (1987) argued that filmic depictions of abled love interests are uncritically positive as they are usually represented as having no problem with finding the disabled lead attractive or falling in love with them. However, it is the disabled character's poor self-esteem and lack of self-acceptance that prevents the couple from being together (Longmore, 1987). Therefore, cinematic portrayals invert social reality by suggesting that it is in fact the disabled who are responsible for their lesser romantic value and not the prejudice and attitudinal discrimination rife in ableist society.

However, what is encouraging is that two films in this sample actively challenged the aforementioned discourses. In *You're Not You* the dialogue to follow sets up the hegemonic construction of a disabled partner as burdensome but arguably does so to expose how caring for a disabled partner is frequently and unfairly used as a justification for unfaithfulness (Barnes, 1992):

Bec: *But if this is about your husband having an affair, why are you taking a bullet? Tell him to move in here.*
Kate: *It's my fault, not his. I'm the one who got sick. Not him. This isn't the life he built, the life he deserves. He turns me over in my sleep. He feeds me, he bathes me. He does everything but breathe for me. Believe me, he'd do that if he could. He's 37 years old. He deserves happiness.*
Bec: *We all deserve some happiness. What we don't all deserve … is a little extra snatch on the side from some skanky cooze.*

Arguably, the above extract should be read as a form of resistance, as it challenges rather than perpetuates discourses of burden and ideologies that promote the conception that the disabled are not worthy of abled romantic partners and that impairments are responsible

for the breakdown of relationships. Bec's response illuminates the contradiction inherent in Kate's claims that her husband's affair was justified because he *"deserves some happiness"* that she can no longer provides him with. Bec counters this with an inclusive response that emphasises how *"we all deserve some happiness"* but implies that the disabled are still deserving of the same dignity, respect and commitments in marriage as the abled. She blatantly retorts that caring for a disabled partner does not entitle one to an affair: *"What we don't all deserve… is a little extra snatch on the side from some skanky cooze"*. Additionally, *Stronger* promotes the message that the disabled are worthy as romantic and life partners through portraying a narrative in which Jeff and his abled partner, Erin, stay together after the acquirement of his disability and go on to have children, leading happy and fulfilled lives.

6. Cinematic Constructions

The Politics of Representation: 'Cripface'

The previous sections have collectively argued that through highly caricatured and stereotypical portrayals, the disabled are still largely misrepresented in and through film. However, this study also found evidence of underrepresentation, as all three contemporary films continued the tradition of 'cripface' by casting renowned, yet abled bodied actors in disabled roles (Harris, 2014). As such, contemporary representations of acquired physical disability in this study continue to be scripted, produced and portrayed by abled persons and their conceptualisations about the disabled experience (Stewart, 2018). Therefore, it can be claimed that abled society still has hegemonic control and influence over the way in which disability is culturally constructed given their monopoly over Hollywood films (Flynn, 2016). Beyond this, 'cripface' arguably remains unproblematised in popular imagination, as Jake Gyllenhaal was praised for his portrayal of the disabled character (Jeff Bauman). Notably, he received an award nominationfor Best Actor *in Stronger* (IMBd, n.d.). Thus the results of this analysis indicate that transformation towards disabled self representation in film may not have gained significant traction.

Freak Show Fascination: Fetishising the Disabled Body in Film

"Don't stare!"
Everybody's mother.

(Garland-Thomson, 2005, n.p.)

Numerous authors have argued film operates as the modern day freak show, with film makers exhibiting disability and continuing to capitalise on voyeuristic, forbidden and socially de-conditioned desires of the normate[11] to stare at the spectacle of anomalous bodies (Brodesco, 2014; Church, 2011; Richardson, 2010; Whittington-Walsh, 2002). Following these authors, it is argued that appeasing audience members' voyeuristic desires amounts to a fetishisation of the disabled body in film. This argument is supported by evidence of theatrics, suspense and exploitative camera work present in the cinematic discourse analysed in the three contemporary films. Most notably, this position finds expression during scenes in which the lead character's disability is revealed to audience members for the first time.

In *Me Before You*, prior to the audience's introduction to Will the tension is palpable as suspenseful music plays loudly and overwhelmingly, while the camera captures a medium-close shot of Louisa's apprehensive facial expression. Additionally, this is shot from a side angle which works to capture the movement of Louisa's throat as she gulps in anticipation and preparation for her first encounter with a disabled person. Will's mother adds to this suspense through her foreboding remark that he *"has good days and bad days"*, leaving the audience unsure as to which side of Will they will be shown. Collectively, this mise-en-scène[12] helps evoke a tense-filled atmosphere, as the audience is kept waiting alongside Louisa for the reveal of Will and what has become of him in his disabled state. As such, in this scene both the emotion elicited from the audience and the use of camera angles creates a spectator position that aligns with that of the abled character. Cinematically, this positioning constructs the audience as onlookers and the disabled character as a fetishised object (Norden, 1994). Moreover, this objectification is further aided by the use of theatrics or staged effects, as Will is positioned behind murky glass doors which obscure his disability from view at first but then slide open, like the drawing of stage curtains, to uncover Will's disabled body to the audience. Arguably this theatricality, coupled with the aforementioned tension, creates a freak-show-esque atmosphere to the reveal of Will by relying on contradictory impulses of fascination and repulsion, awe and pity, or anticipation and satisfaction (Conroy, 2012).

[11]Garland-Thomson (1997) uses the term 'normate' to designate a collective subjectivity that stakes a claim to normality through policing the boundaries between identities(Linton, 2010, p.232).
[12]Mise-en-scène collectively refers to the visually artful ways in which cinematic discourses are displayed in film (Moura, 2014).

Interestingly, Kate's reveal in *You're Not You* also relies on this technique as the audience is first shown a silhouette of her naked disabled body; however, it is obscured by the misted glass of the shower. The mystification of the disabled body was a common trend identified in the chosen films and as such it is argued that this works to amplify the suspense for the audience through delaying and subsequently heightening the gratification of their voyeuristic drives. Following this mystification, *You're Not You* appeases the audience's desires to gaze upon Kate's 'impaired' body as it includes a close up camera angle of her limp arm as well as captures an exaggerated shot of her exposed back, hunched over, with her spinal column and scapular looking angular and distorted. Arguably, these depictions are included to exaggerate and exploit corporeal differences as a means of fetishising the other and enfreaking the disabled body. Moreover, the suspense evoked throughout these scenes can be considered a genealogical function of disability being associated with side shows and freak discourses (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Therefore, disability has come to be conceptualised in popular imagination as an exoticised corporeality which constitutes this heightened form of exhibition.

Similarly, *Stronger* invokes this mystification process by including scenes in which Jeff's amputated legs are initially concealed by hospital bed sheets, ensuring that his flesh is not completely exposed. Yet, the 'incomplete' form of his limbs is nevertheless outlined by the draping of the sheets over his body. The audiences' voyeuristic desires are tantalised but inhibited through these visual techniques. This continues during the reveal of Jeff's disabled body which is figuratively marked by the undressing of his bandages. In contextualising this scene, it begins with an establishing shot of dark and dreary clouds outside of Jeff's hospital window. Such imagery provides a sense of theatricality, as it evokes a sinister and foreboding atmosphere to his reveal. Moreover, this scene is also filmed through a close up and over the shoulder shot of Jeff's amputated legs. However, while they appear in the foreground and are framed in the centre of the shot by Jeff and Erin's faces, his limbs have been edited and deliberately blurred. Arguably, this editing serves a similar mystification function as previously identified in the analysis of the other two films. Throughout this scene Jeff refuses to look at his legs and instructs Erin to turn away to*: "Don't look at 'em"* to which she responds: *"I'm not looking at 'em"*. Thus, both the cinematic discourse such as the camera angles, framing and editing as well as the dialogue in this scene work together to initially thwart the act of staring. However, the emphasis on *"not looking"* ironically encourages the audiences' forbidden desires to stare, by playing on their proclivity to look at precisely that

which they have been instructed to look away from. Thus, the act of looking is aided by film being a more private and commodified space to carry out these forbidden desires (Flynn, 2016). Therefore, thwarting this reveal only works to heighten the audience members' proclivity to stare when they are given opportunities later on in the film.

However in free associating, it could alternatively be claimed that *Stronger* confronts and ultimately stunts the audiences' voyeuristic impulses through blurring the reveal of Jeff's disabled body. Yet, this position is debunked if one considers the numerous scenes in which Jeff's amputated legs are exposed and exploited cinematically through close up camera shots which emphasise his scarred knees or his impairment being prodded by the hands of the medical establish. Further, Jeff's body is enfreaked by high angle shots which demean him through exposing his naked body in the shower or position him as a victim figure in a hospital bed. Thus, if one takes into account the film in its entirety, there is evidence to support the position that *Stronger* initially blurs Jeff's disability to intensify suspense and delay voyeuristic gratification, as his amputated legs do not remain blurred out of focus throughout the film.

Therefore following Norden (1994), these production features present in all three narratives work to fetishise the disabled body in film, which in turn corroborates the position that contemporary films are still largely produced for the consumption of abled audiences. Church (2011) echoes this claim that the disabled have been subsumed by a problematic and pervasive representational history of unequal viewing dynamics. This unequal dynamic can be attributed to the ableist gaze, which holds within it a normalising authority (Boyd, 2016; Loja et al., 2013). Moreover, staring is considered an act of symbolic power which operates at the level of the body and "reaffirms the cultural superiority of the onlooker" (Williams, 2017, p.32). It does so by consolidating and policing the boundaries between subjectivities of the spectator and the spectacle (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Therefore, enfreaking the disabled body in film serves both a regulatory and reaffirming function as it reassures abled audiences that 'they' are not like the disabled other or the 'freak' being presented, and in doing so it reveres the abled norm. Thus, this discussion suggests that the freak show fascination that has continued in contemporary film is premised on the desire to dissociate from the other. As such these findings concur with Kemper's (2007, p. 1) assertion that: "the demand for otherness is predicated upon deeper continuities-a need for comfort or for reinforcement of deeply engrained social values that contribute to a safely bounded sense of self".

7. Discursive Functions of the Before and After Narrative

Polarising Ability and Disability

Cinematic discourses can operate to create before and after narratives and arguably this sets up a process of comparisons that imbues ability and disability with certain cultural meanings and legitimates stereotypical assumptions associated with these groups. In *Me Before You,* Will's abled and disabled selves are juxtaposed through a number of cinematic discourses such as settings, props, dialogue and narrative sequencing; all of which work to encourage these before and after comparisons. For example, the film opens with a scene in abled Will's apartment which is set up as a bachelor pad, with an attractive blonde in bed to match. This signifies an independent, sexual and adult life. However, later in the film the setting changes as Will predominantly resides in his childhood home with his parents. This setting change perpetuates infantalising discourses about disability by associating disabled life with dependency and regression (Barnes, 1992; Longmore, 1987).

Further, the three films rely on a chronological narrative sequence which constructs separate abled and disabled selves and lives for the lead characters and therefore work to encourage the audience to make these before and after comparisons. Both *Me Before You* and *You're Not You* open with scenes of blissful and 'idyllic' abled lives that are disrupted by the acquisition of disability. However, as the narratives progress, they foreground a loss of independence and abled bodied privileges, until the characters chose death over a life with disability. Conversely, *Stronger* inverts this stereotypical narrative by opening with Jeff's life in a meaningless place. Abled Jeff is constructed as a man who leaves others to clean up his mess at work in order to watch a baseball game. A love interest has also recently broken up with Jeff for *"never showing up for anything"* important. As Jeff adjusts to his disabled life he comes to find strength and meaning in his disability and evolves into a character who *"shows up"* for his family.

However, disability is utilised as a character arch and thus comes to take on metaphorical significance. Given the narrative of descent in *Me Before You* and *You're Not You,* disability comes to signify loss and deprivation. While in *Stronger,* it serves as a representation of strength and hope in the face of adversity. Therefore, the findings of this research reveal that through before and after narrative constructions, contemporary films continue to perpetuate the stereotypical representation of disability as an atmosphere or curio (Barnes, 1992).Thus, regardless of the symbolic significance that disability is imbued with

through these narratives, whether it is positive or negative, this study holds with the numerous authors who have argued that using disability as a metaphor is reductive and misrepresents the disabled experience in film (Black & Pretes, 2007; Harnett, 2000; Longmore, 1985). Moreover, these hyperbolised and caricatured portrayals of disability in all three films point to a missing discourse of disability being represented in an incidental and socially inclusive way (Barnes, 1992; Hartneet, 2000; Vertoont, 2018). Particularly, this critique is succinctly expressed in the following quotations:

> In ableist culture disability can't just be – it has to mean something. It has to signify (Davies, 2013, p.37).

> Disabled characters are over-simplified and used not for their complexity as people but for their easily identifiable impairment, which is exploited by screen writers for dramatic effect, for emotional appeal and for blatant symbolism (Harnett, 2000, p. 21).

Additionally, before and after narratives rely on provocative portrayals through the use of the discursive strategies of invoking extremes and polarities in their representation of abled and disabled selves. This is best demonstrated in *You're Not You* and *Me Before You*. At the beginning of *You're Not You* the audience is given a brief overview of the different spheres of Kate's abled life, namely marriage, professional and social life which work together to depict a picturesque existence. The opening scenes revolve around Kate's happy marriage and fulfilled sex life with her husband. The film then depicts a brief scene in which Kate is dressed in sleek professional wear and is on a business call with a client while standing powerfully, towering over her work. This representation works to construct her as a successful business women and productive member of society. Following this, cheerful music plays in the background and the audience is showed snippets of a supposedly blissful day, as Kate walks home flowers in hand. The film quickly cuts across to wide screen angle of her affluent family home, with a few close up angles that change in rapid succession to give an overview of her idyllic life inside it. Kate is then constructed as a graceful host, as the camera zooms in on her cooking for a dinner party, connoting a healthy social life.

However her disability begins to creep in, as symbolised by her dropping a wine glass and it shattering. This imagery works discursively to foreshadow how Kate's life of excessive happiness will too shatter with the acquisition of her condition. Her disability is foreshadowed again when she finishes playing a piano piece. In this scene, her guests'

applauds in the background are silenced and the camera zooms in on her hand, which is uncontrollably shaking. Kate looks worryingly at her hand, singular and suspenseful music notes begin to play while the screen cuts to black. This mise-en-scène works to construct disability in a very foreboding manner and as something to be feared. As the narrative progresses disabled Kate's life is presented oppositionally, as her once happy marriage crumbles after her husband is caught having an affair with his secretary. Kate is no longer working and her social life has greatly diminished, given her changed social standing amongst her former abled peers (Dziura, 2015). Notably this finds expression in a dinner party scene amongst her former friends which is filled with awkward tension as Kate struggles to eat independently. Thus, before and after comparisons reveal how Kate's abled and disabled lives and selves are polarised in their representations.

Similarly, film makers rely on extreme and polarised representations in *Me Before You* as the audience is introduced to Will's abled self through props such as a surf board and sporting pictures that are strategically placed around his old apartment and speak to his former adrenaline-seeking hobbies. Additionally, the very opening line of the film constructs Will as a man who craved life-affirming adventures and being active: "*Now, you see, this is what we could be doing on holiday. Not all the hiking up mountain stuff that you are planning".* Therefore, from the outset Will's identity is prefaced on his ability. This is also made poignant in a home video of him and his friends entitled *"Willy the Crazy":*

There are very few people out there who can claim they have out-Bonded James Bond.
But birthday boy Wild Willy, Will Traynor, is certainly one of them.
Hey Will, any final thoughts, bro?
I'm thinking you should be next, mate.
Yeah, right!
We're all thinking it …
Is there really nothing he can't do?
Do we hate him?
- Yes.
- we do!

Through this short meta-film, abled Will is presented to the audience as a larger than life character as evidenced by his nicknames: *"Willy the crazy"* and *"Wild Willy"*. He is also constructed as a man who has and does it all as implied by his abled peers envy: *"do we hate*

him, yes we do!" Further, he lives a life on the edge as he is shown to be engaging in extreme sports such as cliff-diving and wake-boarding. Therefore he is portrayed as an invincible action figure as evidenced by the claim that he is one of the few to have *"out Bond James Bond"*. Together with the rhetorical question *"is there nothing he can't do?",* the importance of his ability in his former identity is highlighted. However, the narrative sequencing makes this rhetorical question ironic as the audience is shown this meta-film as Will lies paralysed in bed, implying there is nothing much he can do now. Therefore, in both films these hyperbolic representations of extreme happiness and excessive ability serve to make the acquisition of the characters' disabilities more tragic, as the audience is encouraged to consider the abled life Kate and Will once led and to draw comparisons to their current disabled lives.

The process of evaluative comparisons is made explicit to the audience in a scene in *Me Before You* where Louisa is caught prying at old photographs of Will. The first of which shows Will graduating and is suggestive of hope for a successful future and promising life. The second shows a picture of Will's parents smiling, connoting their happiness which serves to foil their current portrayal as worried and saddened. The third is of Will with a former love interest, and the fourth is a picture of Will surrounded by friends, both of which are suggestive of a social life and speak to his former social standing and integration in society. This is contrasted with his current confinement, marginalisation and smaller social circles, comprised mainly of his caretakers (Black & Pretes, 2007). Collectively, these picture props operate discursively to situate Will's current position in the hegemonic discourse of loss commonly associated with disability (Watermeyer, 2009), as he is surrounded by the remnants of his former 'fulfilled' abled life. This is also expressed in the dialogue of this scene:

Louisa: *Sorry, I was, I was …*
Will: *You were just looking at my photographs, thinking how awful it must be having lived like that and ended up like this.*

The use of the phrases "*like that*" and "*like this*" directly speak to this juxtaposition set up by the before and after narrative as the films constantly work to construct the differences between a happy, fulfilling and independent abled life verse an unfulfilled, dependent disabled life. Will's reasoning for why he destroys the pictures reiterates this

message, as his former life is said to haunt him in his 'bed-ridden' state: *"Well, I don't want those pictures staring at me, every time I'm in bed, waiting for someone to bloody get me out again, okay?"* Arguably, the before and after narrative in film discursively functions in a similar vein to 'us vs. them' distinctions (Church, 2011), as it entrenches the divide between abled and disabled groups by constructing their experiences as polar opposites. As such, it situates the characters' abled and disabled selves in inclusionary and exclusionary positions of power and agency that speak back to societal structures and networks (Wirth-Koliba, 2016). Thus these binary representations play a consolidating role in solidifying positions of power in society. This interpretation is supported by the literature as disability media scholars have classified before and after comparisons as its' own genre called 'normality drama' (Darke, 1998). In this genre it is argued that disability operates as a prop to affirm and strengthen the normative system through its' representation of disabled life as abject in comparison to abled life (Chievers & Markotic, 2010; Darke, 1998; Malinowska, 2018).

8. Burden, Indignity and Dependence

Again the time and sequencing in disability films works to construct abled and disabled identities, capabilities and experiences in contrasting ways in this theme. The opening scene of *Me Before You* revolves around close up camera shots of an abled-bodied Will's daily routine and self-care activities such as showering, getting dressed, buttoning up his shirt and tying his shoe laces as well as is suggested when Will offers: "*I'll cook tonight*". Additionally, *You're Not You* highlights abled Kate's self-sufficiency through the use of close up camera angles of taken for granted self-care tasks such as putting on makeup, in order to foreground the importance of ability in daily life. However, *You're Not You* takes this one step further, in using matching scenes of Kate's morning routine before and after her disability. Thus, the same self-care tasks that were initially performed by Kate are repeated to the audience, however, now they are performed by her husband and carer, accentuating disabled Kate's dependency on others. It is argued that these are seemingly trivial and daily tasks that are frequently glossed over in other film genres. Thus, it is argued that including close-up and detailed scenes of self-care activities in disability films works to construct the former abled self as independent, dignified and capable. However, as the film progresses to showcase the daily life of the disabled character, it situates their difficulties within discourses of burden, dependency, indignity and disgust. Noteworthy scenes and dialogue from the three films are provided as evidence to support this claim:

Me Before You perpetuates problematic discourses concerning caretaking, as the film portrays the profession as undignified or demeaning work that is said to not *"require any skills"*. This is revealed when Louisa is job hunting and protests that she is desperate for employment, proclaiming: *"Pleee-ase! I'll take anything".* The use of the word *"pleee-ase"* and the tone and annunciation which drags the word out helps to construct the phrase as a plea, while the phrase *"I'll take anything"* suggests disabled care is something abled individuals will only entertain as a last resort or take out of sheer desperation. Further, this is echoed by the recruitment agent who subsequently reveals that the family has had trouble recruiting someone to work in this field: *"This is the fifth time they tried to recruit. They're desperate"*. Moreover, the job advertisement states that they are looking for *"care and companionship for a disabled man"* to which Louisa responds alarmingly: *"what kind of care?"* This response speaks back to the stigma around caring for disabled persons and the 'unpleasantness' of dealing with their 'indignities' or personal hygiene (Pavlides, 2005). The trope of care being associated with indignity is repeated throughout the film and finds expression when Louisa's boyfriend, Patrick, imagines what it would be like to be disabled and remarks in horror: *"I mean, to have strangers wipe your ass, Jesus!"* Similar remarks are expressed by Jeff's girlfriend, Erin, in *Stronger:*

Erin: *Last night, he's fucking wasted and covered in his own shit.*
Jeff: *Hey …*
Erin:*And I have to clean him up. And nobody else is there helping me.*
Jeff: *Oh, it's my fault?*
Erin:*I have to carry him to the bed.*
Jeff: *Can you not fucking say that right now?*

In the above dialogue, *Stronger* situates the disabled character's need for care in discourses of indignity and burden. Similar to Patrick's remarks in *Me Before You*, it does so through invoking deliberately grotesque imagery that is exacerbated by the use profanity: *"he's fucking wasted and covered in his own shit"*. Arguably, this imagery works to illicit the emotional reaction of disgust from the audience which operates discursively to infantalise disabled individuals. This is because emotions are not personal or "psychological dispositions" but rather they function in "concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119). Following Ahmed (2014), this study holds that the

affective economy of disgust works to solidify power relations between abled and disabled groups through portraying superior and inferior forms of corporeality. Moreover in the above passage, care is constructed as burdensome: *"I have to clean him up"* and *"I have to carry him to the bed. And nobody else is there helping me".* In this scene Erin goes on to assert:

This didn't just happen to you. Could you just open your eyes for one fucking second and acknowledge the huge circle, look at me! Look at me! Jeff, the huge circle of people that have fucking altered their lives to orbit around you. Okay? You have no fucking idea how much.

The opening line underscores the impact that disability has not for the disabled individual but for the abled, as evidenced by the phrase: *"This didn't just happen to you"*. The message this sends to the larger public is concerning, as this scene speaks to the problem disability causes for abled bodied society as opposed to highlighting the problems with society that make living with a disability more challenging. Moreover, the discourse of disability as burdensome is reiterated by the repetition of the phrase *"the huge circle of people"* to exaggerate the impact that Jeff's disability has had on abled others. This is aided by the hyperbolic construction of this impact in the subsequent line: *"that have fucking altered their lives to orbit around you".* Together, the use of the terms *"circle"* and *"orbit"* recapitulate circular imagery to accentuate the stereotype that caring for the disabled requires an all-consuming care given their 'dependency'. Additionally, the tone Erin takes with Jeff is authoritative, as conveyed by her demands for him to look at her when she is speaking. Her tone is one of condescension as she speaks to Jeff as if he is ignorant and unaware of his dependency on others: *"You have no fucking idea how much…"*

Taken together the discourses perpetuated by the above scenes strip the disabled group of their dignity and justify the lower levels of respect they are afforded in society (Pavlides, 2005). Furthermore, the consequence of situating disabled care in discourses of indignity, burden and dependence is that they construct disabled people's needs for care as shameful which in turn fosters a sense of internalised ableism. According to Campbell (2009) internalised ableism is the internalisation, emulation and adulation of the oppressor's values. This is expressed by the characters in the following scenes and dialogues and is problematic because it reinforces for disabled viewers that this is how they should feel and behave in response to their disability. In *Me Before You*, Will is presented as highly reluctant to ask for help. This plays out in a scene where his wheelchair gets stuck in the mud and he denies he

needs help and insists that Louisa does not ask other abled strangers for their assistance. Moreover, Will veils his sense of shame around needing help in sarcasm: *"nothing like being spoon fed in public".* Additionally, in *Stronger*, Jeff's shame around asking for help with the private act of using the bathroom is noticeable as he stumbles over his words: *"What do you need? Uh, to use the, uh, bathroom".* He also begins by using the word *"help"* but then tailors off as indicated by the ellipse and substitutes it with the euphemism *"Can you give me a hand"*. Furthermore, he tries to temper this request by saying: *"for a second?"* which is a discursive stratagem that functions to lessen the degree of help he is asking for:

Jeff: *E .Can you help…Can you give me a hand for a second?*
Erin: *Yeah. What do you need?*
Jeff: *Uh, to use the, uh, bathroom.*

Kate is also presented as being ashamed to ask for help with using the bathroom as evidenced by her hesitancy, pauses and describing the assistance she needs briefly and euphemistically: *"Bec, I'm going to need some help. Uh …Getting on. And I'll need some assistance after…wiping".* Thus, presentations of disabled characters as being hesitant to ask for help, reinforces the ideology that an inter-dependent life with disability is shameful, infantalising and humiliating (Hayes & Black, 2003). Additionally during this scene, Bec laughs inappropriately when assisting Kate with using the bathroom. Kate proceeds to ask: *"what's funny?"* to which Bec responds insensitively: *"It's just this thing that my roommate Jill says. She'd rather have cats than kids, until kids learn how to shit in a litter box"*. Recounting this anecdote works to infantalise and beastilise Kate and reduces her to an infant or an animal, both of which dehumanises and indignifies her in this personal moment. Kate's shame in response to this is apparent: "*What I am is a grown woman who needs help using the bathroom"*. Lastly, the cinematic discourse in this scene helps create a sense of shame and discomfort as it is filmed through close up camera angles with Kate and Bec in very close proximity to one another. Arguably, filming this intimate moment in such an invasive manner discursively serves the assumption that disability brings with it an intrusion of privacy and personal space.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that a number of stereotypical constructions of disability identified by seminal authors (Barnes, 1992; Longmore, 1987; Norden, 1994) over the past three decades have persisted in contemporary films. Most notably, this study confirmed that medical model conceptualisations of disability abound (Darke, 2010; Haller & Zhang, 2014; Schwartz & Lutfiyya, 2009). Therefore, this model can still be considered a hegemonising and oppressive ideology in the cinematic construction of acquired physical disability: all three contemporary films centred on medicalised tropes, jargon, props and settings. Discursively, these pathologising portrayals work to conflate disability with impairment, subsequently promoting narratives that disqualify the agency and bodily autonomy of disabled characters. Further, through a process of 'patientifying', disability is reduced and confined to the realm of the corporeal. Consequently, the struggles faced by the disabled are individualised, as they were presented as physical and psychological difficulties. Therefore, it is argued that this process of medicalisation in film serves a depoliticising agenda, as it works to obscure the social origins and political and economic disenfranchisement of the disabled (Flynn, 2016; Linton, 2010; Longmore, 1987; Shakespeare, 1994). Moreover, it is argued that the persistence of medical model portrayals of disability delegitimises alternative conceptualisations put forth by opposing paradigms such as the social, cultural or affirmation models. Representations informed by these models are notably omitted from all three films. Therefore, contemporary films collude with the medical establishment to endorse ableist ideologies that secure the power and privileges of abled bodied society.

Similarly, additional stereotypes identified across the films serve an individualising and depoliticising agenda. This found expression in the *supercrip* constructions and narratives of physical rehabilitation or psychological maladjustment. Collectively, these representations popularise the message that the challenges of the disabled arise out of personal and moral failings of the individual. Therefore, perpetuating these stereotypes shifts the remedial focus from societal oppression onto overcoming disability and successfully adjusting or normalising. The representational power of these narratives is that they revere and solidify abled bodied standards while simultaneously trivialising the systematic exclusion faced by the disabled minority.

Additionally, this study found evidence that binary and stereotypical representations of acquired physical disability have endured in contemporary films. Constructions of disabled protagonists as *supercrips*; as victims of medical tragedies, subsumed by losses and limitations; as hypersexual or asexual; as infantalised; as dependent, undignified and burdensome; as their 'own worst enemy' and 'better off dead' all contribute to a highly emotive and caricatured portrayal of disability. Taken together, these superficial constructions serve a dehumanising agenda that is to the detriment of recognising the full personhood, social identity and citizenry of disabled individuals. Moreover, caricatured constructions are aided by the omission of representations of disabled lives in ordinary or incident ways (Barnes, 1992; Hartneet, 2000; Vertoont, 2018).Therefore, it is argued that the disabled are still being manipulated in film for their metaphorical significance, exploited for comforting or cathartic symbolism, and capitalised on through the sentimentalised and sensationalised portrayals used to market films (Flynn, 2016). As such, this contemporary analysis has uncovered that the disabled continue to be isolated cinematically (Norden, 1994), since a major findings of this research has been that disability films are still largely produced for and consumed by abled audiences. This interpretation is also supported at the second level of Fairclough's (1995b) analysis and manifested in the cinematic discourses such as the camera angles, theatricality and narrative sequencing; all of which align abled audiences in positions of spectatorship and fetishise the disabled as objects.

However, the analysis also revealed that there have been areas of progress in contemporary films. Specifically, this progress manifests in challenging discourses of disabled persons as undesirable and unworthy romantic partners in both *You're Not You* and *Stronger*. Additionally, progression can also be seen in the protagonists' resistance to the imposition of homogenising discourses and the 'abled knows best' narrative in *Me Before You* and *You're Not You*. Further, all three films invert and thus challenge the abled saviour stereotype through including discourses of reciprocity. Collectively, these advancements signify a step towards including more complex characterisations of individuals with acquired physical disability and more nuanced interactions between abled and disabled groups. However, it must be noted that their impact is arguably diluted given the paradoxical finding that contemporary films simultaneously challenge and perpetuate competing constructions of the disabled experience.

Therefore, the findings of this research concur with previous authors who have concluded that transformation into disabling imagery in film has been slow or falsely

progressive (Darke, 2004; Flynn, 2016; Haller & Zhang, 2014; Ljuslinder, 2014). Although steps towards more nuanced and diverse representations were evident in this study, the films continue to perpetuate hegemonic discourses, emotionally provocative and caricatured portrayals of acquired physical disability. Thus, despite significant advances that have taken place in the material lives of the disabled, discrimination is still operating more insidiously, at the level of the symbolic, through film (Flynn, 2016). In offering a potential explanation for the lack of transformation in film, it can be suggested that it is precisely due to these material advances achieved by disability rights activists that there is a need to re-establish and police the boundaries between abled and disabled groups, in order to maintain ableist ascendancy.

In response to these conclusions, this study proposes the following recommendations. This research holds with authors who denounce the stereotypical and cinematically isolating representations of disability in film (Barnes, 1992; Longmore, 1987; McDougall, 2006; Norden, 1994; Vertoont, 2018). The study calls for more complex characterisations of acquired physical disabilities and more dynamic interactions between abled and disabled characters. This needs to be accompanied by ordinary portrayals of the disabled experience which position this minority as part of the general social landscape (Hartnett, 2000; Vertoont, 2018). It is hoped that these efforts will dispel disempowering discourses and desensationalise disability (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Moreover, Stadler (2006) argues that there is didacticism inherent in film. Therefore, it is proposed that films should be harnessed for their enabling potential by including alternative paradigmatic representations of disability, informed by social, cultural and affirmation models. Exposure to alternative conceptualisations can be used to deconstruct the hegemony of the medical model and conscientise abled and disabled audiences alike to social disablement (Schwartz et al., 2010; Stadler, 2006). To assist in bringing about this paradigm shift in film, it is recommended that more disabled personnel are recruited into the media industry and that consolatory bodies are established where advice can be sought (Barnes, 1992). Furthermore, self representation is an empowering inclusive movement that can help challenge abled ignorance and misconceptions (Stadler, 2006). Therefore, it is recommended that the film industry moves away from ‘cripface’ and appropriately casts more disabled actors in disabled roles (Barnes, 1992; Hartnett, 2000; Stadler, 2006). However, this also needs to be accompanied by disability equity training for abled personnel, and greater enforcement of disability media policies such as the American’s Disability Act (1990) and the INDS (1997).

Strengths and Limitations

This research study has a number of notable strengths. Most significantly, this study contributes to an underexplored area of research that expands on a traditional CDA to include multimodal analysis of the data. Therefore, a methodological strength of this research is that it explored a more integrated analytic method. Particularly, this was important given the power of representivity in film, and the need to analyse this power and its operational effects through a more dynamic and comprehensive semiotic lens. Further, a common critique of CDA is that it does not sufficiently account for affect, as it is mainly focused on deconstructing ideologies (Hammersley, 2003). However, Müller (2013) suggests that hegemonic meaning making is always permeated with emotional investment. Therefore, through analysing both the production and consumption of films (Fairclough, 1995), this study brought together affect and discourse to broaden the understanding of why certain discourses become hegemonic (Müller, 2013). Therefore, an additional strength is that this research contributes theoretically to the social model of disability through employing an underutilised discursive lens to investigate the cultural imagery that informs disabling attitudes and ableist discrimination. Additionally, this study has helped modernise studies on disability films by providing an analysis into contemporary films, while firmly embedding the findings within seminal literature. A final strength includes the number of steps that were taken to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical and analytically rigorous manner.

While the results of this study are noteworthy, it is important to acknowledge their limitations. A significant limitation is the small sample size of three films. However, given that this research is situated within a qualitative paradigm with a focus on in-depth inquiry, a larger sample was unfeasible. Additionally, the sample was quite diverse including three different types of acquired physical disabilities: quadriplegia (*Me Before You*), ALS (*You're Not You*) and above the knee amputation (*Stronger*), as well as encompassed films from three separate genres: Romantic Drama (*Me Before You*), Drama (*You're Not You*) and Biography (*Stronger*).Nonetheless, the findings are limited in that they do not provide a comprehensive overview of the representivity of acquired physical disability in film, but rather are tailored to the three films analysed. Moreover, all three films sampled are Hollywood productions and thus the discourses, ideologies and stereotypes identified may be culturally and contextually specific. An additional implication of sampling Hollywood productions is that these films are marketed for profit (Black & Pretes, 2007). Consequently, a potential bias of this genre is that

these films may include more sensationalised portrayals than documentaries or lower budget independent based films.

Furthermore, only films pertaining to acquired physical disabilities were analysed, while using a framework (i.e., Barnes 1992; Longmore, 1987; Norden, 1994) that was based on the broad spectrum of disabilities. Thus, it may be possible that noteworthy stereotypes not analysed in this research may still persist in contemporary films. However, these stereotypes may not have been identified in this analysis because they may be more common to sensory, psychiatric or developmental disabilities. Moreover, while this research attempted to narrow the scope by focusing on a subpopulation of disability, employing a CDA meant that disability was often discussed more broadly, given the emphasis on power relations between abled and disabled groups. Additionally, this study only analysed films with a disabled protagonist and as such films that include disabled supporting characters may represent disability in a more incidental way and promote different conceptions of the disabled experience (Black & Pretes, 2007). Lastly, the reception of film messages is a highly personal process and therefore it is possible that other researchers may interpret the films differently and reach opposing conclusions. However, significant steps were taken to counter this personal bias, including engaging in researcher reflexivity, free association and peer revision.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the under-exploration of a multimodal CDA, specifically in disability studies, it is recommended that future research continue to develop this methodology by investigating disabling representations in the media from a semiotic lens. Therefore, other genres of media representations, such as documentaries or reality TV series concerning disability, could be explored through a multimodal methodology. Further, given the highly specific nature of film analysis, it is recommended that future studies continue to develop this body of literature and investigate contemporary cinematic constructions of multiple disabilities to better assess the progress of disabling representations in films to date. Moreover, there is room for expansion in future analyses to sample films from a wider context, such as European, South African or lower budget independent films. This is because these alternative narratives may perpetuate and challenge different discourses than the dominant portrayals of Hollywood productions.

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