

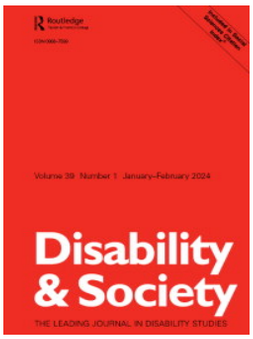
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Disability & Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cdso20

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To cite this article: Shawni Botha & Clare Harvey (2024) Disabling discourses: contemporary cinematic representations of acquired physical disability, Disability & Society, 39:1, 62-84, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2022.2060801

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2060801

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DISABILITY & SOCIETY
2024, VOL. 39, NO. 1, 62–84
https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2060801

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Disabling discourses: contemporary cinematic representations of acquired physical disability

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ABSTRACT

Film, a powerful publicising agent of knowledge, can have detrimental ideological and material implications contributing towards the systematic exclusion of disabled people. The paper explores how acquired physical disability is constructed within three contemporary mainstream fiction films. Guided by theoretical disability models and stereotypic representations of disability, identified by seminal authors in the field, the discussion highlights discourses that are perpetuated, challenged, or omitted within cinematic portrayals of disability. The paper also addresses how these discourses contribute to the maintenance or subversion of ableist power. The data underwent a multimodal analysis guided by critical and cinematic discourses. 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. Arguably, contemporary disability fiction films are still largely produced for, and consumed by, abled audiences. Recommendations for transforming cinematic representations of the disabled are addressed.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 December 2020
Accepted 25 March 2022

KEYWORDS
acquired physical disability; critical discourse analysis; cinematic discourse; disabling representations; film; multimodal analysis

Points of interest

- Films can communicate accurate knowledge as well as damaging stereotypes to the public. Disability has often been portrayed negatively in films and thus it is important to critically analyse films about disability.
- The paper discusses three contemporary films in which the main actors have an acquired physical disability. What is said about disability through the films' dialogue, and how disability is shown through camera angles, music, and props was analysed.
- The research found that films about acquired physical disability continue to produce negative stereotypes about disability. Thus, discrimination against disabled people is continued.

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- Encouragingly, some stereotypes about disability were seen to be challenged in the contemporary films.
- Future films need to be more inclusive of disability. Characters need to be complex, all-rounded individuals, with disability being only one facet of their personhood.

Films are powerful publicising agents of knowledge. The paper investigates filmic representations of acquired physical disability. Acquired disabilities develop during a person's lifetime because of an accident or illness rather than being present at birth (Employer Disability Information, 2020). Cinematic representations of this particular sub-group are of interest to analyse given the heightened corporeality of physical disabilities and their alignment to the visual modality of film. Existing studies on filmic representations of disability, while important, do not specifically focus on acquired physical disabilities (e.g. Brylla 2017, 2018; O'Dell 2015; Wilde, Crawshaw, and Sheldon 2018).

The transition from the abled to the disabled group status speaks back to the ableist ideologies that uphold the oppressive relations between the two groups. This paper hopes to contribute to Campbell's (2009, 4) call for a shift in our analytic gaze and aims to 'concentrate on what the study of disability tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism'. Arguably, mass media functions as a socialising agent, simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing hegemonic values and beliefs. On the individual level, the negative discourses in the media are internalised by disabled people, impacting on their self-esteem and identity (Flynn 2016). Additionally, discrimination is institutionalised in the social, cultural, political, and economic fabric of society. Therefore, disabling representations in the media 'are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily, and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion' (Barnes 1992, 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 (Stadler 2006).

Therefore, there is a need for research to engage with experiences of disability at a societal and political level. While some important work has been published in this area, these publications have a different focus to that of the current paper. For example, Ayisi and Brylla (2013), Brylla and Hughes (2017), as well as Markotić (2012) analysed portrayals of disability in documentaries. Markotić (2019) also investigated how disability is constructed in children's films. The current paper critically examines how acquired disability is constructed in three contemporary mainstream fiction films in order to identify the prevailing discourses, stereotypes, and socio-cultural norms surrounding disability. Engaging with representations in contemporary films is important given the dated nature of the films analysed in previous research

(Darke 1994; Riley 2005; Whittington-Walsh 2002). Indeed, Ellis (2011) critiques Chivers and Markotić (2010) for investigating portrayals of disability in dated films. Moreover, an analysis of mainstream fiction films is warranted, since these have the allure to captivate audiences through immersive plots which are most likely to impart stereotypes and ableist discourses, through their exploitation, sentimentality, and dramatisation. Additionally, mainstream films have the potential to popularise these discourses due to their ability to reach mass audiences.

Methods

Given the focus on meaning-making agents such as discourses, stereotypes, and representivity, the discussion in this paper is embedded within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm. According to Fairclough (1995a, 135), CDA is a conscientisation tool used to investigate how 'practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power'. A powerful structure that shapes and constrains individual subjectivities and social practices is the media (Flynn 2016). The authors in the current paper investigate how film discursively constructs or challenges societal conceptions of disability.

Moreover, the paper aims to expand upon the conventional application of textual CDA, through an analysis of multimodal discourses—a medium addressing language, in 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 here as the representational way subjectivities are constituted and circumscribed in symbolic relations of power (Stadler 2006).

The non-linguistic modes which make meaning in film are cinematic discourse—the 'filmmakers' main expressive vehicle and primary form of communication with, and influence over 'film viewers' (Janney 2012, 85). These include: 'staging, camera work, editing, and other conventional cinematic depictive practices that are used to shape perspectives' (Janney 2012, 85). The current discussion only highlights these film techniques when they function to discursively construct disability. Thus, this paper draws from, and adapts the work of, multiple theorists including, Fairclough (1995a, 1995b), Janney (2012), as well as Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) to create an integrated analysis of various modalities. This is important given the power of representivity and the need to analyse this power and its operational effects through a dynamic and comprehensive lens. Arguably, this is a novel method of analysis in the field of disability and film: Brylla (2018) uses content analysis in such work, and no analyses guidelines are provided by Corbella (2010) or Gauci and Callus (2015). Furthermore, Wilde, Cranshaw and Sheldon

(2018) offer an informal discussion on their take of *The Shape of Water*, without providing a method. Thus, the integrated multimodal analysis put forth in the current paper is important.

The corpus of film texts

The data consists of three films: *You're Not You* (2014), *Me Before You* (2016) and *Stronger* (2017). Inclusion criteria comprised

1. A protagonist who acquires a visible physical disability.
2. Contemporary representation of disability—sampling films released in the last decade.
3. Mainstream fiction films—reaching large audiences through wide distribution, generating a minimum worldwide gross profit of $500 000 (IMBd's, n.d.; The Numbers, n.d.).
4. English films, given the focus of analysing language and discourse.

Brief synopses of the films

A full synopsis of each film cannot be provided here, however some relevant details for the discussion are included.

You're Not You follows the story of concert pianist, Kate, who acquires Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), a progressive motor neuron condition affecting muscle movements responsible for breathing, speaking, and walking (ALS Association 2020). 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 is constructed as an unlikely friendship between Kate and abled Bec.

Me Before You tells the story of Will who acquires quadriplegia, consequently losing his lust for life. Despite Will falling in love with his new (abled) carer, Louisa, he decides that he cannot 'live boldly' with his impairment, opting for what is portrayed as the 'noble' act of euthanasia.

Stronger portrays the life of Jeff, who underwent a double leg amputation above the knee following the 2011 Boston Marathon bombings. The plot follows his rehabilitation journey and his 'heroic' quest to walk again.

Data generation

The films were chosen through *Google* searches and generated through the legal purchasing of the copyright versions on DVD. The data is in an audio-visual form: scripted dialogue and observations of cinematic discourses—the way disability is constructed through camera angles, editing, music, props etc. (Janney 2012).

Data analysis

The data was analysed through Fairclough's (1995a, 1995b) framework of CDA, as well as Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) concept of multimodal discourse, and Janney's (2012) description of cinematic discourse.

In performing the analysis, the discursive patterns which emerged recurrently across the films were identified and coded. This process was achieved iteratively by reading the transcripts and combining these with observations noted while repeatedly watching the films. Thus, the analysis was co-constructed linguistically through scripted dialogues and symbolically through cinematic discourses. Thereafter, the analysis considered how these multimodal discourses function to construct disability in ways which reflect, or challenge stereotypes identified by seminal authors in the field (e.g. Barnes 1992; Corbella 2010; Gauci and Callus 2015; Longmore 1987; Norden 1994). Additionally, Fairclough's (1995b) emphasis on presence/absence in representations, and the role that missing discourses can play in forming particular constructions of disability through exclusion or silencing of alternative representations was important to note.

Following the identification process, connections were made between the discourses, the discursive practice (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. The chosen framework allows consideration into who has access to the media and thus, who has agency to construct and portray media representations. Collectively, layering the analyses produces an exploration into stigma and power relations between abled and disabled positioning.

Disability in contemporary mainstream fictional film

Medical tragedy

The medical model has dominated cinematic portrayals of disability for political ends (Haller and Zhang 2014). The three film narratives analysed here rely on a series of medical tropes, jargon, props, and settings to foreground medical constructions of disability. Large portions of the narratives occur in hospital settings, with the disabled characters bedridden. Concerned family members hover around their bedsides. This imagery is coupled with melancholic background music or sounds of beeping heart monitors and strained breath.

> 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:… to stop his **muscles atrophying**.

Louisa: **But you're still trying, right?**

Physiotherapist: … And he's constantly open to **infection**. (Me Before You)

The ideology of disability as a medical tragedy is heightened by the juxtaposition set up between Will's efforts and an underwhelming prognosis. Moreover, Louisa's plea speaks to this senseless medical tragedy. The discursive strategy of listing medical ailments constructs disability as tragic—a never-ending onslaught of misery (Schwartz and Lutfiyya 2009). Through invoking extremes and absolutes disability is strategically situated firmly within the body, obscuring disability's social origins and political ramifications (Flynn 2016).

Hospitalisation scenes are filmed through top-shot camera angles positioning the spectator as looking down on the disabled body (Norden 1994). Additionally, the audience is situated behind glass doors looking into the ward, associating disability with confinement and separation (*Stronger*; *You're Not You*). Long camera takes emphasise time-consuming care, connecting disability with dependency (Darke 2010).

Lastly, presenting disabled characters as victims operates to illicit and exploit pity from the audience, reaffirming the 'paternalistic relationship of subordination' of minority groups (Hayes and Black 2003, 114).

The above multimodal analysis demonstrates how stigmatising portrayals of disability in film are constructed through what is said about disabled characters as well as how they are filmed through cinematic discourses.

The politics of care

The process of medicalisation establishes abled professionals in positions of power and surveillance (McDougall 2006).

Doctor: …did you already **pre-medicate** him?

Nurse: …He's already gotten his **oxy** and his **dilaudid PO**.

He has a **PR in fentanyl for breakthrough**. (Stronger)

Abled professionals speak in mumbled voices, mentioning a slew of drugs and discussing medical paraphernalia alongside medical jargon; all of which pathologise disability. The medics talk over Jeff, addressing him in third person. Therefore, Jeff's impairment works to objectify him as a medical case which dehumanises him (Boyd 2016).

These relations of power also play out in *Me Before You*:

Physiotherapist: *Blood pressure meds to raise it in the morning…Tablets for nerve pain. Anti-spasm tablets four times a day…*

This dialogue is accompanied by imagery of cupboards filled with drugs in Will's annex—which looks like a hospital ward setting. Disability is constructed as a life of unrelenting pain and misery. Furthermore, Will is portrayed as a passive recipient of medical care, stripping him of his agency and bodily autonomy (Davis 2013):

> Physiotherapist:…*you can give him pain killers, if he asks, just try to resist giving him sleeping pills, because they tend to make him a little…irritable… 'more irritable'*.

The abled professionals' control over Will's medical decisions and daily functioning is orchestrated to appear to be in Will's 'best interest'—merely ensuring that he does not become 'more irritable'.

In *You're not You* 'patientifying' disability conveys passivity and possession by the medical establishment (Linton 2010): 'Kate, the patient friend I take care of'. The word 'patient' over 'client' not only shows affinity to medical model conceptualisations of disability but entrenches power dynamics through establishing active—I take care of'—and passive roles. Kate's primary role as patient is foregrounded.

Notably, there are moments where the 'abled knows best' narrative is challenged by the disabled characters through assertions of self-determination and independent living (Davis 2013). This finds expression in *You're not You* when Kate fires her carer, declaring agency to her abled husband:

> Kate: *She made me* ***feel like…a patient.*** *I'm not a patient.*
>
> Evan: *…but…She's not a nurse. How can I trust you'll be okay with her?*
>
> Kate: *Maybe she'll actually listen to me…*

Arguably, the hiring of non-medical staff is Kate's attempt to equalise the power dynamics of care. The word 'actually' connotes that she had not been afforded this respect by her past carers. They made her feel invalidated and subordinated (Linton 2010). Similarly, in *Me Before You*:

> Will: *…me smashing those was not an accident.*
>
> Louisa: *Sorry…I didn't think*
>
> Will: …***You thought you knew best***.

Furthermore, when Will is introduced to his carer, he attempts to subvert the power dynamics between them by playing into Louisa's preconceived assumptions of disabled people. Louisa smiles awkwardly and expectantly at Will, who pulls a face and makes crude noises, feigning a mental and/or intellectual disability at Louisa's expense. Moreover, Will challenges the relationship dynamics that relegate him as a bystander in his own narrative (McDougall 2006): 'You don't have to talk across me, mother. My brain isn't paralysed yet'.

Sensationalising loss in opposition to 'normal'

Hegemonic discourses of loss, and the subsequent adjustment narratives are recurrent plot devices in filmic representations of acquired disability (Black and Pretes 2007). In *Stronger*, Jeff's amputation is prefaced in loss: '…our son lost his legs?'; media report: 'Jeff Bauman was standing next to one of the bombs when it detonated, *obliterating* his legs'. Furthermore, discourses of loss are sensationalised for dramatic appeal. The following ellipsis heightens suspense, while the use of profanity hyperbolises the extent of the loss: 'your fuckin' legs…They're gone…' Moreover, the camera zooms in on Jeff's face, as he winces in pain at this realisation.

Similarly, discourses of loss are sensationalised in *Me Before You* through highlighting the severity of Will's impairment: 'We are talking about **complete loss** of the legs and **very limited** use of the arms and hands. **Would that bother you**?' The power of wholeness discourse promotes a hegemony of normalcy—sub-humanising those with bodies who do not meet its' ideals (Loeser, Pini, and Crowley 2018). Will's disability is framed as rare and traumatising to encounter. Likewise, Kate's disability in *You're not You* is introduced as overwhelming: '…have you ever seen, let alone cared for, someone **suffering from** a **major degenerative illness**?' The use of adjectives—'very', 'complete', 'major'—function to situate Will and Kate lower down on 'the hierarchy of impairment' (Deal 2003). The higher one places on this hierarchy, the greater privileges, inclusion, and accessibility one is offered in society (Deal 2003). Therefore, biological essentialism is used as a powerful ideological weapon to legitimate society's social, economic, and political structures (Campbell 2009).

Discourses of loss include a metaphysical loss of self (Dziura 2015). The title, *You're **Not** You*, implies that Kate has lost her 'original' self; reiterated in the cinematic discourse during the audiences' introduction to Kate and her new disabled lifestyle—she is depicted as perplexed by her 'unrecognisable' reflection in the mirror. These constructions speak to McRuer's (2006) argument that dominant (abled) identities are presented as the norm. 'I miss…**me**' (*You're Not You*); 'I want to be in Paris, **as me**. The old **me**' (*Me Before You*). Here, both lead characters confess to missing their former abled selves, with 'me' suggesting their true/original selves. Disabled lives are devalued by associating the loss of ability with a loss of something quintessentially human—the self. Pressure for wholeness and 'compulsory able-bodiedness' (McRuer 2006) creates a desire to normalise:

> *…I just wanna **walk**.*
>
> *…I just wanna **stand up**.*
>
> *…I just wanna be **normal**.* (*Stronger*)

Abled/disabled saviours

One of the most prevalent, distorted stereotypical constructions of disability, particularly acquired disability, in film is the depiction of disabled characters as maladjusted or 'their own worst enemy' (Black and Pretes 2007). The disabled are represented as embittered, hostile, and self-pitying, isolating themselves (Barnes 1992):

> Will: *I don't do anything, Miss Clark. I sit. And just about exist.*
>
> Louisa: …*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?* (*Me Before You*)

The message conveyed is that Will is his 'own worst enemy'—dismissing Louisa's attempts. As such, the disabled are portrayed as responsible for the ostracism and prejudice they experience because they 'choose' to respond like this (Longmore 1987).

According to Black and Pretes (2007), the disabled are frequently represented as needing psychological insight from 'wiser', benevolent abled saviours to help propel them along their narratives of adjustment. The focus becomes the kindness—and superiority—shown by the abled, side-lining widespread ableism. This is a discursive strategy in *Me Before You*, as Louisa is hired to help Will rediscover happiness and find meaning in his new disabled life: 'What am I here for? To cheer him up, I guess'. The cinematic discourse reiterates Louisa's character: 'warm, chatty with a life-enhancing presence'. Her colourful, eccentric attire also works to depict her as the embodiment of cheerfulness. Consequently, a change arises in Will's demeanour: 'He's in a good mood. It's a long time since he's laughed…' (physiotherapist).

The abled saviour and saint also manifests in *You're Not You* when Kate's friend adulates the kindness and care Kate's (abled) husband provides her with: 'Isn't he **incredible**?…a **saint** that one'. Therefore, it is argued that films are still largely produced for abled audiences (Black and Pretes 2007), encouraging them to identify with the abled lead characters as benefactors.

Notably, *You're Not You* also inverts the narrative of the abled saviour since caring for Kate helped Bec rediscover her sense of self-worth, constructing Kate as her 'disabled saviour': '…the biggest thing…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, as the title *Me Before You* implies, Will changes Louisa's outlook on life: 'I have become a whole new person these last six months, because of you'. These discourses of reciprocity destabilise the traditional power dynamics of top-down relationships between abled and disabled groups (Shakespeare 1994), promising progression from unidirectional, caricatured depictions of disabled lives.

The victor/victim narrative

Arguably, Hollywood depictions of disability continue to construct the disabled experience through the binary, stereotypical lens of overcoming disability by means of remarkable feats or succumbing to it as the pitiful victim (Gauci and Callus 2015; McDougall 2006).

The inspirational victor

You're Not You and *Stronger* perpetuate the discourse that disability is a 'struggle' which can be managed, or overcome with willpower and perseverance:

> Kate: *I'm now in the chair, and it's harder to breathe.*
>
> Doctor: …*that's to be expected. This process only moves in one direction, but* ***attitude*** *goes a long way.* (*You're Not You*)
>
> Media report: *Jeff's* ***continued strength and perseverance in the face of adversity*** *represents all that is…Boston Strong!* (*Stronger*)

These extracts discursively function to situate the 'problem' of disability in the individual through listing personal qualities abled society considers necessary to overcome disability. The dialogue suggests that possessing these qualities is supposed to assist the disabled characters; yet this individualises the struggle of disability by shifting emphasis away from the social problems the disabled collective face. It also sets up the 'blame the victim' mentality (Gauci and Callus 2015; Longmore 1987), because the difficulties disabled individuals face are constructed as a consequence of their personal moral failings and not of systematic oppression. Thus, the origins of ableist oppression are dissimulated under the guise of an uplifting narrative.

The fact that *Stronger* is portrayed as a biography colludes in concealing the political undertones of the inspirational narrative by presenting Jeff's experiences as a matter of fact, granting authority to the presentation of disability as a personal struggle. Furthermore, *Stronger*, as alluded to in its title, exemplifies the supercrip narrative (Harvey 2015) since 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, Jeff is continuously constructed as a 'hero' by the press and by abled society. Thus, abled audiences are allowed to enjoy feel-good films, which helps vindicate instead of challenge their privileged positioning in society through valorising ableist standards.

Moreover, the victor narrative helps sooth psychological anxieties that disability invokes in abled audiences (Shakespeare 1994). *Stronger* transmits the message that Jeff's triumph over tragedy paves the way for others to overcome their own struggles:

…seein' you out there…throwin' that fuckin' pitch, you showed the world that they can't fuckin' break us…

…it ***gave me a little hope****, made me* ***feel a little better****, and I just wanna say*

fuckin' thank you…(crowd cheers).

Towards the end, the film switches to a documentary style, including real-life footage of Jeff walking again on his prostheses. The biographical narrative works to legitimate the inspirational fictional caricature. The setting is one of triumph and hope.

Arguably, the victor narrative is deceptive, in that it is falsely considered a more positive portrayal of disability in the media (McDougall 2006). Thus, this discussion holds with Barnes (1992), who argues that victor narratives are exploited for their sentimentality—discouraging genuine reactions from audiences, such as understanding and compassion for the disabled. Moreover, these caricatured portrayals omit the full personhood of disabled individuals (Watermeyer 2006). Therefore, while the 'disabled victor' may be regarded as challenging discourse, it can be asserted that it continues to insidiously perpetuate stigmatising stereotypes of acquired physical disability.

Succumbing to disability: Rather dead than disabled

Garland-Thomson (2004) suggests that if disability cannot be overcome or cured, then 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, while reaffirming their positioning as fortunate and superior (Hayes and Black 2003). Whether a character's journey will follow the victor or victim narrative is dependent upon the type of disability acquired 'in Hollywood some impairments are more acceptable than others' (Barnes 1992, 15). This is evident in the sampled films, as 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.

Conversely, without this hope for rehabilitation, characters with severe impairments must be killed off. An attempted suicide scene from *You're not You* perpetuates the discourse that a disabled life is a lesser form of existence:

Bec: *Last night, what were you doing at the top of the stairs?*

Kate: *I just thought it'd be easier…*

In *Me Before You* Will suggests that euthanasia is his only available option: 'It's **not going to get better**…I am going to go to Switzerland'. This location is allegorical, as it serves to connote a place in which euthanasia is

decriminalised, and thus reducing the attached stigma to such an action (SBS World News 2018). Furthermore, the difficulties Will faces in participating in events such as dining at the horse racing or his wheelchair getting stuck in the mud, work to set up his decision of euthanasia as logical. It suggests that a life with limited mobility is not worth living since it is one of a second-class citizenship. This representation is deliberately depoliticised, highlighting the severity of Will's impairment as opposed to the severity of the discrimination and inaccessibility disabled people encounter in society (Shakespeare 1994):

> *I need it to end here. No more* ***pain and exhaustion*** *and waking up every morning already wishing it was over.*
>
> *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.*

These extracts promote the ideology that a life with disability is an inconsolable reality (Schwartz and Lutfiyya 2009). Will's repetition and emphasis on the past tense principle 'loved' works to suggest that disabled life cannot be 'accepted' or enjoyed. Death is presented as preferable or, as Kate and Will suggest, the 'easier' option to enduring a life of misery. Therefore, disabled life is devalued and Will's decision for euthanasia or Kate's refusal of treatment are legitimised as the final acts of independence that they can exert over disability. In *Me Before You* the ethical debate of the 'right to die' works to position the audience on the pro side. Will's euthanasia is not to be 'judged' because he is merely exercising his right to 'freedom' of choice—an argument appealing to democratic societal values of individual rights (Davis 2013): physiotherapist: 'I can't judge what he wants to do. That's his choice'; his father: 'It's his choice and this is what he wants'.

Precluding sexual subjectivities

The 'un-desiring'

The disabled have been precluded from sexual citizenry because they have continuously been conceptualised as either un-desiring or undesirable in lay consciousness, cultural imagery, and public policy (Loeser, Pini, and Crowley 2018). 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 positioned physical difference as socially deviant (Garland-Thomson 1997).

Asexual representations manifest in *Me Before You* and *You're Not You*, since both open with sexual scenes between the lead abled characters and

their romantic partners. However, once the characters acquire their disabilities there is an absence of portrayed sexual lives. This silence around discourses of desirability and pleasure de-eroticise disabled corporeality and actively construct disability as an asexual subjectivity through omission. This silencing technique is explained by Foucault (1979, 27): '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'.

Cinematically, sexuality is 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 (Evans 2014). The camera follows Kate while her husband cautiously positions her in bed like a fragile patient; working to construct disabled life as routine, rigid, insipid, and asexual. Both characters lie apart, and Kate looks longingly at her husband, calling out his name in want of intimacy. However, he quickly dismisses her: 'You wake me up if you need anything…' Their relationship has become one of fulfilling 'needs', not desires. The film crosscuts to Bec who is engaged in sexual relations with a man whom she has recently met. In contradistinction, abled sexuality is represented as spontaneous, exciting, and promiscuous. Moreover, these comparisons are heightened through the use of cinematic discourse, as an uncomfortable silence and stillness in Kate's bedroom is juxtaposed with rebellious rock music playing 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

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

The message conveyed arguably 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 sexual activity (Malinowska 2018; Wilde, Crawshaw, and Sheldon 2018). This positioning renders Will as subordinated and emasculated.

Will reinforces stereotypical assumptions about asexuality for men with spinal cord injuries, alluding to his sexual impotence while talking to Louisa:

> *I can't watch you wandering around…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***.

Additionally, he implies that this loss of sexual ability has influenced his decision to euthanise himself.

On the other end of the continuum, *Stronger* perpetuates discourses of sexual deviancy when Jeff is moaning, having fallen out of bed. However,

his mother is under the impression that he is masturbating: 'The kid's got no legs, and he's blowin' loads'. The deliberately crass language constructs Jeff's expression of his sexuality as abhorrent. This speaks back to stereotypical portrayals of disabled people as hypersexual or sexually deviant (Loeser, Pini, and Crowley 2018). However, *Stronger* is the only film which includes 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. Erin's reaction destabilises the taboo surrounding disabled sexuality—brushing it off as commonplace, rather than sensationalising it. Arguably, this signifies a progressive leap in the representation of disabled sex in film.

The 'undesirable'

The disabled continue to be conceptualised as undesirable romantic partners (Malinowska 2018; Wilde, Crawshaw, and Sheldon 2018). These discourses promote the ideologies that disabled individuals are unworthy of the same love and commitment as abled individuals—the disabled are undeserving of abled partners, and relationships fail for the disabled solely because of their impairments. In *Me Before You* discourses of the disabled as unworthy life partners intersect with discourses of pity and burden. The following exchange concerns Will's former love interest leaving him:

> 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 desirability –proclaiming that the only plausible explanation that one would stay with a disabled partner would be out of 'pity'.

Will echoes similar sentiments as he constructs himself as an unworthy life partner for Louisa:

> Will: …***I don't want you to miss out on all the things that someone else could give you***…*I don't want you to look at me one day and feel even the tiniest bit of regret or pity.*

Will's description of a life with him is one of stagnation and burden for his partner: 'tied to me'. Additionally, he suggests that staying in a relationship with him would result in missed opportunities for Louisa that someone else could afford her. Implicit in this assertion 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'.

Louisa is depicted uncritically, appearing to have no hesitations regarding pursuing someone with a disability as a romantic partner. According to Longmore (1987), it is the disabled characters' lack of self-acceptance that prevents couples from being together. Therefore, cinematic portrayals invert social reality by suggesting that it is the disabled who are responsible for their lesser romantic value—not the prejudice rife in ableist society.

Encouragingly, the other two films challenge the aforementioned discourses. In *You're Not You* the hegemonic construction of a disabled partner is set up as burdensome, arguably to expose how caring for a disabled partner is frequently and unfairly used as a justification for unfaithfulness (Barnes 1992):

> Bec: …*if this is about your husband having an affair, why are you taking a bullet?*…
>
> Kate: *It's my fault, not his. I'm the one who got sick…This isn't the life he built, the life he deserves…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.*

Bec's response illuminates the contradiction inherent in Kate's claims that her husband's affair was justified because she can no longer provide him with happiness. Bec's inclusive response, 'we all deserve some happiness', implies that the disabled are deserving of the same dignity, respect, and commitments in marriage as the abled.

Additionally, *Stronger* promotes the message that the disabled are worthy as romantic, life partners through portraying a narrative in which Jeff and his abled partner stay together after the acquirement of his disability, having children and leading happy, fulfilled lives.

Cinematic constructions

Politics of representation

The paper has argued that through highly caricatured and stereotypical portrayals, the disabled are still largely misrepresented in and through film. However, there is also evidence of under-representation, since all three films continue the tradition of 'cripface' by casting abled actors in disabled roles (Stewart 2018; Wilde, Crawshaw, and Sheldon 2018). Studies suggest that 95% of disabled characters are portrayed by abled actors (Woodburn and

Kopic 2016). Literature speaks to the power afforded to those who are allowed to construct and disseminate cultural representations in the media (Baker et al. 2009; Lane 2019). Thus, the opportunity for self-representation is pertinent to destabilising stigma, since 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 without the lived experiences of disability, abled actors may rely on (inaccurate) stereotyped and caricatured portrayals of disability to inform their performance.

Despite these politics of representation, 'cripface' remains largely unproblematised in popular imagination. Notably, abled Jake Gyllenhaal was praised for his portrayal of disabled character Jeff Bauman, even receiving an award nomination for 'Best Actor' (IMBd, n.d.). In theorising about Hollywood's ableist monopoly on disabled cinematic representations, Davis (2013, 41) argues that allowing abled actors to transform into disabled characters through theatricality and cinematic technology provides comfort to abled audiences because 'the fear of fragmentation and destruction of the ego is compensated for by the notion that "it's only a movie"'. Perhaps this may speak to why the same special affects are not employed to allow disabled characters to play abled actors in films (Lane 2019)—a technique that could have been used in the three films analysed here when the audiences initially meet the abled characters before they acquire their disabilities.

Freak show fascination

Authors (Church 2011; Whittington-Walsh 2002) argue that film operates as the modern-day freak show—exhibiting disability and capitalising on voyeuristic, forbidden desires of the 'normal' to stare at the spectacle of anomalous bodies. Appeasing audiences' voyeuristic desires amounts to a fetishisation of the disabled body—supported by theatrics, suspense, and exploitative camera work. This position finds expression during scenes in which the lead characters' disability is first revealed to audiences.

In *Me Before You*, prior to Will's introduction the tension is palpable—suspenseful music plays overwhelmingly, while the camera captures a medium-close shot of Louisa's apprehensive facial expression. Moreover, the side-angle shot captures Louisa as she gulps in anticipation 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 meet. Collectively, this mise-en-scène evokes a tense-filled atmosphere since the audience is kept waiting alongside Louisa for the reveal of Will and what has become of him in his disabled state. Cinematically, this positioning constructs the audience as onlookers and the disabled character as a fetishised object

(Norden 1994). This objectification is aided by theatrics, with Will positioned behind murky glass doors—initially obscuring his disability from view, but then these slide open revealing his disabled body. Arguably a freak-show-esque atmosphere is created to the reveal of disabled Will by relying on contradictory impulses of fascination and repulsion, awe, and pity (Conroy 2012; O'Dell 2015).

Kate's reveal in *You're Not You* also relies on this technique since the audience is first shown a silhouette of her naked disabled body; however, it is obscured by the misted glass of the shower. Following this mystification, the audiences' desires to gaze upon Kate's 'impaired' body are appeased by a close-up camera angle of her limp arm, as well as capturing an exaggerated shot of her exposed, hunched over, distorted-looking back. These depictions exaggerate and exploit corporeal differences as a means of fetishising the other, enfreaking the disabled body.

Similarly, *Stronger* invokes this mystification process in scenes in which Jeff's amputated legs are initially concealed by hospital bed sheets. Nevertheless, the 'incomplete' form of his limbs is outlined. 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 a shot of dark clouds outside Jeff's hospital window, evoking a foreboding atmosphere to his reveal. Moreover, this scene is filmed through a close-up, over-the-shoulder shot of Jeff's amputated legs. However, while they appear foregrounded and framed in the centre of the shot by Jeff and Erin's faces, his limbs are deliberately blurred. This editing serves a mystification function. Jeff refuses to look at his legs and instructs Erin: 'Don't look at 'em'. Thus, the cinematic discourse as well as the dialogue work together to initially thwart the act of staring. However, the emphasis on 'not looking' ironically encourages the audiences' forbidden desires to stare. The act of looking is aided by film—a private, commodified space to carry out these forbidden urges (Flynn 2016).

It could be claimed that *Stronger* confronts the audiences' voyeuristic impulses through blurring the reveal of Jeff's disabled body. Yet, this position is debunked by the numerous scenes in which Jeff's amputated legs are exposed and exploited cinematically through close-up camera shots which emphasise his scarred knees. Furthermore, Jeff's body is enfreaked by high-angle shots which demean him through exposing his naked body or position him as a victim figure in a hospital bed.

Thus, it is argued that contemporary fictional films are still largely produced for the consumption of abled audiences. Hence, the discussion holds with Church's (2011) claim that the disabled have been subsumed by a pervasive representational history of unequal viewing dynamics; a dynamic attributed to the ableist gaze, which holds within it a normalising authority

(Boyd 2016). Enfreaking the disabled body through the above cinematic discourses serves both a regulatory and reaffirming function, reassuring abled audiences that 'they' are not like the 'freak' presented—revering the abled norm.

Polarising ability and disability

The three films rely on a chronological narrative sequence, constructing separate abled and disabled lives for the lead characters, encouraging audiences to make before and after comparisons. These narratives rely on provocative portrayals through the discursive strategies of invoking extremes and polarities in their representation of abled and disabled selves.

Initially in *You're Not You* the audience is given a brief overview of the different spheres of Kate's abled life which work together to depict a picturesque existence. The opening scenes revolve around Kate's happy marriage and fulfilled sex life. A scene showing Kate dressed in sleek professional wear, on a business call while standing powerfully over her desk constructs her as a successful, productive member of society. The film cuts across to a wide-screen angle of her affluent home and the camera zooms in on her cooking for a dinner party, connoting a healthy social life. However, her disability begins to creep in, symbolised by her dropping a wine glass and it consequently shattering. This imagery works discursively, foreshadowing how Kate's life of excessive happiness will too shatter. Her disability is foreshadowed again when she finishes playing a piano piece: her guests' applauds are silenced and the camera zooms in on her uncontrollably shaking hand with Kate looking worried. Singular, suspenseful music notes begin while the screen cuts to black. This mise-en-scène constructs disability as foreboding and fearful. As the narrative progresses disabled Kate's life is presented oppositionally—her once happy marriage crumbles after her husband has an affair, she is no longer working, and her social life has greatly diminished. A dinner party scene is filled with awkward tension as Kate struggles to eat independently.

In *Me Before You,* Will's abled and disabled selves are juxtaposed through several cinematic discourses. The film opens in abled Will's bachelor pad, with an attractive blonde woman in bed, signifying an independent, sexual, adult life. However, later in the film Will resides in his childhood home with his parents. The setting change perpetuates infantilising discourses about disability—associating disabled life with dependency and regression (Barnes 1992). Will's identity is prefaced on his ability—a home video of him centres around an adventurous theme: 'There are very few people out there who can claim they have out-Bonded James Bond'. Together with the rhetorical question 'is there nothing he can't do?', his ability in his former identity is highlighted. However, the narrative sequencing makes this rhetorical question ironic because the audience is shown this meta-film while Will lies paralysed in bed,

implying there is nothing much he can do now. These hyperbolic representations of extreme happiness and excessive ability serve to make the acquisition of the characters' disabilities more tragic. Therefore, the audience is encouraged to consider the abled lives Kate and Will once led and to draw comparisons to their current disabled lives. Arguably, the before and after narrative discursively functions as an 'us versus them' distinction, situating the characters' abled and disabled selves in inclusionary and exclusionary positions of power and agency that speak back to societal structures (Church 2011).

Conversely, *Stronger* opens 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. 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 meaning in his disability, evolving into a character who 'shows up' for his family.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that stereotypical constructions of disability identified by seminal authors (e.g. Barnes 1992; Corbella 2010; Gauci and Callus 2015; Longmore 1987; Norden 1994) persist in contemporary mainstream fictional films. Medical model conceptualisations of disability abound as hegemonising and oppressive ideology in cinema. Discursively, these pathologising portrayals work to conflate disability with impairment, promoting inaccurate narratives that disqualify the agency and bodily autonomy of disabled characters. Through 'patientifying', disability is confined to the realm of the corporeal. Accordingly, the adversities faced by the disabled are individualised, as they are presented as physical and psychological difficulties. Arguably, medicalisation in film serves a depoliticising agenda, working to obscure the social origins and political disenfranchisement of the disabled experience. Consequently, alternative conceptualisations put forth by opposing paradigms such as the social, cultural or affirmation disability models are deligitimised. Subsequently, contemporary mainstream fictional films collude with the medical establishment to endorse ableist ideologies that secure their power and privileges. Similarly, supercrip discourses popularise the mistaken message that the challenges of the disabled arise out of personal, moral failings. Therefore, perpetuating these stereotypes unhelpfully shifts the remedial focus from societal oppression onto overcoming disability. The representational power of these narratives revere and solidify abled standards while simultaneously trivialising the systematic exclusion faced by the disabled minority.

Constructions of disabled protagonists as supercrips; as victims of medical tragedies, subsumed by losses; as hypersexual or asexual; as infantalised; as their 'own worst enemy' and 'better off dead' all contribute to highly emotive and caricatured portrayals of disability. Collectively, these superficial

constructions serve a dehumanising agenda that is to the detriment of recognising the full personhood and citizenry of disabled individuals. Moreover, caricatured constructions are aided by the omission of representations of disabled lives in ordinary ways (Barnes 1992). Therefore, the disabled are to a large extent still being manipulated in film for their metaphorical significance, exploited for comforting or cathartic symbolism, and capitalised on through sensationalised portrayals used to market films—which are still largely produced for, and consumed by, abled audiences. These interpretations have been evidenced in the paper via the cinematic discourses of camera angles, theatricality, and narrative sequencing—all of which align abled audiences in positions of spectatorship which fetishise the disabled as objects.

Promisingly though, the analysis also revealed progress in contemporary mainstream fictional films with challenges made to discourses of disabled persons as undesirable and unworthy romantic partners. Protagonists were shown to resist the 'abled knows best' narrative through assertions of self-determination and independent living, and the abled saviour stereotype was inverted through including discourses of reciprocity, which helps to equalise the power dynamics of care. These advancements signify a step towards including more complex characterisations of acquired physical disability and more nuanced interactions between abled and disabled groups. It is hoped that the inclusion of these empowering portrayals of disability can be used to help conscientise audiences to alternative representations of the disabled experience.

Nonetheless, the transformation of disabling imagery in film continues to be slow. Despite societal advances that have taken place in the material lives of the disabled, discrimination is still operating insidiously and symbolically through film.

Subsequently, the paper calls for more complex characterisations of acquired physical disabilities and more dynamic interactions between abled and disabled characters, accompanied by ordinary portrayals of the disabled experience. Thus, positioning this minority as part of the general social landscape. Disability and disabled characters should not be portrayed as victims, isolated, and confined to medical scenes in films. It is hoped that these efforts will dispel disempowering discourses, desensationalise disability, as well as reduce stigma and ableism so that those with (acquired) disabilities can be realised as 'ordinary', independent contributors of society.

Recommendations

The didacticism of films should be harnessed for its enabling potential by including alternative paradigmatic representations of disability in order to deconstruct the hegemony of the medical model and conscientise abled and disabled audiences alike to social disablement. In assisting this paradigm

shift, it is recommended that more disabled personnel are recruited into the media industry and that consolatory bodies are established. Furthermore, self-representation is an empowering inclusive movement that can help challenge abled misconceptions. Therefore, it is recommended that the film industry moves away from 'cripface' and appropriately cast more disabled actors, accompanied by disability equity training for abled personnel and greater enforcement of disability media policies.

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