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Disability Studies

Watch and Learn

America loves the Oscars. The world loves the Oscars. Movies, such a valued piece of our culture, are a form of art that people from everywhere can gather around to appreciate. And, on this one night a year, those actors that we fawn over and learn to love are praised with glory. We sprinkle them with affection because, on that big screen, they are able to bring together stories that capture our own lives. In those two hours or so, they are relatable – one of us. However, there are many communities, and one in particular, that often to not feel fair representation. The disability community in America has historically been falsely reenacted and appropriated in film. One of the primary reasons for this is the continued casting of able-bodied actors to play the role of disabled characters. Although receiving praise in some areas, Hollywood has a lot to reflect on and a far way to go in respect to disability culture. Here, I will dig deeper into this phenomenon by analyzing four critically acclaimed feature films that dare to portray disability on screen.

Charlie: What you have to understand is, four days ago he was only my brother in name. And this morning we had pancakes.

Released in 1988, Rain Man received the awards of Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, and, in one of his all-time career successes, Dustin Hoffman for Best Actor. Depicting a man on the autism spectrum, the film also received some appreciation from the disability community, although for a different reason than the Academy found.

“Before Rain Man, there was no popular conception of what autism looked like, among the public or on-screen,” (Knights 2018). Hoffman was the first actor to really bring autism into the public eye and illustrate a person with autism as just that – a person. The director really highlights this lack of public knowledge about autism with the nurse character who, when Charlie writes down his brother’s diagnosis asks, “He’s… artistic?” At this point in the 1980s the only people really informed about autism were specialized clinicians, who were rare and hard to find. However, a soon as the world got to know Raymond Babbitt, they got to recognizing all of the autistic people that had previously been hidden behind the protection of parents or institutions.

What Rain Man is criticized for, is its inability to introduce autism has a diverse spectrum. Because Raymond is a savant, the audience is left with this idea that all autistic people are quick with numbers and have an incredible memory. This practice of idealizing disabilities to put forth the most fascinating, useful, and somewhat superhuman qualities, can be seen as a form of modern freakism. In addition, we should be questioning why it is that our society created this stereotype of autism after being introduced to this first widespread example of its depiction. It was not the film that created the stereotype, but more the fault of the audience and what they took from it. (McCarthy 2018). Why is it so hard to expand our minds from this one character? Instead we become stuck and Raymond Babbitt became the unrealistic standard for autism.

Forrest Gump: Mama says they was magic shoes. They could take me anywhere.

 Introducing: a film that changed the way we view cinema today. A film that pushed the boundaries of screenwriting and swept the nation. Forrest Gump is an icon and a household name in America. However, considering the fact that the leading character was portrayed to be neurodivergent, this film was not received well by the disability community.

 First of all, it’s important to point out that Forrest’s character can only be described as neurodivergent, because the specifics of his disability were never claimed and given recognition. The creators of this role just produced a character that modeled stereotypes of intellectual disability. Art Blaser (1995) of the Los Angeles Times also points out that those stereotypes that *were* chosen fit the ideas of what a disabled person *should* look like. Gump was so loveable to his able-bodied audience because he is the “type” of disabled that people like. He, “fits Hollywood standards because he is a neat, young straight, white American male” (Blaser 1995). However, as we knows, it is impossible to fit disability into a box. Real disabled people are of any age, race, gender, or class. They may be “messy” or unhappy sometimes. The only aspects of Gump’s disability that might be defined as atypical are there to provide humor for the audience.

 Another problematic factor of this award-winning feature is its perspective on living with disability. Forrest Gump epitomizes the inspirational porn narrative by proving again and again to it is possible to “overcome” your disability. And that, *despite* his disability, he still finds a way to become a hero. The first time we see this represented is by a scene at the beginning of the movie when young Forrest must run away from the school bullies. Jenny yells at him to, “Run Forrest, run!” as he magically sheds off his movement-restricting leg braces and finds an ability to run away faster than the bikes chasing him. Another character that follows this development path is Lieutenant Dan. As a white male, disabled late in life, Lt. Dan’s bilateral above-knee amputations are a symbol of losing his masculinity and heroism. He becomes the archetypal “angry gimp” that Gump befriends. Then the movie ends with a romantic return of Lt. Dan as he walks at Forrest’s wedding with his new “magic legs” – a rediscovery of his masculinity and normality (Lopez 2019).

 Although with clear intention to serve the able-bodied community, the film did leave a few positive messages with the viewer. Mrs. Gump, the most loved character by critiques from the disability community, represents the fight for educational integration led by parents of disabled children in the 1950s (Green 2019). And beyond the leading role, Forrest Gump displays a variety of disabilities, including leg braces, amputation, AIDS, and mental health. This message of diversity is a very important one for the fight of representing and respecting disability culture.

Becky: Tell me what you want as fast as it comes to you.

Gilbert: I wanna be a good person.

 In another depiction of autism, we view Leonardo DiCaprio as a supporting actor in the role of Arnie Grape. With an Academy Award for this work, DiCaprio developed his character so well that the audience, who was viewing him for the first time in a major motion picture, had trouble determining if Leo really had autism.

 Like Rain Man, What’s Eating Gilbert Grape presented autism in a manner that informed the audience that those with the disorder cannot care for themselves. Throughout the film, Arnie was able to express himself by engaging in activities that society would not consider as “normal”. We saw Arnie stim by rocking, flapping his hands, or running. He would run away to climb trees or even, in one scene, up the town’s water tower. The townspeople and family members in the film clearly regarded these moments as abnormal and wrong. It is intriguing to wonder if the audience watching the film would interpret Arnie’s actions in the same way. Is this the intentions of the producers to question the reactions of the townspeople and the reaction of yourself?

 Another idea that is brought up by Simon Baron-Cohen (2013) regarding the meaning of this film is the question of who has the disability? Each of the predominant characters in the Grape family has something in their lives that is a functional impairment. Society automatically thinks of Arnie’s autism. But what about Mrs. Grape, who lives at home with depression and obesity after her husband’s death? Could Gilbert be considered disabled with all of the pressure placed on him by his family and the able-bodied culture that surrounds him? This film pushes its audience to question how we define and identify disability.

 Although hard to pin down the true meaning of this abstract film, What’s Eating Gilbert Grape does address the hardship placed on the caretakers of disabled people in a world not created for them. It places the spotlight on a family who would often go unacknowledged and clearly highlights the need of support for families with disabled children.

Stephen Hawking: I’m sorry. I did my best.

This drama, based on the true life story of one of the most brilliant minds in theoretical physics and cosmology, shows a more modern depiction of disability on screen. Released in 2014, disability critics clearly see the difference in film adaptations of disability culture between the early 1990s and today. This use of an able-bodied actor to play the part is more fitting because of the fact that Stephen Hawking did not develop ALS until later in life. Disability activists fighting for the “Nothing About Us Without Us” movement point out the lack of representation among a crew of able-bodied actors, directors, producers, and writers. However, The Theory of Everything is able to prove the true advancements in the ability of Hollywood films to – more accurately than before – represent and educate on disability culture.

The greatest applause for The Theory of Everything goes to its ability to brutally expose the troubles of daily tasks that come with being disabled in a society built for an able-bodied person (quote disabilityhorizons.com author). For Hawking this may be cutting and eating food or navigating an auditorium where he is speaking. In addition, it’s not just troubles of the disabled person but also the caregiver in that person’s life. Jane, Stephen’s wife, pushes the film so much further with her representation of the pressure that this role puts on her and her marriage. She fights a constant battle of “love and duty” against “resentment and despair”.

The marriage between Stephen and Jane becomes a very central plot of the movie. AsKristen Page-Kirby(2014) describes, the film becomes about everything else too – not just his ALS. It is about their marriage, his work, and their children. It is about everything that any couple in the world fights for. It is about the struggles that make up any life. Hawking, unlike many of the characters previously analyzed, is so much more than his ALS.

To scrutinize:

Are disabled main characters written to win Oscars or to genuinely educate on disability?

Do these films express the true value and intricacies of disability culture? Is it more than just a mimicry of physical differences?

 Who here is being robbed of their right to self-representation?

Are we able to completely accept a disabled character for who they are? Or are we aching for the shattering of the illusion?

Would he have received the award if his character was not disabled?

How is this film serving the disability community?

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