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Escaping the Evil Avenger and the Supercrip: Images of Disability in Popular Television

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'Accept me for what I am and I'll accept you for what you're accepted as.'   (Christopher Nolan, 1987).

Introduction

This article examines the extent and significance of the under-representation of the disabled community in fictional film and television, arguing that when it is portrayed on-screen, the images are often inaccurate or unfair. Whereas media treatment of women, the gay community, or ethnic minorities has received considerable academic attention, no such priority has been given to the nature of the portrayal of the disabled, or the lack of proportional visibility on our screens.

There are 350,000 people with disabilities in the Republic of Ireland (National Rehabilitation Board and RTÉ, 1992) representing approximately ten per cent of the Irish population.[1] Were disabled people proportionately portrayed and represented on Irish television, ten per cent of characters and presenters would be disabled – one in ten news readers, soap opera characters, television hosts. This is clearly far from being the case. In 1997, across the six main British and Irish soap operas on Irish television, there were only three disabled characters. Apart from specialist news bulletins for the deaf, there are no visibly disabled newsreaders on any of the stations currently available to Irish television viewers. With no established language or research methods to draw on in the study of disability in the media, this article adapts some tools of gender studies and argues that many of the problems of representation that have been highlighted for gender will be seen to have a corresponding value for investigating film and television portraits of disability, and for deconstructing some of the coded messages the mass media may be sending us about certain groups in society.

1. The definition of 'disability' used is that developed by the World Health Organisation which includes physical or psychological impairment or restriction and the handicaps that result from these conditions. The one exception is that of non-congenital mental illness which is not included as a disability for the purposes of this article.

Representing disability

Gender studies have identified many cases in which female characters in the fictional media are stereotyped and not allowed to develop into fully-rounded individuals. Disabled characters are frequently subject to the same restrictions. They are over-simplified and used not for their complexity as people but for their easily identifiable impairment which is exploited by scriptwriters for dramatic effect, for emotional appeal or for blatant symbolism.

One of the common 'uses' of disabled characters is as the irredeemable villain. Martin Norden, in one of only two available critical media studies texts about disability, (Norden, 1994) has coined the term 'evil avenger' to describe the stereotype of disabled baddies seeking revenge for the bad deal they have been dealt in life. Adventure films such as the *Batman* movies and *James Bond* cast disfigured and deformed characters as the villain – easily identifiable personifications of evil. The immorality of the villain is linked with his or her physical deformity as a dramatic technique. In *Goldeneye*, for instance, the moment that Bond's friend turns evil and betrays him coincides with the moment that he is physically disfigured, and thereafter the deformity represents all that is bad and lacks heroism. From Shakespeare's Richard III to the modern day 'Two Face' Batman villain, we can see writers using physical disability to embody, or personify evil.

When they are not inextricably linked with the dark side, disabled characters are often portrayed as remarkable achievers, 'supercrips' who, against all odds, triumph over the tragedy of their condition. In contrast to the evil avenger, the supercrip stereotype depicts a disabled person who, through astounding personal endeavour overcomes their disability – a cripple who learns to walk, a dyslexic person who becomes a writer. Dramatically, this image is useful to script writers for whom a disabled person's triumph over their impairment is a metaphor for the more general human struggle to overcome life's obstacles. The image, however, is unsavoury to disability critics who see it as crucial that a disabled person learn to accept their disability, rather than constantly struggling to rise 'above' it to 'normality'. It should not be assumed that it is the ultimate goal of a disabled person to be cured. The underlying message, or ideology, of this logic is that disabled people can never be happy as they are and must change to be accepted and valued.

Even the widely acclaimed film *My Left Foot*, Jim Sheridan's story of disabled artist Christy Brown, relies somewhat on the supercrip stereotype. In a Channel 4 *Without Walls* documentary, disabled critic Shabnam points out that when the hero writes with his left foot on the blackboard, his father lifts him up proclaiming 'This is Christy Brown, my son. Genius!' and brings him for his first drink in the pub. It is only when Christy begins to behave extraordinarily that his father accepts him.

Depiction of disabled people behaving 'ordinarily' arises much less frequently in film. Although there are a number of 'once-off' examples of films such as *Children of a Lesser God* or *Boyz in the Hood* which represent people with disabilities as fully-rounded individuals, there are few films in which disabled characters play secondary roles as incidental people in society. In films, central characters have mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and friends, but few disabled characters fill those roles. Although there are films *about* disability, it is rare for disabled people to appear in an 'ordinary' capacity, as part of the general social context. One representation, which has been held up as a rare example by Shabnam is the brother of the groom in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. He is firstly a brother, a good friend and he also happens to be deaf. His disability is incidental, though not ignored, and his deaf-signing is vividly depicted in the wedding scene where he signs to the congregation that he believes his brother is in love with somebody else.

However this film is exceptional. Disabled characters are more commonly portrayed in dramatic, dangerous or challenging situations. The disabled mothers, brothers, friends and business people that make up ten per cent of the population and lead ordinary lives rarely appear in television or film fiction. This reduces the possibility of on-screen disabled role models for disabled people, and deprives the estimated seven out of ten people (NRB and RTÉ, 1992) in Ireland who do not come in personal contact with disabled people the possibility of encountering fictional disabled characters. The media fail to counteract its stereotyping of disability with sufficient 'ordinary' characters for whom disability is merely one aspect of the personality portrayed. The resulting message is that disability is too abnormal to be integrated into 'normal' society.

With no context in which it is seen as 'normal', disability is perceived as threatening and unusual. The subjectification of female characters as described by feminist psychoanalysis 'controls' the threat of the unknown woman by either punishing her or fetishising her. Similarly, the disabled evil avenger always gets his or her 'comeuppance'. The supercrip is portrayed as perfect: too intelligent, too sporty, and too gifted to be feared.

Norden (1994) discusses how disabled people are further isolated cinematically by various devices including the point of view shot which posits the spectator invariably as able-bodied; physical distance is often put between disabled characters and others, and shots are rarely taken from realistic wheelchair-height eye-lines. Thus we can begin to see the link with psychoanalytical theory. The spectator is automatically constructed as able-bodied.

Feminist theorists such as Mulvey (1975) and van Zoonen (1994) have concluded that many female characters in fictional film and television are over-simplified either for dramatic purposes that suit the script-writer, or as a means of keeping them in their place in either a pre-meditated or subconscious way. Examined under similar parameters, disabled characters in the fictional media tend to be used for the dramatic power of their disability alone, or over-glorified for emotional appeal.

Althusser (1971) suggests that Ideological State Apparatuses, such as the media in this case, play a vital formative role in the creation of a world and personal view. If we look at the portrayals of disability that embody evil in a physical disfigurement, or any of the other stereotypes, there seems just concern as to what they say to disabled and able-bodied people about disability. When disabled children see close screen connections between evil and their physical condition it cannot contribute to a positive self-image: when they see that supercrip is the acceptable public face of disability, they are not affirmed as valuable people for who they are or what they achieve, but rather defined in terms of their limitations, their achievements defined in terms of overcoming these physical limitations.

Just as there are positive, complex representations of women in films, and films where women do indeed succeed in escaping the restrictions of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975), so too there are positive representations of disabled people. The following study details a character in *Boyz in the Hood* identified by a group of young disabled people[2] as being particularly well represented. His disability is an integral part of his character, without it being the main reason for his inclusion.

Boyz 'n the Hood

John Singleton's 1989 film *Boyz 'n the Hood* is an exploration of the violence and frustration of the black ghettos of Los Angeles through the eyes of a group of teenagers growing up in this tense atmosphere and struggling to find their own identity. It begins with the two disturbing statistics: (1) one out of every twenty-one black males in America is murdered. (2) Most of these deaths take place at the hands of other young black males. These are the issues dramatised by the movie, not disability.

The story portrays the life of Tre Styles, a bright, ambitious youth, and his friends. One of the gang, Chris, is physically disabled, and uses a wheelchair. This never becomes a key issue in the film however – it is his membership of the group of teenage boys that merits his portrayal and his disability is incidental, or at least secondary. This is not to say that his disability is in some way hidden, or disregarded, rather it is realistically portrayed as an aspect of the day to day life of Chris. The character, played by Redge Green, is first introduced sitting around a table playing cards with three of the other characters. It is not until he pushes his chair back from the table at the end of the game, and it is actually a wheelchair, that the viewer becomes aware of his disability. Thus we are first introduced to a person, rather than a disabled person.

Chris is an integral part of the 'gang'. Crucially, his wheelchair is portrayed as a mode of transport rather than a restriction. He uses the wheelchair to 'breakdance', but is never portrayed as a wheelchair-user of exceptional athletic prowess. He is shown as a teenager with energy to expend, just like the others in this ghetto, where boredom offers few outlets for their frustration. This realism continues in the face of danger. When a rival gang drives around threatening to kill indiscriminately with a rifle, one of the gang immediately suggests that Chris be helped off the veranda. When he needs help it is accepted, until then it is not offered. In this way his disability is neither given heroic status nor ignored.

Not only does this film present us with an interesting and well-judged example of a disability representation; it also provides an insight into the manner it which the cultural studies world appears to be largely indifferent to the issues pertaining to

2. The research for this study included a focus group conducted in May 1997 in Ballinteer Community School. Six participants, aged between fifteen and twenty and with various physical disabilities discussed representation and misrepresentation of disability in soaps opera and film.

disability. In a study of *Boyz 'n the Hood* Wiegman (1993) specifically seeks to examine the interaction between various aspects of identity, such as gender, age, race, class etc., and to point out various categories of male and female status which negate seeing 'male' or 'female' as single or stable entities. The categories of 'women' or 'men' become less useful as we see the hierarchical structure that arises around sub-groupings of those categories such as black men, black women, white women etc., Weigman argues that the construction of black masculine identity is particularly problematic because within a particular hierarchy, black men come below white women, who come below white men. This happened historically, in literature and other cultural forms, she argues, through its feminization, on one hand, and 'hypermasculinization' (portraying black men as a sexual threat to white women) at the other extreme. She sees the film as subverting these stereotypes and exploring new representations of black identity:

> a meditated black masculinity is played out in the competing characterisations of young black men in Style's neighbourhood, from the troubled Doughboy (Ice Cube) who spends his youth in and out of reform school, to his brother Ricky (Morris Chestnut), a teenage father who is on course for a football scholarship... to the more peripheral figures Monster, Docky, and the *wheelchair bound* Chris, all participants in Doughboys raucous circle (my emphasis).

The term 'wheelchair-bound' is of the variety of language that the disabled community is at pains to eradicate and finds unacceptable. The term conjures up images of helplessness, need, and people in some way defined by their use of a wheelchair. Chris, I would argue, is certainly not 'wheelchair-bound'. Firstly, as described, he uses his wheelchair as his mode of transport, rather than being bound to it. Secondly, director John Singleton depicts him, with rare and much needed realism, out of his wheelchair, sitting on a sofa, relaxing and playing computer games with other boys. It is surprisingly unusual for films to show physically disabled wheelchair-users out of their wheelchairs, as if the language used to describe these people e.g. wheelchair-bound negates thinking of them engaged in activities without wheelchairs! Even Wiegman's essay, which specifically sets out to explore conflicting hierarchies within cultural expression, does not avoid the common trap of language which objectifies people with disabilities – indeed the very use of the word 'the' before wheelchair-bound Chris heightens this effect. Whilst tracing the various elements of feminism, masculine and racial portrayal, and relating them to class and economics, her study, save for its reference to 'wheelchair-bound Chris', completely neglects a category with which this film so positively dealt – physical disability. This illustrates what I believe to be a failure on the part of communications/cultural studies theorists, to include the sub-division of able-bodied/disabled in its examination of themes of gender-race-class, as Wiegman describes them, even when examining those films which include noteworthy portrayals of disability.

Soap opera and disability

The soap operas available to an Irish television audience: *Fair City* and *Glenroe*, *Brookside, Eastenders, Coronation St.* and *Emmerdale* similarly display a general absence of disabled characters, despite the flexibility that soap opera possesses to include disabled characters and to develop them realistically. There are on average forty characters in a soap opera. Of all the characters in the Irish soaps *Glenroe* and *Fair City*, only one (Miley Byrne of *Glenroe*) has a disability. A central character in *Glenroe*, Miley was revealed some years ago to suffer from epilepsy. It affected his life significantly for several episodes and then Miley came to control his condition with medication. The story line, according to Claire Reynolds, the script editor for the series, was introduced as a convenience for script writers to explain why the actor Mick Lally could not drive, whilst he took lessons! Apart from this, the last time a physically disabled character featured regularly in either of the Irish soaps was eight years ago: *Glenroe*'s Dave Brennan, who used a wheelchair as a result of childhood polio.

Among British soap operas, there are a further two disabled characters: Chris Tate from *Emmerdale*, a villainous man who was injured in a plane crash and Maud Grimes from *Coronation Street*, an elderly lady now using a wheelchair. In total then, there are three disabled characters out of approximately two hundred and forty (1.25 per cent) – far from representative of the ten per cent proportion of the population who have a disability.

From the point of view of the disabled community soap operas are particularly important because of their power to shape attitudes towards disability. Soap operas draw huge audiences. In the week ending 29 June 1997, *Fair City* had 639,000 viewers – the top rated programme on RTÉ 1 (TAM ratings, *RTÉ Guide*). The ten most popular programmes listed for RTÉ 1 that week included five soap operas. Five of the top seven programmes shown by Network 2 were also soap operas (episodes of Australian soap opera *Home and Away* in each case). This pattern of popularity is repeated throughout the ratings (*RTE* Guide: 1997), with minor seasonal differences.

In addition to its popularity, many theorists (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987; Dyer et al, 1981) have noted the *significance* that soap opera has for its audience. Viewers enjoy it and believe its social realism. It depicts *ordinary* life, situations that people can identify with, personal stories, working class characters, family life and social relationships.

Taking into account the 'ordinariness' of the themes of soap opera, the genre is one that could be effectively employed to demonstrate the corresponding 'ordinariness' of disability. The significance that soap opera has for its audience and the pleasure derived from it come partly from the ability to see representations of oneself and the kind of life 'Joe Soap' leads. Disabled people do not have many opportunities to see representations of themselves on screen and as discussed above, the images they do see are often one-dimensional. If 'ordinary' life is portrayed by soap opera, then disability has a part to play in this normality.

Soap opera is arguably the genre best equipped to successfully portray characters from marginalised groups due to its flexible form and open-ended time frame. Using *Coronation Street* as a template, theorist Christine Geraghty, (Brown, 1994; Fiske, 1987; Geraghty, 1981) has identified the features of narrative, time and characterisation within soap opera which make its unique portrayal of daily reality so attractive to audiences.

Soap time is 'real' in the sense that within each episode, time is close to that lived by the audience, and between episodes, characters are considered to pursue an 'unrecorded existence' while the audience is getting on with their lives. Soaps are also open-ended – the narrative runs constantly and multiple plot lines inter-link and entangle over time and episodes. The use of 'cliff-hangers' at the end of each episode contributes to a continuing lack of closure, which in turn contributes to the creation of a sense of the future in the serial. The characters in soap operas are developed over a period of years, as opposed to the minutes or hours common for 'one-off' dramas, and the audience becomes deeply familiar with some characters. The form of soap allows the story line to twist and turn, to reflect social trends and opinion and to integrate a vast array of characters and situations into situations into the plot. Nothing in particular ever has to happen and no conclusions have to be reached.

As identified previously, one of the main areas where people with disabilities remain virtually unseen is as incidental, non-central characters. The formal features of soap opera lend it the potential for showing disabled characters as part of a wider social context. The large number of characters means that the character will not need to be a central part of every narrative, and may also perform dramatic functions completely unrelated to disability, especially in plot-lines that centre around other characters. A character that is developed over the long periods of time common for soap opera has a greater chance of speaking for him/herself rather than being 'spoken' since he/she will gain familiarity as a *character* rather than just a disabled character. The ordinariness

and permanence of the soap opera removes some of the features of tokenism, as any character must have multiple aspects to endure the long running nature of the genre.

Soap opera should be capable of presenting images of disabled people that go beyond mere stereotypes. It is a genre that has (often unfulfilled) potential to contribute to the integration of marginalised groups by depicting and developing ordinary disabled characters in ordinary situations leading ordinary lives.

3. Interview with author.

According to Patrick Dawson and Thomas McLoughlin, two scriptwriters from *Fair City*, the absence of disabled characters is noteworthy and should be amended.[3] However, a telling comment made by Thomas McLoughlin, highlighted one misunderstanding: 'it didn't occur to us to include disabled characters. And the reason it didn't occur to us is because we don't deal in issues…' Disability is not only an 'issue', but it is also an element of daily life – the very reality which soap seeks to portray. The question must be asked as to why it would occur to writers to include gay characters but not disabled, when the population figures are approximately equal.

The writers also indicated apprehension at writing in disabled characters. Dawson suggested that if the one disabled character introduced in a soap opera was a crooked businessman, for instance, there would be a problem: 'because we would be representing all disabled characters as slimy bastards'. The writers felt it would be necessary to depict a disabled 'paragon of virtue' to avoid offending or misrepresenting the disabled community as a whole. It is interesting to note that it was the two most common stereotypes – evil avenger and supercrip that came to mind for the writers.

Representation

The word 'representation' is applied in different ways according to the occasion of its use and is a potent concept as a whole, especially for a minority which can be seen to be under-represented. Richard Dyer (1988) has identified four senses of 'representation'. Each of the senses he speaks about has relevance in the study of portrayals of the disabled. The first sense he calls 're-presenting' - how television re-presents our world to us. Instead of seeing television either as a window on reality, presenting a clear unmediated view, or at the opposite end as a pure fabrication:

> Representation insists that there is a real world, but that our perception of it is always mediated by television's selection, emphasis and use of technical/aesthetic means to render that world to us. (Dyer, 1988:3).

Let us examine this first sense with regards to disability. On the evidence of lack of representation of disabled people as quantified in soap opera, for instance, we can see that theirs is not an immediate or obvious choice. As demonstrated earlier, the emphasis taken in disability portrayals, when they do occur, tends towards emphasising the disability over the complete personality of the disabled character.

The second sense identified by Dyer is that of being representative *of* something – or typicality. To what extent are the portrayals of women, the gay community, or disabled people typical of how those groups manifest themselves in society? Dyer maintains that we cannot communicate the individuated or the unique, we must always deal with the typical. He goes on to say: 'what harm or good the stereotype does to the group is of interest' (1988: 3). Whilst he does not see all stereotypes as derogatory, the categories that emerge such as supercrip and evil avenger, as common stereotypes, are certainly not ones that work to the advantage of the disabled.

The third sense of representation referred to is that of representation as speaking *for* people: faced with television images we constantly need to ask not 'What is this image of?' so much as 'Who is speaking here?' This applies mostly, according to Dyer, for groups outside the mainstream of speech. Television speaks often on our behalf, without

letting us speak ourselves. For those people with disabilities who for a century have existed in Norden's 'cinema of isolation', it has been able-bodied directors, writers, and able-bodied actors who have spoken on their behalf.

The final sense of representation identified by Dyer asks the question: 'what does the image represent to the people who are watching?' This is not necessarily always the same as its 'ideal' meaning, or that intended by those who produced it. This is borne out by the experience of disabled people. For some, watching even those portrayals of disabled people which are well intentioned and aim to represent people with disabilities fairly, the message taken from the films is not entirely the same as that consciously intended by the director. Those disabled viewers who made the *Without Walls* programme felt that the message of *My Left Foot* was that in order to be accepted a disabled person must conform to what is valued in able-bodied terms – the moment of Christy's acceptance by his father coincides with his proving of his intelligence and literacy.

Therefore we can see that the representation afforded to disabled people, using any of these four senses tends to be of a problematic nature. Although this is a long-standing problem with roots deep in societal prejudice and assumptions, I believe that this is not a problem without solutions.

The first sense of representation that Dyer talks about, the selection and emphasis made by television, as shown by the lack of depictions of disabled people, does not currently favour disability. But according to Desmond Bell:

> … students in media studies actually expect to practice what we
> preach. From the outset Media Studies has been concerned not only
> with the retrospective appreciation of 'classic' media texts and with
> the refinement of consumer sensibility, but with the education of
> potential *producers.* (Bell,1992: 27)

Producers who receive an education in media studies will read about the portrayal of women, the gay community, ethnic minorities, and can take this knowledge into account in producing their own representations. They will not automatically read about disability, as there is no strong body of literature available, as explained. Therefore, even those conscientious enough to attempt to practice what they have learnt, may not have considered disability in the way that other groupings will have become familiar. If those writers I spoke to are typical of television or film writers, it is not only media graduates who will have been exposed to media studies literature, as both of them were well versed on media theories. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that an increased academic interest in the topic, and the directing of articles to the general rather than to specifically the disabled readership, may cause disability to occur to writers like Patrick Dawson and Thomas McLoughlin in the future.

The second sense of representation highlighted by Dyer, that of typicality has a similarly poor record for disability, with the proliferation of stereotypes that cast disabled people as pitiable, heroic, villainous etc. The film of *Boyz 'n the Hood*, and the possibilities available from television genres such as soap opera for portraying characters with disabilities as rounded individuals, clearly demonstrate an ability to transcend unhelpful stereotyping.

The third sense of representation begs the question 'who is speaking'. In this regard, I believe that the responsibility for change lies largely with the disabled community. A common analogy drawn by disabled critics is that white actors are no longer 'blacked up' to play black roles, and that it is an outrage to cast able-bodied actors in disabled roles. When speaking to Patrick Dawson, he indicated that there is *one* physically disabled actor on Irish Equity books. If there are no disabled actors available it is fruitless to criticise directors who cast able-bodied actors to 'speak' for the disabled. Similarly the absence of media specific literature discussing disability places some responsibility on disabled writers to redress the balance.

Finally, the fourth sense of representation, which examines what the portrayal means to those watching. The difficulties that disabled people can have in constructing identity has been studied by Goffman (1963) who defines stigma as: 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance' (Goffman, 1963: 9). He includes people with disabilities as a stigmatised group in society. To return to the language of gender studies, the dominant ideology of our society does not treat people with disabilities as it treats the able-bodied majority. This social inequality is both reflected by and upheld by the media. As society's attitudes change, the media will reflect those attitudes. However, the media can also play an active role in challenging society's fear and misunderstanding of disability by consciously seeking to portray characters with disabilities realistically, fairly and frequently. Providing *realistic* portrayals of disability will help in both the construction of a healthy self-image for disabled people, and a more informed image for those who never come in close personal contact with the disabled.

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