

## FILMS AS PROTEST: TOWARDS EQUITABLE DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN FILMS

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### ABSTRACT

Films can contribute to disability advocacies through a critique of ableist attitudes and discriminations against disabled people. Film's potentials are found in its popularity as a mass medium and its unique quality as a storytelling media combining moving pictures and sounds. Studies have found that films have predominantly represented disabilities stereotypically through tropes such as pity and tragedy, thereby misrecognizing disability identity (Norden, 1994; Safran, 1998; Black & Pretes, 2007). Other studies have found that the prevalence of using nondisabled actors to play disabled roles represents media injustice and inauthentic portrayal of disabilities (Ross, 1997; Siebers, 2016; Kupperts, 2007; Haller, 2019). This paper offers initial recommendations on the use of films as protest for disabled people in a time where disability identity and inclusion are more salient. Arising from workshops held with disabled people and filmmakers to co-produce knowledge on authentic representation, the recommendations in this paper reflect ways forward for inclusive disability representation on screen.

**Keywords:** Disabilities, films, protest, representation, people with disabilities, disability identity, and inclusion.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Films are an important and influential media (Gallagher, 2008; Batty, 2011; Young, 2012). They combine the powers of audio and visual presentation to convey imagery and stories to an audience. Films are moving pictures in narrative format and as Carroll (1985:93) argues "narrative is, in all probability, our most pervasive and familiar means of explaining human actions." In addition to films acting as conveyor of human actions, they are also regarded as popular art. As art, films mirror society (Monaco & Lindroth, 2000). They also show social processes and attempt to illustrate the issues and agendas in a society. Because of films' popularity, some scholars like Alamu (2010) and Combs (2013) have described it as a popular media.

Furthermore, films' potential to contribute to change has been well recognised by several film theorists. For example, Scott (2000) argues that movies convey ideas, identities, beliefs, and values of any given society. Examining the critical influence of Hollywood in American political life, Scott notes that

...the film industry has been crucial in opening up wider social and cultural awareness of the ways in which institutions operate in America. Hollywood has also served to ground many of the fundamental principles and beliefs of the nation in the consciousness of its citizenry through symbolic as well as pedagogic means (Scott, 2000:10).

Similarly, while several factors contribute to identity formation and inclusion within society, and while these are constantly changing according to personal, political, national, and international discourses, films have been identified as one of the vehicles for conveying and influencing identities (Talmon & Peleg, 2011; Celli, 2016). In this paper, the argument is that films can support society to articulate its own historical experiences and reimagine its identity. For example, in a study on how Israeli cinema influences its national identity, Talmon and Peleg (2011: x) illustrate the powers of films thus:

Movies stir us because they tell us something about ourselves and our fellow humans; they can mobilise us to identify with common ideals, devote and even sacrifice our lives for them. They open a window to cultures we are curious about and hold a mirror to the cultures that create them, reflecting that culture, its highlights, and its discontents.

The mere fact that films disseminate stories makes them a very influential media of communication. As such, films are important because, although they sometimes depict reality, they can also create new realities and initiate a change agenda for the acceptance of these new realities. Thus, I argue that films, like traditional mass media, can set agendas about salient social issues. As earlier noted, the potential of films as a media of communication is demonstrated in their audio-visual powers, combining the ability to tell stories with moving images. They are one of the most enduring popular media around the world. Films tell stories of people, places, and histories. Just like literature and other art forms, films also document a people's way of life and experiences.

In a study conducted to assess films as a medium of communication in Dawah, Basit et al (2011: 68-69) note that "film is not only elevated as an aspect of art but most important, it is also the medium of conveying effective messages that can be propagated." Furthermore, there are scholars who believe that films have the potential of influencing ideologies. For instance, Barker and Austin (2000:5) argue that, "Films participate in the social and political process, and are seen as carriers of ideas and ideologies – in extreme versions counting among the most important carriers in the last century." Based on this, there is a place for the use of films as protest for the rights and identity of disabled people. For example, Riley (2005) suggests that stereotypical and negative portrayal of disabilities can have adverse effects on policies around key sectors like education, employment, health, and housing for disabled people. Thus, it is important for films to appropriately articulate disabilities in order to advance the rights of disabled people and not contribute to stereotypes about disabilities. Having examined the importance of films in the representation of disabilities, I now turn to a literature review of disabilities and the prevalence of epistemological normativity of bodies.

## 2.0 OVERVIEW OF DISABILITIES IN LITERATURE

Many studies have documented the representation and perception of disabilities in society (Safran, 1998; Herndon, 2002). These studies sometimes focus on the history and myth around

bodies and the representation of disabilities in cultures, fairy tales, and literature, or in media such as films. For example, body and disability studies especially have considered how the body is represented in culture as both the subject and object (Erickson, 1990; Farley, 1997; Latour, 2004; Shilling, 2007; Miller, 2011; Ingerslev, 2013). Other scholars have researched into abjectness, essentialism, binaries, and normativity in relation to the body (DeMello, 2013; Ingersley, 2013). Therefore, in literature and in culture, the body represents different layers of meanings both deductively and inductively.

Unarguably, the body is a political subject (Foucault, 1977). This is evidenced in the concepts and interrogation of gendered bodies, racialized bodies, and colonial bodies (DeMello, 2013; Richardson & Locks, 2014). Often, the body is the first point of negotiation, which people engage with, and by which, human relationships are established and defined. Thus, how the body is engaged, sometimes, speaks to broader issues of socialisations and learned behaviours. Furthermore, power is often implicated in body discourses and in the responsibilities placed on the body to be a certain way. The role of power or the powerful in defining the body may be regarded as a product of culture, media, or the construction of those with access and agency.

Thus, the role of power in the uses, classifications and perceptions of the body is notable (DeMello, 2013) in that, how the body is defined, engaged, or classified, lies with the powerful in society. This hegemonic construction and attendant inequality could account for how disabilities are conceptualised in different cultures. DeMello (2013:5) further notes that

Bodies are shaped in myriad ways by culture, by society, and by the experiences that are shared within a social and cultural context. In addition, bodies are shaped by history, and as such, they are always changing, as are our ideas about them. Bodies are contingent: moulded by factors outside of the body, and then internalised into the physical being itself.

As the body appears to be defined and constructed by the powerful in society (be it through the media showcasing what an ideal body should be or through commonly held beliefs about the normativity of the body in society), so is disability itself perceived as a social construct (Söder, 1989; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Oliver, 2013). This explains the ideas behind the social model of disability, which attributes the definition of ableism and disability to the organisation of society and societal structures. For example, since a normative body has been defined as two legs and two hands, then it becomes 'abnormal' when a body does not fall within this normative definition. Therefore, the social model makes the distinction between impairments and disabilities; acknowledging that impairments are biological or physical while disabilities are solely a consequence of societal structures and constructs.

However, not everyone agrees with the social construction of disabilities and ableism. According to Dewsbury et al (2004), one of the weaknesses of the social model of disability is its attempt at an explanatory account of the social life of people with disabilities wherein one is tempted to ask, whose experiences account for a social construction of disability, and whose do not. This also agrees with the argument of Schur, et al (2013) who critiqued the social model for marginalising minority experiences such as those of women with disabilities, sexual minorities with disabilities and even people of minority ethnicities with disabilities. According to this argument, the social model does not embrace the intersectionality inherent in disability experiences and disability studies. By so doing, the critics argue that there is an underlying

privileging of one disability experience over another. Further noting that the social model is mere radical sociology, Dewsbury et al (2004:147-149) explain,

Simply asserting that something is a social construction often tells us very little, because it is extremely hard to find anything that cannot be treated as a social construction...[for social model of disability theorists], really their problems lie in the fact that they have made the phenomenon of disability disappear. It is in this sense that the social model of disability might be construed as an 'anti-social' model.

Inasmuch as there is merit in the argument and critique above, and because there is no use defending the non-existence of disabilities as a consequence of societal construction, one cannot also discount the place of socio-political hegemony and structures in the experiences of disabled people. This is to say, dominant power structures within the society potentially affect the experiences of disabled people, which justifies and corroborates the position of the social model. Therefore, the socio-cultural context where disabled people are situated contributes considerably to their collective and personal experiences.

Historically, people with disabilities have been perceived as both a marvel and a disdain. In a society where they are mostly in the minority, disabled people are sometimes excluded from mainstream engagements and activities such as civic duties like voting and standing in for elections (Lord et al, 2014). In short, they are sometimes seen as outcasts, the other, monsters, freaks, rebels, the unwanted and the incomplete. Other terms they have been associated with include "handicapped, insane, epileptic, idiot, and midget, feeble-minded, crippled, lame, deaf and blind" (Bogdan, 2012:1). Some of those who perceive themselves as disabled people's allies, have done so based on pity. There is an extant literature on the politics of pity and weaponizing pity to discriminate against disabled people (Stramondo, 2010; Hayes & Black, 2003; Mitchell & Snyder, 1997).

In medieval times, people with disabilities were set apart from society, mostly because there were many prominent myths about disabilities. For example, in medieval England, the commonly held belief was that people acquired disabilities because of their sins or as a result of being born under a different star (Historic England, 2018) which is no different from the belief held in many other countries about disabilities being a consequence of wrongdoing or sin. At the time, people were born with disabilities or they became disabled because of diseases such as leprosy, polio, wars or unfriendly working conditions. As a result, disabled people were largely catered for by the Church who built hospitals for what they only regarded to be 'sick' people. However, the downside of this was that it positioned disabled people as charity cases or at other times, caricatures or 'freak shows' (Bogdan, 2012). Therefore, when disabled people were not seen in church gates begging alms according to accounts of the Bible (Pearman, 2010), they are in theatres or circuses entertaining nondisabled audiences for paltry pay.

Another factor to be considered here is the considerable lack of medical and structural advancement at the time. For example, wheelchairs, braille, hearing aids and even ramps were not popular at the time and disabled people were less independent and often had to rely on the nondisabled for their experiences of the world. The lack of medical and structural support for people with disabilities also informed their identity as invalids or idiots at the time (Bogdan, 2012). Moreover, wars largely influenced disabilities in medieval times (Metzler, 2013; Njung,

2020). Not only did this increase the number of disabled people in the form of acquired disabilities, it also adversely affected their living conditions and performance in society. Some rulers in medieval times would intentionally blind opposing armies in retaliation or as a spite to the opposing armies' rulers (Metzler, 2013). In Africa, the perception of disabled people was not much different. For example, in the early days, people with disabilities were seen as a curse or punishment from the gods (Olaiya, 2013; Etieyibo & Omiegbe, 2017). In addition, in some parts of precolonial Africa, disabled people were seen as sacrifices or rituals to the gods (Groe & McGeown, 2013; Rohwerder, 2018). By so doing, disabled people were simply murdered for the mere fetish of it.

### 3.0 DISABILITIES AND THE FILM MEDIA

Moving away from the historical conceptions and perceptions of disabilities, literature has shown that the media, especially films, are a very important factor in determining how disabilities are conceptualized and perceived in society as well as among media audiences (Barnes, 1992; Zhang & Haller, 2013; Holton, et al 2014; Goethals, et al 2020). Furthermore, the relationship between disabled people and films has been rather contentious as illustrated in the dilemma between framing disabled people as charity cases or objects of pity (Kama, 2004; Green & Tanner, 2008) and their portrayal as heroes, super-humans, or an inspiration to the nondisabled in society (Riley, 2005). This later portrayal indicates what, the late American Comedian and disability rights activist, Stella Young referred to as 'Inspiration Porn' in her 2014 TEDxTalk (Young, 2014; Haller & Preston, 2016). Corroborating Young's assertion, Riley (2005: ix) notes that there is "the patronizing, trivializing, and marginalizing narrative of disability in the media today. The mainstream press finds it irresistible, but this steady diet of sugar has its dangers...it is transforming individuals into symbols by playing on an audience's sympathy and sense of superiority." Riley's argument centres on how films perpetuate the stereotypes of disabilities to their own advantage often disregarding the rights of disabled people and their input. Riley (2005:1) further notes:

One in every five people on the planet has a disability and, because of that, is shamefully misrepresented in the fun-house mirror of the mass media. Consigned by the arbiters of what is published or produced to a narrow spectrum of roles, from freaks to inspirational saints, lab rates or objects of pity, people with disabilities have not seen the evolution in their public image that their private circumstances have undergone in the aftermath of political and media progress over the past four decades. Even the specialized publications, programmes, and films dedicated to people with disabilities (and sometimes run by them) present such twisted images that one wonders what bizarre trick is being played on the "last minority."

The identity and perception created from imagery and portrayal of social issues are often in the hands of the image-maker, which, sometimes, leaves the imagined or the portrayed powerless and helpless. As Baran and Davis (2012) note, those with access to discourse determine who has agency or not. In a study of media portrayal of disabilities, Zhang and Haller (2013) found that although the American media portray people with disabilities both positively and negatively, disabled people often perceive these media representations as unrealistic and a misrepresentation of their lived reality. In essence, most media portrayals and filmic representations are leaving out the inputs of disabled people themselves and by so doing are appearing to misrepresent this important minority group. The World Bank (2020) notes that

there are approximately 1 billion people living with various forms of disabilities globally accounting for about 15% of the total world's population. Nevertheless, this number is not a fixed estimate as each year; more people join the growing number of disabled people (Yazbak, 2004; French & Swain, 2004; World Bank, 2020). Thus, the relationship between the film media and people with disabilities has always been of interest to many researchers in body and disability studies.

In a study concerning education and disabilities, Samsel and Perepa (2013) found that how the media represent disabled people influenced the perception of teachers involved in the education of disabled people. Arguably, mainstream media and films, through their framing of stories, agenda setting and gatekeeping, perpetuate stereotypes about disabilities (Norden, 1994). The finding from Samsel and Perepa (2013:143) corroborates this as they note, "most of the sample felt that TV and films tend to sensationalise or stereotype disabilities. Some also felt that the media tend to amplify the feelings of sympathy and pity towards a person with disability."

On the other hand, Smedema, et al (2012) found that the use of humour, especially disability humour, in the representation of disabilities in films contributes towards a positive perception of disabilities and people with disabilities. According to them "this result indicates that disability humour may be an effective means of positively influencing attitudes towards persons with disabilities" (Smedema, et al, 2012:1435). However, there are scholars who have noted that disability humour may not always be as effective in reducing stereotypes about disability and changing perceptions about disabled people in society (see Shakespeare, 1999 and Coogan, 2013). For example, what is the extent a joke can go before turning into mockery, bullying or shaming? Another question to bear in mind is who has the power to make these jokes about disabilities? Elites? Ordinary people? People with disabilities themselves?

Furthermore, literature is mostly in agreement about the role of the film media in negotiating discourses, in that they have the power to choose what and how to represent a given discourse or narrative (Weimann, 1999; O'keeffe, 2006; Yan, 2020). This ultimately has potential influence on how the audience engage with such discourse. A notable media in this regard are visual media such as television and films (see Gerbner, 1998). To further elaborate, Rodan and Ellis (2016) had found that television representations of disabilities contribute to the construction of disabilities and how people with disabilities are perceived. According to them, "television representations continue to rely on prejudicial attitudes regarding acceptable bodies that circulate in the media and historical representations of disability. [Thus] television discourse mediates reality through the way it reflects and constructs values and beliefs about different aspects of reality" (Rodan & Ellis, 2016: 6&8). In short, how the media represent disabilities largely determines society's relationship with people with disabilities, and what society potentially perceives as the 'reality' of being a disabled person (Samsel & Perepa, 2013; Safran, 1998, Norden, 1994). In the next section, I briefly examine literature on the representation of disabled people in films.

## 4.0 THE WORKSHOP METHOD

The workshop method is considered a qualitative research tool that can "provide a platform that can aid researchers in identifying and exploring relevant factors in a given domain by providing means for understanding complex work and knowledge processes (Ørngreen &

Levinson (2017, p. 70).” Workshops are an effective method for data gathering whether conducted as online, hybrid or in-person. Workshops promote the discussion of divergent views and opinions as well as encourage negotiated points of agreement or recommendations (Shaw, 2006).

In 2021 and 2023, I organised workshops to gather data on equitable and authentic representation of disabilities and disabled people in films. A total of 85 people attended the workshops including disabled people, representatives of disability groups, academics, filmmakers, and audiences interested in disability discourses and films around the UK and Africa. The format of the workshops was hybrid and then online in 2023 where, together with professional facilitators, I employed technological aids such as journey mapping to promote anonymous contributions by participants. As Shaw (2006, p. 830) notes, “Technology can help by supporting participants in freely sharing their opinions and by logging data for post-workshop analyses.” Thus, the data collected during the workshops were cleaned with the aid of Nvivo and the key themes and recommendations itemised.

Purposive sampling was initially used to select the first 20 participants after which, others registered to attend through online invites. The objective of the workshops was to draw up initial recommendations for equitable representation of disabled people in films. Participants were put into small working groups online and offline, to initiate ideas for advancing authentic and positive disability identity in films. After hours of brainstorming sessions and discussions, the groups returned with suggestions on how films can better represent disabilities and disabled people. In section 4.1 below, I have outlined the major suggestions from the workshops as recommendations and ways forward for film representation.

## **4.1 Initial Recommendations for Using Films as Protest for Disability Advocacies**

The following suggestions detail the recommendations of participants in the workshops. These suggestions are underpinned in the use of films as activism for people with disabilities.

(a) Resources: Filmmaking needs resources. Thus, participants suggested film funding from government agencies and private stakeholders to fund films on disability issues. Participants further outlined the:

- Creation of access to tailored funding for research on disability and film
- Support for filmmakers who make social issue films on disabilities.
- Sharing of resources through infrastructure support and peer to peer networking among disabled filmmakers and nondisabled filmmakers who make films on disabilities.

(b) Information and Language: Access to the right information and use of acceptable disability language featured prominently in participants’ recommendations. The points noted include:

- Fostering better information for disability filmmakers on how to access funding and support.
- Revaluating the language of disabilities and moving towards a more expansive vocabulary that incorporate the intersectionality of disabilities such as capturing women with disabilities, women and men of colour with disabilities, and so on.

- Disseminating legal frameworks to creatives and filmmakers who make disability films so that they can be informed on what their rights are and what the inclusion frameworks are. Legislations such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities (CRPD) should be made available to filmmakers in accessible formats.

(c) Best Practice: Participants recommended that disability filmmakers should be held to a standard of best practice. Some of the best practices suggested included:

- Creating more spaces for representing disabilities in an inclusive way. This means both visible and invisible disabilities without establishing a hegemonic order of disabilities or having one disability preferred over another and consequently favouring same on screen.
- Avoiding nepotism: Diversity in film representation of disabilities should not be about 'who we know' but about all disabled people who advocate for disability rights and positive disability identity.
- Ensuring more space for disabled actors and performers in Film and television.
- Casting disabled actors in leading and supporting roles across all genres of film, not just in films about disability but in all films.
- Fostering a participatory culture of filmmaking to include disabled people at senior levels such as in production and directing.
- Developing thorough evaluation mechanisms of disability films at filmmaking stages and in funding.
- Using films as a space to critique ableist attitudes towards people with disabilities.
- Not using accessibility to discriminate. For example, all characters in a film should be subtitled not only disabled characters.
- Increasing the frequency of films about disabilities so that disabilities become an integrable difference and not an occasional occurrence or feature in films. This means disabled characters should become a regular feature in films.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that films are important vehicles of protest for disability rights and for advocating positive disability identity. Films' advantage is found in its qualities as an audio-visual storytelling media, and disabled people and disability allies could harness the potential of films in ways that ultimately makes disabilities an integrable difference and a fundamental aspect of diversity policies. Arising from workshops in which over 85 people participated, recommendations were made towards equitable disability representation in films. Some of the recommendations included casting disabled actors in lead roles in films that are not necessarily based on disabilities and providing funding for filmmakers who make disability films. Another key recommendation here is to increase the frequency of disability representation in order to significantly contribute to making disabilities an integrable difference and not an occasional feature in melodramas and tragedies. Furthermore, the recommendations illustrated the combined efforts from filmmakers, funding agencies, disability allies and disabled people. It is clear from the workshops findings that films can play a significant role in advancing disability rights when films are done the right way such as using acceptable language of disabilities to avoid stereotypes and a misrecognition of disability identity.

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