

## Editorial

### Editorial: Special Issue on Disability and Film and Media

Beth Haller<sup>1</sup>

Lawrence Carter-Long<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Global Alliance for Disability in Media and Entertainment (GADIM)

<sup>2</sup> Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund

### Abstract

This Editorial for v17i4, Special Issue of Disability and Film and Media, highlights the role film and media play in some work around creating more equity and inclusion. In addition to highlighting some examples from around the globe, it provides an overview of the contents of the issue.

*Keywords:* disability, film, media

### Editor's note

We are delighted in this issue to feature as guest editors two of the nation's preeminent scholars on disability and film and media, Beth Haller and Lawrence Carter-Long. For years, they have helped shape our national (and global) conversation about the role film and media may play in our concepts of disability. We are grateful for their lending their voice to readers here in this issue. – RDS Editorial Team

So much mass media representation of disability for generations has reverberated with an ableist and inauthentic tone; many television shows and films still do. But authentic and empowering representations are beginning to take hold. Mass media reflecting empowering disability content can assist societies worldwide to better include and respect the disability community. People with disabilities are 15 percent of the world's population, 1 billion people, and fair and unbiased representation of disability in a country's news and entertainment media can help increase a disability justice perspective. The International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva, Switzerland says that "portraying women and men with disabilities with dignity and respect in the media can help promote more inclusive and tolerant societies" (ILO, 2015).

The world has seen more entertainment media created by the disability community in recent years. For example, the musical film "Best Summer Ever" (2020) features a fully integrated cast and crew of people with and without disabilities. *Variety* called it a "template for disability representation in Hollywood" (Ferme, 2021) because with its multiple stars with disabilities, it tells its story with disabled actors but is not focused on any kind of disability theme. "It's the first musical to star people with disabilities and the first SAG-registered movie in which more than half the cast and crew are disabled," according to the *Best Summer Ever* creative team (2020). Set to premiere at the SXSW Festival in 2020, which was derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is now available on Hulu.

In 2021, the spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) community came together to create the "Spaces" music video. Directed by wheelchair-using filmmaker Dominick Evans and starring singer-songwriter James Ian, both of whom have SMA, it features adults and children with SMA and their families in pictures shown over lyrics that say, "I'm not invisible. I'm an original." and "If there is one thing to see, it's my humanity" (2021). It also shows the

wedding of well-known YouTuber couple Squirmy and Grubs (Shane Burcaw, who has SMA, and Hannah Aylward, who is nondisabled). The biotech company Genentech, which launched a new SMA treatment in 2020, sponsored the music video, and Evans directed the Los Angeles-based filming remotely with an iPad from his home in Michigan. Evans said that his work directing remotely illustrates that disabled people can be part of creating good representation in Hollywood, if they are given proper adaptations: He said, in the future, “I want to make a TV show that I direct from my home in Michigan so people can see that any disabled person that has the talent can do it. And I don’t want that to be seen as something inspirational but as something realistic. We can do these jobs if we’re given the right accommodations. I have chronic pain but I was able to direct the video ‘Spaces’ from my bed in the place I was most comfortable in” (Kinross, 2021).

In the United Kingdom, the British Film Institute (BFI) restarted an initiative in 2021, Press Reset, to get more disabled talent into equitable and inclusive spaces in the film and television industries. BFI is also educating these industries about the ableist structures within these fields. It wants film and television in the UK to be proactive in dismantling ableism. The steps the industries should take are: “recruit responsibly; engage with the Disabled community; set targets; equal pay; think about access; and be an ally” (BFI, 2021).

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The articles included in this special issue delve into the current media issues about how disabled people and their issues are or are not presented equitably on screen, as well as considering problematic representations of the past. With their analyses, commentary, and reviews, the authors examine everything from disability metaphors in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea to temporal drag in the television show *American Horror Story* to how young disabled creators on Instagram are reinforcing their disability identity with their posts.

Two of the articles in this issue are creative works. Talia Steinmetz critiques the stigmatizing tropes of the 1996 Disney film, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with a Disability Studies lens and then re-imagines the film, with an alternate script that centers Quasimodo as a hero. Quasimodo becomes a disabled human man with an excellent set of skills that will aid him on his Hero's Journey and in his pursuit of a fully realized romantic relationship with Esmeralda.

Director Cameron Mitchell provides a Director's Statement about his film, *The Co-Op*, which dismantles disability stereotypes by giving disabled characters, all played by disabled actors, the power in a robbery scenario. Mitchell wants his short film to prove that film can center disabled characters (and disabled actors) in any genre because people with disabilities are part of a strong community in society. Never again, he says, should Hollywood use the tired and stigmatizing disability stereotypes that so often have populated films.

Using the affirmation model of disability, Kristen Tollan investigated how eight young adults with disabilities used their Instagram photos and captions to express their identities as disabled people. She found that in addition to discussing their disabilities, chronic illnesses and/or mental health, the young adults reflected social media trends such as using existing hashtags, posting about family, friends and pets, and discussing gratitude and positivity about their lives. While reinforcing their disability identity through their Instagram posts, these young people are also showing nondisabled people that the disability experience is not a uniform one and that disabled people are happy and goal-oriented like many nondisabled people.

Alison Wilde analyzes disabled characters in the television series *American Horror Story (AHS)* to look at issues of narrative and representational in/equalities across seasons

with special attention paid to the “Freak Show” season. Even though the “Freak Show” season is lauded for the number of disabled actors employed, Wilde reminds us that the majority of disabled characters were played by nondisabled actors. Even though some argue that temporal drag queers the entire series, Wilde says that the disabled actors have been left out of this queering (with exception of Jamie Brewer, an actor with Down syndrome who is in multiple seasons of *AHS*.) Wilde explains that temporal drag in the series still favors whiteness and nondisabled actors.

John Ndavula and Jackline Lidubwi looked at vernacular radio in Kenya, stations that broadcast in local languages, to see how these radio stations’ content did or did not support inclusive education for disabled students in rural communities. They found that few vernacular radio stations aired information about inclusion in schools. Their interviews with key stakeholders in vernacular radio illustrated that even when a radio station discussed the topic of children with disabilities, inclusive education was not included. Their research showed that the radio stations rarely contacted disability activists or inclusive education experts on that topic. They recommend that vernacular radio producers broadcast more content about inclusive education and consult disability experts about that content.

Eunyoung Jung explores a print publication in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Korea to delineate how disability metaphors were used in content about the patriotic-enlightenment movement before Japan occupied Korea. The pro-independence, pro-modernization *Korea Daily News*, a voice of Korean elites, had a section called *pyunpyungidam*, filled with “strange stories,” some of which were populated by blind, deaf, and nonverbal archetypes of disabled people. Jung writes that these stories equated metaphorical blindness and deafness with “ignorant” Koreans, who the newspaper saw as clinging to outdated ways of being in the modern world. The metaphor of “muteness” was applied to other news media and Koreans

who surrendered to Japanese censorship. As in other cultures, Jung says that those in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea who were promoting Western enlightenment used the stigmatizing metaphors about disability that conveyed a message that people with disabilities are subaltern and deficient, further marginalizing an already oppressed group.

Jeff Preston reviews the new full-length version of *Code of the Freaks*, which he says presents academic theory and activism around Hollywood's representation of disability in an understandable and captivating way. It is filled with in-depth research and outstanding examples of the ableist structures surrounding the film industry's representation of disabled characters. Aman Misra and Kara Ayers review Dennis J. Frost's book, "More than Medals," which is a history of the Paralympics and disability sports in postwar Japan. Misra and Ayers say the book confronts wrong-headed notions that the Paralympics and disability sports in general are a product of the West. The book explores Japan's innovative approach to the Paralympics and delves into media coverage of and public attitudes toward disability, as they intersect with sports played by disabled people. Misra and Ayers hope this book will inspire much more research and analysis of disability sports in Asia. Finally, the essays also include an excerpt of an interview between Superfest co-director Emily Beitiks and Superfest founding member Peni Hall. The short conversation gives a glimpse into the origins of Superfest, the world's longest running disability film festival.

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