

Popular Culture and Disability
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Disability is popular. Whether as source of fear and/or fascination, what it means to have a disability has been a subject of continual popular interest. These contradictory impulses are reflected in the way that disability has been—and continues to be—represented in popular media.

When we say that disability is popular, we mean this in at least two ways:

- (1) Disability is a source of popular attention: media audiences are very interested in the experience of disability and looking at media that would purport to allow them the vicarious experience of disability, with a host of media products and programs addressing this interest.
- (2) We also mean to stress that disability is, in a very real sense, created in the popular. That is, the social meaning of bodies with disabilities is fashioned in the process of representing them in circulated media. It is through this ritual of popular forms that many people (both with disabilities and without disabilities) formulate their ideas of what it means to have a disability.

Disability Studies has of course concerned itself with how this constructed nature of disability has been hidden and how instead the “medical model” of disability has been used as a way of attempting to control the story of disability, buttressing current distribution (or lack thereof) of social power. As such, popular media has often offered well-defined cultural scripts of what it means to have a disability. Scholars including the late Paul Longmore and Martin Norden have offered valuable roadmaps of the recurrent stereotypes that have formed ideas of disability in popular media, particularly film: the avenger, the freak, the monster, the innocent, all caricatures that do their best to reduce the complex and organic experience of disability to simple object of pity, scorn, or fear.¹

While media circulating in popular media has certainly been complicit in reinforcing and helping articulate the repressive structures that support ableism, they do not always do so. At the same time that they have been culpable of images and forms that have encouraged discrimination and exclusion, popular media continues to be a powerful public place in which these same limiting cultural scripts are often challenged and perhaps re-imagined.

Cultural Studies pioneer the late Stuart Hall stressed the importance of the realm of popular culture. While many critics and scholars have been dismissive of popular media, Hall suggests we pay closer attention. Popular culture matters. It is the unstable ground on which an essential battle is being waged. A constant conflict both for and against tradition, both for and against established orders and structures of power. Hall suggests that it is from this unstable maelstrom that culture (and its future forms) emerge. Popular culture has at its center “the changing and uneven relations of force which define the field of culture.”²

So this issue of the *Review of Disability Studies* asks us to take popular culture seriously, to consider some of its forms and how they might participate in a conversation culture is having with itself about what disability means. It is a conversation in which new, potentially transformative and empowering forms may be emerging. This special issue assembles some of the most provocative glimpses into this international dialog. The works gathered here consider the shifting places where the plastic concepts of disability meet the equally shifting ground of popular culture.

In “Precarious Inclusions; Re-Imagining Disability, Race, Masculinity and Nation in My Name is Khan,” Nadia Kanani invites us to examine the ways in which disability and popular culture intersect with

cherished notions of masculinity and nation in the realm of Bollywood film. Similarly, in “Keep It Right Homeland: The Female Body, Disability, and Nation,” Joelle Rouleau considers how post-9/11 fears of nation negotiate with concerns of race, gender and sexuality in the popular American television program’s imagining of disability. In the essay “Body Vandalism: Lady Gaga, Disability and Popular Culture,” author Christopher Smit invites us to consider unexpected ways in which the global media pop star Lady Gaga may serve as a powerful popular site to redefining disability. And the essay “The Legacy of 19th Century Popular Freak Show Discourse in the 21st Century X-Men Films” by Fiona Pettit adds an important historical dimension to this issue with her consideration of the ways in which historical forms of popular culture continue to resonate in new forms and contribute to the precarious social identity of those with disabilities.

It is our hope that the essays in this issue contribute to the continued investigation of the ways in which popular forms inform the frames by which we know the body, and most importantly, how popular engagement with these frames may transform both the popular and disability, offering perhaps glimpses into better things to come.

Raphael Raphael, PhD is a film and media scholar focusing on the relationship of the body and media. His writing appears in *Modern Language Association's Teaching Film* (2012) and his recent book is called, *Transnational Stardom: International Celebrity in Film and Popular Culture* (with Russell Meeuf) (2013). Dr. Raphael lectures at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and serves as technology faculty for the American Community Schools in Athens, Greece. He is co-editor of the new journal, *DIS/ART: The Journal of Disability Culture and the Visual Arts*. His scholarship is also informed by his own practice as a digital artist.

Holly Manaseri, PhD holds a doctoral degree in the Cultural Foundations of Education specializing in the area of Disability Studies from Syracuse University. She has conducted educational research and evaluation studies for the UH Center on Disability Studies in the area of Interdisciplinary Studies, place-based education and has extensive experience in the development of collegiate curricula in the area of Disability Studies. Most recently, Dr. Manaseri has participated in the development of the undergraduate Disability Studies program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and is currently developing an Inclusive Education Certificate at Leeward Community College for paraprofessionals. As a former public school principal, she has been involved in the practical application of inclusion and as a parent to a son with complex medical needs, she has been a active advocate for inclusive schooling. Dr. Manaseri has had presentations accepted on how portrayals of disability in media intersect with inclusive education policy at the international PopCaanz conference in Australia and New Zealand.

Endnotes

1 See Longmore’s seminal essay “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2003; and Norden’s *Cinema of Isolation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994.

2 See Hall’s “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” originally published in Raphael Samuel’s *People's History and Socialist Theory*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1981.