

## Creative Works

### A Conversation about Film, Activism and Social Media with Disability Activist/Filmmaker Dominick Evans

(with RDS Multimedia and Creative Works Editor, Raphael Raphael)

Raphael Raphael, PhD

RDS Associate Editor of Creative Works and Multimedia

University of Hawaii at Manoa

**Abstract:** An informal interview with Disability Activist/Filmmaker Dominick Evans. Topics include film and media representation of people with disability and the use of social media in activism.

Dominick Evans is a self-described “trans queer crip director/writer, activist, dad, and nerd.” Dominick’s work delves into inclusion in media, sex education for Disabled/LGBTQIA youth, marriage equality for Disabled people, institutional bias, and LGBTQIA/Disabled reproductive rights. In 2014, Dominick founded #FilmDis, a Twitter chat about Disability in media.



A prolific public speaker who has spoken around the world, Dominick works for the Center for Disability Rights in New York as a Media & Entertainment advocate. Dominick is also a part of the ADAPT media team, and is on the board of Not Dead Yet.

**RR: What do you see as the relationship between your creative practice as an artist and as activist?**

DE: My activism heavily influences my creative processes. I always seek to work with marginalized individuals, like myself, on all of my film sets. I prefer to work with POC, LGBTQIA folks, disabled folks...we get less opportunities, so I find that often untapped creativity coming together from everyone as something that is so comfortable, fun, and exciting. Some of my early films did not have diverse casts, and that's something I have changed. Our casting is much more open for most of the stories we are telling. The more aware I become of other forms of oppression, the more I want to include in my own work. My film crews have always been very diverse though. Probably because marginalized people are more willing to work with a disabled director.

I create stories that include disabled people in a variety of roles. We are living our lives

all over the world, so why aren't there any disabled characters in background scenes in films? We don't see disabled people in bit parts, supporting roles, or as main characters very much. If disabled characters are in film, we are either the main protagonist or our existence as disabled people serves as a plot device to motivate the action of the nondisabled protagonist. I like to create stories about life that just happen to have disabled people, LGBTIA folks, POC-- or someone who is all of the above--in them. That's influenced by the work I do as an activist.

**RR: How does social media fit into your activism?**

DE: Social media is a major part of my activism. Part of getting the message out about inclusion for disabled people in films, television, and other forms of media is building up an audience. I have worked to cultivate an audience on social media, which has allowed me to start the discussion about inclusion in ways that involve people all over the world. I don't think I would've been able to get the message out there in quite the same way without social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

Social media is a great tool for disabled people to connect with one another, and it has also built a sense of community for disabled activists fighting to change the world both online and off. It's connected us in ways that allow us to work together, and it's created more opportunities for expanding the conversation on inclusion and access for all disabled people.

**RR: What do you see, in general, as the impact and potential of film (and television) on the real lives of people with disabilities?**

DE: We as a society look to the media to understand things about life we might not have experience with personally. That's why media is so influential on how we treat others. We see the bias of the news and how marginalized communities are treated because of this media. The same is true for narrative film, documentary film, and even animation. So if nobody has ever interacted with anyone who they knew had a disability, their only reference to disability is what they see in the media. Disabled people are not treated very well in any kind of media including film.

What society [takes away] from films that include disabled characters is that disability must be depressing. Disabled people must not be capable of working or doing much of anything. They get this message because disabled actors are not allowed to portray disabled characters. Disabled actors really are kept from portraying any type of character, whether they were written to be disabled or not. We are absent from Hollywood in many ways, so after the film is over nondisabled people don't have to think about us. They don't have to realize how oppressed some of us really are. They don't understand that we are out in the world, trying to fight for access and accommodations. The nondisabled actor portraying disabled characters can leave the role behind and not have to think about disability again, and the audience knows that. They don't have to care about disabled people or disabled issues because they don't see what's happening to many of us. In the

overwhelming amount of cases, they never truly see us.

We really need to see films that involve disabled people in every capacity. They don't need to be films about disability. Just including actors who have disabilities that present visually makes the role a disabled role. It doesn't even have to be a movie about disability, because our lives are so much more than our disabilities. Casting actors who are open about having disabilities that are not usually visible in films (for example, a psychiatric diagnosis may not be visually presented since someone with this type of disability may be able to hide it) also needs to happen to destigmatize disability in Hollywood. Actors are afraid to come out and say they are disabled if they are hiding it, because they will lose work if they do.

It's advantageous to cast disabled actors. We know authentic representation is profitable to Hollywood. The disability community is also a multibillion-dollar spending power. We consume massive amounts of media. If we were given the chance, our films would make money for Hollywood.

**RR: Any films people would be surprised to learn that you like?**

DE: Wow! I'm not sure what people think of me, so I think most people would be surprised about a lot of the films I like. I think some people would be surprised that I like work by Korean director, Park Chan-wook, especially his film, *Lady Vengeance*. I love most films with Cary Grant in them, but my favorite is *North by Northwest*. I really like films like *Twelve Monkeys* and *Requiem for a Dream*, even if they are not the best representations of disability, and *Cecil B. Demented* and *I Shot Andy Warhol* are obscure favorites. I also really loved the movies *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, *Hidden Figures*, *The Color Purple*, and *Selma*. Of course, truthfully, I truly do love superhero movies. I'm a big fan of *Captain America*, *Black Widow*, the *X-Men*, and *Black Panther*. Some people might also be surprised to know that the movie I most anticipate coming out in 2018 is *A Wrinkle in Time*. I've been waiting close to 20 years for an amazing film adaptation (the TV movie was terrible).

I have eclectic tastes! You also are sure to catch me watching 80s movies. Whoopi Goldberg in *Jumpin' Jack Flash* is my jam!

**RR: Any thoughts on the superhero genre?**

DE: I love comic books, and as a certified geek, that love spills over into the superhero genre. I think the superhero genre has many great opportunities for disabled characters and actors. Disability is everywhere in comic book characters and superhero films.

The *X-Men* is a great example, and many disabled people relate to aspects of the comics, shows, and movies. The way that mutants are treated and othered parallels the way many disabled people have been treated and othered. The same is true of the hunting and mistreatment of meta-humans in the DC universe. For the *X-Men* and meta-humans some of their abilities are disabilities. You see that with *Rogue*, for example. There are also a

lot of harmful cure narrative surrounding the X-Men, which mirrors that of the cure narrative surrounding disability. This narrative is especially poignant in films like X-Men: Days of Future Past, where Dr. Bolivar Trask (played by Peter Dinklage) is literally a disabled person who has his own accommodations and agency, but is leading the charge to 'cure' those with the X-gene.

We see superheroes and villains who use prosthetics or half their bodies have been altered into weaponry, like Cyborg or even Tony Stark who depends on technology to stay alive. You even have characters like Superman who have to have accommodations when they encounter things like kryptonite, which significantly weakens him, Supergirl, and others from Krypton.

I would love to see a physically disabled superhero who has a militarized wheelchair, and they don't need to have superpowers or anything like that. If they have the money of Tony Stark, they could create amazing weaponry that allows them to still be disabled without having to transform themselves or without removing the actual disability. The potential is there for disabled characters to be included. Perhaps I will make a future film that explore this.

**RR: What are your thoughts on “disability drag,” non-disabled actors playing characters with disabilities?**

DE: First, most disabled people working on disability representation are not really fond of this term. For many it feels very appropriative of gay culture. Some people use ‘cripping up,’ but that still has problematic connotations. I've been calling it disabled mimicry. I'm highly against disabled mimicry. I've never seen an accurate depiction of a wheelchair user or someone with most disabilities. Every once in a while, Hollywood will cast a nondisabled person as a disabled character in a movie where the disability is basically not acknowledged except for a wheelchair, a crutch or some other adaptive device the nondisabled actor uses. They rely on physically depicting the disability through stereotypical actions. Disabled actors don't have to do this. They are simply disabled by existing.

A nondisabled actor can't accurately portray the unique way my body moves as a disabled body. Any attempt to do so is mimicry. It's mockery. A disabled body moves the way it does naturally. It's normal for us. I don't think that's anything you can act accurately. This is problematic because sometimes there will be one characteristic beyond all the terrible characteristics that a disabled person finds somewhat relatable. That still does not make the portrayal okay. It's still causing harm to whatever disability community it's representing. It just complicates things, because we are all so desperate to see ourselves reflected in characters in some way. It makes many disabled people willing to look past all the negative harm these films are causing.

**RR: What is the purpose of #FilmDis?**

DE: #FilmDis is a Twitter chat that was started as a discussion about disability in the media. It's been active for the past three, going on four years. The purpose is to explore the ways disability in the media is harming or helping the disability community. I think it serves to educate nondisabled people who are not aware of these issues, while giving a voice to disabled people expressing their displeasure, anger, or even joy at portrayals of disability in the media.

#FilmDis has been so successful that we have created a nonprofit, FilmDis, which we are developing into a media monitoring and analysis organization.

**RR: Anything else you wish to say?**

DE: It's really hard to make films if you are disabled, at least from a monetary standpoint. I am trying to finish up my latest film, Nance + Sydney, and we have to get audio editing, color correction, and some other things. We usually have to crowdfund for our films to even get made. It's really hard to find people willing to support our work, if it's not out in theaters! We don't have big studio support.

So if you are willing to share this, very grateful!

<https://www.gofundme.com/help-us-finish-nance-sydney>