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The Other Point of View: Disability Representation in Film

Chapter 1: Introduction

Films have been shaping our values over time. The message of films is often a product of social views at the time of the film's production. The genre of horror, for example, capitalized on the societal fear that The Great Depression caused. Likewise, sympathetic disability representation started as a product of the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990. Messaging in films can also affect societal views. This idea is extremely relevant when talking about disability representation in media.

This study determines whether disability representation in film has changed in the 126 years since its first appearance in 1897, *The False Cripple*. The Lumiere Brothers created the first short film about a disabled man who had to beg on the street. According to an article by PBS, *The Evolution of Disability In Film: After The Accolades, The Work Continues*, "Fearing arrest, the huckster hops up and hurriedly dashes off into the distance with the cop in hot pursuit as a crowd gathers" (Carter-Long). The reason why the police officer gets suspicious of the man is not clear, all that the audience knows is that once the police officer looks at the beggar's paperwork and suddenly did not trust him. Either the police officer sees that the man is a beggar on the streets and wants to make sure he is not doing something illegal, or the man is a cripple, and the police officer thinks that a person with disabilities should not be trusted.

The short film has been re-adapted one year later with a blind man instead of a cripple, called *The Fake Beggar*. The police officer is suspicious of the blind man when someone accidentally misses the collection hat, so the blind man reaches to pick up the money and the police officer starts to chase the blind man away. (Carter-Long). This time the reason the police officer is suspicious is more obvious, a blind person cannot see the money so how does he know where it is if it hit the ground? In addition to the portrayal of disability, this study will also examine the barriers faced by actors with disabilities. What differences exist between the barriers faced by disabled individuals and the ones portrayed in films? How has the perception of disabilities changed over the years?

Chapter 2: Methodology

The databases used were Google Scholar, PBS, Britannica, Labor of Bureau and Statistics. Google Scholar had articles and books that were academic literature from scholars, universities and education sources. The key terms that were searched were “disabled actors” anytime with 645,00 results “disabled character portrayals” anytime with 46,800 results, “disabled character portrayals in film” since 2020 with 17,100 results, “non-disabled actors in film” anytime with 5,320 results, and “disabled character animation” with results of 44,500. Britannica was an encyclopedia that had articles from credited sources. The key terms were “horror genre film” with 100 results, “Marlee Maltin” with 40 results, and “Tod Browning” with 74 results. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was an educational media. The key term was “first short film disabled person” with 1 result. Bureau of Labor and Statistics was a report of geography, employment, unemployment, and standards of an industry in the United States.

The key terms that were searched were “disabled actors” anytime with 3,260 results, “Disabled” anytime with 2,050 results, “disability” anytime with 9,300 results, and “actors” anytime with 3,260 results. Out of the many articles, books and journals, the limitation was there was not enough information about disabled actors playing disabled character who acted more than their condition. The reason that disabled actors got typecasted in roles for disabled characters dealing with problems of their disability. The directors, writers and actors are going to be the ones who can change the industry standard.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The research has been divided into seven categories: Understanding Disabilities, Statistics, Disabled Character Portrayals, Experience of Disabled Actors, Disabled Actor Barriers, Non-Disabled Actors, and Disney & Pixar. The first category, Understanding Disabilities explained the difference between disabilities and what issues came with it. The second category, Statistics reported on the number of actors in the industry and disability employment. The third category, Disabled Character Portrayals expressed the types of disabled characters. The fourth category, Experience of Disabled Actors influenced the characters they played. The fifth category, Disabled Actor Barriers were confessionals about how the industry treated them. The sixth category, Non-Disabled Actors was about disabled characters being played by normal people. The last category, Disney and Pixar influence the way children and young adults understand disabilities through animation.

1: Understanding Disabilities

Physical and Mental Disabilities

According to the *Disability and Health Overview* article from the CDC, disabilities are defined as a physical or mental impairment that hinders their ability to do basic functions in life or affects the quality of life. A limitation of one or more life activities. Functions of life can be described as learning, mobility, cognitive delay, chronic pain, visual or hearing impairments, amputation, paralysis, spinal cord injury, wheelchair users, seizures, and much more (“Disability and Health Overview”).

According to [ssa.gov](https://www.ssa.gov) *Social Security Administration article*, the major categories of disabilities were cardiovascular, muscular, senses, speech, immune, respiratory, mental, and neurological. Cardiovascular issues cause heart attacks, blood flow problems, and irregular heartbeats causing a person to deal with deadly side effects of losing oxygen or aneurysms. Muscle weakness or inflammation causes a person to be physically exhausted and unable to do certain tasks. Senses are categorized as vision loss, which limits the ability to see details and hearing loss, which limits the amount of sound that can be heard. Speech affects the ability to communicate by stuttering. Immune diseases were listed as cancer, autoimmune diseases which is the attack of healthy tissue, and the ability to get sick more often and with the same recurring infections. Respiratory diseases were defined as difficulty moving air in and pushing air out. This means that Sarcoidosis is the scarring of lungs, cystic fibrosis, a condition that mucus builds up and blocks the airway, and asthma inflammation of the airway, are all types of disease that make it difficult to breathe (“Social Security Administration”).

According to Mental disorders, also known as mood disorders, are listed as depression, bipolar, schizophrenia, body dysmorphia, bulimia, anorexia, anxiety and personality disorders. Neurology affects a person’s brain function ability to remember, concentrate, understand and apply information (“Intellectual Disability”).

Conditions of a Disability

A condition is defined as one: affecting cognition in memory, understanding and learning, or two: mobility which affects the person being able to navigate around. These conditions may show signs of disability at birth or later in life. For example, at birth if a mother had substance abuse when she was pregnant, the child could have developmental growth issues. A child's genetic makeup can affect different aspects, such as a disorder of chromosomes, leading to Down Syndrome. Longstanding conditions are permanent such as nerve damage, vision loss, diabetes, or amputation. Developmental conditions show symptoms of little to no eye contact, non-verbal, and repetitive motion leads to Autism (“Disability and Health Overview”).

History of Fear

The impact of fear came from one man, Tod Browning. He was an American director who was interested in macabre, disturbing and horrifying films. In his early years as a director, he worked on forty silent picture films, including *Dracula* (1931), starring Bela Lugosi and his association with famous actor Lon Chaney, he started the genre of horror pictures. The impact of the films still impacts society today, the main movie on disability is *Freaks* in 1932.

At 16 years old, Tod Browning ran away from home and found employment in the circus as a clown, magician's assistant and barker, a job where a person called in people to come see the show. He moved on from the circus to make his first directed film in 1914, *The Lucky Transfer*. One day in June 1914, Tod Browning was driving drunk when he crashed into a moving train at high speed with other people in the car. The actor George A. Sigmann was seriously injured along with Tod Browning, and the actor Elmer Booth was killed. Tod Browning had a long recovery where he started screenwriting to pass the time. When he recovered, he went back to directing. In 1925 Browning wrote and directed a series of melodramas with Lon Chaney as the lead role. Lon Chaney's characters were covered in makeup to look physically disfigured. This was Tod Browning's first deep fascination with disabled characters. He worked with the Metro-Goldwyn-Maver (MGM) studio. In 1930, Chaney acted in his first sound film called *The Unholy Three*. Browning had switched from using MGM to Universal Studio, so the film was under MGM, so another director had to step in. Lon Chaney suddenly died of bronchial cancer in 1930. In the Monster Movies film genre, the monsters were characters who were feared and seen as evil. Browning made the movie that society sees as the classic Universal film, *Dracula* (1931).

Disability Rights

According to U.S Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, the *Guide to Disability Rights Laws* article explained what laws the government has established to protect disabled people from unfair treatment. The definition of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is “person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (“Guide to Disability Rights Laws”). This definition describes when a person’s daily functions are not working as they should for a normal person. The ADA covered the types of life activities that people with disabilities have trouble with. The first one is Title I: Employment, this prohibits the discrimination in hiring, training, and pay. Before a job offer can be made, the person with disability cannot be asked about their disability. For one, the information on the disability does not have to be disclosed at the interview or at all. Two, once the disability has been discussed, reasonable accommodation must be provided in the workspace.

Section 504 came out as the first law for disabilities. Any agency that received Federal Funding or Financial Aid could no longer exclude, deny benefits, or be discriminated against a person with disabilities in the United States. This means alterations on programs and buildings have to be made accessible for people who have hearing loss or vision disabilities. The law specifically protected visual and hearing-impaired people. Any building for education or public use must have visual accessibility for yellow tape on the staircases, Braille on the door signs, elevators that say what floor a person is on, and yellow bumps in front of the crosswalks. Anyone who is hearing impaired has to have access to Sign Language Interpreters, closed captioning on videos, and assistive technology. (“Guide to Disability Rights Laws”)

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was amended by Congress in 1998 to include electronic and information technology. This means that any Federal technology electronic or informational has to be accessible to the public and employees with disabilities. The example of information technology according to the *Guide to Disability Rights Laws*, “a system that provides output only in visual format may not be accessible to people with visual impairments” (“Guide to Disability Rights Laws”). If a document is in a smaller font on printed paper, for the print to be accessible, it would either need to be a bigger font on the paper or the person would receive the document electronically. The law protects the rights of disabled people asking for basic needs to make them just as capable as people without disabilities. Unfortunately, not every able-bodied person follows the Americans with Disabilities Act including: no discrimination of employment hiring, not all public buildings and locations are up to code with physical accessibility, and no denying assistive technology.

2: Statistics

Employment of Disabled Actors in General

According to “Bureau of Labor Statistics: Actors”, the employment number of Motion Picture and Video Industry actors is 15,530. The employment number of Performing Arts Companies actors is 6,660. The employment number of Amusement Parks & Arcades actors is 6,540. (“Actors”). The findings of this article was that out of the total number of actors in all employment categories was 28,730 and the highest number of actors was 15,530 in the Motion Picture and Video Industry

The states with the highest employment rates are California with 22,220 actors, Florida with 8,550 actors, Illinois with 6,460, New York with 6,120, Georgia with 5,380 (“Actors”) The findings of the *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: Actors* article is that California has the highest employment of actors across the United States. The finding of the article was that total number of actors who live in California, Florida, Illinois, Georgia, and New York were 48,730 and the highest state with actors was California. (“Actors”).

Employment of People with Disabilities in General

The second source is the *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: Persons with Disabilities*. This 2023 article is broken up into two sections; employed and unemployed. The employment rate for people with disabilities over the age of 16 is 21.3%. During the entirety of 2023, 197,000 disabled people and 1,287 non-disabled people were unemployed. Employment of people with disabilities for 16 years or older for men is 23.5% and 19.4% for women. The Unemployment of Disability for everyone is 7.6%. The Unemployment of Disability for men is 7.8% and 7.4% for women.

The Arts, Design, Sports, Entertainment, and Media industry only includes 2.1% of men with disabilities and 2.0% of women with disabilities. One limitation to this study was that there was no specific information on actors with disabilities.

Another finding of this article was that 2023 was the highest unemployment rate of people with disabilities since 2008. The difference between employed men with disabilities and employed women with disabilities are 4.1%. The difference between unemployed men with disabilities and unemployed women with disabilities are 0.4%.

In the Arts, Design, Sports, Entertainment, and Media careers, the difference between employed men and employed women was 0.1%. The difference between employed men non-disabled in Art related fields and employed women non-disabled in Art related fields are 0.2%. The findings were that 195,713 people with disabilities were searching for jobs than people without disabilities. (“Persons with Disabilities”).

Employment of Actors with Disabilities

According to the book, *Breaking into the Business: Experiences of Actors with Disabilities in the Entertainment Industry*. Men 40 years and older get 40% of leading and supporting roles while women 40 years and older get 23% leading roles and 29% of supporting roles. The book also explored the themes and messages that disabled characters often conveyed. An overwhelming majority of disabled characters were portrayed as victims who overcame their impairments in order to be like everyone else. In these types of stories, the characters lacked an identity outside of their disability status. The characters were portrayed as “brave” just because they lived their lives like “normal” people. Their disability was seen as plot rather than an actual character. The findings are in the study done by Screen Actors Guild, actors struggle with casting in the auditions. Male actors were more likely to be casted in leading roles than female actors by 17%. Male actors were 11% more likely to be casted in supporting roles than female actors (Raynor).

3. Disabled Character Portrayals

Perception of Blindness

According to the article, *Aesthetic Projects Engaging Inequalities: Documentary Film for Social Change*. The article defines Social Movement of Disability as the societal barriers placed on disabled people to stop them from being a part of society, the movement would work to break the barriers held upon the disability community.

The experience of the disabled character who is trapped by a barrier of perception. The movie called “*Plan F*,” is about a blind man who is a car mechanic. The customers believe that disabled people have superpowers that not only allow them to overcome their disability but to be more powerful or intellectual than the non-disabled person. The costumers believe that the blind man has superpowers to repairs on a car that many sighted mechanics turned away.

The audience’s perception of disabled characters is that disabled characters are how real disabled people feel and fit into the world. The limited interactions with disabled people make the able-bodied audience think that disabled people have a superpower or want a normal life. The findings of the article are that the social movement is the awareness of disability representation and how to change it respectfully and positively to where the disabled character and the audience can relate (Cole).

Physical Disability or Emotional Disability

The book, *Cinema of Isolation*, studied how disabilities isolate people. In Robert

Rossen's classic film *The Hustler*, the crippled character walks with a limp. This character has no purpose in life and drinks too much. The experience of the non-disabled majority, the audience without any disabilities, both fears and holds disabled people as beneath them. The weight of her emotional drinking outshines her disability. The findings of the article are that the character is only an alcoholic because she has a limp. To the audience the message of Cinema is that a person with disabilities is forever going to be ostracized from society. The nondisabled majority would not even notice her disability as a cause of her drinking problem (Norden).

Communication Through Silence

According to the book, *Disability Representation in Film, TV, and Print Media*, silence exists when all sound stops. In film, silence was used to express the lack of something or to get an emotional reaction from the audience. There are very few Deaf people who cannot hear at all, but most people have a degree of deafness where they can still hear some sounds. A person who lost hearing at birth or who became deaf at a young age, calls themselves 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' because they communicate in American Sign Language. The stigma of cochlear implants, hearing aids, and that a deaf person can use their voice to communicate, was not Deaf since they could still hear. The English words do not directly translate every word to American Sign Language. Facial expression, hand movement, and body language express the visual language of ASL.

In the film, *A Quiet Place* the post-apocalyptic world was invaded by aliens that killed anything that made sound. The family only survived for so long because they would use ASL to communicate with their Deaf daughter, Regan. The mother Evelyn was played by Emily Blunt, a famous actress. The father, Lee, was played by John Krasinski, the director and co-writer of the film. The oldest child, Regan, was played by Millicent Simmons who has been Deaf since she was 12 months old from a medication overdose. At the beginning of the movie, the family was collecting supplies in the store for their sick middle child, Marcus, played by Noah Jupe. The youngest child, Beau, was played by Cade Woodward. If the Abbott Family had not talked or made loud noises, they would have been safe from the sound-hunting monsters. Beau wanted to bring a NASA space shuttle toy with him, but Lee tried to explain in ASL that the toy would make noise. Secretly Beau packed the toy in his backpack because he was too young to understand how dangerous it really was. There were two ways to use silence: changing sound levels, character voice and audience reaction.

In the first scene, the establishing shot showed a row of tall green trees with a few orange and yellow trees in the background of the scene. The trees in the foreground were lighter in color. In the middle ground, the characters walked on top of train tracks where the farther the characters walk, the more overgrown grass they have to walk on. Slowly the camera moved to the right, displaying the top of a telephone pole that was slanted. Without having to see the broken spot in the pole, the audience can infer that the telephone pole has fallen over. This scene emphasized the relationship between the dangerous landscape and the fearful characters. Music mimicked the somber horn sound of a train. A piano played one low note, let it fade out, and then played a high note.

The second scene was a close-up of the sandy ground. There were leaves scattered throughout the sand in the foreground. Beyond the sand, there was a small hill that was covered with leaves. Even with the focal point on the middle ground, the blurry tree trunks could still be made out by their shape. Bare feet walk across the sand, crunching lightly with each step. The piano music was louder and not in sync with the softer sound of footsteps, creating a syncopated beat. No one in the family wore shoes because shoes were louder on certain materials.

The third scene was an extreme long shot of the family walking through the woods. The camera started off with an extreme close-up of square metal poles that form a horizontal beam. Then the camera drifted downwards where the poles made a giant 'A' shape. The music stopped. This silence was the first time that the audience would realize there was something bad about to happen. The family walked on the bridge.

A montage of medium close-ups of the characters and the characters' perspectives from the chest up. This began when Lee was carrying Marcus, the mother was staring in front of her, and Marcus' face was shown over his father's shoulder. The wind blew hard, creating a static like sound. The next scene was a MCU of Regan walking a little to the right, revealing the reflection of Beau's NASA space shuttle toy in his hand. There was no sound when the camera showed Regan because she is Deaf. The space shuttle blared a warning sound with a loud rush of the rocket engine starting up. Suddenly, Lee stopped in his tracks. The camera and the father rotated in opposite directions, Lee turned behind him and the camera turned in front of him. Regan parted her lips, she heard no sound, but knew something was wrong. She had no idea that the toy was making noise because everything was happening behind her. Lee puts down Marcus. Evelyn covers her mouth in fear but also to stop herself from shouting. The music ramped up playing faster drum beats as the father races to pull Beau from danger. The camera tracks the movement of a black creature racing through the woods. The tall creature with four long spider-like legs, threw itself into Beau. The little boy disappeared and so did the monster.

Another form of silence was to conceal the voice of the character, Regan. In every horror movie, the same scream was used for the female protagonist who survived the tragic monster attack when everyone else died. The male version of the scream originates from the Warner Bros movie, *Distant Drums* in 1950. The character Private Wilhelm got attacked by an alligator. The sound department had six takes of Gary Cooper, the actor who played Private Wilhelm, screaming in different pitches. The most common scream was from the fifth take. The Wilhelm Scream was taken from the studio archive to be used in over four hundred films, including films used today. The female version of the Wilhelm Scream was used in horror movies when the monster was attacking other characters and chasing the female protagonist.

In the movie, *A Quiet Place*, after Regan's last family member died, she opened her mouth to scream but no sound came out. Deaf characters have been portrayed as mute people who do not make sounds at all. The hearing audience was made in mind when the first film with a deaf actress was in it. The character Blinda was supposed to scream at the end of the movie, but the director thought that a deaf girl should be seen and not be heard screaming. The director of the film did not want to scare the audience by hearing the wails of a deaf girl. The reason why *A Quiet Place* did not have Regan scream at the end of the movie was left up to the audience to interpret. Millicent Simmons, the actress who played Regan, gave a new take on what it means to have a Deaf Actress play a Deaf Character. Her authentic acting of communication in ASL with facial expressions and body language was truly her speaking (Jeffress).

4. Experience of Disabled Actors

Deaf Actress Won Awards

According to the article, Marlee Matlin is the first deaf person to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, Golden Globe Award for youngest performer to win the Oscar for Best Actress. The personal experience from Marlee Matlin is about her role in society and film. Activism is a big part of Marlee's film career. She represents the hearing-impaired community and other disabilities in movies. The director of *Children of a Lesser God* decided to cast Marlee Matlin as the lead role in the film instead of the acclaimed actor William Hurt.

The findings of the article are that only three people with disabilities have won an Oscar. Disabled actors are recognized for playing disabled characters. The leading role of the film *Children of a Lesser God* is a hearing-impaired cleaning lady who only converses in American Sign Language (Bauer).

Disabled Camp Fights for Rights

The second source is *Crip Camp*. The author of the article “*Crip Camp*” is Michael Rembis. The date of the article is 2024. Then, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominated Crip Camps for Best Documentary Feature. The movie is about Camp Jened who held sit-ins for Section 504 in 1977. Camp Jened led the charge to the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. The documentary follows the experience of disabled people who went to a summer camp in 1971 and met other disabled people.

The Americans with Disabilities Act gets services to help disabled people succeed in life while Section 504 stops discrimination. The campers and counselors of Camp Jened changed the course history forever. The director of the *Crip Camp*, Jim Lebrecht was a former camper at Camp Jened ().

Judy Heumann was an American rights activist who became permanently disabled at eighteen months old from polio. The disease left her in a wheelchair, her parents were told that she could not attend a public kindergarten because her wheelchair was a fire hazard. Her parents advocated for her so much that the school put her in a segregated classroom until she was about to go into high school. Unfortunately, a new policy dictated that wheelchair students had to be homeschooled. She learned from an early age that if she wanted to be treated like a human being, she needed to have equal rights that protected her, and others like her ().

5. Disabled Actors Barriers

This section was about the confessionals of disabled actors sharing their experiences with auditioning for a role. Some actors got to audition, some never made it to the audition stage, and some got the role. Each person dealt with their own disability and their own struggles trying to get accommodations and accessibility.

Accessibility Struggles

In the case study *Acting the Part*, there were auditions and set locations that were not designed to be used by disabled people. Six people were amputees who needed to use elevators. On set equipment wires can be hard to go around when someone has mobility issues. Each participant was given a number of how many disabled people had the same diagnosis. Participant Three struggled to get her powered wheelchair over the wires so she had to wait for someone to move the wires out of her way. She felt helpless and in the way of everyone (Gulka).

Accommodations Denied

In a study done by *Acting the Part: Case Study* there were several needs that were not being met. One blind participant struggled with small font sizes on contract sheets. Although she asked for a digital copy of the contract, it was denied. She wanted to show that she could be independent, but when she had to rely on others to read the contract out loud, her co-workers saw her as someone who would always be a burden.

A hearing loss participant expressed his concern about not being able to understand directions. The actor could follow the lead of hearing actors on set but when it came to him having to do anything by himself, he kept missing his mark to stand. The issue with accommodation of an ASL interpreter was not that he was denied service but that there were not enough interpreters in the field and there was no one who could come to set. He missed his lines because he could not hear his co-stars, he did not know when to start or stop acting, and he could not hear when the director gave him feedback on how to do better. He felt he could not be a good actor if he only followed the lead of others, he even questioned if he should be acting at all (Gulka).

Inclusive Accessibility

Acting the Part: Case Study asked actors if they have any positive experience where the crew found ways to include them. Where Participant Three struggled with moving around on set with her powered wheelchair, Participant Two, another wheelchair user, found there was no elevator to get to auditions. Participant Two was used to dealing with able bodied people ignoring his needs. The casting director moved the auditions down to the lobby so that he could audition like everyone else. He was surprised that the equipment used to videotape the auditions was also moved to the lobby, he thought he would never get a fair chance to audition. (Gulka).

Creating Accommodations

Acting the Part: Case Study asked what crew members were more likely to create accommodations. Participant Nine, a Deaf person, had no one to communicate with in ASL on set. Most the of the participants noticed that Production Assistants or Assistant Directors were willing to include the disabled people to make them feel just as important as their abled of the participants noticed that Production Assistants or Assistant Directors were willing to include the disabled people to make them feel just as important as their abled-bodied co-stars. One Production Assistant took the time to learn ASL so that they could help a Deaf actor understand what to do on set. (Gulka).

Too Disabled

Acting the Part: Case Study asked if they were ever not given a chance to audition. Unfortunately, many actors had been told they would not get a role because they were disabled. Participant Nine, a Deaf Actor, had a great conversation with a producer who contacted them about wanting the actor to play a role, they stated “I use ASL and can speak and I was on [show name]. And then she said ‘oh?’ And I said, ‘I’m deaf’ (Gulka). And that was the end of that” (Gulka). The Participant was ghosted because they had expressed that they are deaf. Even though the actor explained that they were on another show before, it was still not enough to convince the producer to hire them. Many actors deal with the same issues of getting so close to being hired and then when disclosing their disability, the actors get turned down for the role.

6. Non-Disabled Actors

Acting Autistic

According to the book, *Disability Representation in Tv, Film and Print Media*, the director of the movie *Music is Sia*, the famous singer-songwriter. The lead character is a non-verbal autistic girl, but the character is played by a neurotypical (non-autistic) 14-year-old girl. Sia responded to backlash stating that her movie is a love letter to caregivers and the autism community. The personal experience of Sarah Kurchak, an autistic film critic, said that “the character in *Music* was made to restrain her autism” (Jeffress). The findings are that Sia did not want an Autistic actor on her set because the actor would be too difficult to work with. Instead, Sia decided she would always have two autistic consultants on set. This ableist perspective made the autism community and others that Sia predetermined that neurodivergent people would be too hard to work with (Jeffress).

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects social interactions, hyper fixation, and repetitive behaviors. The symptoms of autism according to *Britannica* are ‘lack of facial expressions, little to no eye contact, and delay or lack of speech’ as well as ‘hand flapping...inflexible to changing routines...disruption of routines, schedules, familiar surroundings may cause agitation or tantrums” (“Autism”). For most people autism will be perceived as high functioning, where they have issues but can live independently, or severe, where they need someone to take care of them because they cannot live independently and cannot talk. Besides the generalized issues of communication, sensory issues are hard to deal with for an autistic person. Uncontrolled environments may have loud noises, flashing lights, crowds, smells, and certain feelings of materials like clothing or towels.

Acting Disabled

Non-Disabled actors used prosthetics or props to make themselves appear “disabled”. Manipulate their body to look disfigured or change their voice to stutter, lisp, or talk slower. Instead of hiring disabled actors who already fit the role in appearance, the industry hires non-disabled actors to play the roles because they cannot play the part as well. In the movie, *The Theory of Everything*, the actor who played Stephan Hawking, Eddie Redmayne studied the Motor Neurone Disease (MND) that Stephan Hawking has. Eddie Redmayne went as far as to visit patients to understand more about what muscle weakness and system nerve damage does to someone. This actor won an Oscar for his role as a disabled person (Davis).

Why can a non-disabled actor be praised so highly for their performance as a disabled person but a disabled actor with the actual disease be told they could never play the role? Do non-disabled people understand that it is not just a role that can be turned off when the filming is over? Disabled people live with the disease every day, struggle to do basic tasks because of the disease and are hated because they are too disabled. Even worse, ‘you do not look blind’ said from the perspective of someone who had never experienced vision loss.

7. Disney and Pixar Animation

Disabled Heroes

The 2003 animated Pixar film, *Finding Nemo*, had two types of disabilities represented. The first one was Nemo. His fin was injured when the Barracuda, a dangerous fish with two rows of teeth, murdered Nemo’s mother and the rest of the baby clownfish eggs. From the attack, Nemo only has half a fin, which worked twice as hard to move up and down than his whole fin. When going to school for the first time, the other sea creature children notice Nemo’s disability, saying “What’s wrong with his fin? He looks funny” (Stanton). Nemo’s dad, Marlin, told the children and the parents that “we call it his lucky fin” (Stanton). Marlin’s view of Nemo’s disability was that it was just a part of him and nothing to be ashamed of. The other parents tell their children they must be nice to Nemo. Once the children learn from their parents that Nemo’s physical deformity was nothing to joke about, the children started telling Nemo things that were wrong with them. The purple octopus child told Nemo, “See this tentacle, it’s actually shorter than all my other tentacles but you can’t really tell” (Stanton). Since the octopus’s child had one tentacle shorter than the other, she was the first one to comment that she had a deformity too. The physical deformity that Nemo had was accepted by others since the dad started the conversation with a positive attitude.

Unfortunately, Nemo was kidnaped by fishermen on the school field trip. Marlin, a worried parent, goes on a mission to find his son. Later in the movie, Marlin meets Dory, a blue tang fish with short term memory loss. In an attempt to find her family, Dory wandered around the ocean. She repeated herself often, asking questions that she had already asked a few minutes ago. Dory followed Marlin because she claimed that she saw the boat that took Nemo, but she cannot remember what direction he went in. Marlin was getting frustrated at Dory for repeating herself, getting them lost, and Marlin constantly having to save her from danger. The audience was meant to feel bad for Dory as she was incapable of traveling on her own safely and pitied when Marlin got mad at her for screwing up. The sad part was that even though Dory explained that she has short term memory loss, Marlin still does not understand her intellectual disability. Marlin decides that Dory was too much trouble for him to take care of, so he told Dory he was leaving her behind. Dory became upset saying, "No one's stuck with me for so long before and if you leave, if you leave, I just, I remember things better with you, look I do. P. Sherman 42, 40, 2, I remember it I do, it's there, I-I know it is because when I look at you, I can feel it, and I-I-I look at you and I...I'm home" (Stanton). Dory was stumbling because she was trying to remember what she wanted to say. She was upset that she could not remember. This was an accurate representation of someone with short term memory loss struggling to remember something important. She knows the information but no matter how many times she repeats the boat name, she cannot remember, she cannot form the words even when she remembers parts of the information. However, the audience was made to feel bad for her character throughout the movie since her memory loss was so severe she lost her parents, she lost her home, and lost anyone who was around her because no one wanted to be patient with her.

At the end of the movie, Dory finally finds her parents, they were happy to see her, exclaiming that Dory “remembered in her own *amazing* Dory way” (Stanton). Although this scene was nice that she found her parents, their reaction was that her “super abilities” made her finally remember. To the audience, she had overcome her memory loss to be respected by other characters that otherwise would have left her behind. Marlin wanted to leave Dory behind but then when Dory ran away from Marlin suddenly, he needed to find her. Marlin realized that he would not have found Nemo without Dory’s help.

Disabled Villains

In the 2012, animated Disney film, *Wreck It Ralph*, disability was used as a trait of a villain, the character’s impairment was associated with their villainous ways. The story centered around arcade games coming alive at night to interact with each other. In the story, there was a character named Turbo in a racing game, Turbo Time. The backstory behind “going Turbo” was told by Fix It Felix, “He loved the attention. So, when RoadBlasters got plugged in, he stole Turbo’s thunder. Boy was he jealous, so jealous that he abandoned his game and tried to take over the new one. Turbo ended up putting both games and himself, out of order” (Moore). The owners of the arcade thought the games were broken, so they unplugged it. Anyone who was left behind in the arcade game after it was unplugged was gone forever. Turbo was seen as a character who had gone crazy.

More Than Their Disability

The *Owl House* is a Disney animated series from 2020-2023. The main character, Luz, is a human who enters the Demon Realm, the Boiling Isle. Luz always dreamed of becoming a witch, so she meets a woman named Eda the Owl Lady, who agrees to teach her how to do magic. A human had never been able to do magic before so when she was enrolled in Hexside, the school for demons, she was looked down on for being weaker. There are only eight covens for magic, and every year the new students pick which one they want to go in. Luz does not want to choose because if she chooses, she loses all other magic. Luz can use glyph magic, it's a form of magic where she writes the magic. Although the series never expressed any disabilities outright. Luz's magic would be considered an impairment because she must write it down when in danger.

When Eda the Owl Lady was younger, she tried to explain to her mother about her nightmares of the Owl Beast. Eda can turn into a winged monster who tries to kill anyone, even her friends and family. The Owl Beast took over Eda's body but spiritually Eda was still in there, just trapped in her mind running from the monster. In the middle of the night, Eda's mother Gwendolyn talks to the Potions Coven on how to get rid of the curse, but the only solution was to keep the curse at bay with an elixir. Gwendolyn was terrified of her daughter, so she said "Keep it at Bay?! Oh no, my daughter is suffering, and I want that thing out! Cut it out if you have to" (Terrace). The mother feared not only for her own safety but for the safety of her other daughter. Eda's character was the only one truly hated, whose curse was seen as evil. She ran away from home because being alone was safer than staying with her terrified mother. Gwendolyn never went looking for Eda because in her mind it was the curse that made Eda run away, it was the curse that created the rift between her and her daughter. Although Eda ran away from her home, she did not run from her horrible curse, the curse that she could not control, the curse that her mother made her believe was unnatural.

Later Gwendolyn believes that she found the cure to Eda's Owl Beast curse, so she stole all of the elixirs that helped Eda keep the monster at bay. The elixirs symbolize the denial of disability accommodations and accessibility where the disabled person had to rely on the able-bodied people. When Gwendolyn finally realized what she did to Eda when both Eda and the other daughter were fighting, saying "I made you think your curse was something to be ashamed of, whether we want it or not, it's a part of you. And I love every part of you" (Terrace). This was important because Eda for the first time was able to control the Owl Beast. She heard her mother apologize for endangering her, making her feel worthless to the curse, and finally accepted her daughter for the way she is. Eda, who just wanted her mother's approval of her curse, felt the weight of all the guilt she carried around be less intense. The Owl House does something no other show has done in animated films, still dealing with her disability and her feelings towards it. She does not have the supercrip trait of everything was all better because the superpowers were accepted by others or the superpower saved the day, so everyone suddenly forgot that she did not hate the curse. It took time for Eda to fully accept the curse in herself and not be afraid of it, although she was able to control it more, she still had times where it was harder to control and sometimes, she was trapped but once she was able to accept herself, she slowly started to make a road to recovery.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

I believe that my personal life and work experience have prepared me for my Honors Thesis. My twin sister has been Legally Blind since eight grade where she lost a majority of her sight to the start of retina detachments that had to be fixed with surgery. She is the only one in the school system who is legally blind so it was hard for people to understand that she wasn't completely blind. I have been working for a Non-Profit organization that helps Legally Blind college students interview blind professionals in the workforce. This work has made me realize, now more than ever that Disability Representation in Film has been written out of pity or fear of disabled characters. My passion to understand why Disabled Actors are not given a fair chance to act and why Disabled Characters have been portrayed in certain ways.

As a filmmaker an ethical dilemma I see in the future would be casting a person with a disability, For a blind person comments would be comments "how can they act if they cannot see". I would tell the person who is making the comments that you have no right to tell someone what they are not disabled because you cannot see what their condition is, doesn't make it any less real. Most casting directors are looking for a certain image of the character they want to portray but if the image they have in their head is wrong then how does the standard change? The voice of not just the disabled audiences but the normal audience as well boycotting and slandering the movie before it even hits the box office, is one way. Another way is social movement, people gravitate towards movies to help them understand situations. A genre of film only changes when something in society makes it change, copied repeatedly until it becomes adopted in mainstream media as filmmakers try to reimagine the film that put a social matter in a new perspective.

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