The Cultural Value of Cinematic Representations of Disabled People

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Introduction/Background

The cultural value of disabled people was largely overlooked within media and film studies until the 1980s, when disabled people and disability studies highlighted the misrecognition of disabled people lives and called for improved form of representation. The most well-known study, feeding into media producers manifestos for change, was Colin Barnes report on disabled people in the media[i], commissioned by the British Council of Disabled people, a leading disability organisation in the 1990s. [100]

Cultural/media analyses of representations of disabled people have developed increasingly sophisticated and nuanced approaches to portrayals of impairment (defined here as individual deviations from medical norms) and disability (defined here as forms of social oppression). This work has progressed from Barnes's examinations of common stereotypes, towards psychoanalytic examinations of film by Martin F. Norden and Tom Shakespeare, and theorisation of the non-disabled normativities of conventional film narratives as 'normality genre' by Paul Darke. Much current work is associated with 'Cultural Disability Studies' approaches which emerged from the USA in the late 1990s, including the literary approaches typified in the content of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*.

Much has been assumed about how images are interpreted in all this work. Invariably the polyphony of the text or of the situated knowledge of the researcher is neglected in singular readings of cultural texts, rendering questions of interpretation a marginal concern. Exceptions to this include Shakespeare's discussion of the complexity of film texts[ii]. Nonetheless, significant questions have been raised about the cultural value placed on disabled people by the cultural industries by the few reception studies undertaken.. These include Sancho's study of television audiences' opinions[iii], and Briant et al's study of newspaper reports[iv], highlighting the predominance of misleading, outdated, and often pathological tropes of disability, despite the increased visibility of disabled people in the media. Research on the

reception of ‘disability films’ has been scant. Consequently, our knowledge of how audiences make meanings from cinematic representations is low.

With this in mind, we wanted to examine young people’s interactions with, and interpretations of, images of disability, especially as they are a key audience who are targeted by the film industry. Further, people under twenty are a generation who have grown up watching films made after the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation. Erikson[v] shows that early adolescence is a key age in identity formation - where young people begin to form values and outlooks carried through into adult life - and where they develop a keen sense of reflection in comparisons of self with others, so it was believed that a focus on young people, aged thirteen to fourteen, would illuminate the ways in which meaning is attributed to impairments and disability.

‘Disability films’

Our investigation set out to undertake in-depth analysis of film viewers’ experiences and interactions, focussing on the ways in which both non-disabled and disabled viewers made engagements with a few ‘disability films’ allowing more in-depth insights into interactions between cinematic texts and the film audience. Our definition of ‘disability films’, were those which had disabled protagonists, and which had identifiable disability and impairment themes within the narratives.

We wanted to understand some of the ways that young people read disability imagery, by showing them different types of film featuring various impairments, chosen from two different eras in film; *Freaks* (1932) was chosen as one of the earliest ‘disability’ films, and the remake of *Rear Window* (1998) and *Finding Nemo* (2003) were chosen as films made after the (UK and US) anti-discrimination acts of the 1990s. We avoided adaptations of books to focus clearly on cinematic forms of storytelling ‘uncontaminated’ by their literary knowledge. From a very narrow range of films, for under fifteen year olds, we identified themes from prior textual analysis, measured against commonly recurring themes in Disability Studies literature, e.g. stigma, spectacle, competence, and barriers to participation. We promoted the participants’ involvement in the choices of film as far as possible, but most comedies and other films they requested were not allowable for this age group; popular requests were for X-Men films and horror films.

The young people

The participants were drawn from three local schools. As suggested, the age group of thirteen years of age was considered to be a key age in identity formation, but we also chose this year group was because we did not want to overburden those doing GCSEs. The sample of schools included one which had excellent Ofsted reports, one satisfactory 'improving' school and a third which was 'good'. There was a good ethnic mix in all groups, including Black and Asian students and the groups were fairly evenly mixed in terms of socio-economic background and sex, as we requested. As far as we knew, there were two children with impairments in the group from the 'good' school, one child with an impairment in the improving school, and one who identified as disabled in the most advantaged area.

Over four months, we paid four visits to each school. On each of the first three visits the film was shown before moderating a focus group discussion. Each school group was comprised of six to seven young people. On the fourth occasion we went in to hold a final discussion with the young people, so that they could do a presentation or other piece of work for their school. Most of these discussions were held without teachers present, though one school sometimes had a teaching assistant present, mainly to assist a student with their needs.

The young people were given a brief introduction to the films – e.g. for *Freaks* we told them a little about Freak shows and explained how many of the actors had led very exploited lives working in Freak shows before they were cast in these roles. As a group who are still formulating opinions and prejudices we wanted to explore how young people read cinematic portrayals, and how these are negotiated and re-articulated and shaped by their own emerging identities. The remainder of this paper focuses on only one of the films, *Finding Nemo*, to allow for closer analysis.

Engagement with *Finding Nemo*

Finding Nemo was chosen because the young people had asked for comedy and this was one of the few we could find with an age-appropriate certificate. We also believed it would allow them to reflect on their childhood memories of the film, and any changes in their views. We were pleased that this was their choice, particularly as humour and children's media is an under-researched area[vi].

All the young people knew the story well as they had all watched it previously at least once. Briefly, the film tells the story of a clownfish Marlin and his son, Nemo, who has one fin shorter than the other. Nemo is captured by a diver in the Great Barrier Reef and taken to Sydney, and his timid father sets out on a journey to bring him home. His father is anxious to protect him from the start when he is the only surviving egg from a clutch which also killed his wife Coral. Nemo learns to take many risks, and his father eventually learns to be less protective.

The young people's capacity for critiquing of conventional stereotypes of disability and impairment became much more apparent when they discussed *Finding Nemo*. This may have been due to their thoughts following the showing of *Rear Window* and their initial discussion of disability signifiers, but is also likely to have been due to their previous knowledge of the film. Their growing disability critique extended beyond Nemo, and Dory (his travelling companion, with memory difficulties) to other characters. They we particularly interested in Gil; most groups agreed that this film sought to portray Gil, a fish with a very obvious scar, as dangerous, the clear villain/ringleader within the fish tank that Nemo finds himself trapped in, in a Sydney dental surgery. They argued that Gil played the most important part in Nemo's transition to adulthood. One student, Tom (Group One: this and all further names anonymised), said they liked the twist that he went from *'villain to hero'* and thought that the fish tank, was possibly a metaphor for an institutionalised environment, acting as the portal to Nemo's new-found adulthood, and positive disabled identity – giving him a greater sense of independence, and agency. Drawing on their implicit, if unacknowledged, knowledge of disability stereotypes which attribute evil to 'deformity', Group Two articulated Gil's initial character as the fish equivalent of a Bond villain, describing him as '*bug-like'* and scarred. Rachel said '*The first time I saw this movie, he just sounded like a really shady person, like he was going to be like a next villain coming up, and' [ ] he's like a hero [ ] he saved Nemo*'. Declan agreed, remarking *'he saved his life'*

Groups' Two and Three went on to discuss Gil's nickname for Nemo - 'sharkbait'. Most of the students agreed that this name was given to 'boost his confidence', though Declan argued '*isn't that kind of putting him down? As a term which meant he was bait for sharks, that he won't 'even understand?'*. Fiona argued that, whether he understood this or not, he might sound stronger, and this might make him think *Ooh,*

I'm stronger'. She went on to relate this to wider attitudes of physical function, help and independence, especially when all the other fish wanted to help him when he got stuck in the tank, and Gil told them to 'let him struggle' to leave him to do it on his own. There was a lot of engagement and ambivalence about the use of language and virtues of self-help in both these cases, and discussion of the role of social support and role models portrayed in such scenes. Going beyond this, Phoebe said *'if the other fishes helped him, then he would just rely on them all the time, to try and get out of his mess'*. This seems to reflect dominant discourses on the dependency (and value) of disabled people, benefits and unemployment, as discussed in Briant et al's study of newspapers (footnote iii). Conversely, this can be interpreted in accordance with critiques made by the disabled people's movement - about the need to drop the 'special' label and foster independence and agency in young people[vii]. There was eagerness to talk about this in Group One. Reece said: *'It's not just for disabled people, it's anyone, actually, because you can see what they do first, and if they actually are struggling, then you need to help. Because if they don't let you be independent for a bit, then they won't know anything'*. Phoebe agreed with Reece saying 'everyone struggles in life'. This led them on to a discussion of risk taking and suggested that we all have to take risks based on your own choices whilst taking sensible precautions. Other children discussed the idea of challenges in relation to both risk and opportunity, and the role of adults in providing such options. Re-iterating the need to feel culturally valued further discussions showed the importance of someone '*believing in you'* and of the crucial need for social support networks (referenced to the collaborative escape attempts being made by fish in the tank).

The young people were beginning to understand the ways which narrative structures can shape meaning and help to create attachments and emotions in the viewer. Group Three talked about death and pointed out that death at the beginning of a film is less sad than at the end, or in the course of the film, comparing *Finding Nemo* with *Rear Window*. Most of them believed that there were differences between narratives when person has an impairment '*from the outset*, and those who develop impairments within the course of the story. Siddiq said '*But if you're born with it, it's kind of a bit better, because you're more used to it*'. There was agreement across the groups about this, with one girl saying Nemo '*had a lot of time to think about what he was going to do'*. But most participants also indicated that disabled children/fish have

an inadequate (shared) map for their childhoods, highlighting their lack of knowledge, perceived differences from the 'norm' and the possibilities of isolation within peer groups. Phoebe said *'he didn't know what it was, but he didn't get quickly used to it, he was still nervous about what was going to happen next*', suggesting perhaps that disabled children's lack of access to other disabled peers may be a significant source of anxiety.

Chloe agreed, and spoke of the acquired impairment in *Rear Window* as something which *'hit him harder'*, though Sarah, speaking of pain and psychological suffering, pointed out that it was more likely that a film-maker of a children's film would '*hide it a bit* '. The rest of the group agreed, Siddiq said that he did not recognise his small fin as an impairment and thought that few people would. Similarly. it was agreed by Group Two, that the film-makers wanted to minimise the impairment whilst making broader points about disability, because they might believe that a more 'serious' impairment would cause distress to children (reflected perhaps the film's/Marlin's reframing of this fin a as his 'lucky fin'). Further, several members of this group had told their friends that they were watching *Finding Nemo*, who asked why it was considered a disability film. One of them questioned why their friends could not see that when there were at least three disabled characters, but most said they had watched it frequently and were shocked to realise that they had not recognised the disability themes. Some of the group members admitted that they had questioned why we were showing it as a disability film at first, and that they saw the most obvious impairment as Dory's memory loss. It seems significant that cognitive differences were seen as the most important within this story, perhaps mirroring the forms of inclusion and ideas of students with cognitive difficulties as 'difficult' found in [viii]schools and the wider community. Presented as part of our series of 'disability films' they all now agreed that disability is central 'message' of the film, appreciating the diversity of impairment representations in the film.

In this respect *Finding Nemo* differed considerably in the interpretations of young people. Overall there was a great deal of agreement in the interpretations of this film, which contrasted sharply with their experiences of the other two films. Briefly stated, these disagreements were largely focussed on characters who were played by disabled actors. Some questioned seeing disabled people as 'spectacle', others expressed feeling more comfortable with the satisfaction of curiosity towards

impairments, whilst one student asked why disabled people's voices and experience should dominate in *Freaks*, recommending that they should get another job doing something more useful, echoing the disparaging sentiments, and cultural values found by Briant et al.

Conclusion

The reactions to impairment by children seem to exemplify some of the issues involved in understanding how impairment is read within *Finding Nemo* and in disability imagery more generally. In explorations of their interactions with *Finding Nemo*, it was clear that students were aware, all along, that they were being given moral messages from an early age, and yet they had not noticed that this was a film about disabled beings and others' responses to them. Although it might be seen as a good thing that these young people did not 'see the disability' as some people[ix] are wont to say, and took universal themes of suffering, struggle, risk and independence away as their most significant readings, now tied firmly to disability stereotypes, it is clear to see that constructions of disability 'as a state of the body to which value judgements are assigned' go largely unnoticed by those who are not 'disability-aware'[x]. Their discussion of the other films show also demonstrated that their views of real disabled people still relied, for some, on dominant, more pathological, discourses of disability.

This small study has demonstrated that young people are keen to gain more understanding about people who they may have little access to within their peer group, and can quickly gain a critical awareness of cultural depictions of disability, but it also showed that they are rarely given such opportunities and that discourses of disability are likely to go unchallenged, leaving cultural values intact.

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[i] Colin Barnes, *Disabling Imager and the media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People*, Rybur : Halifax 1992

[ii] Tom Shakespeare, Art and Lies? Representations of disability on film (Disability Human Rights and Society), in Mairian Corker and Murray K Simpson (eds), *Disability Discourse*, Buckingham: Open University, 1991, p171

[iii] Jane Sancho, Disabling Prejudice: Attitudes towards disability -A report of research undertaken by the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 2003, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/research/disabling-prejudice.pdf [accessed 11th February 2017]

[iv] Emma Briant, Nick Watson, Greg Philo, *Bad News for Disabled People: How the newspapers are reporting disability*, Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2011

[v] Erik. H. Erikson, *Identity,Youth and Crisis* London: W.W.Norton, 1968, P.129

[vi] Ewa McGrail and Alicja Rieger, Humour in Literature About Children With Disability: What Are We Seeing in Literature, in *The Education Forum,* 78,3, 2014, p 291

[vii] These arguments can be found, for example, in the work of Disability Studies scholars Colin Barnes and Alison Sheldon, 'Emancipatory' Disability Research and Special Educational Needs, in Lani Florian, *The Sage Handbook of Special Education*, London: Sage, 2007 p. 233-246.

[viii] Chrissie Rogers, *Parenting and Inclusive Education Discovering Difference, Experiencing Difficulty*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p167

[ix] The tendency to say' see the person not the disability' is perhaps exemplified in the video produced by the National Disability Council: *See the person…not the disability', 2015*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McjQK-mGaNE [accessed 11th February, 2017]

[x] Ann Millett, Review: Other fish in the Sea: *Finding Nemo* as an Epic Representation of Disability, in Disability Studies Quarterly 24, 1, 2004, http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/873/1048 [accessed 11th February, 2017]