



Ability Divide and Disability Guide: Exploring the Screen Space

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Abstract

*Attitudinal barriers can take the form of negative stereotypes about disabled people. These stereotypes can include assumptions that disabled people are dependent, helpless, or pitiable. These negative stereotypes can create barriers to the social inclusion of disabled individuals by influencing how others perceive and treat them. To address attitudinal barriers, it is important to challenge and change negative attitudes and stereotypes about disability. This can involve educating the public about disability, promoting understanding and empathy towards disabled people, and working to reduce discrimination and prejudice. It can also involve advocating for the rights of disabled people and working to create more inclusive policies and practices. The evolving theory of disability has come in contact with all disciplines. However, there is very little discourse on the concept of disability and the philosophy of film. The present essay, "Ability Divide and Disability Guide: Exploring Screen Space" is an attempt to examine the relationship between disability and the philosophy of motion pictures with reference to *Speechless*. The objective of this article is to emphasize the inclusion of disability as a concept or a perspective in the motion picture. It is essential to study the realistic portrayal of disability on screen, and its prospective consequence on the audience who constitute the society.*

Keywords: Disability, Ability, TV Series, Inclusion, Normal.

Introduction

As Plato says art is twice removed from reality. The motion pictures are doubly removed, nonetheless, they are also a close imitation of real life. Although, there are genres like fantasy, and sci-fi, the appeal of realism in art and media is universal. Further, the motion picture prompts long-term responses from the viewers. The responses from the audiences are ideological and attitudinal. Motion pictures are very influential in the construction of value systems and collective conscience. "In *Carnal Thoughts* Sobchack asks what it means to say that movies 'touch us'" (qtd. In Branigan 40). Motion pictures penetrate the collective conscience, and form a shared perception. Lacan's suture is the coexistence of both imaginary and symbolic stages / conscious and unconscious together. Motion pictures aid in creating consciousness, and emerging unconsciousness.

Moreover, a motion picture or any literary text can act as an agent of a concept or idea. Though it is commonly believed that only art films disseminate social values or convey a message, every motion picture leaves an imprint. Undeniably, every motion picture, may it



be a film, a documentary, or a Tv series leaves an emotional sediment behind. A concept is very essential for a motion picture. It is important as it helps in better connecting with the audience. However, there is ambiguity about the term, 'concept,' characteristically, the concept is both general and specific:

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of understanding the nature of what a concept involves making sense of how a concept is something that is both singular and general; singular, insofar as it is decidedly different from other concepts – other possible relations that may very well involve some partial aspect of any other concept – and general since it must also describe something that can contain more than one instance. (Price 150; emphasis mine)

The presence of a concept in a text or a film makes it more substantial. A motion picture is a modern brainchild, nonetheless closely associated with philosophy. Though, it is technical and electronic in making, its import is both societal and ethical. The screen, the scenes, the language, and the directional techniques are important aspects related to a motion picture. Most important is the philosophy which emanates out of it. Some scholars believe that both films and philosophy are intermingled. Both are inseparable:

There really is no disentangling philosophy and film. Film is part of philosophy; philosophy is part of film. Most major philosophical issues are expressed in film in one way or another because film, properly conceived, is a way of thinking about the world. It's about the relationship between our perception of the world and the world itself. It's riddled with fundamental issues of epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of perception, philosophy of mind, moral philosophy, and on, and on. (Morris 5; emphasis original)

Film theory that connects to social conscience typically refers to how films can reflect or influence social attitudes, values, and beliefs. One approach to film theory that focuses on this connection is known as ideology critique. This approach involves analyzing how films convey and reinforce dominant ideologies, as well as how they may challenge or subvert these ideologies. Another approach to film theory that relates to social conscience is known as cultural studies. This approach looks at how films are shaped by and also shape cultural and social contexts, including issues such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Some specific examples of film theories that connect to social conscience include The Frankfurt School's theory of the "culture industry," which argues that mass-produced culture, including films, serves to reinforce the dominant ideology and distract people from social and political issues. Jean-Luc Godard's theory of "counter-cinema," suggests that films can be used as a means of resistance and social critique. Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze," discusses how films often represent women in a way that reinforces patriarchal values and reinforces gender roles. bell hooks' theory of "oppositional gaze," which suggests that films made by marginalized groups can offer alternative perspectives and challenge dominant ideologies.

If social inclusion is an important concept, then, the narratives and representations of disability in constructive light are also an essential philosophy of motion pictures. There is a need to methodologically and systematically examine this idea. There have been only a few



motion pictures delineating the characters or the theme of disability. However, when it comes to theorizing disability and motion pictures, there is very little done or said. At present, there are a few texts, like Alison Wilde's *Film, Comedy, and Disability* by Routledge 2019; Jacob Johanssen and Diana Garrisi's *Disability, Media and Representations* by Routledge 2020; and *The Routledge Companion to Disability and Media* 2020 by Katie Ellis and et al. *These books at length discuss the representation of disability in media, including films and tv shows.*

*There have been also few scholarly written essays and articles, exploring the representation of disability in motion pictures. In 1985, Timothy R. Elliot in his article, titled, "Feature Films and Disability: A Descriptive Study," finds out that psychiatry was the form of disability largely represented in the films, and that most disabled characters were played by men. Britt R. Thomas talks about "disabled aesthetics" in the article titled, "Dogme 95 and disabled identity on film." Vickie Gauci & Anne-Marie Callus in the article, "Enabling Everything: Scale, Disability and the Film the Theory of Everything" discuss the representation of scale in the 2014 film, *The Theory of Everything*. The article addresses the question, like, how a focus on the film can prompt some rethinking of perspectives both within disability studies and within the conceptualisation of scale more broadly. Further, Connor and Vejoian in their article, "Pigs, Pirates, and Pills: Using Film to Teach the Social Context of Disability" establish how films can help in educating society about disability.*

Similarly, Jayana Jain in the article, titled, "Bit of Barfi, Sip of Margarita: Disability and Sexuality in Hindi Films" attempts to survey the depiction of disability and sexuality in selected Hindi films. The study compares the sexual construct of the disabled bodies of Jhilmil in Anurag Basu's *Barfi!* (2012) and Laila in Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a Straw* (2014). Therefore, there have been few discourses and deliberations on the subject of disability in connection with motion pictures. However, the significant role of motion pictures in appropriating the idea of disability; and the effect the tv has on society requires to be incorporated.

A tv series is a more powerful agent of social change when compared to a film. One reason is, a tv series is a hyper-industrial product. 'Attention economy,' 'manufacturing of audience,' and 'industrialization of memory' are some of the terms which relate to tv series. Raymond Williams' 'television flow' is become a reality. Undeniably, tv series has a stronger and more concentrated bearing on the viewers. It is because, the audience is emotionally connected with the narrative and the characters, over some time. Generally, the audience is called the consumers of the media industry. There are scholars who even believe that the viewers are not just the consumers, but the products. "The product they sell is indeed the audience they produce" (Qtd. In Bro 23)

Tv narrative and tv fiction as a means of social change are argued and discoursed by many scholars. "Just as with other forms of art and expressions of popular culture, TV fiction can be at once a reflection of, and a normative guide for, social life. As Keen writes: 'That narratives have the potential to transmit not just shared positive values but also disciplinary models of social control (including hierarchies, norms, and discriminating standards) over the



societies that share them has been a commonplace of contemporary theory.” The interplay between media and society is ambivalent. Sometimes, it is society inspiring the media, and occasionally, it is vice versa. However, here, the argument is how motion pictures, particularly, the serialised programmes on television are of greater implication.

Often, social traits and predominant values – which are expressed in specific trends or lifestyles that are symptomatic of social life and become socially binding – emerge from the study of these fictional works. Contemporary TV series reveal some of the most singular expressions of the contemporary western lifestyle (Garcia 1; emphasis mine).

There are few tv series which portray individuals with a disability and their ordinary and extraordinary experiences. *Special* - This Netflix series follows the life of a young man with cerebral palsy as he navigates the challenges of being an independent adult and advocating for himself. *The Good Doctor* - This medical drama follows a young surgeon with autism and savant syndrome as he works at a prestigious hospital and learns to communicate and connect with his colleagues. *Switched at Birth* - This teen drama follows two young women who were switched at birth and raised in different families. One of the main characters, Bay, is deaf and uses American Sign Language. The show explores issues related to disability, identity, and family. *Glee* - This musical comedy-drama features a diverse cast of characters, including several with disabilities. Artie, the main character, is a wheelchair user, and the show explores his experiences and challenges as well as those of other disabled characters. *Breaking Bad* - This crime drama features a main character, Walter White, who is diagnosed with lung cancer and becomes a methamphetamine cook to secure his family's financial future. The show explores the physical and emotional challenges he faces as he deals with his illness and the dangerous world of drug trafficking.

Discussion

The present essay uses *Speechless* as an example and case study, which is a very well-known tv series. It also becomes a befitting example on account of the representation of disability. *Speechless* is an American sitcom television series which was telecasted on ABC network. It began on September 21, 2016, starring Minnie Driver, John Ross Bowie, Mason Cook, Micah Fowler, Kyla Kenedy, and Cedric Yarbrough. It is one of the widely acclaimed and reviewed tv shows. The series whirls around the DiMeo family. Maya who is a British American represents the ‘mother activists’ as she is a resolute mother, fighting every battle of her disabled son. Jimmy is a father who is sympathetic and always equipped to stand by his family. Dylan and Ray are JJ’s siblings whom both love and help their elder brother. JJ can be called the protagonist, he is a high schooler with cerebral palsy and the centre of his family’s attention. He communicates by using headgear with a laser pointer to indicate various words, letters, and numbers on a board attached to his wheelchair, while others read aloud what he says. Though eventually, JJ can use a synthetic voice as a screen reader, his family and friend prefer to lend their voice to read aloud. This can also be interpreted as how JJ ‘s voice is replaced by the voices of others who are capable of speech articulation. However, he fights and takes his voice back.



The DiMeos move frequently from one place to another, in an attempt to find a better educational environment for JJ. Eventually, they find an inclusive school for JJ which also provides JJ with humanitarian aid. Kenneth is a caring, forthright groundkeeper who becomes JJ's aide. His innovative ideas and personal life make the series very interesting. The tv series, *Speechless* has not only attracted the film world but also has become a subject of academic discourse:

In the last class of my doctoral seminar last week, several students mentioned watching the season finale and last episode of *Speechless*, (discussed by Beth Haller in this volume) in which the central character JJ, who has cerebral palsy (played by the actor Micah Fowler who has cerebral palsy), graduates from high school. He is selected to be the graduation speaker, communicating (as is his typical mode) with his laser pointer headgear to indicate words, on a board attached to his wheelchair, while his family steps up to read these aloud for him when his support person chokes up. JJ advises his classmates to "be unrealistic." The final scene reveals him starting college at NYU, a plot twist that provoked discussion in the class. (Ellis XXV).

Katie Ellis in her introduction to *the Routledge Companion* also goes on to tell that, [the show] changes the conversation surrounding those with disabilities and provides much-needed visibility for the estimated 61 million Americans who identify as having a disability. This is the case all over the world. There are several individuals with disability in society, but they continue to live under the stereotypical eclipse. However, the positive influence of tv is a step forward in the direction of social inclusion and disability awareness. "Disability is no excuse, Amen," begins the second season of *Speechless*. *Speechless* is realistic, though there are some emotional hyperboles scattered around. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of Phenomenology is imperative to understand the impact of *Speechless* in society. J.J.'s trials and tribulations not only are cathartic in nature but also become a motivational narrative. Further, J. J.'s mother who is the 'mother of courage' fighting her son's battle inspires and advocates the rights of children with disability. "A narrative is like a frame in that it 'contains' an embedded moral (ideological) lesson involving a character seeking a goal and overcoming obstacles" (Warren Buckland 157). The narrative of *Speechless* is pregnant with inspiration and theatre.

The tv series, *Speechless* in sixty-three episodes and three seasons have been successful in creating cognizance about cerebral palsy, and other disabilities. Though, there are several subplots, but, the main narrative of a person with special needs and the family in support, foreground everything else. Furthermore, as *Speechless* is a light-hearted comedy, it appeals to the largest portion of the audience. The witty dialogues and comic spectacles leave an indelible impression on the viewers. Palpably, the genre is also a determining factor for the amount of effect on the audiences. As Altman states, "a genre-based approach can acknowledge the diversity of viewing experiences, their differing interpretations, and the 'relationships between those users' to 'actively consider the effect of multiple conflicting uses on the production, labelling and display of films and genres alike'" (Qtd Wilde 56). Humour and humanity go hand-in-hand in the show.



The tv series, *Speechless* interweaves several disability motifs. Maya's quest for an inclusive and equal environment for her son underlines the narrative. In *Speechless*, JJ's participation in the prom Dance is an example of an inclusive society. His mother makes sure that he can attend the dance. Though he appears to be different from his classmate with a wheelchair and humanitarian aid, he is part of the event. What is more, JJ also runs for the present in the election conducted by the school's council. In one episode, Jimmy takes his son JJ to play arcade games at the local ice hockey ring. Further, there are many other instances, where JJ is enabled to participate by his mother's determination and family's support. Although there are several hurdles along the way, JJ's mother is determined to eliminate them or at least, overcome them all.

JJ's aid, physical therapist, and family constitute the crew of his 'hardship.' Lafayette is a metaphor for an inclusive setting for persons with special needs. The acceptance of JJ by the teachers and the students are instrumental in undoing the stereotypes: that a person with cerebral palsy is confined to care and nursing, and seldom goes to school. His classmates and others at school notice him and make an effort to connect. His presence is regarded and accredited by his peers even in sports activities. Furthermore, JJ gets invited to the bonfire organised by his school football team. This welcoming attitude of the high schoolers marks an attitudinal transformation. This also symbolises the impending social inclusion and its significance from the perspective of a person with a disability.

'Normal life' is an important trope in the narratives of disability. There is a constant search for 'normal life' both at a social and emotional level. Maya tries hard to get her son a normal social life. She argues, fights, and complains, all in pursuit of a normal life for JJ. A normal social life for a person with a disability is a dream and not a reality. This binary opposition of dream and reality in the context of a normal social life is an important thematic strain, and this is very well addressed in *Speechless*. The audience might get to know, what is 'pursuit of a normal life' is for a person with a disability. Maya's struggle to bring her son into the mainstream to experience what others experience is one of the principal themes of the series. Right from waking up, to retiring for the night, she is occupied with planning and executing everything in the interest of JJ. She is hard-pressed that JJ should study in an inclusive school. The family outings, their social engagements, and all other special activities whirl around JJ and his inclusion.

Maya's desperation to make her son JJ feel normal results in her enabling her son to run away from the home. She is concerned by the fact that JJ is trying to run away from the home, nevertheless, she is happy that JJ can be like the other teenagers. JJ's family helped and encourage him to in participating all infamous trials to give him a feeling of normalcy. They want him to break the rules like other teenagers, and not regret that he is unable to be like others as he is always looked after. JJ's eighteenth birthday is a sad realization of the things that JJ is unable to do like the other people of his age. However, the family tries hard to prepare JJ for reconciling with the future. JJ's parents create a separate living space in their garage to make him feel more independent of his family. They call it a 'man cave' which symbolizes masculinity. It is also because JJ feels emasculated by his disability. This new



space given to JJ also empowers him with individuality and autonomy. Eventually, JJ can do small things for himself. He can do the zipper, and pick up things off the floor using a grabber. These small but significant accomplishments increase his self-assurance and independence. He enjoys solitude and freedom.

Speechless introduces several inclusive systems and assistive technologies to the mainstream audience. This can be called, educating, or creating awareness regarding important concepts, like inclusion, assistive technology, and human assistance. JJ's family can procure access to an inclusive club, where they go as a family and JJ can use the pool with a ramp. Further, the audience also gets to know the significance of ramps in public places to make them more inclusive, and the availability of special parking, etc. JJ attends a camp for other teenagers with disability. This camp for children with disability is a paradox, nullifying the message of an inclusive environment. However, at least, it provides the knowledge that there are camps, and individuals with a disability can also participate. JJ also participates in a rave in the woods on a Halloween night. Further, there is a depiction of accessible clothes for persons with disability. Maya and Melanie take up this entry price of stylizing clothes which are accessible. JJ uses assistive technology besides human assistance to perform his day-to-day tasks. For example, he uses the interactive board which helps him in communicating. In one episode, he comes across a computerized pad which is also speech enabled and can help in communication. Further, Lafayette represents the new facilities for students with special needs. The challenges faced by JJ also enable the audience to comprehend the degree and level of challenges a person with JJ's disability experiences. Mobility, communication, interaction, socializing and everyday chores are all presented in the series.

The translation of idiosyncrasies from the screen to real life cannot be misjudged or overlooked. Maya's Oscar party for the mothers of children with disability is a creative cultural gesture. The objective of the party seems to offer a break to the hard-working mothers. However, Maya and the other mothers are unable to separate themselves from the thoughts of their children with special needs, and they transform the party into a support group. While, films and tv shows have been effective in making fancy dress parties, and it's like popular and a reality, Maya's Oscar party might also set a trend and become a tradition in the reality. Maya's bubbling enthusiasm can translate into reality for individuals caring for disabilities.

There are also other characters with disability in the series, breaking away from the confines of stereotypes. Zach Anner is a person with a physical disability nonetheless, he is someone who can drive a car. Norah is another character with cerebral palsy. She is a new student at JJ's school, Lafayette. She also faces similar challenges and impediments to JJ. Clair is another female student with a disability in JJ's school. Further, Maya's involvement with other mothers also brings in more characters. When Maya and Melanie come together on a jury and despite their difference binds to each other because they both have sons with special needs. Melanie's son Logan is another character who lives with a disability. However, like any other teenager of his age, he loves to go to the movies. Young individuals with



disability aspire and desire like their able-bodied counterparts. This rendition of characters with disability with everyday chores and challenges takes the audience one step close to reality.

The ‘film in a film’ is another important thematic device in *Speechless*. It is also the most important reason for taking up *Speechless* in this essay. JJ’s interest in making movies is highly symbolic. It not only symbolizes the importance of involving persons with disability in the film industry or show business or motion pictures but also, narrows the divide between ability and disability. JJ’s eagerness to study making motion pictures, and participating in the same, confirms that his disability is not a barrier. Further, he gets an opportunity to direct a horror movie at Lafayette. In turn, JJ’s directed film is appreciated by his friends and family. What is more, he wins an award for his movie without disclosing his disability to the jury. He can compete with all, and prove his ability besides his disability. Although his family and friends are worried for him, JJ is confident of his enterprise. He is prepared to participate and present his talent.

One of the philosophies of the motion picture should be to narrow the gulf between ability and disability in society. Persons with a disability occupy a very small portion of the screen space. Further, whatever little screen space they occupy is also influenced by preconceived ideas and predispositions. The stereotypes of persons with disability constitute a narrative which is very infrequent. As a result, “The disabled people are recognized as human beings who are situated within particular social and cultural structures, knowledge and policies that enable but also disable their subjectivities” (Johanssen and Garrisi 2).

The social gulf between persons with disability and persons without any disabilities is wide and widespread. “people with intellectual disabilities have lacked a voice, authority, and control over their lives throughout history” (Hellzén, Ove, et al.). The social participation of persons with disability is just about nil or negligible. It is not that they cannot partake in society, but it is for the reason that, society seems unprepared to include persons with disability. “Put simply, is it actually possible to be an 'equal opportunities offender' in a society which has such gaping inequalities, and where the opportunity to speak of the social world seems to be largely premised on one's position within an increasingly unequal society where opportunities to contribute to public discourse are indexed closely to one's position in the social-economic hierarchy?” (Wilde 46). There are layers of inequalities and discrimination which can be removed by awareness and second-person experience.

Conclusion

The present essay advocates the usage of motion pictures, tv shows, and media in shaping the collective attitude of society towards disability in a positive light. It strongly recommends the motion picture act on the philosophy of an inclusive society, “The media can influence values and attitudes... Generating awareness of the lives, experiences, talents and contributions of disabled persons in an integrated setting is important for providing disabled persons with highly visible role models and for changing negative stereotyping of disabled persons by the media where this happens” (Ellis 2; emphasis mine). This contribution of media is an important step towards transformative politics in society.



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