The Representation of Disability in the Media

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BA (Hons). Creative Digital Media

2020

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Anna-Maria Mullally for all her kindness, guidance, advice and support through this process and over the past four years. I am incredibly grateful to have been given the opportunity to write about this topic and I wanted to thank you for the opportunities you have given me to share my story with some of your other students. Along with this I would like to thank my personal assistant Dylan for his support and patience through this project and over the past two years that we have been working together. To my family without whom I would not be where I am today let alone writing this dissertation, thank you and I love you all very much.

Abstract

I am one of hundreds of thousands of individuals on the island of Ireland that lives with a disability on a daily basis. The life that I live is an adventure. However it also comes with its challenges. One of the most prominent issues that I have to deal with is people's attitudes towards my condition whether they be positive or negative. I have always wondered why people react the way they do towards me and how this reaction comes about. Therefore as a media student, I wanted to understand how the media portrays disability and why this is the case, in a bid to ascertain whether there is a discrepancy between disability in reality and disability in the media. This dissertation seeks to analyse the development of disability representation over time and make recommendations where necessary as to how it can be improved going forward into the future.

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Introduction

Disability can be described as any condition which limits one's ability to undertake everyday activities. Disability can be attributed to a number of different areas such as intellectual, psychiatric, cognitive, neurological, sensory or physical impairment, along with a combination of various impairments. Personally I have a physical disability known as Cerebral Palsy. I was born three months early with a bleed on my brain that resulted in developmental delay and I require a wheelchair to get around. As somebody who lives with this condition on a daily basis, my family and I have first-hand experience in understanding just how difficult my situation is. As a consequence of this, I have always tried to be as positive as I can. I am aware that I am in a position where I have the ability to speak up for those who are unable to fight for themselves and challenge pre-conceptions surrounding disability in the process. As a media student, over the past four years I have learned about media production through television, radio and multimedia. However, I have also learned about how the media operates. In this way, it has become clear to me that through avenues such as media ownership, politics, advertising and others, the media continues to portray certain people or communities in a particular way which ends up privileging their experience. As a result, we as media consumers and citizens are not being given the full story. From an academic perspective, the interpretation of disability as a whole is split into two categories: the medical model of disability and the social model of disability. According to Tom Shakespeare, the medical model of disability adopts the approach of reducing the problems that disabled people face to issues of "medical prevention, cure or rehabilitation" (Shakespeare, 1997). In contrast, the social model that defines disability as a social creation in that it involves "a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society." In this way, the social model is seen as one that fosters the removal of barriers, anti-discrimination and independent living whereas the medical model is seen as regressive and reactionary (Shakespeare, 1997). It is the intention of this dissertation to examine the representation of disability in the media from a social model perspective. Drawing on the work of academics such as Tom Shakespeare, Robert L. Johnson, Katherine Fusco and Kathleen Ellis in the field of disability studies, this body of work will seek to answer some important questions. Firstly, how is disability being represented in the media? Is there a lack of representation and if so, why? How does the representation of disability in the media affect society? How do we improve the representation of disability in the media? Through examining these questions, it is the aim of this dissertation to gain a greater understanding of the representation of disability in the media, in the hope of bringing more awareness to the topic going forward.

Chapter 1 – The History of Disability in Cinema

It is widely understood that the mass media has an obligation to 'inform, educate and entertain' (Reith, 1923). The media is seen as a mirror. This is because it is meant to function as an intermediary to keep people aware of what is happening in the world around them. Issues such as politics, education and religion make up a selection of the content that is brought to our attention by the powers that be in the media industry. Along with this, there is the topic of disability. The media possesses a massive scope and consequently has a great deal of influence over the portrayal of these topics through a variety of different platforms (Singh and Pandey, 2017). As a result of this in order to obtain a more intricate understanding of the representation of disability in the media, it is the intention of this chapter and subsequent chapters, to view the subject matter through the prism of cinema. The dissertation will later seek to compare the representation of disability in cinema with that of its representation in television. For the purposes of this chapter, the analysis will be carried out through examining the work of academics such as Kath Duncan, Kathleen Ellis and others.

When investigating the history of disability in cinema, it is necessary to look at the history of cinema itself. In his piece of work entitled *"Better Gestures": A Disability History Perspective on the Transition from (Silent) Movies to Talkies in the United States,* the academic Robert L. Johnson states that in the late 1920s Hollywood began to make a transition from silent films to films that included audible dialogue, which were also referred to as 'talkies.' This transition reflected a societal shift in the area of deaf education. The transition took place because more of an emphasis was being placed on lip reading as a successor to sign language (Johnson, 2017). Silent films that were made during this transition period were known as 'dummies' because at the time it was a common derogatory term used towards the deaf and mute community. The negative connotations associated with the deaf and mute community is reflected in the 1929 film *Where East is East.* This is because one of the characters, Bobby says that others must think of him as dumb for responding using pantomime. Johnson asserts that this perpetuates a stereotype regularly linked to the deaf and mute community which implies a lack of intelligence, or even humanity to begin with. On top of this, Johnson explains that Joanna Burke, and other scholars, describe how since the time of Aristotle, it has been understood that "audible speech alone enabled the development of human reason and separated humans from beasts." This belief is known as *phonocentrism* and can be applied to the deaf and mute community as an example of how the development of vocal communication through lip reading, compared to sign language provided them with a distinction between human and beast (Johnson, 2017).

The death of Lon Chaney in 1930 was seen as a time when Hollywood came to a halt. Chaney was known as 'The Man of a Thousand Faces' due to the versatile nature of some of his roles, such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera.* Although Chaney himself was not disabled, the academic Katherine Fusco makes the point that it was the extreme lengths that Chaney went to for a role which gave him a very close proximity, and therefore association with disability (Fusco, 2018). Two years after Chaney's death in 1932, his close friend and collaborator Todd Browning released the film *Freaks.* Fusco states that this film relies more on actual disability in comparison to Chaney's images of disability, which were brought to life through impressions using makeup and acting. Fusco puts forward the idea that there are different ways to interpret the film and the way it represents disability. For some scholars the film is "tremendously sympathetic to the actors with microcephaly, quadriplegia, or dwarfism." In other cases, the film is seen to be focusing on the eventual demise of the able-bodied. Due to this the community of *Freaks* is viewed as "loving, loyal and normative." This is evident through the sanctity of marriage that is undertaken in the film. However, this marriage involving the carnival's 'midget' is simultaneously shown to be false. In this way, in some circles the film is viewed as a moral monstrosity (Butler, 1970). In contrast to this, Fusco asserts that certain academics such as Rachel Adams view one of the final scenes where the circus cast is chasing the big woman through a dark and stormy night as “retaining the idea of difference as monstrous” (Adams, 2001). The negative association with the circus freaks continues and becomes more problematic as the woman was punished. Her punishment involves being transformed into a freak which is portrayed as a horrible experience. In light of this, Fusco argues that the issue with *Freaks* is that it blurs the lines between exploitative display and sympathy (Fusco, 2018).

Meanwhile across the other side of the world, through the course of the 1930s and 1940s in Germany, the Nazis were taking a different approach. They used Darwin’s concept of natural selection taken from his book *The Origin of Species* and implemented it on the human population. The process placed particular emphasis on those with disabilities. The Nazi regime believed that allowing the disabled community to live would result in them reproducing more quickly which in turn, would weaken “society’s ability to function efficiently.” As a result, this would then place an “unfair burden on non-disabled people” (Cook, 2008). Furthermore, Cook states that the Nazis considered the economic and social hardships that Germany had been through during the course of the 1920s and 1930s, were as a consequence of “the weakening of the population created by an unfair burden.” Under the leadership of Joseph Goebbels as Reich Minister of Propaganda, the Nazi painted the disabled community as useless and people who had “lives unworthy of living” through various platforms such as posters, news broadcasts and cinema (Cook, 2008). One of the most famous Nazi propaganda films that pertains to the representation of people with disabilities at the time is *Ich Klage An (I Accuse),* directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner in 1941. The film tells the story of a doctor who is forced to make the unimaginable decision to kill his wife who has been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. While at the time of writing this dissertation this is seen as a horrible situation to be in, the Nazi regime wanted audiences to see it as an act of mercy towards the couple. This is similar to Todd Browning's 1932 film *Freaks,* as disabled people and the 'freaks' in the film are both seen as something that is not worthy of existing (Cook, 2008).

The representation of disability in cinema is not simply restricted to Hollywood and European countries. As with many art forms, it has a worldwide theme of interpretation. However with that being said, Elizabeth Ferrier argues that during the 1990s the depiction of disability as a disadvantage was a common occurrence regardless of nation or culture (Ferrier, 2001). Cinema narratives focused on characters that had to overcome a variety of setbacks. In this way the negative connotations that were associated with disability which were evident through the 1950s, continued to perpetuate through films such as *The Piano (1993)* and *Cosi (1996)* amongst others. However there was one distinct difference between disability in cinema in the 1990s and earlier cinema in the 1950s. Characters with disabilities during the 1990s played more of a central role in the narrative which can be perceived as a step forwards (Ferrier, 2001). The academic Kath Duncan and her colleagues put forward the idea that Australian cinema during this time was attempting to break the stereotypical narrative structures that are associated with characters with disabilities in Hollywood. This point is illustrated through the 1998 film *Dance Me to My Song.* In the opening scene, the film continues to perpetuate the conventional portrayal of able-bodied compared to disabled characters. This is apparent as able-bodied character of Madelaine (Joey Kennedy) is seen as independent and sexually desirable compared to Julia (Heather Rose) who must lie in bed unable to move waiting for Madelaine, her carer, to arrive (Duncan, et al. 2005). However during the course of the film, we find that it is actually Madeline who is struggling with her life. We learn that she is willing to do anything to find a lover and this eventually leads to her getting raped. On top of this, she asserts a great deal of control over Julia's life which contradicts the portrayal of carers as selfless and familiar. In this way although in this film the character with a disability is in a position of vulnerability, it also applies to the character who is meant to make them feel less vulnerable. This shows that in comparison to Hollywood, Australian cinema of the 1990s was willing to deconstruct popular narratives around disability. With that being said, characters with disabilities during this time still possessed an inferiority complex compared to their able-bodied counterparts because able-bodied characters had control over those with a disability due to their need for help (Duncan, et al. 2005). In addition to this, Duncan and her colleagues discuss that the representation of disability in 1990s Australian cinema centres around the concept of being lonely and the need to be 'rescued from their current situation.' This is apparent in *Dance Me to My Song* as Julia is left at home alone and is seen to be saved when her male able-bodied counterpart arrives. Similarly, in the 1993 film *The Piano,* the protagonist becomes isolated after having her finger chopped off. As a result, the one thing that gave her a 'voice' is taken away from her. Through these depictions, Duncan and her collaborators argue that it appears as though without someone or something to help them, people with disabilities would not be able to survive. They say that "we are not offered any depictions of disabled life being revolutionary, or a social movement of its own, as these characters fumble and fall through their hostile worlds." In this way it is apparent that cinema continues to portray disability as a vehicle of sympathy with which to draw an audience's attention, both physically and emotionally (Duncan, et al. 2005).

In her 1999 book *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives*, fellow academic Kathleen Ellis states that in relation to representation "people with disabilities are one of the only remaining minority groups where the problem continues to be located in the damaged body rather than in an unadaptive society." As a result of this, one could say that the social model of disability needs to be integrated on a more regular basis in the world of film and filmmaking (Marks, 1999) (Ellis 2003). Despite claims to the contrary, class does play a role in influencing the fate of characters in the 1997 film *Gattaca.* According to Mary Jo

Deegan and Nancy A. Brooks in their book *Women and Disability: The Double Handicap,* this is the same when it comes to disability. They argue that "although physical restrictions pose significant problems… socially created barriers effectively prevent full community participation" (Deegan & Brooks, 1985). Furthermore Ellis discusses the representation of the *experience* of disability in films such as *Gattaca,* as being proven to be a significant barrier for people with disabilities in their journey to becoming more wholly accepted within society. Consequently, she puts forward the challenge that we need to become more cognisant of the way in which motion pictures influence our attitudes towards those with disabilities (Ellis, 2003). This sentiment is echoed by Martin Norden who asserts that "as powerful cultural tools, the movies have played a major role in perpetuating mainstream society's regard for people with disabilities, and more often than not the images born in those movies have differed sharply from the realities of the physically disabled experience" (Norden, 1994). Ellis expands on this by putting forward the idea that the experience of disability differs from its reality in a variety of different ways. Firstly, she argues that disability can be represented through the continual use of stereotypes. Secondly, disability can be used as a narrative device. Finally, it can be used with the view of reassuring able-bodied audiences of their 'normality.' Ellis believes that of the three forms of representation, *Gattaca* utilises the use of stereotypes as a narrative tool that aims to remind audiences of their 'normality'. In doing so, simultaneously the film reminds the disabled community of their lack of value in society. In her piece of work, Ellis references the work of the academic Paul Longmore when talking about the representation of disability in the media. Longmore makes the point that disability is around us in society more often than we may have first realised. With this comes the fear of becoming disabled. In this way, Longmore argues that movies play the role of reflecting the subconscious anxieties and prejudices that we may have about disability back onto us, which in turn feeds the cycle that helps the able-bodied community, yet again feel more secure about their situation (Longmore, 1987). At the time of its release, Ellis discusses the fact that *Gattaca* was described as the 'thinking person's sci-fi film'. However she argues that it is evident audiences were thinking about the topic of genetic engineering instead of focusing on disability (Ellis, 2003). This point of view is backed up by Paul Longmore who explains that films regularly portray characters with a disability in such a way that results in audiences absorbing information and yet not being aware that disabled characters are present in the film (Longmore, 1987). Given that an able-bodied character with a heart defect assumes the identity of a paraplegic, *Gattaca* can be seen as a film uses false representations of disability in order to persuade audiences that the status quo should remain in place. This highlights the foundation of the medical model of disability which argues that as somebody with a disability in society, where one is now, is as far as that person is ever going to get in their lifetime (Ellis, 2003). Ellis explains that the academic Anne Finger identifies parallels between "discrimination experienced by the 'de-generates' of the film and people with a disability" living in society. Furthermore, Finger puts forward the point that *Gattaca* portrays a world where success is defined by science, while the audience more than likely consists of a large amount of the 'de-generates' that are shown on screen, which in itself demonstrates an inferior opinion of the disabled community. (Finger, 1998). On top of this, Finger states that *Gattaca* depicts a disabled character that is instantly recognisable as a negative stereotype. This is because the character of Jerome (Jude Law) is "shown to be weaker and lacking in the desire to succeed." Meanwhile, Finger explains that Jerome is also stereotypically disabled in that "he has no friends, smokes a lot and drinks too much" (Finger, 1998). Similarly, while Jerome ultimately kills himself, it is the able-bodied character of Vincent (Ethan Hawke) who gets to fulfil his ambition of going to space. In addition to this, the fact that the audience identifies with Vincent through the course of the film serves to further emphasise the divide between disabled and able-bodied characters, both on screen and in society as a whole. (Finger, 1998). Ellis highlights the first scene where we see Jerome in the film. The scene shows Jerome wheeling himself into an empty room. He looks defeated as he has decided to sell his genes. Ellis points out that in contrast to the rest of the film where everything is futuristic and high-tech, Jerome's wheelchair is distinctly out of date. Along with this, conveying such a scenario in a film which portrays the fact that there is no longer racism or classism, reinforces that discrimination in relation to disability is still present. Furthermore, the idea that the chair is old and squeaky implies disability is a thing of the past and does not exist in the future. This can be seen as relating to the feeling that people with disabilities are seen as ghosts in society. Further discrepancy between able-bodied and disabled characters is evident in a scene where Vincent is on crutches and Jerome is in his wheelchair while looking at *Gattaca*. Ellis illustrates that although the two characters are now in the same 'disabled' position, Vincent explains in his voice-over that Jerome did not have the desire to succeed. This is further evidence of the implementation of the medical model of disability, in that disability is seen as an individual problem (Ellis, 2003).

In conclusion, as has been shown in this chapter, the representation of disability in cinema has been around since the 1920s. Although a transition took place between silent films and the first films that contained audible dialogue, it is evident that the representation of disability in cinema through the course of the 20th century possessed an overarching narrative in which people with disabilities are viewed as vehicles of sympathy in order to entice an audience into the rest of the narrative. In addition, through the work of Kath Duncan and others the chapter has shown that the representation of disability is not only isolated to the world of Hollywood, and is instead a global portrayal. In the case of Germany during the 1930s and 1940s, the Nazi regime used cinema as a tool to inforce the belief that people with disabilities were not worthy of life. The negative connotations associated with disability in cinema during the 20th century continued during the 1990s has been shown through reference to films such as *Gattaca* and *The Piano.* It is the intention of this dissertation going forward to take a more in depth look at the representation of disability in film through examining the films *Me Before You and Inside I’m Dancing.*

Chapter 2 – Me Before You vs Inside I'm Dancing – A Comparison

The purpose of the second chapter of this dissertation is to undertake a comparative study between *Me Before You* (2016) and *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004). Through the work of academics such as Esther Ingham, who researches in the area of Critical Disability Theory, the chapter will examine the attitudes of both films towards the subject of disability in the form of their protagonists, Will Traynor (Sam Claflin) and Rory O' Shea (James McAvoy). In chapter one it was found that representations of disability in early film were negative. Due to this, chapter two will provide the opportunity to ascertain whether or not these representations have changed, in the twenty-first century. Both films reference the topic of romance in relation to disability. As a result of this the chapter will investigate how it is portrayed, along with how these portrayals effect societal portrayals around disability as a whole.

Me Before You is a film adapted from Jojo Moyes' best-selling novel of the same name. The film follows the blossoming romance between Will Traynor (Sam Claflin), a recently quadriplegic, wealthy playboy and his personal assistant, Louisa (Lou) Clark (Emelia Clarke). We learn that Will has made plans to travel to Switzerland and end his life (Gilbey, 2016). With that in mind, Will's parents employ Lou Clark as his personal assistant, giving her six months to do her upmost to persuade him to reverse his decision. However, despite Lou's best efforts to show him the adventures that life holds, Will decides to go ahead with his plan and kill himself, via euthanasia. In a 2016 article for *The Guardian* newspaper, the journalist Robert Gilbey stated that prior to its release, the film was the subject of a great deal of controversy (Gilbey, 2016). Instead of the name Will being used to signify something positive, it is used to symbolise the fact that following Will's death, Lou now has access to more money than she has ever seen. In addition to this, disability campaigners took issue with the film's motto of 'Live Boldly,' saying that it "applies in this context only to the able-bodied – and comes at the cost of a disabled man's life." A number of activists utilised social media using the hashtag #MeBeforeEuthanasia, with one user stating "I'm not a thing to be pitied or killed off to make the audience cry." Along with this, another individual tweeted saying "I have Will's disability. Stop killing me on film! #liveboldly, fight cripple snuff films" (Gilbey, 2016). In the article the actor and activist Liz Carr states that opportunities in the media to cover the topic of disability are few and far between. In addition, when the topic is covered she states that "there is a disproportionate number of stories which relate to the 'problem' of disability being solved by death." Furthermore, Carr believes that television and filmmakers seem to be drawn towards characters with a disability who want to die. Meanwhile, "they're less keen to cover the rest of us who might want to live but are struggling to get the health and social care resources to do so" (Gilbey, 2016). In this way, filmmakers seem to prioritise provoking a particular emotional response in relation to disability and what it means for a character, compared to remaining accurate to the day-to- day experiences of countless people with disabilities around the world (Gilbey, 2016).

At the start of the film, Will is portrayed as an 'alpha male' in that he is rich and handsome and has everything he could possibly want. Link these two sentences as they appear to be contradicting each other. In contrast to this, following the accident, the academic Esther Ingham states that Will's life is viewed as being "synonymous with misery, hopelessness and burden" to others (Ingham, 2018). As a result of this it is evident that filmmakers are still portraying stereotypes about disability that were present in film seventy years ago. Ingham refers to the assertion that the "presence of disability can evoke a deep-rooted death anxiety in the able-bodied." This means that that it is uncomfortable for the able-bodied "to live even alongside disability, let alone with it (Shakespeare, 1994; Wilson, 2003). She states that this is apparent through the films use of 'autonomy' and 'choice' in its dialogue. These are two "principles not upheld elsewhere in the disabled character's portrayed existence," along with the fact that there is no mention at any stage of mental health support for Will (Ingham, 2018). In relation to *Me Before You*, while the victim and inspiration tropes are used simultaneously, there is another stereotype present in the film. Ingham states that the film is "a classic Beauty and the Beast tale where the disabled beast is miserable until the able-bodied beauty can penetrate his icy exterior." It is evident that Lou has the power and agency while Will is destroyed and devoid of hope. This means that in reality, the theme of *Me Before You* is about the socially disadvantaged, able-bodied lead character who manages to find "strength, reason and resources to live as a result of her relationship with the misfortunate, disabled lead character." Meanwhile, although she can make him happy, he can never live a full life (Ingham, 2018). In an attempt to show that *Me Before You* is not speaking for all disabled people, Gilbey argues that the screenplay offers a brief moment of understanding when Will says "I get that this could be a good life." However in the very next breath, Will gives in once again, stating that he can't be "the sort of man that accepts this." Given that Will's character comes across as determined and uncompromising, Gilbey makes the point that it is implied that the type of man who deals with life with paralyses is inferior to him (Gilbey, 2016). As an individual with a physical disability that is lived with on a daily basis, I find this portrayal very difficult to understand. Although my situation poses a great deal of regular difficulties, it does by no means mean that I am unable to live my version of a full life. The most troubling aspect for me of the portrayal of disability in *Me Before You* is the fact that Will refuses to consider the possibility of a life with Lou. This is evident as he states "I don't want you to look at me one day and feel even the tiniest bit of regret or pity… you have no idea how you're going to feel even six months from now" (Ingham, 2018). I have never wanted anyone to take pity on me as a disabled person. Admittedly, I have had times where I have not felt good enough for certain people. However I would argue that this feeling is as a result of portrayals of disability in the media such as this. I believe that the question needs to be asked as to why a filmmaker might think that the only way they can make money in relation to the representation of disability in film, is in a way that devalues their situation in comparison to their able-bodied counterpart (Ingham, 2018), even when the role is played by a bankable star, such as Claflin

Inside I'm Dancing, the 2004 film directed by Damien O'Donnell offers another perspective when examining the representation of disability in cinema with reference to romance. The film, released in the United States as *Rory O'Shea Was Here,* follows the story of Michael Connelly (Steven Robertson) and Rory O'Shea (James McAvoy) as they look to live life independently and to the fullest possible degree (Irish Film Institute, 2005). Michael is a 24-year-old who has Cerebral Palsy and is shown to be living in a nursing home. Michael is seen to be someone who is letting time pass him by until the arrival of Rory gives him a whole new perspective on life. This is because in contrast to Michael, Rory is a character who, although aware of his difficulties, does not let them define who he is (Irish Film Institute, 2005). In the Irish Film Studyguide published in 2007, the academic Tony Tracy states that *Inside I'm Dancing* is an unusual film as it does not involve a central heroic character who spends the film overcoming obstacles in a bid to eventually 'get the girl.' Conversely, it is a film that portrays a pair of disabled characters "who are more complex than they at first seem to both the audience and each other" (Irish Film Studyguide, 2007). In addition to this, although they do not 'get the girl', they do learn a great deal about friendships. However, although the film has unusual elements, it is evident to Tracy that the narrative structure resembles well-established templates of storytelling in film, particularly in relation to the template known as 'A Stranger Comes to Town.' This storytelling device stipulates that a character outside of the main setting, comes into that world with a new perspective compared to the established characters. There is an initial period of conflict between the characters before they go on a journey that drives the rest of the narrative (Irish Film Studyguide, 2007). In the case of *Inside I'm Dancing*, Rory is the stranger who has a different view of the world to those at the nursing home in Carrigmore. This sets up the conflict that Rory has with the staff at the nursing home and hence, initiates the journey that Michael and Rory go on. In this way, it can be seen that *Inside I'm Dancing* offers a contrast to previous portrayals of disability. This is because the film showcases a disabled character in the form of Rory O'Shea, who is unwilling to accept his circumstances as they are and instead seek to carve his own unique path in life.

In the opening scene of the film, Tracy states that given Michael's position in the frame along with how he is lit, his facial expression and the fact that he is facing in an entirely different direction, "all mark him out as in some way isolated in his environment" of Carrigmore nursing home.

(Inside I'm Dancing, 2004) Michael sits facing in the opposite direction to the residents

This is further compounded as the audience is made aware that what is on the television is a 1970s children's TV show called *Bagpuss*. Tracy states that on account of their age, "they are an unlikely audience" for this type of programme. As a consequence, this "creates an impression of infantilisation among the residents" (Irish Film Studyguide, 2007) (*Inside I'm Dancing, 2004).* There is further evidence of this impression of infantilisation as Michael tries to warn Eileen (Brenda Fricker), one of the nursing home staff about the floor polisher flex lying in a precarious position on the ground. However, "because of his muffled diction, she has no idea what he is saying and misinterprets his prescient warning as an indication that he wants to go to the toilet." In this way it can be seen that *Inside I'm Dancing* puts forward an accurate representation of disability in comparison to reality. This is because although the film showcases a negative situation in this scene, it is accurate to say that people with disabilities get patronised on a regular basis, particularly from people who do not take the time to understand ones' circumstances (Irish Film Studyguide, 2007) (*Inside I'm Dancing, 2004).* Another instance where it is evident that the film accurately portrays disability can be seen in how Michael and Rory's friendship develops. Tracy states that this first occurs during an art class when Rory makes an amusing reference to Stephen Hawking. Secondly, when Rory interrupts Michael's physiotherapy session and reveals that he can understand him, we catch a glimpse of authenticity. Tracy also references the 'hair gel' scene where the two characters help each other look 'cool'.

(Inside I'm Dancing, 2004), hair gel scene.

Tracy makes the point that "all of these encounters involve Rory re-evaluating "the opposition between 'inside' and 'outside' for Michael." This becomes readily apparent when Michael asks Rory "what's out there?" and he responds " 'out there' is out there. Don't you want to be like everyone else, get arrested, get laid… How long have you been living in places like this?" When Michael says that he has been living like this all his life, Rory asks "what crime did you commit?" (Irish Film Studyguide, 2007). This section of the film provides an accurate representation of disability in the real world for a couple of reasons. Firstly through Rory's attitude. People with disabilities want to be just like everyone else and Rory represents what this is like in reality because he does not let his condition hold him back in chasing what life has to offer. Secondly, Michael's perspective of asking "what's out there?" represents the unfortunate reality for a great deal of people with disabilities. This is because without the necessary supports, many people are unable to live life to the fullest possible degree free of any unnecessary restrictions. This can result in an isolated and meandering existence (*Inside I'm Dancing,* 2004).

In his piece of work entitled *The Disabled Male Gaze: Expressions of Desire and Emotion in Rory O'Shea Was Here*, the academic Michael Gill offers an alternative viewpoint on the film. Gill puts forward the argument that despite an initial tone that places independence and self-sufficiency" to the forefront, "*Rory O'Shea Was Here* employs a narrative of disability that offers an ultimate option of death instead of living with impairment" (Gill, 2006). This is due to the fact that Rory dies at the end of the film. Along with this, Gill states that the film puts forward the idea that "the only meaningful relationships are authorized via professional routes." Firstly, although I am aware that the film could have ended earlier in order to keep Rory alive, it can be argued that this is another instance where *Inside I'm Dancing* depicts an accurate representation of disability. This is because in the film Rory has a condition called Muscular Dystrophy which in reality results in an individual having a shorter life expectancy of between their late teens and early twenties. Therefore despite the association between disability and death yet again being negative, in this case it is necessary (Gill, 2006). This is because in contrast to Will in *Me Before You,* Rory as a character does not have a tangible choice as to whether he lives or dies. Gill's assertion that the only meaningful relationships for those with disabilities come in a professional capacity, is apparent in this film as a result of the interactions between Michael and Siobhan. Although Siobhan acts as Michael's carer, through the course of the film he develops feelings for her on a romantic level. During the fancy-dress party scene as Siobhan dances with one of her friends, Michael finally gains the courage to tell her he loves her. However Siobhan rejects his advances and ultimately quits her job in a bid to avoid crossing her professional boundary (*Inside I'm Dancing, 2004).* While this portrayal reiterates long standing stereotypes about disability and romance in film, it simultaneously highlights the view that society holds around the subject in saying that people with disabilities are only able to have relationships under a particular set of circumstances. Otherwise it seems as though people with disabilities are not able to have their own version of a love life. Consequently, both films challenge the subject of disability and romance and blatantly showcase the fact that over the course of time, the film industry has not been willing to alter the trajectory of a narrative pertaining to a disabled character and their love interest. Furthermore it shows that in the name of making a profit, the film industry is willing to damage the representation of disability in the real world in terms of the ability of the disabled to fall in love.

In conclusion, through the work of academics such as Esther Ingham and Michael Gill along with the Irish Film Institute and Robert Gilbey, it has been shown that *Me Before You* (2016) and *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004) can provide an useful opportunity to examine the representation of disability in twenty-first century cinema on a more detailed level. In the case of *Me Before You,* it is apparent that upon its release the film received a great deal of backlash because of Will's death. On closer inspection, it is evident that the portrayal of disability in this film uses stereotypes that were apparent in the very beginning of representation of disability in cinema. This is because the film yet again portrays a situation where death is the 'preferred' option to living life with a disability. Furthermore, in relation to romance *Me Before You* portrays Will as a character who is unable to see that Lou can make him happy. He views himself as a burden to her and does not want to be the reason that she is held back in any way. Consequently, *Me Before You* places a negative association around disability and romance by implying that people with disabilities are in some way not worthy of love just like everyone else. Meanwhile it is evident that *Inside I'm Dancing* attempts to challenge standard cinematic portrayals of disability as it showcases the realistic fight of many people with disabilities in relation to societal attitudes towards their condition and the battle to live as independent a life as possible. In addition to this, the film accurately portrays the humour with which many people in this situation live their lives, in the form of Rory's cheeky, rebellious personality. Although it would appear that this film follows *Me Before You* in its use of the death stereotype as an alternative to life with a disability, this is in fact an accurate portrayal given Rory's condition. With this in mind, it can be seen that although both films use significant elements of traditional stereotypes about disability, they also provide a contrast in attitudes and in their definition of what it means to live life with a disability.

Chapter 3 – Paddy Slattery Case Study

The first half of this dissertation has undertaken an investigation of the representation of disability in cinema with reference to two areas in particular. Firstly, the history of disability representation was examined through looking at films such as Tod Browning's *Freaks* and *Ich Klage An.* Through the course of time it was found that the film industry used the same stereotypes pertaining to disabilities that were used fifty years previously right up until the 1990s. With further research of more modern films that tackle the topic of disability such as *Me Before You* and *Inside I'm Dancing,* it was found that although the representation of disability in cinema has developed in time, it has also incorporated updated versions of dangerous narratives about disability. This is evident as both films, in different ways, make reference to the fact that death is a preferred option to living life with a disability. However it is important to note that both chapters looked at the representation of disability through a fictional medium in comparison to life with a disability in the real world. Due to this, it is important for this dissertation to gain balance. This will be achieved through acquiring a real world perspective on the representation of disability in cinema. With this in mind it is the intention hereto undertake a case study of Paddy Slattery. Paddy is a writer, director and producer of films from Ireland who also has quadriplegia, sustained from a car crash. This chapter will examine Paddy's body of work as a writer, director and producer along with the challenges that he faces in these roles due to his condition and his view on the current state of disability representation in cinema. This will be carried out through examining an episode of the *Dan and Darragh Do Ability* podcast of which I am co-host, that he featured in. In addition to this the chapter will make reference to other creators in similar situations. Examples of this include the Irish author and poet Christopher Nolan and the director Simon Fitzmaurice. However in this regard the chapter will pay particular attention to the poet Davoren Hanna.

Paddy Slattery was born on the 23rd of November 1979 in Clonbullogue, County Offaly, Ireland. He was raised in Offaly in a family of ten with four sisters and three brothers. As he was not fond of school, Slattery decided to leave education after his Junior Certificate. Instead, at the age of sixteen in 1995 he moved to London to work in construction. In a 2016 article for the Irish Independent, the journalist Áine O'Connor charts Slattery's journey through an interview with him. During his time in London, Slattery was homesick and was also missing a particular girl he liked. Due to this he chose to come back to Ireland and work for a company that had jobs in Dublin on a regular basis. In addition to this, he managed to ask the girl out on a date and they arranged to meet up on the following Friday. O'Connor states that on the Monday prior to his date, he was unable to get his regular lift home. As a result, they obtained a lift from a passing car that was willing to take them from Edenderry to Clonbullogue. However "the driver, who they didn't know, was young and didn't know the road" leading to the crash (O'Connor, 2016). While in Tullamore Hospital in preparation for life-saving surgery, the doctors cut off Slattery's favourite jacket. O'Connor states that he viewed that jacket as "a metaphor for my life" due to the fact that "everything I knew and was comfortable in was no more." This was because among other injuries, Slattery had broken his neck at the C5 and C6 vertebrae. O'Connor points out that in real terms, this meant he was now quadriplegic. Slattery admits being naively optimistic in thinking he would be back playing football two weeks later. O'Connor writes that Slattery's quadriplegia meant that he spent four years in hospital with an end to his mobility and privacy as he knew it. Slattery recalls that "there was a point after my car crash where I was ashamed of my life, where I was ashamed to be 'a cripple.' I didn't want to see a reflection in a mirror or a window because the image that was projected back to me was somebody that I wasn't - somebody disabled, somebody that was lesser." This in itself is reflective of the stereotypes that are used to represent disability in cinema (O'Connor, 2016).

It is widely understood that one of, if not, the most important aspects of bringing a character to life on screen, comes in the form of casting choice. This is no different when casting characters with a disability. In a 2018 article written for TheJournal.ie, Paddy Slattery makes the point that as a writer, director and producer of films who also has quadriplegia, the question as to whether or not disabled characters should be played by actors with a disability, comes up on a regular basis. However, he states that the very fact that this conversation is happening “is a promising indication of progress in our industry” (Slattery, 2018). Slattery puts forward the point that the answer to this question is not as simple as it seems. To begin with, on the set of a big budget film that can cost anywhere between 15 and 200 million euro, irrespective of whether a character has a disability, a producer’s priority “is not always artistic integrity or authenticity.” Instead it comes down to the ‘bottom line’ of whether or not the film can make a profit. This is determined by securing funding from potential investors who are convinced that the film is likely to succeed, which in itself is somewhat down to the quality of the cast. Slattery points out that “If a producer has to hire an actor to portray a character with an intellectual disability and they are presented with a choice, to hire a completely unknown yet competent actor with an intellectual disability or to hire someone like, let’s say Sean Penn, and get him to impersonate a character with an intellectual disability? They will hire Sean Penn every time.” This is because he is a good actor who can also sell a movie (Slattery 2018). In addition to this, he argues, “if we say that only disabled actors can play disabled roles – then where do we draw the line? Should we only ever cast bald actors to portray characters affected by baldness?” With that being said, Slattery is aware that casting should be based on circumstance. He uses the example of ten actors turning up to auditions for a secretary in a running shoe advert, “nine of them are able-bodied actors with less than average acting skills but one paraplegic actor has brilliant acting skills.” In this case, ”the paraplegic actor is more than capable of portraying the secretary, as they will not be required to walk in the advert” and therefore they should be hired.

With that being said, Slattery makes it clear that he is "really not a fan of hiring someone because they have, or have not, got a disability in the name of political correctness and I, for one, would not like to be hired for a job on that basis." He asserts that he would like to see "fair opportunity afforded to people with disabilities" in relation to the audition process. Making further reference to the misrepresentation of disability in cinema by likening it to the objectification of women or Muslims being portrayed as terrorists, Slattery argues that "actors with disabilities are underrepresented in this industry." Consequently, for young people with disabilities acting is not commonly seen as a career choice (Slattery, 2018). However Slattery is optimistic that numbers of disabled actors will rise which will "have an impact on the prejudices that permeate our industry and society as a whole" along with "the cultural benefits from the new diversified stories that we tell and the art that we create." (Slattery, 2018). He believes that "having a disability should be as incidental to the script as your protagonist's propensity for getting up in the morning or going to bed at night. End of story." (Slattery, 2018). While commenting on his perspective following the crash in an interview with the *Dan and Darragh Do Ability* podcast, Paddy Slattery refers to it as "the moment my body switched off and my imagination switched on." He states that disability is generally considered to be "an impairment and hindrance" in life. However from his perspective, Paddy's current situation has offered him "one of the most liberating opportunities in my life." In this way it is apparent that for Slattery, the only restriction that is present in relation to disability is "because there is a conventional way of doing things" (Slattery, 2019). Therefore, people with disabilities have an unconventional way of doing things which means that from a societal point of view it is the equivalent of fitting a square peg into a round hole. Slattery makes the point that this is where 'disability' arises in that the conventional way of doing things needs to adapt itself to include those with disabilities. This would allow people with disabilities to live life on their own terms without unnecessary restrictions (Slattery, 2019). Slattery argues that we need to redefine what disability is. He believes that because of his disability, the film industry seems to make an assumption that he is going to make content that pertains to some aspects of a conventional disability. In relation to his now award-winning feature film Bro*ken Law*, he stated at the time of the interview that he would most likely encounter some criticism given that none of the characters have a disability. With that being said, he makes the point that the protagonist in the film does in fact have a disability, in the form of the fact that he is "incapable of addressing a certain emotional issue in his life." Based on this widening of the term, it is apparent that disability in itself is a matter of perspective (Slattery, 2019). Slattery points out that he has seen people that are at the peak of their physical powers and seem to have everything to live for and yet have the 'disability' of not being able to overcome a particular barrier that they are faced with. Although Slattery had made the point that disability needs to be redefined, there was a question as to whether disability should be redefined or dismantled entirely. In response Slattery pointed out that disability would always be there in whatever form it decides to take. In this way, he puts forward the point that there are "two ways to solve a math equation. There is the conventional way and then there's another way, and it just so happens that we (as people with disabilities) need the other way to solve the problem." When talking about how we can improve the way in which disability is viewed, both as a society and the media, Slattery states "the more our understanding of what everyone's ability actually is, the more we will see a healthier representation of disability" (Slattery, 2019). Furthermore, he asserts that as a consequence of telling healthier stories about disability, "the rest will take care of itself." Due to this, it can be seen that through the course of time in relation to disability, the media has had an increasing influence on how society as a whole views the topic. Therefore, if more of a conscious effort is made from a media standpoint on the tone of narrative pertaining to disability, this is bound to reflect on society. With that being said however, it is also the responsibility of society to alter its narrative about disability which could influence the media.

As a result of both areas working together, it would allow for attitudes towards disability to improve and continue to progress.

It is clear that one of the most important aspects to living life with a disability is having access to personal assistance. In an article written for broadsheet.ie prior to the government's 2019 budget where those with disabilities campaigned for the right to a personal assistant Service to be provided in Ireland, Bodger talks to Paddy Slattery about the importance of a personal assistant in his daily life. In relation to the current situation, Slattery states that "Imagine being told you don't have a right to lead an independent life. Imagine being told you don't have a right to design your own daily/nightly routine. Imagine being told your basic needs will be met on someone else's limited and degrading terms, if at all" (Bodger, 2019). Although an issue surrounding the provision of personal assistance and the representation of disability in cinema may not seem to be related, it can be argued that this is in fact the case. This is because as Slattery states that people with disabilities are not able to live life on their own terms without a Personal Assistant, the same scenario has been unfolding in the film industry for the past seventy years. The scenario in question involves that fact that people with disabilities up until this point, have not been in control of how the film industry portrays their circumstances. While Slattery makes the point that without a Personal Assistant "I may as well kiss my ambitions of filmmaking goodbye. I may as well do our government a favour, curl up in a ball and die," this is in fact what is happening when it comes to disability being portrayed on screen (Bodger, 2019). There is no doubt that in this way the lives of people with disabilities in reality and on screen converge in a dangerous collision that must be rectified going forward.

In the same way that this chapter is designed to offer a real-life perspective on the representation of disability in cinema, it is also important to gain balance in the chapter itself. This will be done through looking into the life of a poet. Davoren Hanna was born in Dublin in 1975 to Brighid and her husband, the journalist, Jack Hanna. Davoren had very little control of his body and along with not being able to speak, he was “assessed as mentally handicapped until he was seven” as a consequence of his quadriplegia diagnosis. In a 1996 article for the Irish Times, Sean Archbold writes that Hanna first learned to communicate using a letter board while sitting on his mother’s lap. Hanna reflects on this moment in his autobiography *Not Common Speech* saying that “the word `Mama' pushed with folded fist across the black meadow of magnetic board liberated me from an eternity of nothingness." Archbold states that Hanna “had devised a way of knocking off the letters he did not want by sweeping his hand across the blackboard” (Archbold, 1996). In 1977 at the age of two, Hanna was seen to be “mentally handicapped.” However his parents rejected this saying “we could not accept that the dance of merriment in his eyes in response to the repartee in the home or his rapt concentration on a piece of music indicated a mental retardation." This perspective on his condition was again on show following his progress using a blackboard, as Brighid transitioned Hanna to the use of a typewriter for communication. As a result, although still limited he was able to communicate more effectively using phonetic spellings such as “I like a lisl kes please” which translated to ‘I like a little kiss please.’ Archbold writes that Hanna was attending the Central Remedial Clinic and Saint Michael’s House, “where some staff could not easily accept that a child whom they generally saw locked in inertia could generate these sentences" (Archbold, 1996). Hanna himself details a ‘test’ that he had to undertake whereby Brighid typed with him while she wore a blindfold. Archbold points out that the ‘tests’ did not go well “because if Davoren was in a high state of spasticity or was tense or mistrustful of the person with whom he was working, nothing would happen” (Archbold, 1996). Hanna later commented on his feelings regarding the tests, stating “when those who doubt the authenticity of my voice ask how can a boy like that possibly communicate with such severe physical handicap, a satanic fury overcomes me.” These situations provide evidence of the inherently negative attitudes that society had and still has, towards those with disabilities. Although he sadly passed away in his sleep at the age of just 19, Deveron Hanna provides another example of what it means to life a full life in his situation. People with disabilities are not disabled, they are different and unique. There has never been anything wrong with being unique (Archbold, 1996).

In conclusion, as has been shown this chapter has offered a contrast to the first half of the dissertation. This is because it has delved into real-life examples of living with a disability. The chapter has shared the story of writer, director and producer Paddy Slattery through interviews with the man himself and others such as *The Irish Times*. It has been shown that after the crash that resulted in his diagnosis of quadriplegia, Slattery did feed into the stereotypes about disability that are used in film in that he felt lesser than his able-bodied counterpart. However, during his time in hospital, Slattery's perspective changed and he learned to take control of his situation. He believes that disabled characters should not necessarily be played by disabled actors. Instead, the best actor for the role should get the part, regardless of whether or not they have a disability. In an interview with the *Dan and Darragh Do Ability* podcast, it can be seen that Slattery feels that there needs to be more accurate representations of disability in cinema and the media as a whole. Through examining the story of the poet Deveron Hanna, the inherently negative attitudes that wider society has towards those with disabilities is evident. However, the common denominator between these two individuals is the fact that both decided to defy their respective diagnoses and have an impact through what they do. In this way it is apparent that there needs to be a collective effort from the media and society to treat disability in such a way that, instead of being marginalised, it thrives.

Chapter 4 – Disability, The Media and Society

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the representation of disability in the media. In the first chapter, this was carried out by delving into the history of disability representation in cinema in order to provide a source of context going forward. The chapter charted the origins of disability representation in cinema up until the 1990s while ascertaining whether or not depictions of disability had changed over this period of time. Following on from this, the second chapter took a more in depth look at what the representation of disability looks like in more modern cinema and whether or not these portrayals are accurate to real life, with particular focus on romance and disability. However, given that up until the third chapter it all depictions of disability were based on fictional cinematic representations, the third chapter aimed to provide balance to the dissertation by conducting a case study of the filmmaker Paddy Slattery who is quadriplegic as a result of a car crash and of the poet Davoren Hanna. It is the intention of the final chapter of the dissertation given the information that has come to light thus far, through the work of academics such as Diana Garrisi, Jacob Johanssen and Michele Wojciechowski to understand how societal views towards disability have been impacted through its representations in the media and by extension, how they have improved to become more positive and authentic..

Garrisi and Johanssen point out that disability scholars are still working on moving away from the perception of disabled people as "subjects who suffer from medical conditions." Conversely, disabled people are being recognised as human beings who are situated within particular social and cultural structures, knowledge and policies that enable but also disable their subjectivities" (Garrisi and Johanssen, 2020). Although this may seem as a step in the right direction, the very fact that this distinction has to be made to begin with is a negative. The question has to be asked as to what impact this has had and continues to have on society. Due to the representations of disability that have been covered to this point in the dissertation along with many others, people who live in these situations are conditioned to see themselves reflected in a negative light, both on screen and in society. The concept in film whereby those with disabilities are ‘situated within particular social and cultural structures’ is synonymous with societal attitudes towards disability. This is because those with disabilities are often pigeon-holed. There is an automatic assumption in relation to disabilities that has one of two outcomes. Firstly, that these people are inherently unable to complete certain tasks and secondly, that they only socialise with ‘like-minded’ people. As a consequence, people with disabilities are not given the right to choose and therefore are prevented from being individual and unique (Garrisi and Johanssen, 2020). Garrisi and Johanssen put forward the point that the various ways in which we think about disability in the real world along with the arts, media and entertainment “can bring benefit and understanding not only to media and disability scholars but also to researchers working across the fields of education, social services, science, health and medicine” (Hadley and McDonald, 2019, 1). As a result, scrutinising global media is seen as a practice that “may provide an opportunity for re-imagining and creating media that challenges the status quo” (Schatz and George, 2018). Doing this would allow for further advances to more liberating politics, both in relation to policies around disability and politics in general. In this way, it is evident that through Hadley, McDonald, Schatz and George, Garrisi and Johanssen reinforce the importance of a collaborative effort between all aspects of the entertainment industry and society in order to progress to a stage where disability is no longer a factor in society. It is important to note that disability as a field of study has strong foundations in the United States and the United Kingdom. As a consequence, many publications on this topic reference examples from the English speaking world. A number of scholars have argued that “disability is often the direct or indirect result of imperialism and colonialism” (Ghai 2010; Puar 2017; Nguyen 2018). This has become known as Anglophone disability studies (Fraser 2016, 2). Anglophone publications about disability are seen to have shown “far too little documented scholarly interest in disability in non-Anglophone contexts" (Fraser 2016, 2). Consequently Garrisi and Johanssen's piece of work looks to contribute to the "ongoing efforts to de-Westernise disability studies in order to expand analyses and theoretical frameworks beyond the West" (Garrisi and Johanssen, 2020). With this in mind it is necessary to the point that this dissertation in itself is written as a critique of media representations of disability. However in a wider context, it is written as a critique of Western representations of disability in the media as this is the culture that I have been exposed to not only during my studies but also life in general. This point highlights the need of Western society to be receptive to other cultures in order to gain a greater understanding of how they view the world. In relation to disability, this is just as important as any other topic as it may open people's eyes to another perspective on disability that could possibly be used to perpetuate an alternative narrative both in the media and in society as a whole. Garrisi and Johanssen state that portrayals of bodies in the media "can affect our lives because media are one of the primary agents of socialisation" Due to this, stereotypical representations of disability in the media "can strengthen stigmatising views of disability impacting on one's perception of the self and one's relation with others in a society" (Worrell, 2018). Consequently, it is necessary to undertake a critical analysis of representation of disability in the media as a means of change (Bolt, 2014). It has become evident particularly in the past fifteen years that the bodies we are exposed to whether it be in newspapers, television, or social media, are often made to appear as though they are perfect. This is done in order to "conform to racialised, ableist and heteronormative ideals of what it means to be beautiful and normal in contemporary capitalist societies" (Garrisi and Johanssen, 2020).

When examining the representation of disability in cinema through the field of disability studies, it can be seen that despite scholars' best efforts in highlighting the importance of moving away from a representation of disability that draws directly on the medical model of disability, this is a representation that unfortunately continues to take precedence over all others. This is because it focuses on gaining an audience reaction and subsequent profit rather than remaining faithful to the reality of living with a disability. However as is to be expected, cinema is not the only medium which provides representation of disability in the media. Another aspect of the media that can be analysed in relation to this is television. In a 2020 article entitled *Actors With Disabilities and the PTs Who Treat Them*, the academic Michele Wojciechowski examines the lives of actors with disabilities and how they use their respective conditions as a tool rather than a hindrance in their work. Wojciechowski begins the article by telling the story of the actor Kurt Yaeger. He was a former BMX professional who had a motorcycle accident which resulted in the need for his left leg to be amputated below the knee. On top of this he sustained a “serious pelvic fracture, tore his bladder in half, broke all of his right ribs and fractured seven vertebrae” (Wojciechowski, 2020). Following a total of three and a half months in hospital and a total of 27 surgeries, one of which was to repair his collapsed lungs, Yaeger then spent the next 3 months recovering. It was then suggested to him that he should take up acting. Despite being initially hesitant, Yaeger agreed and began setting up his online profile. Shortly after doing so, Wojciechowski states that Yaeger received an offer from a company who were looking for an actor with a leg amputation to play a character who was a wounded Afghan refugee. Due to some ingenuity in his audition tapes as he did not speak Farsi, Yaeger landed the role and has since been in TV shows such as *NCIS, NCIS Los Angeles, Sons of Anarchy* and *Quarrie*. As a result of this it can be seen that Yaeger was unwilling to accept the perceived limitations of his diagnosis. In addition to this one could say that Yaeger's story acts as a direct contrast to the attitudes that were held towards disability in early representations whereby when a character was killed, it was viewed as a 'mercy killing' (Wojciechowski, 2020). Similarly the actor R.J Mitte who is known for his most recognisable role as Walter White Jr in *Breaking Bad* incorporates his condition into his work in a variety of ways. Wojciechowski states that Mitte was not correctly diagnosed as having Cerebral Palsy until the age of three. He was taken to hospital to undergo physical, occupational and speech therapy amongst other treatments. These treatments took place over a period of 10 years and Mitte "continues to perform exercises, stretches and movements he learned in physical therapy to keep his body well-honed." He has played a variety of different characters with disabilities including Muscular Dystrophy, "one who was a paraplegic and a couple who had Cerebral Palsy." Mitte explains that "what I try to do for these characters is not mimic the disability itself, but create its own entity within that character. So, every character I play faces different obstacles to overcome" (Wojciechowski, 2020). This shows that Mitte is portraying these characters in such a way that allows their condition to be an element of who they are and their story compared to something that defines them which is captured very often on film. Along with this it also provides a window into the lives of those with disabilities in the real world because this is precisely how those with disabilities want to be treated and more importantly how they *should* be treated. As a result, the importance of the portrayal of disability on screen cannot be overstated. This is reiterated through the academics Ronda S. Black and Lori Pretes in their 2007 article titled *Victims and Victors: Representation of Physical Disability on the Silverscreen,* as they state that the portrayal of people with disabilities "contributes to societies' overall perception of disability" (Nelson, 1994; Susman, 1994). Due to this, shows such as *The Good Doctor* which first aired in September 2017 on *ABC* and *Sky Witness*, play an important role in shifting our perceptions of disability as a whole.

In *The Good Doctor* Freddy Highmore (Bates Motel, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory) plays Sean Murphy, a promising surgeon who also happens to have autism. The journalist Kerry Magro, writing from experience as someone who has the condition states that this is a "very difficult role for anyone to play given how broad the autism spectrum truly is." However with that being said, Magro states that Highmore depicts the character well as he shows "several characteristic that accompany an autism diagnosis." These characteristics can take the form of things such as "social awkwardness, lack of eye contact, playing with his hands during stressful situations" (Magro, 2018). Magro points out that the characteristic of playing with your hands in stressful situations is something she still does to this day and as a result she believes that the portrayal of this character will resonate with many in the community. In addition to this, Magro states that in the pilot episode, the president of the hospital Dr. Glassman (Richard Schiff) discusses hiring Sean and thus giving him a job in the hospital. Although this may seem insignificant to many viewers, she points out that statistics from the Department of Labour in the United States show that "a majority of those with disabilities in the U.S. today are unemployed." Dr. Glassman sums up the show's accurate and positive depiction of disability when he states the following: "aren't we judged by how we treat people? I don't mean as doctors, I mean as people. Especially those who don't have the same advantages that we have. We hire Shaun and we give hope to those people with limitations that those limitations are not what they think they are. That they do have a shot. We hire Shaun n and we make this hospital better for it" (Magro, 2018). Furthermore, their commitment to an accurate portrayal of disability is personified by the employment of David Renaud as one of the principle writers on the series, along with another writer who is on the autistic spectrum. This is because Renaud became paralysed following a car accident and as a result has experience living with a disability and people's attitudes towards it. From a personal perspective, Highmore's portrayal of Shaun Murphy and the show in general have resonated with me to a great extent. I can empathise with Murphy on a number of levels particularly in relation to certain social interactions and his difficulty when it comes to relationships in the third season (Bitran, 2018). As a consequence of this, it can be seen through the areas of acting and programming alike, that television has taken a leading role in bridging the gap between representation and reality of disability. However given that television and cinema both come under the same umbrella as a form of media that by extension are very similar, the question must be asked as to why television is so far ahead of cinema, not only in relation to the frequency of its portrayals of disability but also in terms of the accuracy of these portrayals. It is clear to me that cinema still has a long way to go to be on par with television in this area. However, in no way should this be the case. Media as a whole, with particular emphasis on cinema and television must work together in order to provide consistent and long-lasting changes to societal attitudes towards disability. With that being said, it is important to be aware of the fact that positive portrayals of disability as seen in *The Good Doctor* often focus more on intellectual disabilities such as Autism in comparison to their more limited focus on physical disabilities. There is no apparent reason for this bias other than that it might be considered 'sexier' to portray intellectual disabilities rather than physical ones. This would result in audiences being more comfortable with what they see on screen as the portrayal could resemble the struggles of an able-bodied individual more closely, while still making those with disabilities feel as though they are being represented. In this way while there needs to be a continuation of positive portrayals of disability in the media stemming from shows such as *The Good Doctor*, there also needs to be a concerted effort to balance the bias between positive representations of intellectual and physical disabilities.

In conclusion as the work of Diana Garrisi, Jacob Johanssen and Michele Wojciechowski, shows and as has been discussed here, people with disabilities are still viewed as being pigeon-holed, from a societal perspective. This comes as a result of inadequate media representations of disability, particularly in relation to cinema. In contrast to this, it is evident that portrayals of disability on television are far more advanced in relation to their accuracy of representation of disability through shows such as *The Good Doctor* along with actors like Kurt Yaeger and R.J Mitte. Thus, there needs to be a considerable narrowing in the discrepancies between television representation and cinema representation, particularly given the similarities between both mediums. Meanwhile, although television seems to be leading the way in relation to accuracy of representation of disability compared to cinema, it is evident that there is a tendency to favour portrayals of intellectual disabilities over physical disabilities on screen. In order to allow for every individual with a disability to feel as though they are being represented, there needs to be as even a distribution as possible of physical and intellectual representations of disability. This in turn would allow for a better societal understanding of disability, along with better lives for those who live with disabilities on a daily basis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation was undertaken in a bid to analyse media representation in relation to the topic of disability. This was carried out under the framework of understanding what the media's representation of disability is, why this is the case, whether or not representations are positive or negative, and finally, how these representations can be improved going forward. It was found that not all forms of media were moving at the same pace when it came to disability representation. This can be seen in the contrast between the mediums of cinema and television. Firstly, when cinematic representations were examined from the 1930s to the 1990s and then again in the twenty-first Century, it is evident that although there are small improvements towards a more inclusive portrayal of disabilities over the course of this time, cinema was still using stereotypes pertaining to disability in twenty-first Century films such as *Me Before You* (2016) and *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004) that were present in the 1930s in films such as Todd Browning's' *Freaks* (1932).

Conversely it was found that portrayals were starkly different when representations of disability were examined in the form of television. Evidence of this could be seen through the work of Freddie Highmore in *The Good Doctor* and R.J Mitte in *Breaking Bad*. With that being said, on the whole it was apparent that there was a bias in the television industry towards portraying characters with intellectual disabilities rather than physical ones. It is evident through this body of work that neither of these discrepancies both need and should be in place. In the same way that the media acts as a mirror to reflect what is happening in the world, it also acts in a way in which people with disabilities view *themselves*. People with disabilities are different because we are 'differently abled,' not because we are disabled or less than anyone else. With this in mind I believe the media plays a key role in changing the whole narrative around disability in society. As has been shown, this does not necessarily need to come in the form of actors with disabilities being cast for these roles. Rather, there needs to be consistency attached to the accuracy of portrayals of disability in the media. This would then result in a more accepting society as people with disabilities would be able to embrace being unique without unnecessary restrictions.

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