

Disability Studies Quarterly
Fall 2002, Volume 22 No. 4
pages 144-162 <www.cds.hawaii.edu/dsq>
Copyright 2002 by the Society
for Disability Studies

Disabled Sex and the Movies

Leslie Harris
Rand Afrikaans University
Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

The mass media play an important role in socialisation and influence the construction of meaning. They shape the way people perceive the world around them. Many people have no contact with disabled people so gain their knowledge of disability from the mass media. It therefore becomes important understand how the media shape reality. This paper uses aspects of semiotics to examine the construction of meaning and some of the signs, symbols, and icons of disability imagery with particular emphasis on the intersection of sexuality and disability on the silver screen. Comparisons are drawn between negative and positive portrayals of sex involving disabled characters. Adult videos produced specifically for the devotee market are contrasted with those produced for a wider audience.

We live in an information age bombarded on all sides by images and information hurled at us by the various mass media all vying for our attention. It is thus evident that the mass media play an important role in shaping our perceptions of reality. That role should not be underestimated. Tan maintains that as technology advances, the mass media play an ever increasing role in our daily lives and our perceptions of social reality:

The mass media have become important socialisation agents as well, creating and shaping many of our shared attitudes, values, behaviours and perceptions of social reality. (Tan 1986, 243)

The mass media thus acquire an ability to manipulate the unsuspecting public. The media themselves, however, are also subject to manipulation and often produce a distorted image of the world (see Kellner 1992). That can have a direct effect on how people interact.

This becomes particularly relevant when discussing interaction between disabled people and their nondisabled counterparts. A disability rights activist in South Africa

commented that many people have little or no direct contact with disabled people (Cohen 1998, interview).

He was not the first person to comment on the problem. Sky News of 18 December 1994 reported that lack of interaction was debated in the House of Commons in Britain following reports that 30 percent of disabled people in the United Kingdom were denied access to public facilities because of their disability.

Cohen says people who have no interaction with disabled people get most, if not all, of their knowledge of disability from film and television. And the images of disability in those media are predominantly negative (Hevey 1992; Morris 1993; Toy 1992). Barnes (1992) takes it further, and identifies ten stereotypes of disability. Of those, seven are negative.

It is therefore understandable that many nondisabled people responded to the topic of this paper with surprise. They are amazed that disabled characters in movies do have sex lives. Anecdotal evidence gleaned from informal discussion with friends and colleagues suggests that most do not relate the sexual lives of disabled characters they might see in movies with their own sexuality. It is seen as a plot device and not as a component of the character's overall identity. That attitude also reflects a common stereotype of disability identified by Barnes (1992) and Norden (1994): of the disabled person as sexually abnormal. Given these misperceptions, it becomes important to understand how the media construct and impart them.

Discussion in the following pages is drawn from research towards a master of arts in communication which examines how semiotic analysis of film and television reveals the way programme makers try to impose a reading of disability on the viewers. This paper does not delve deeply into the theory of semiotics or of mass communication and it does not present a comprehensive analysis of how film makers treat disability. Instead it focuses more on application, using aspects of semiotics to take a brief, somewhat superficial look at the construction of meaning and some of the signs, symbols, and icons of disability imagery.

Semiotics

Briefly and simplistically stated, semiotics is the science of signs (Culler 1983; Fiske and Hartley 1978; Eco 1979). There is an abundance of approaches to the science and many theorists use different terms for the same concepts. My overall approach in this paper is informed by the philosophies and general ideas of Barthes (1982, 1983, 1986) and specific analysis based on the methods outlined by Eco (1979, 1990). With its origins in linguistics, semiotics seeks to uncover the layers of meaning in a text. For the purposes of this paper texts include words, photographs, films, and television programmes.

The starting point for considering semiotics is the sign

which can be anything taken by social convention to represent something else. Eco (1979) gives a useful framework from which to consider sign production, essential to understanding signs and the role they play in constructing meaning. He says sign production takes into account the common use of languages, aesthetic communication, and signs as signals among other things. This paper focuses on two elements of semiotic analysis: syntagmatic analysis and paradigmatic analysis. Syntagmatic analysis is linear analysis which takes note of the narrative structure. That is useful when analysing two prevalent stereotypes of disability, the disabled person as evil or victim.

Analysis of the filmic structure reveals:
Person becomes disabled.
Disability leads to bitterness.
Disabled person seeks revenge on society.
Nondisabled person rescues the disabled person.

or
Person becomes disabled.
Disability leads to self-pity.
Disabled person withdraws from society.
Non-disabled person shows disabled person that life is worth living.

Paradigmatic analysis does not concern itself at all with narrative structure and instead looks for alterations in meaning when any element is changed. Thwaites et al. (quoted in Chandler) note that "paradigms expand; syntagms contract." In terms of film, paradigms can be taken to refer to the choice of shot, transitions between shots, other *mies-en-scene* elements, and applying variables on the paradigmatic axis to elements within the shot.

Sonesson (1999) says pictorial semiotics is "concerned with understanding the nature and specificity of such meaning, as vehicles of meaning, which are colloquially identified by the term picture." Going further, he implies that when analysed, pictures which form part of the same text need not have the same nature or even be connected to each other. This distinction allows for a wide diversity of images facilitating understanding of how one image can convey diverse meaning even when part of the same text.

Before entering the boudoir, it is useful to consider paradigmatic analysis of the "largest, most obvious and cumbersome prosthesis, the wheelchair" (Lonsdale 1990) which has assumed iconic status almost throughout the western world. It is conceivable that the paradigm will shift dramatically depending on the type of wheel shown in the image or even the specific part of the wheelchair depicted. Interestingly, a wheelchair is usually signified by a close-up of the wheel and seldom by other parts of the chair, for example the footrests or handles at the back which could evoke a different response in the viewer.

When a wheelchair-user appears on screen, there is often a tight close-up of a wheel. The shot in question shows the top half of a wheel dominating the screen with spokes and

handrim visible. A hand grips the handrim and moves the wheel.

Paradigmatic analysis of three examples of the wheel close-up-in the opening sequence of television coverage of the South African national championships for the physically disabled in 1986, in the video *Meet Ellen Stohl*, and in television coverage of the 2000 Paralympic Games shows how syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis combine to evoke starkly differing responses from the viewer.

In the example of the South African games, the wheel had a grey tyre, widely spaced black spokes, and a black handrim close to the outer circumference of the wheel. Part of the user's thighs and lower back were also visible. A woman's hand gripped the handrim at the right of the screen and slowly moved across the screen clearly propelling the chair. Despite the movement, the overall impression was one of stasis. The wheel then moved out of the shot from right to left and an image of a young woman's head and shoulders in profile faded in on the right of the screen. For a brief moment the wheel and the woman's profile occupied the screen simultaneously.

A very slow zoom-out revealed an attractive young blonde woman wearing a long-sleeved track-suit top, long slacks, and dress shoes sitting in a wheelchair. She then looked down and began to wheel slowly out of the shot, moving across the screen from right to left.

She was shown moving across a grassy surface that appeared to be on a ridge with the city skyline dimly visible in the background creating a sense of isolation. Low-key slow music, muted colours, very slow movements and soft lighting throughout the sequence combined to subtly evoke a sense of pity at seeing an attractive young woman using a wheelchair.

In *Meet Ellen Stohl*, filmed in 1987 in the United States, the paradigmatic elements of a similar syntagm evoke a different response. There is a cut to a close-up of a wheel which completely fills the bottom two-thirds of the screen. It is similar to a bicycle wheel with many metal spokes, a grey tyre, and grey handrim close to the tyre. There are small coloured beads at the junction of every alternate spoke and the wheel rim. The user's thighs, hips, and lower back are visible.

A woman's hand grips the handrim at the right of the screen and moves across quickly to the left. Her arm moves back quickly for the next push. Her arm, the moving spokes, and coloured beads all create a sense of fast movement and physical activity while the wheel remains centred in the frame. The sense of vibrancy is reinforced by strong, bright lighting and upbeat background music.

The camera cuts to a shot of the wheel from the front. Parts of the chair's frame and the edge of the user's cushion are visible at the right of the screen. The wheel and rim, clearly revolving, are at the centre. The woman's hand hangs down at the left, her fingers lightly curled around but not touching the rim. Her fingernails are painted. The camera then cuts to an overhead long shot of purple foliage. Through the

leaves and blossoms one sees an attractive young blonde woman wearing a white tank top, short denim skirt, ankle socks, and tennis shoes sitting with her legs crossed wheeling along a concrete pathway past other people. Also noteworthy is the fact that it is a bright, sunny summer day.

The camera cuts to a shot of the woman coming towards it, her arms outstretched as she steers her chair by moving her upper body. The camera tracks her as she crosses it, passing other people and finally spinning her chair through 180 degrees as she stops and joins a group of friends.

Unlike the first example above, this sequence does not evoke pity. Nor does it evoke undue admiration. The movement, music, bright sunshine, and colours combine to portray a happy, socially active young woman who happens to use a wheelchair. That is reinforced by the transition between shots - the cut.

If film is compared to language, cutting between shots is analogous to the full stop between sentences (cf. Metz 1974; Monaco 1980). Short, snappy sentences create a sense of urgency. The tempo of the text increases. Cutting between shots helped create the vibrancy in this sequence. The sunshine is also worth commenting on because in literature the sun has long been used as a metaphor for life. The bright sunshine in this syntagm subtly signals that there is life after disability.

The wheel close-up was also featured frequently during television coverage of the 2000 Paralympic Games. The camera usually cut to a wheel which filled most of the screen. The wheel is larger than usual, cambered at a noticeable angle and often has a spoke-guard. The handrim is small and at the centre of the wheel, near the axle. Part of the user's legs and lower back are visible. The user's hand either dangles next to the handrim or rests lightly on it rather than pushing the wheel. The hand is gloved and the fingers flex gently, causing strong forearm muscles to ripple.

The camera cuts to an overhead long shot of the racers lined up in the starting blocks. It then cuts to a close-up of an athlete's face and pans from athlete to athlete. It tilts down to a close-up of the wheel and cuts to another long shot of the athletes listening for the starter's pistol. A commentator gives information about the athletes and the event while stadium sounds are heard in the background.

This sequence is virtually identical to those of all televised races: the camera shows the athletes in the starting blocks under starter's orders; focuses on the athletes' faces to show their concentration and tension; zooms in on their shoes against the blocks and their fingers supporting them as they prepare to run; then zooms out or cuts to a long shot to show them explode into action as the starter fires the pistol.

Paralympic gold-medallist Linda Mastandrea noted that media coverage of such events conveyed a "sense of power," as opposed to the "sense of pity" often evoked in dramatic productions (Mastandrea 1998, interview). She also commented on how people's reactions to her in daily life differed

depending on the type of chair she was using. They would usually avoid initiating contact when she used her street chair, but when using her racing chair "people would come up and comment and start to talk about sport." An important mimes-en-scene element in paradigmatic analysis is camera angle. In the *Meet Ellen Stohl* syntagm discussed above, when she approached the camera it was at her eye level helping to reinforce the impression of normalcy. Film makers often use a high camera angle looking down on the subject to convey an impression of superiority. When the camera looks down on a wheelchair user, it reinforces all the negative stereotypes of disability.

And now to the sexual stereotype of disability. In the movies it is almost taken for granted that disabled people are incapable of normal sexual relations. Certainly in many movies which contain disabled characters that character is often depicted as asexual. Ellen Stohl, who in 1987 became the first paraplegic to model for *Playboy*, says disabled women have a particularly hard time because "if you're paralysed it's okay to have a brain, but you're not allowed to have a body" (Stohl 1998, interview). She cited the need to "regain my identity as a woman" as a motivating factor in her decision to pose for *Playboy*.

Mainstream movies which feature disabled characters often portray that struggle for identity. In *Passion Fish*, for example, the main character - May-Alice, a former soap opera star paralysed in an accident - finds it hard to believe that a guy who invites her to go for a boat ride with him is actually interested in her. He is married and after the trip May-Alice comments to her caregiver that his wife does not have to worry because she can no longer have sex.

That scene reflects Ellen Stohl's experience. She noted that if she flirts with married men while in her wheelchair, their wives do not perceive her as a threat. She said it was understandable because there are still no images of disabled women as sexual beings, with sexual needs, in most of the films and television shows being produced today.

Disability Imagery in Film and Video

Paradigmatic analysis of *Passion Fish* is interesting because the image of disability shifts as the character develops. In the early part of the film, when the negative stereotypes prevail, the scenes are dimly lit, background music is in a minor key, and the general feeling conveyed is one of gloom and hopelessness. But as the character develops and the positive images creep in, the lighting and colours become brighter, the camera angles become more empowering, and upbeat music plays. Towards the end of the film May-Alice also begins to accept her suitor's advances.

Early in the film May-Alice is seen being wheeled through an airport. Unlike most films, which would focus on the wheel, the image is of her legs and feet. She wears black leggings

which make her legs appear thin and flat black shoes. It is a fairly tight close-up, shot head-on, of her feet on the wheelchair's footrests. Her immobility is effectively contrasted with the moving feet around her. Though effective, the image is negative because it connotes helplessness and dependence.

As the camera zooms out we see her sitting dwarfed in a hospital chair wearing sunglasses and trying to disappear. She reluctantly responds when fans recognise her and ask for her autograph. We then see her in her own chair, a Quickie, the correct size and more appropriate. Her posture in the chair, and her general demeanour, give the impression that she dislikes it intensely. She spends most of the first part of the film on a sofa in front of a television trying to drink herself to death.

She goes through numerous caregivers until Chantelle arrives. She has problems of her own, needs the job desperately, is strong enough to stand up to her employer, and she "rescues" May-Alice. This is the classic stereotype of a nondisabled person rescuing the disabled person. The connotations are overwhelmingly negative implying that disabled people are unable to live unless helped by their nondisabled counterparts.

As May-Alice gains strength and begins to come to terms with her disability, we see more brightly lit shots and scenes of her in skirts starting to live again. The scene immediately before the boat ride is instructive as May-Alice tries to decide what to wear. It is reminiscent of any number of movies in which young girls agonise over the clothes to wear for a first date. Finally May-Alice decides to wear shorts for the boat ride and, by the end of the movie, she appears as a woman secure enough to speak her own mind.

Despite this relatively positive portrayal, there is no physical intimacy between May-Alice and her suitor even at the end of the film when she has clearly come to accept her disability. There are, however, numerous scenes of physical intimacy between Chantelle and her suitors. This undermines the more positive aspects of the film's depiction of disability and sexuality.

As the boundaries of so-called "normal" sexuality are redefined for the silver screen, we can expect more images of disability to creep in too. One example of this redefinition is the amount of bondage now seen in mainstream cinema. A few years ago such fare was only obtainable at adult outlets.

A particularly striking example of how disability imagery creeps in appears in Peter Medak's 1992 film *Romeo Is Bleeding* which features Gary Oldman as crooked cop Jack Grimaldi assigned to guard captured assassin Mona Demarkov, wonderfully portrayed by Lena Olin.

Demarkov begins the film with a minor disability, the third and fourth fingers of her left hand are missing. The missing fingers and the sexual tension between Grimaldi and Demarkov are fixed in the viewer's mind early in the film.

Grimaldi takes Demarkov to a motel room to guard her while waiting for federal agents to take her into their custody. After they enter the room and he removes her handcuffs, she goes to sit on a chair with a window behind her. She sits with her legs spread and her hands on her thighs. There is a patch of sunlight on the ground on the left of the screen and part of a desk is seen at the left of the screen.

The camera slowly zooms in on her, and she looks to the left as Grimaldi walks across the room towards the desk. The camera cuts to a long shot, from her left, looking towards the desk. Demarkov is seen in profile, and she dominates the foreground. Her left hand is clearly visible resting on her left thigh, showing the missing fingers.

Grimaldi walks to her and offers her a cigarette which she takes with her left hand. The camera then cuts to a close-up of her hands shot from above to show what Grimaldi sees as he looks down. Her dress has fallen open and he can also see her slip, the tops of her black stockings, and the bare flesh of her thighs above the stockings.

The camera cuts to a close-up of Grimaldi's face shot from below to reflect what Demarkov sees as she looks up at him. He is staring down at her with a slightly dazed expression. The camera then cuts back to the close-up of Demarkov's thighs shot from above to reflect Grimaldi's view. She slowly crosses her right leg over her left and transfers the cigarette to her right hand, then sits with her legs crossed and both hands resting on her right thigh. Again the missing fingers are noticeable.

Then comes a cut to a medium shot of the room, filmed from the left slightly behind Grimaldi, of Demarkov looking up at him. His arm dominates the foreground. As she looks at him Demarkov says, "It's not polite to stare." The camera cuts to a medium shot from the opposite side and looking up as Grimaldi leans down and forward to light Demarkov's cigarette.

Next is a tight close-up of Demarkov, shot from the front, as the cigarette is lit. Her face is shown in a tight close up, filmed from slightly below so that one is looking up at her. Her face dominates the right three quarters of the screen with the light square of the window at the left of the screen. Demarkov looks up at Grimaldi, purses her lips seductively, and then exhales a thin stream of cigarette smoke from between her lips, a classic femme fatale shot.

The interplay and sexual tension between Demarkov and Grimaldi continues and the sequence eventually ends with her seducing him with Grimaldi flat on his back on the floor with his trousers undone and Demarkov sitting on top of him, most of her clothes discarded.

Hollywood's leading ladies very seldom have any blemishes particularly if they are supposed to be sexy and seductive. Demarkov is sexy and seductive and her character in the film uses those attributes as weapons. Thus, in classic Hollywood, her missing fingers would rule her out as a sexual partner for Grimaldi. She can play that role here only because the missing

fingers are a crucial plot device.

During the course of the film Demarkov double-crosses her Mafia bosses and conspires with Grimaldi to fake her death. To do so she needs a body. She tricks Grimaldi into killing his girl friend, and after he flees the scene, cuts the body down, removes its left arm and replaces it with her own, now severed, arm, and sets the body alight. The missing fingers were used to identify the body as Demarkov's.

Shortly thereafter comes a marvelous scene which begins with a tight close-up of Demarkov clipping some leather straps into place. As the camera pulls out, we see that she is wearing a black leather corset-type garment that pushes her breasts up from beneath leaving the nipples and upper halves of the breasts bare. The black leather straps and clips over her left shoulder hold her artificial arm in place.

She reaches down with her right hand and brings her artificial hand up, locks the arm at the elbow, and gives a small grunt of satisfaction. She then turns to left and right, admiring herself in the mirror. She is holding a cigarette and the smoke curls up around her face. The scene is shot from below, putting her in a position of power. It is reminiscent of the way the classic femme fatale is shown in many gangster films and resonates the first cigarette scene, described above.

The camera zooms in on the image in the mirror and we see Demarkov turn her back and walk towards a bed. It is shown in a long shot and Grimaldi is lying unconscious on the bed handcuffed to the iron bedstead. The camera cuts to a close-up of an artificial hand which reaches out and prods Grimaldi awake. It then cuts to a medium shot of Grimaldi waking up and realising that he is handcuffed to the bed.

The camera then cuts to a long shot of the locale and we see Demarkov standing behind some plants wearing a loose-fitting black blouse with the left sleeve hanging empty. Next is a cut to a close-up of her face which fills the top half of the screen. The bottom part of the screen is filled with colourful plants.

We then see Demarkov in a medium shot, shown from Grimaldi's perspective, approaching him and standing over him. She reaches into her blouse, pulls a gun out, points it at him, and says, "Did you miss me, sweetheart?" The camera cuts to a medium shot of Grimaldi who looks up at his arms handcuffed to the iron bedstead behind his head.

The camera then cuts to a medium shot of Demarkov who puts the gun down on a bedside table and sits on the bed seemingly on top of Grimaldi. There is some conversation between them and she lies down, manoeuvring so that she is lying half on top of him with her head on his shoulder. Were it not for the fact that they are both clothed and he is handcuffed to the bed, and sweating profusely, this could be any couple lying in bed after making love.

The camera next cuts to another close-up of the two of them, this time from the side, and Demarkov asks, "Wanna buy yourself some time?" The camera rises slightly and Demarkov

sits up looking down on Grimaldi, then moves out of the frame. There is a close-up of Grimaldi looking up at her and he nods slightly. She then comes into the frame again, and she teases him, lightly brushing his lips with hers, but moving away as he responds.

Demarkov moves up and out of the frame and the camera lingers briefly in a close-up of Grimaldi looking up. It cuts to a medium shot of her, seen from the waist up and slightly below. One gets the impression that she is on the bed kneeling over Grimaldi. She then removes her blouse, revealing her artificial left arm.

The camera cuts to a close-up of Grimaldi looking up at her, then cuts to a medium shot of her looking down at him, and she says, "With or without?" The camera cuts to a close-up of Grimaldi looking up. He swallows, stares steadily at Demarkov, and says, "Without."

The camera immediately cuts to a tight close-up of Demarkov's face. She frowns slightly, her lips curl up a little at the corners as though she is about to smile, though no hint of a smile reaches her eyes. Her lips return to a neutral position, and she begins to look to her left and down with an almost apprehensive expression on her face. The camera tilts down and pans to the right, so that her face is no longer in the frame, and her right arm enters the frame coming across her body to unclip the leather straps at her left shoulder. The camera tilts down as she removes her artificial arm revealing a bandaged above-elbow stump. The camera lingers briefly, with her bare breast filling the left of the screen and the bandaged stump dangling down next to it on the right of the screen. The entire sequence was shown in a close-up with tilting and panning the only movement of the camera.

The camera cuts to a tight close-up of Demarkov's face, seen from slightly below with her looking down, as a huge grin spreads across her face and she laughs maniacally. The camera then cuts to an overhead long shot of the room and we see her from the back, sitting on Grimaldi's legs. She hurls the artificial arm over her head and it flies towards the camera arcing down and to the left before disappearing from the frame. The camera immediately cuts to a close-up of the prosthesis smashing into glasses on a sideboard and the screen fades to black.

Throughout this sequence the cuts between shots act almost as a visual dialogue mirroring the conversation between the characters. The cut is by nature a sudden transition conveying a sense of urgency. In this sequence it heightens the sexual tension between the characters.

A number of aspects make this scene unusual. There is the overt sexuality of Demarkov's character even after she has her arm amputated. The fact that she is in a dominant position almost throughout the film, and particularly in this sequence, is also unusual. Disabled characters are seldom shown in positions of power. Particularly unusual is the frame immediately after she removes her artificial arm where her stump is shown next to her bare breast. The breast is an

almost universal icon of desirability and sexuality. Stumps are seldom seen in the same light.

Informal discussion with friends who also saw the movie revealed that the juxtaposition of the stump and the bare breast made the stump more acceptable. Some expressed surprise that they did not feel a sense of revulsion when seeing the stump and attributed that to the presence of the breast in the frame. (This observation is based entirely on informal conversation and was not part of any form of scientific enquiry.)

It is reasonable to assume that most viewers would not regard this scene, with its clear overtones of sado-masochism, as "normal." That sexuality of such a nature is shown in a mainstream movie, without being an essential plot device, is itself interesting though beyond the scope of this paper. Also interesting, and noteworthy, is the similarity between this scene and the many sex scenes in mainstream movies: the camera angles, lighting, and transition between shots were identical to those usually used when onscreen sexual encounters between young lovers are shown. The only difference was the nature of the sex depicted and the disability element.

Despite the moves towards a more positive portrayal of disabled people as sexual beings, these films still contained powerful negative images. It is thus worthwhile to look briefly at the videos Ellen Stohl made for *Playboy* and compare their treatment of disability and sexuality.

Meet Ellen Stohl was produced by *Playboy* in 1987 and tells how Stohl approached the magazine to model for it. Significantly, this video does not include any nudity apart from where the camera briefly pans over Stohl's layout in the magazine. And even then there is significantly less nudity than usual and it is impossible to see that she is disabled.

Also, the first visual indication of the wheelchair on screen is a long shot of Ellen Stohl sitting in the chair against a brown backdrop of what appears to be linen draperies. She is wearing a white blouse, brown skirt, and her hair is carefully coifed. She speaks briefly about herself and then the wheel syntagm appears on the screen.

There are cuts between the static shot of Stohl in her chair to scenes of her answering questions after a lecture or doing stretching exercises in what appears to be an empty dance studio. In one scene, the camera cuts to a long shot of a bar and Stohl sitting on a barstool. In a voice over she describes how men flirt with her or try to get her to dance when she sits on a barstool and her wheelchair is hidden, but tend to ignore her if she sits in her wheelchair.

In 1994 Stohl again made a video for *Playboy* documenting the making of a poster to celebrate sexuality and disability. *A Body in Motion Remains in Motion* begins with a moonlit scene of a nude woman floating on her back in some water. The woman is Ellen Stohl. She moves her arms in a breaststroke motion and moves from right to left across the screen. The ripples in the water reflect silvery light and her breasts protrude from

the water like islands. Stohl says in a voice over, "I really think sex is a wonderful thing. I enjoy sex very much. It's the most intimate form of communication, and certainly a form of communication I like to participate in."

The next significant sequence in this video is the actual sex scene. It begins with a long shot of a couple at a table, shot against a sunset. The camera cuts to the close-up of Stohl's face, then cuts to a medium shot of the couple. The edge of a round table is in the foreground, Stohl sitting at the left of the screen, and her companion walks towards her from the right. He reaches out, takes her hand and pulls and she rolls towards him. He bends down over her and they begin to caress and neck. Stohl comments in a voice over, "You know, the chair is great to have sex in. It's got its own rocking motion that can really work well."

The camera cuts to a medium shot, from the side of the table, and one sees the entire chair, with Stohl sitting in it, and part of a house in the background to the left. Her companion straightens, then leans down and lifts her out of the chair. The empty wheelchair rolls back and is stopped by the table as he carries her into the house.

In many romantic scenes the male partner scoops his lover up into his arms and carries her across the threshold. The only difference in this scene was the presence of a wheelchair at the beginning of it.

The camera views them from behind and follows them into the bedroom. Thereafter come typical sex scenes as they lie on the bed and caress and arouse each other. The lighting is dim, romantic music plays in the background and there are multiple fades from a close up of them kissing to him removing her panties.

The camera then fades to a medium shot, with Stohl on top, moving her upper body as she and her lover caress and kiss. In a voice over she says, "Having a disability means you can't go by the script. You have to talk about it and that makes it much more intimate." The voice over fades out and you hear them talking, though the words are difficult to make out. He then grabs her legs, behind the knees, and pulls her towards him till she is in a sitting position over his groin. He lies back and relaxes, she sinks down, and they both sigh with pleasure.

What makes this sequence remarkable is that it is almost identical to any other sex sequence one is likely to come across. And although Stohl's disability is obvious - her legs are noticeably thin and immobile - the focus is on the sex and not her disability.

The scene is similar to the one between Kate Saunders and John Grady in *Closer and Closer*, but contains none of the negative elements present there. It is an entirely positive portrayal of sexuality and disability. *Closer and Closer*, made by Fred Gerber for television in the United States in 1996 starring Kim Delaney and Peter MacNeill, is also worth considering. The movie features Delaney as Kate Saunders, a

disabled writer leading a reclusive existence after a psychopath, obsessed with the serial killer in her first novel, acted out the plot and tried to make her his last victim. The sequel to the book is about to be published and the killings begin again.

An unusual feature is the strong, disabled woman as the main character helping the police solve the crimes. There are some of the usual disability stereotypes: the disabled person remote from society (Barnes 1992) and elements of the high-tech guru (Norden 1994) creep in as well. The initial relationship between Saunders and MacNeill's character, John Grady, the lead FBI agent on the case, is strained. It soon becomes clear that they had a romantic relationship before Saunders was injured. In another stereotype, Grady assumes the role of rescuer (Barnes 1992) and he forces Saunders to recount the events leading up to her injury so that she can "move on" with her life.

The scene is, naturally, completely cliched: she rejects what he has to say, shouts at him, he shouts back, she tries to leave, he reaches out a hand and stops her and says, "Let the people that love you help. Let me help." She cries, says she will try and the scene ends with a close-up of them embracing.

The camera then cuts to the bedroom. The room is seen in medium close up and the camera lingers on three candles, pans across the room to the bed, zooms in to show Grady lying on top of Saunders, and they are clearly indulging in some foreplay. He rolls off her, lifting her slightly so that she is lying on her side facing him. There is a tight close-up of them lying face-to-face, talking and Grady reaches up and gently strokes Saunders's face. Throughout the sequence romantic piano music plays softly in the background. The tight close-up helps draw the viewer in and emphasises the intimacy of the scene.

The scene is noteworthy in the context of this discussion because there is no difference whatsoever between it and the sexual encounters seen in countless other films. During the scene Saunders' wheelchair is not shown anywhere in the shot and no verbal reference is made to her disability.

The Devotee Market

There is one other class of film that has interesting parallels with films featuring nondisabled sexuality, those produced for the adult market. Most films produced for the adult market do not feature disabled subjects, but in those made for the devotee market all the featured models are disabled.

The Amputees are Beautiful Web site, run by Carol Davis, defines a devotee as "a person (typically male) who is attracted to amputees (typically female)." However, a glance through the groups listed at Yahoo Groups shows that there are devotees for almost any flavour of disability.

Carol Davis lost her left leg to cancer and, after

discovering the devotee phenomenon, formed CD Productions to make videos specifically for that market. Similar videos are now available from numerous sources on the Internet and video clips of disabled people can be downloaded from a number of sites and Yahoo groups.

The devotee finds the disability itself erotic so the primary difference between these videos and mainstream adult movies is that the camera focuses on amputation stumps, paralysed limbs, and the appurtenances of disability - wheelchairs, crutches, orthoses, and prostheses - instead of on bare breasts and genitalia. Davis in fact commented on this saying that she found the scenes requested rather boring and not at all racy (Duncan 1997).

In the CD Productions videos there is also a fair amount of dialogue mainly of the subject of the video talking about her life and the scenes the viewer is watching. Another distinguishing feature in the CD Productions videos is that there is no nudity or intercourse. In all other respects, however, they are almost identical to many of the films sold by, for example, *Playboy* or *Penthouse*.

A brief look at some scenes from *Per Your Request*, Carol Davis's third video, is instructive in this regard. The video was made in 1994 and, as the title suggests, features scenes requested by devotees Davis corresponded with. It begins with an overhead long shot of a shopping mall and Davis enters the frame from the top left using forearm crutches wearing a red sweater, black miniskirt, and black pump on her single foot. As she crutches across the mall she introduces herself and says she has made two previous videos.

The camera cuts to a long shot of her, taken on the same level directly in front of her, and she crutches towards it. It then cuts back to an overhead long shot and Davis heads towards a bench, sits down, leans her crutches against the bench on her left, looks up at the camera, and says, "This third video, featuring myself, is called *Per Your Request* and is dedicated to those men who feel that less is more."

When she mentions the name of the video, the camera zooms in slightly, then zooms out again. She pauses after the word less and the camera cuts to a close-up, shot from the same level she is on and directly in front of her, of her legs, showing her from the ground to mid-torso. It then zooms in and, as she says more, stops on a tight close-up of her right leg with the stump of her left leg pressing against the thigh. Her left arm rests on her thighs at the top of the screen and part of one crutch is visible at the extreme right of the screen. The camera then cuts to an overhead long shot, the screen fades to black and the titles come up.

The tight close-up in this sequence is reminiscent of the bedroom scene in *Closer and Closer*. It helps draw the viewer in and invites him to take a good look at Davis's stump much in the same way that mainstream adult movies invite the viewer to savour the sight of the model's breasts. Another difference is the preponderance of mundane activities in these videos.

Most adult movies do not spend much time showing the models simply walking down the street for example. *Per Your Request* does. Davis comments at the beginning of the video that a lot of men write asking to see more of things she does in her everyday life.

Thus, after the titles, a medium shot of her crutching along a suburban street fades in. She uses forearm crutches and wears a miniskirt with a white ankle sock and white sneaker on her single foot. The camera cuts to an almost identical shot of her in a similar locale and wearing a slightly different, but similar, outfit. Again she uses crutches and wears the white ankle sock and sneaker. In these scenes her stump is not visible.

The camera then cuts to her in a store wearing a T-shirt and lemon-coloured slacks with the left leg pinned up. The background music fades out briefly as she comments that she enjoys seeking items to sew in different stores, then fades in again. She is shown in a medium shot crutching through the small store. The camera then shows a medium-shot of her crutching towards it until the frame fills with her legs - the viewer gets the impression of her arms, crutches and right leg moving, while the pinned-up left trouser leg hangs at the right of the screen. The camera then tracks back as she crutches through the store.

It then cuts to a long shot of her vacuuming her living room, again wearing shorts, but this time with a prosthesis with a cosmetic cover. The camera then cuts to a close-up of her legs, looking slightly up at them and focusing on the prosthesis. The camera then cuts to another long shot of her vacuuming the room, almost identical to the one that introduced the sequence, but this time she is not wearing her leg. Again it cuts to a close-up of her leg, shot from below and looking up so that the viewer can see her stump in the leg of her shorts - remarkably similar to some shots one sees in adult movies where a male character looks up the model's skirt.

The next sequence worth considering in detail shows Davis skiing. It begins with a long shot of her on the slopes and the camera cuts, pans, and zooms through different shots and angles as she traverses the slopes. Most of the skiing scenes could be taken from any travel video the only difference being the missing limb. During the sequence, Davis comments that many men want to know how to meet amputees and she recommends that they volunteer at a programme for disabled skiers.

But there are noteworthy differences. At one stage she appears to fall and the camera watches in a long shot from above as she slides down the slope. It then cuts to a close-up of her coming towards it and she seems to be unable to stand. She then comments: "Skiing on one leg is hard work. Because I'm an amputee I need to rest frequently. That means a lot of sitting in the snow."

Music fades in again, and the camera then cuts to her sitting in a room. The frame is filled with a close-up of her

stump as she pulls a sock on. The music fades out, and the commentary continues. "So when I get dressed to go skiing, I pull on a stump-sock to help keep my stump warm." The camera lingers for a moment on a close-up of her stump as she smooths the sock out.

Interestingly, in this sequence the close-up did not convey the sense of intimacy noted earlier possibly because it had an almost documentary feel to it with no subdued lighting or intimate music playing. The camera then cuts to a close-up of her legs as she stands to fasten her pants, showing clearly the left pant-leg pinned up. It pulls back slightly to a medium shot as she fastens her belt, then zooms in again as she sits down and adjusts the creases of the pinned-up pant leg. Again the commentary continues. "Besides keeping my stump warm, my stump sock helps protect my stump in case I fall."

The fact that Davis uses the word stump five times in the space of thirty-six words would indicate that her audience is aroused not only by seeing her missing limb, but also by hearing about it - a variation on the talking dirty found in some adult movies. In this case, again, the close-up itself does not convey intimacy and the language used would be the tool employed to further arouse the viewer. The sequence ends with a long shot of Davis on the ski slope.

To emphasise the fact that the amputation is the erotic source there are no scenes of Davis putting on a bra or stockings as one would find in mainstream adult movies. Instead there are numerous close-ups of her putting on her prosthesis and a sequence showing how the prosthesis is fitted and made.

The difference, or similarity, extends to the beach scenes. Most adult movies linger on the curve of a hip or the swell of a breast. Here it lingers on the stump. And where in mainstream films the erotic content is provided by models rubbing suntan lotion on each other, here it comes through Davis rubbing lotion on, and massaging, her stump. All shown, of course, in close-up.

And in this film Davis models different crutches and limbs, instead of various items of lingerie, though there are scenes of her modelling swimsuits. But again, the focus is on her stump and crutches, rather than on the swimsuit. The difference continues during a beach volleyball sequence: instead of the camera focusing on bouncing breasts as the model chases the ball, here it lingers on Davis's stump, showing in close-up the outline of the bone remnant and the way the loose flesh around it bounces as she moves.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has delved briefly into semiotic waters to uncover how filmmakers try to impart their view of disability. Clearly there are many more depths to plumb. Nevertheless, one startling fact has emerged: even in those instances where the filmmaker does portray a disabled protagonist as a sexual being, the positive message is

undermined by other negative stereotypes present in the text.

Thus in *Passion Fish* May-Alice has to be rescued by a nondisabled character before she can begin to explore her sexuality as a disabled woman. Yet, even as she develops and acknowledges her sexuality, viewers do not see her intimate with her suitors. Chantelle, her nondisabled caregiver, is shown in such situations.

Similar negative energy prevails in *Romeo is Bleeding* with its extreme violence and sado-masochistic overtones. While Mona Demarkov is undoubtedly sexual, sensual, and disabled, she is also evil personified. While this is by no means the classic stereotype of the disabled person as evil, it does detract from the positive syntagm of a disabled person as a sexual being. Furthermore, Jack Grimaldi's injuries become progressively more disabling the deeper he is drawn into Demarkov's web again reinforcing the negative perceptions that creep in.

Among the feature films discussed, *Closer and Closer* comes closest to a positive syntagm of disabled sexuality. The romantic scenes, in particular, could be taken from any film. It too, though, contains the negative stereotypes which undermine the positive images, particularly at the end of the film, when the villain turns out to be a wheelchair user.

It is perhaps appropriate that the most positive syntagm of sexuality and disability appears in the most unlikely of places, a *Playboy* video. Mainstream movies tend to copy the adult formula more and more these days; all that is necessary is to persuade filmmakers that that formula also works if the character happens to have a disability.

References

Barnes, Colin. (1992). *Disabling imagery and the media*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: BCODEP and Ryburn Publishing.

Barthes, Roland. (1982). *Elements of semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Barthes, Roland. 1983. *Barthes: Selected writings*. Edited by S. Sontag. Oxford: Fontana Collins.

Barthes, Roland. (1986). *Mythologies*. London: Paladin Grafton Books.

A Body in motion remains in motion. 1994. Playboy Entertainment Inc. Videocassette. 10 minutes.

Chandler, Daniel (no date) *Semiotics for beginners*. Web site at <<http://go7.163.com/wudaeng/Semiotics/sem03.html>> Accessed 21 July 2002.

Closer and closer. 1996. Directed by Fred Gerber. Film made for television. 90 minutes.

Cohen, Neville. 1998. Interview by author. Johannesburg, South Africa, February.

Culler, Jonathan. 1983. *Barthes*. Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks.

Cumberbatch, G. and Negrine, R. (1992). *Images of*

disability on television. London: Routledge.

Davis, Carol (no date). Amputees are beautiful, Web site at <<http://www.cdprod.com/>>. Accessed 3 May 2002.

Duncan, Kath. (1997). *Looking for your one-legged dream lover*. Radio series Women out loud. Australian Broadcasting Corporation. 11 January.

Eco, Umberto. 1979. *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eco, Umberto. 1985. On the contribution of film to semiotics. In *Film theory and criticism: introductory readings*, edited by G. Mast and M. Cohen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eco, Umberto. 1990. *The limits of interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Fiske, John, and John Hartley. 1978. *Reading television*. London: Methuen.

Hall, S. 1980. Encoding/decoding. In *Culture, media, language: working papers in cultural studies 1972-79*. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. London: Hutchinson.

Hevey, Don. 1992. *The creatures time forgot: photography and disability imagery*. London: Routledge.

Kellner, David. 1992. *The Persian Gulf TV war*. Oxford: Westview Press.

Linton, Simi. 1998. *Claiming disability*. New York: New York University Press.

Littlejohn, S.W. 1989. *Theories of human communication*. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Lonsdale, Susan. 1990. *Women and disability*. London: Macmillan.

Mastandrea, Linda. 1998. Interview by author. Tape recording. Chicago, Ill., March.

Meet Ellen Stohl. 1987. Playboy Entertainment Group. Videocassette. 10 minutes.

Metz, Christian. 1974. *Film language*. Oxford University Press: New York.

Monaco, James. 1981. *How to read a film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morris, Jenny. 1993. *Pride against prejudice: transforming attitudes to disability*. London: The Women's Press.

Norden, Martin. 1994. *The cinema of isolation: A history of physical disability in the movies*. New York: Rutgers University Press.

Noth, M. 1995. SRB Insights: Can pictures lie? *Semiotic review of books* (6)2, University of Toronto Web site at <<http://www.epas.utoronto.ca:8080/epc/srb/srb/pictures.html>>. Accessed 2 May 2002.

Passion fish. 1992. Directed by John Sayles. Feature film. 120 minutes.

Per your request. 1994. CD Productions. Videocassette. 60 minutes.

Romeo is bleeding. 1992. Directed by Peter Medak. Feature

Film. 100 minutes.

Sonneson, Goran. 1999. *Pictorial semiotics: the state of the art at the beginning of the nineties*, Web site at <http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/sonesson/pict_sem_1.html>. Accessed 2 May 2002.

Stohl, Ellen. 1998. Interview by author. Tape recording. Los Angeles, Cal., March.

Tan, Alexis S. 1986. *Mass communication theories and research*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Toy, Alan. (actor). 1992. Quoted in *A day in the life of Hollywood* (caption:90). San Francisco: Collins