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Troubling Signs: Disability, Hollywood Movies
and the Construction of a Discourse of Pity

Michael T. Hayes
Washington State University
Rhonda S. Black
University of Hawai'i-Manoa

Abstract

In this article the authors explore images of disability in Hollywood movies. Our analysis draws from the historical-philosophical method of Michel Foucault. We argue that in Hollywood films disability is extricated from its concrete manifestation as a physical or mental condition and treated as a cultural sign. When read across the different movies the signs of disability can be coalesced into what Foucault calls a discourse. Discourses are socially produced ways of talking about an object that situate the object within socially produced relations of power. We argue that when viewed this way disability becomes situated within a discourse of pity. In Hollywood films the discourse of pity articulates disability as a problem of social, physical and emotional confinement. The disabled character's thwarted quest for freedom ultimately leads to remanding the character back to the confines of a paternalistic relationship of subordination.

In the biographical movie *My Left Foot* starring Daniel Day Lewis as Christy Brown, an artist with cerebral palsy, the audience is viewing a movie that some argue marks a turning point in how people with disabilities are represented in Hollywood film. Christy Brown is shown from his early childhood as independent and resourceful; the only barriers in his life are the misunderstandings, prejudices, and stupidity of those around him. Therefore, this Hollywood depiction supports disability rights activists who assert that "there is no pity in disability . . . it is society's myths, fears, and stereotypes that most make being disabled difficult (Shapiro 1994, 5).

Whatever the physically impaired person may think of himself, he is attributed a negative identity by society, and much of his social life is a struggle against this imposed image. It is for this reason that we can say that

stigmatization is less a by-product of disability than its substance. The greatest impediment to a person's taking full part in his society are not his physical flaws, but rather the tissue of myths, fears, and misunderstandings that society attaches to them. (Murphy 1987, 113)

However, it is our position that Hollywood films have been unable to shed the encasing logic of pity. We agree that films such as *My Left Foot* signal an improvement in how the disabled are portrayed in these films, yet they do not operate outside the most subtle and insidious workings of pity.

My Left Foot details the trials and tribulations of the artist as he grows from struggling childhood to accomplished and respected artist. The filmmakers are attempting to make a moral statement that their film transcends the degrading and encasing logic, or illogic of pity that has typically been articulated with various images of people with disabilities. The movie critic Roger Ebert (1990) echoes this sentiment in his 1990 review of the film, "perhaps concerned that we will mistake *My Left Foot* for one of those pious T.V. docudramas, the movie begins with one of Christy's typical manipulations" (P. 2). Ebert understands that the movie is consciously trying to articulate a sense of disability that moves beyond typical representations. Yet the filmmakers are not trying to gloss over the fact that pity and its debilitating features are still deeply entrenched in the public psyche. Pity is still seen in the father's wishes to keep his son hidden from the savage stares and insensitive comments of the community. Pity is still found in the eyes of his mother who wishes to make his life as fulfilled as possible, and is fearful that Christy will be rejected as a love interest by able-bodied women. Pity still exists in the knowing glares of the artist's circle of friends. The moral of the story is that Christy transcends pity through grit, will, and self-determination.

Pity still abounds in the world of those with disabilities, even for one like Christy Brown who found such success. Pity confines life possibilities. Pity oppresses. Pity implies providing for, caring for, and protecting (Shapiro 1994). Pity is an emotionally conditioned social response which marginalizes those with disabilities and better serves the interests of those who show pity than it does the object of their pity. The filmmakers in *My Left Foot* show a skilled adeptness at critiquing pity and working outside the confines of its tragic logic. They cast a knowing eye toward the disabling quality of pity that exists in the world while simultaneously producing a new vision of people with disabilities. But does this movie truly operate outside the dictates of pity? Our position is that it does not.

Methodological notes

Our analysis focuses on a number of popular well-known films (13) with disabled characters, where as one web site (Films Involving Disabilities) provides links to over 2,500 such films. We do not claim that all films involving disabled

characters articulate disability within a discourse of pity, and we discuss at least one film that troubles this discourse, but we have found a significant number of very popular films that situate disability in this way. We have chosen only popular films, because they influence perceptions and opinions of many viewers (Safran 1998). Media images mold society's attitudes, therefore, it is important to analyze whether images of people with disabilities in the media are molding prejudices and fear (Nelson 1994), pity and paternalism, or acceptance and empowerment. Because of the wide audience in which Hollywood films reach, they can also educate.

In the Hollywood movies we have chosen to analyze, disability is articulated within a network of meanings and practices that Foucault (1972) calls a discourse. Discourse has acquired many meanings through its use in recent scholarship (Harvey 1995) but as Harvey suggests "discourse can be roughly defined as the moment of resort to the vast panoply of coded ways available to us for talking about, writing about, and representing the world" (P. 78). Ultimately discourses organize material and symbolic fields of power into which the object of a discourse is situated. We argue that Hollywood films situate disability into networks of social power relations that strictly regulate the "truth" of disability within the discursive structure of pity.

The analysis that follows draws from Foucault's (1972) historical work in which he reimagined the focus of analysis and provided the researcher and the reader with a new method for examining and understanding the object of study. Rather than focus on the object itself (i.e., sexuality) and explicating the terms of its form and function within a historical context, Foucault sought to show how the object emerges, that is, comes to exist within a field of historically contingent power relations.

The purpose of this type of analysis is two-fold: To examine what the object tells us about a particular set of power relations and how the object solidifies and codifies power relations. The focus, then, is not so much on the object, in this case a person with a disability, but on the discourses and the concomitant power relations that surround the object. These power relations call forth the object into existence, providing it with a life but one that is carefully circumscribed within these relations of power.

We draw from Foucault's (1972) method of historical genealogy to examine how disability emerges in Hollywood films within a discourse of disability. This is very different from focusing on the image or the representation of disability within the character who has the disability. By directing our attention to the ways in which disability is constructed through a discourse of pity, disability becomes dislodged from its manifestation as a physical or mental characteristic of a particular human being. We are after all, examining Hollywood movies, and with very few exceptions individuals who themselves have a disability do not play the disabled characters. The actors are performing a version of disability

that is coherent with the plot of the movie.

When viewed from this perspective, disability is a set of signs and symbols that are articulated through the discourse of pity into the context of the film's characters, plot and setting. It is, in fact, only through the articulation of these signs and symbols that people with disabilities are afforded an existence in Hollywood movies. "Identification of the many disempowering stereotypes of disabled people portrayed in film and television is a necessary exercise, but it becomes a sterile one unless connections to the structures that give rise to and perpetuate them are made" (Pointon & Davies 1997, 1).

It must also be noted that in various places throughout this document, person-first language is purposely not used. In most Hollywood characters, the disability or results of the disability are the focal points, not the person. Therefore, we believe that the term "disabled character" is indeed a more appropriate description in many instances than "character with a disability." The creators of the film are seeing the disability before the person. The inner workings of personality that make a person a unique individual are not central to the theme. For example, it is Rain Man, the autistic savant, who is the focus of that film, not Raymond Babbitt, the person. If anything, the movie is more about the personal growth of Raymond's able-bodied yuppie brother (played by Tom Cruise) that results from his newly formed relationship with Raymond (Sutherland 1997). Additionally, in certain contexts "disabled people . . . prefer the term disabled, plain and simple because it underlines the social oppression" (Russell 1998, 14). We believe portrayal of disability in Hollywood film qualifies as such a context.

Whence pity

We begin with a basic premise that pity is a relationship of power that transcends the emotional response established between individuals. The emotional response is simply a device for establishing an asymmetrical relationship between individuals who embody a differential range of mental and physical abilities. The idea of pity and its relationship to the disabled must be understood in an historical context.

Bogdan (1988) makes an interesting observation. Well into the 20th century freak shows were an accepted part of American popular culture; people with physical and mental differences were human curiosities. "Pity as a mode of presentation was absent" (P. 277). Promoters did not emphasize how difficult life was for the "freaks," how unhappy they were, or explain how the admission charge would help relieve their suffering or lead to a cure for their affliction. Pity did not fit into this world. "Using pity as a presentation mode for people with physical, mental and behavioral differences fits better the modern conception of human differences, that is, as pathological"(P. 277). While many find the Freak Show repulsive, these images were fabricated to sell the person as an attraction and is quite

different than the more modern representations of pity for those who are different.

As pity became articulated in the medical model as the dominant mode of representing human differences, we saw the rise of the professional fund-raising, the growth of organized charities and the poster child to advance their causes. While the Freak Show may have been degrading, so is the poster child and the supercrip (Elliott 1994; Longmore 1997; Nelson 1994; Shapiro 1994). The cute, loveable poster child in need of a cure and care from a more capable nondisabled other, sends the message that if benevolent others contribute money, we can make disability go away. Russell (1998) states that the poster child is good for one thing - "to assuage consciences by being the object of charitable pity" (P. 85) and giving the non-disabled an opportunity to feel altruistic. It gives Americans an opportunity to "demonstrate to themselves that they still belong to a moral community" (Longmore 1997, 135).

The supercrip - the flip side of the posterchild - is just as problematic "because it implies that a disabled person is presumed deserving pity - instead of respect - until he or she proves capable of overcoming a physical or mental limitation through extraordinary feats" (Shapiro 1994, 16). "While prodigious achievement is praiseworthy in anyone, disabled or not, it does not reflect the day-to-day reality of most disabled people, who struggle constantly with smaller challenges, such as finding a bus with a wheelchair lift to go downtown or fighting beliefs that people with disabilities cannot work, be educated, or enjoy life as well as anyone else" (P. 17). Shapiro states that it is fear underlying pity in compassion for the poster child and celebration for the supercrip.

In Hollywood films a discourse of pity frames the structure of the narrative into four inter-linked parts: (a) confinement, (b) hope for rehabilitation, (c) denial of rehabilitation, and (d) reconciliation of confinement. Individually and together these elements situate disability into a network of paternalistic power relations that confines those with disabilities and articulates confinement as a social obligation.

The Problem: Confinement

The first aspect of a discourse of pity is confinement. We argue that in Hollywood movies the problem of disability is the problem of confinement. Confinement can take a number of spatial, physical, social and/or psychological forms, but the key to confinement is that it disables the character from realizing his or her will. On the relationship of disability and confinement Shapiro (1994) notes "People with disabilities have been a hidden, misunderstood minority, often routinely deprived of basic life choices that even the most disadvantaged among us take for granted" (P. 11).

These films do not explore the disability itself; the disability only figures into the plot or the character development as a device that allows the narrative to unfold.

In Hollywood films the disability is used to unfold confinement as the key element of the plot. In *Elephant Man*, for example, the main character, John Merrick was born with Proteous Syndrome that produced large growths over much of his body. In the movie, the condition is not given a name and very little is said about John Merrick's physical condition. The film is premised on how the disability confined Merrick physically, socially, and psychologically.

Throughout the movie Merrick is confined. First, in a dark, damp cellar except for the brief moments he is paraded in a carnival by his owner, Mr. Bytes, who states "he's my livelihood. He's the greatest freak in the world." In a fascinating book, Robert Bogdan (1988) further elaborates on the phenomenon of the Freak Show as a vehicle for parading people with differences and disabilities for profit. Setting people with physical differences apart for curious others to view, unfortunately is part of American culture and is a method of isolation and confinement. Next, Merrick is placed in "isolation" at the hospital because he might frighten the other patients. Merrick completely covers his face and body whenever he ventures out into the world.

Disabled characters typically begin their celluloid existence confined in some way and often in the care of another, such as a relative, a paid caretaker or an institution. In *Scent of a Woman* Lieutenant Colonel Frank Slade is spatially and psychologically confined. After an accident left him blind, Slade is spatially confined in a small apartment behind the home of his niece. Psychologically he is confined by his anger and depression at being blinded. Spatial and temporal confinement play a critical role in the plot because it is when the disabled character travels outside these confines that they experience trouble. Confinement, whether spatial, social or psychological, introduces the key feature of the plot structure in movies with disabled characters, which is the character's struggle for independence, moving out from under some form of confinement. In fact the problem of confinement is the problem of disability.

We argue that disability in the form of an actual physical or psychological condition is quite secondary in the construction of the character or in the movie's plot. The story involves a struggle but not to overcome the disability per se but to overcome the confinement that a disability induces.

In *Mask* the main character, Rocky Dennis, is constantly struggling to be free of his mother's suffocating (if not absent) care and the physical confines of his house. He simply wants to engage with the world in a way that other boys of his age might. The movie's plot focuses on Rocky's struggle against confinement and his disability figures into the plot only as a device that induces and maintains various forms of confinement.

Robert Murphy (1987) speaks about social confinement and disability:

With the onset of my own impairment, I became almost morbidly sensitive to the social position and treatment of the disabled, and I began to notice nuances of behavior that would have gone over my head in times past.

One of my earliest observations was that social relationships between the disabled and the able-bodied are tense, awkward, and problematic. (P. 86)

One's social circles are foreshortened and shrunken, "associates are diminished in number and often drawn from a different social strata" (typically of lower social standing than before the disability (P. 124). Murphy further elaborates on the emotional isolation of individuals with disabilities by stating, "The disabled cannot show fear, sorrow, depression, sexuality, or anger for this disturbs the able-bodied. The unsound of limb are permitted to only laugh. The rest of the emotions, including anger and expression of hostility, must be bottled repressed, and allowed to simmer or be released in the backstage area of the home" (Murphy 1987, 107).

A scene in *My Left Foot* illustrates this point precisely when Christy makes a scene at a restaurant in reaction to his female doctor friend telling him she is engaged to be married. Throughout the movie, Christy is included more than most, while still remaining in the periphery. This is illustrated in scenes where he plays kickball with his friends in the neighborhood, and later when he is drinking in the local pub. Christy is allowed to laugh, sing, and participate to an extent in fun activities. However, it is unacceptable for him to express emotions that seem volatile, antagonistic or aggressive.

Even when the disabled character is presented as victim of prejudice and discrimination, the film sends a message that disability makes social integration impossible (Longmore 1987). "While viewers are urged to pity Quasimoto [*Hunchback of Notre Dame*] or Lennie [*Of Mice and Men*], we are let off the hook by being shown that disability or bias or both must forever ostracize severely disabled persons from society" (Longmore 1987, 69).

By articulating disability in terms of confinement, Hollywood films dislodge disability from any form of concrete manifestation and the problematic becomes much broader than a disability or a particular character's struggle and touches upon the larger issues of living in a democratic society. Confinement is the antithesis of life in a free society because it constrains the ability to make choices and to realize one's will. The dramatic tension in these films is defined as the struggle for rehabilitation, that is, to overcome the confinement created by the disability and to being reinserted into the democratic and meritocratic social system.

Hope for Rehabilitation

Disabled movie characters are provided a role in the plot only because there is possibility for rehabilitation; hope that the character can somehow find their own way or be helped by others to overcome the confinement induced by their bodies or minds. This reflects the medical model's premise that disability lies within the person, and the appropriate response for the nondisabled is to "cure or care" (Pointon & Davies 1997). Disability is made worse or better by the character's own attitude towards it.

In *Girl Interrupted* the character Lisa Rowe is portrayed at the beginning of the film as a somewhat goofy, but likable individual. The audience is given hope that she can be rehabilitated and leave the confines of the institution, because she appears so witty and charming. Of course, we see that Lisa has trouble negotiating authority, and she seems to have a mean streak in the way she engages peers and authorities in the institution. But this is what endears us to the character: Lisa is rebelling against confinement within the normalizing logic of the mental institution.

Lisa grabs the viewing audience's attention because they sympathize with her plight, and hope that they might fight the soul robbing tendencies of the mental institution in much the same way. The key to Lisa's existence in the movie is that it appears as if she has the potential for dealing with her mental illness and leaving the institution.

The idea of rehabilitation offers the viewer a sense of hope that the character can overcome the confines of his or her disability to operate in the world in a free, unconstrained manner. Consistent with the medical model of disability, the hope for a cure, or a miraculous event where the individual overcomes their disability, is an underlying current throughout these films. In *Girl Interrupted* we want Lisa to succeed because we see many of the qualities of our own lives in institutional settings being reflected in her struggles.

We also cheer for Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*, as he dreams of an independent life raising rabbits with his friend George Milton. As the disabled character struggles for an independent life, the viewing audience is being confronted with their own indignation with confinement and the idea that some can hold sway over another's life. These feelings emerge from democratic and meritocratic ideals that shape how the viewer constructs an understanding of confinement and the possibility for rehabilitation.

The films are relying on a highly individualistic sense of what constitutes a person who is fully rehabilitated from their disability, and it is expected that the disabled character must achieve a clean break from their caretakers and their paternalistic gaze. The plot is incessantly focused on full independence, as opposed to the more common state of interdependence experienced by people with and without disabilities.

Joon Pearl in *Benny and Joon* attempts to break free from her brother's overly protective care to independently

negotiate simple and taken for granted experiences such as love and public transportation. Full independence is the ultimate goal and as such forms the entire structure of rehabilitation and the life-world of the disabled character.

It may help to understand the force of rehabilitation in the construction of disabled characters by pointing out that Hollywood films never focus on characters whose disabilities are so severe that there is little hope for full independence.

Individuals with severe disabilities, those who Hollywood deems unacceptable candidates for rehabilitation, are simply not afforded an existence, and that form of disability is fully erased from the social consciousness. There are virtually no main characters in Hollywood movies whose disabilities are so severe that there is little hope of existence in a manner independent of the paternalistic gaze. It is only the hope for rehabilitation that calls forth disabled characters and lodges them in the viewer's consciousness.

The hope for rehabilitation creates the disabled character, that is, affords the disabled character an existence as an individual that inhabits the world. The importance of full independence, as opposed to a limited sort of autonomy, is that it is a false goal. The kind of individualistic independence that is upheld as the ultimate goal in these films is an impossibility. Sometimes the viewing audience is privy to the idea that full independence is an impossibility from the very beginning of the film, such as in *Rain Man*, but in other films such as *My Left Foot* or *Benny and Joon* the possibility is presented as real. There is, however, a third aspect to the discourse of pity that must be reconciled within the plot, which is the ultimate denial of rehabilitation for the character.

Impossibility of rehabilitation

In movies with disabled characters there is always that defining moment in the plot when the audience is allowed to see that the disabled character cannot be rehabilitated and overcome the confinement of disability. In one single moment it becomes obvious that the disabled character will never be allowed to live a life of full individual independence. The cinematic quest for rehabilitation (which is typically the quest of those around the character, not necessarily the character him/herself) is an impossible quest: It is a holy grail that exists simply to define and create the quest rather than to articulate a reasonably attainable goal. Rehabilitation is pure uninterrupted desire in which consummation is from the outset an impossibility.

In *Of Mice and Men*, Lenny kills the farm supervisor's wife. In *Benny and Joon*, Joon has a violent reaction while alone on a city bus, in *Rain Man* Raymond Babbit becomes disturbingly agitated when a smoke alarm is activated. Usually, it is a moment in which we see that the disabled character is unable to negotiate a very simple part of living productively in society.

Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* saves Scout Finch and her brother Jem from an attacker. Boo's rescue shows his tremendous strength, and this combined with his ambiguous cognitive disability, we come to understand that confinement is actually good for Boo and good for the larger community. In this way society is absolved of any responsibility because the disabled characters condition is represented as being created by the individuals themselves (Darke 1997).

In these moments the focus of the plot instantaneously shifts and the struggle for independence is replaced by an acceptance of benevolent confinement. It becomes clear in this one moment that the disabled character is not yet ready for a fully independent life in the larger world. The message is that it is a good thing we have these forms of confinement because it is obvious that these individuals cannot live outside of them. These critical moments are important transitions for both the movie character and the viewing audience and from this point on, the plot focuses on the reconciliation of the terms of confinement.

The denial of rehabilitation is the aspect of the plot that elicits the emotional response from the viewer that is typically considered pity. The Webster's third edition dictionary assigns a number of meanings to the word pity, for our argument we will work with one definition, "Sympathetic heartfelt sorrow for one that is suffering physically, mentally or is otherwise distressed." The key idea that distinguishes pity from related terms such as empathy or compassion is sorrow. The subject of pity is defined by an emotional response that demands sorrow or a sense of sadness.

In these films sadness or sorrow is created when the disabled character is denied rehabilitation. Feelings of pity are not necessarily elicited for those who have suffered because of an accident, no matter how serious. In an accident the cause of the disability may be temporary and the immediate emotional reaction may be of shock, horror, or disillusionment, it becomes pity when the hope for overcoming the affliction is removed.

It hardly needs saying that the disabled, individually and as a group, contravene all the values of youth, virility, activity, and physical beauty that Americans cherish. . . We are subverters of an American ideal, just as the poor are betrayers of the American Dream. The disabled serve as constant, visible reminders to the able-bodied that the society they live in is shot through with inequity and suffering, that they live in a counterfeit paradise, that they too are vulnerable. (Murphy 1987, 116-117).

Reconciliation of confinement

Here we return to confinement as a key feature in rehabilitation. The ultimate impossibility of full rehabilitation keeps the disabled confined, but it is no longer the same sense of confinement that initially defined

the disabled character's life. The quality and character of confinement is transformed. In the beginning of these movies confinement seems cruel, debilitating and in some cases sinister. By the end of the movie there is a sense of relief that the disabled character has somehow come to reconcile the form of confinement that defines their life. The end point of the movie typically has the character with a disability, and most importantly the viewer, accepting the disabled character's life lived within the parameters of confinement.

There is a tremendous sense of relief when, in the movie *Sybil*, it becomes obvious that Sybil Dorsett cannot live an independent life outside the mental institution. At this moment we come to see the benevolent importance of such spaces. However, confinement need not appear so benevolent and can take a tragic turn. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* Randle Patrick Murphy is forced to have a lobotomy so that, from the perspective of the institution, he may live safely in the normalizing environment of the mental institution. The ultimate paternalistic act in these movies is the death or murder of the disabled character.

In *Of Mice and Men* Lenny is murdered, yet the act is considered benevolent because it frees Lenny from the confines and inevitable repercussions of his disability. In Hollywood films the plot tension between confinement and the struggle for autonomy is reconciled so that confinement is articulated as the ethical benevolent act of society. And the entertainment value of disability become a method of self-validation for the non-disabled viewing audience (Darke 1997).

Pity, as we have been arguing is much more than an emotional response, yet it is the emotional response that places the subject of pity--the viewer--into an asymmetrical power relationship with the object of pity--the disabled character. The kind of power relationship that is established between the viewer and the disabled character is paternalistic. Paternalism assumes that an individual or group does not have the capacity to make life changing decisions and that those decisions must be made by a caretaker or overseer (Sartorius 1983). The caretaker or overseer can be an individual (relative, employee) an institution (medical, educational) or group (gender, race, class). Within paternalism, taking responsibility for these decisions away from the individual and placing them with an external or third party is viewed as a benevolent, even compassionate, for those who are viewed as being unable to make these decisions for themselves.

Paternalism attempts to mask relationships of domination and subordination within a sense of benevolence that is bestowed on the subordinate by the dominant. The film's narrative paternalism is enacted at two mutually reinforcing levels: (a) the disabled are remanded back to the care of another, and (b) the viewer is inserted through the emotional response of sadness or sorrow. In both cases the relationship of domination and subordination is clouded by an illusion of

benevolence.

Policing regulatory norms: Disability as sliding signifier

The discourse of pity dislodges disability from its characterization as a particular physical or mental object. It is no longer a thing that simply inhabits a body or mind in a specific form, it is a symbol imbued with many meanings and is transportable to different contexts. Once dislodged from its material context, disability can shift and change, move and be moved from place to place, context to context. Hence, in Hollywood films disability is a sliding signifier that transgresses many different boundaries, such as confinement and freedom, individuality and dependence, democracy and autocracy. Transgressive symbols such as disability come into play when there is a social need or desire to make and maintain a border or boundary between objects (Stallybras & White 1989). This is the case with disability since ability and ableness are considered the normal form and disability is viewed as an aberrant condition.

In Hollywood versions the disabled other is a bit too close to the we, the us. These films only allow for disabled characters for which there is the hope of rehabilitation and an individualistic autonomy. In this sense they are transgressive, that is, holding the possibility of crossing the boundary between us and them (Stallybras & White 1989). To function as a sliding signifier, disability must not be considered in its concrete and observable physical manifestation but in how it symbolizes the entire field constituted by the term disability. In this sense disability becomes what Thomson (1997) refers to as the extraordinary body, that is, a figuration of the body that disrupts and disturbs the norm. Disability operates in culture to create figures of otherness in which the narratives comprise an exclusionary discourse (Thomson 1997).

Since we live in a modern culture that constantly defines normalcy, it is imperative to regulate and police the boundaries between the norm and the deviant. Our culture glorifies the body beautiful and youthfulness (Murphy 1987). "The body must be more than clean, it must have certain shape. Today's bodies must be lean and muscular. . .[even the] feminine ideal has shifted from soft curves to hard bodies . . . the pursuit of the slim, well-muscled body is not only an aesthetic matter, but also a moral imperative" (Murphy 1987, 113-114).

The transgressive symbol polices these boundaries but policing is difficult, complex and imperfect because the transgressive symbol moves back and forth across the boundary that demarcates a particular terrain simultaneously disturbing and inscribing the boundaries. As a consequence, the boundaries can never create a complete and unambiguous demarcation between the disabled and the abled. Disability crosses various other social categories of confinement such as race, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. Because the hope for rehabilitation plays such an important role in these

films, the disabled are never fully and completely confined by their disability. For the plot to work, the disabled must experience a form of confinement but the confinement is established within the parameters set by the hope for rehabilitation and the disabled must exhibit qualities that disturb confinement. By being simultaneously in need of confinement but at exactly the same moment expressing the fundamental democratic responsibility for independence, they become considerable transgressive symbols. A character such as Christy Brown in *My Left Foot* may be confined to a wheel chair, but he is a well-regarded artist. Disabled characters even cross their own conceptual boundaries by appearing disabled in one sense but not in another, thereby becoming undefinable and uncontainable in many ways.

Moreover, the fragile differences that demarcate the disabled from the abled are in jeopardy of becoming based purely on chance and luck. In an instant, the abled can become disabled because of accident or illness, as was the case for Frank Slade in *Scent of a Woman*. This is a much different scenario than can be envisioned with other marginalizing categories such as a race or gender. To our knowledge there are no cases of an individual changing races and to change gender requires a concerted conscious effort. Consequently, boundaries between the abled and disabled must be drawn with a great deal of care and the paternalistic confinement of pity carefully and subtly draws those boundaries. The discursive structure of pity constructs the disabled other at a distance, as an Other, but the disabled, although confined spatially, intimately occupy many different aspects of a societies living space and trouble and transgress the boundaries of confinement that are created for them.

The discourse of pity is a weak tool that carefully and subtly inscribes the boundary between self and other in very delicate terms. As a weak tool it can not be wielded at will with clearly identifiable results, which is why the discourse of pity is unpredictable; incessantly shifting and changing from one film to the next. As a weak tool, however, it is highly flexible, moveable and transformable. It inscribes the boundaries of power by appearing as a benevolent paternalistic act that serves those less fortunate, the abled and society in general, and it offers the possibility that confinement is society's benevolent responsibility to the disabled other. The discourse of pity is an act of domination that demands the disabled other remains disabled, confined and on the margin, but one that constitutes that confinement as society's moral duty.

Implications and some recommendations

In examining the discourse of pity as a tool that creates and defines disability in Hollywood films, we hope to shed light on the ongoing problem of representing and making sense of individuals with disabilities as members of society and our immediate communities. In some respects this is the job of Hollywood, it creates a series of possible meanings for the

objects in which it casts its voyeuristic gaze. These meanings can be inspiring, problematic and in many cases downright disturbing. These are the contradictions that make Hollywood film making an interesting site of investigation. The important aspect of these meanings is that they become part of our cumulative historical and cultural text (Mitchell & Snyder 1997; Norden 1994). They are an integral part of the framework we use to make sense of the myriad actions and activities in which we participate. In the case of individuals with disabilities, Hollywood movies interact with a variety of other life experiences to create a framework for how to think about interactions between the abled and disabled.

Let's return for a moment to the movie, *My Left Foot*. In many ways this film is at the forefront of creating representations of the disabled that transcend pity. Christy Brown is winning the struggle for independence by being a successful and accepted artist. Not only does the film honestly and unflinchingly deal with Christy Brown's life, as Roger Ebert points out; it asks the viewer not to be sentimental about Christy Brown because there is much about him that does not deserve a sentimental viewing. This is unique for representations of disabled characters. But we argue that it does not transcend the discourse of pity. As matter of fact the film acts as something of an exemplary model. Christy Brown begins the film in confinement and the audience is given hope that he can exist as a rugged individual, but in the end we see that this is an impossibility and his life is remanded to a caregiver (i.e., he marries his nurse).

While the story of Christy Brown is certainly an improvement in how Hollywood films portray disabled characters, it still recreates the discursive frameworks of domination and subordination through which the disabled are viewed in modern society. As we have attempted to argue in this paper, Hollywood continues to articulate the disabled within a discourse of pity that, in turn, becomes part of our social consciousness of disability and the disabled. The emotional response of sadness or sorrow is not necessary to complete this cycle, what is important are the asymmetrical relationships of power that mark the differences between the disabled and the abled. At this point we must ask, but what else is there? Is there a way to represent the disabled so that they are not confined to the oppressive conditions of pity?

One interpretation of the representation of disability in Hollywood films is that these representations have become considerably better over time. That is disability is no longer considered something to be hidden from view, to be mocked, or to be the object of the most pernicious pity (Jerry Lewis' parading of disabled children during his telethon). Moreover, some films have taken a stance in which these representations are actively critiqued.

While this may be true, we shall argue that these films continue to articulate individuals with disabilities within a

discourse of pity. Albeit, a discourse that has changed over time, and maybe a discourse that has changed to allow for more defensible representations of disability, but a discourse of pity nonetheless. These pity-evoking images support statements by Charlton (1998) regarding the dependency of many people with disabilities that is born of powerlessness, marginalization, and degradation. "This dependency, saturated with paternalism, begins with the onset of disability and continues until death" (P. 3). Charlton further describes disability oppression in his Discourse on disability and states that "hope is useful only when it is not illusory, and help is useful only when it leads to empowerment" (P. 5). Which leads us to - how do we come to terms with this pity?

Reactions to those in the films who interact with disabled characters provides further insight into the emotional response of pity. In watching many of these films, it is not uncommon to become angry with characters who are cruel to the very "brave" disabled protagonist. This is similar to Ayala's (1999) description of "poor little things" and "brave little souls" in the depiction of individuals with disabilities in children's literature. In the viewers perception, these unenlightened, uninformed others become villains. On the other hand, benevolent caregivers become exalted to near sainthood. Therefore, not only do these films evoke powerful emotional responses towards the disabled character, but also to others in the disabled character's life.

Villains and saints surround those with disabilities, but where are the humans in the disabled character's life? Where are the friends/family members who are sometimes supportive and at other times selfish, coming from a place of self-interest rather than altruism? We argue that ascribing villain or saint status disempowers, marginalizes and dehumanizes the object of the pity. So, how do we use these powerful images and emotional responses to empower rather than oppress individuals with disabilities?

In response we would actually like to ask a different, but related question: How do we represent the complexity of human relations that include people with disability without succumbing to the confines of pity? This is an entirely different question than asking how can we represent disabled characters so that they can overcome pity through their heroic acts. Do we want to continue to work towards a representation of the supercrip who can overcome insurmountable odds to live in a hostile society in total individuality? Or must we recognize that people with disabilities require assistance, and that assistance is common to all human experience? Rather than engaged in a struggle for complete independence, living alone with only their own devices to draw upon, why can't we view relationships with disabled and nondisabled characters that are ultimately complex and interwoven into the fabric of everyday life?

We need not continually represent the disabled as only caught in a struggle to meet a fundamental and essential human

need for an individualistic sense of independence from confinement. The disabled exist in the world in many different ways. Relationships between able and disabled individuals are complex, emotional and problematic, just like relationships between every other person encountered in the course of daily living.

We would like to see a movie that explores the complexity of this relationship without assuming that the only mission of the disabled character is to move to a full or greater sense of social and personal autonomy. This is not to ignore the fact that a major concern of disabled persons is autonomy and independence, as it is for people without disabilities. This would be a difficult undertaking because Hollywood does not work outside the confines of socially accepted and propagated conceptions of the disabled. Yet, as a creative and aesthetic undertaking it is uniquely positioned to reconstitute new forms of relationships.

Although we have been critical of the genre of Hollywood film that constructs disabled characters, we feel that there does exist some examples of how disabled characters might begin to be portrayed so they at least trouble the discourse of pity. In the movie *Simon Birch*, the main character, Simon, was born with a genetic condition related to dwarfism. The movie centers upon the relationship between Simon and his life-long best friend Joe Mazzello. The relationship is articulated as complex and emotionally charged. Simon's disability is not ignored and the issues presented by his disability are explored as the problem of maintaining good relationships, not as a movement from confinement to freedom. Rather than Joe accommodating Simon, there are some accommodations made in both directions of the relationship. Simon requires physical assistance from others - he is often transported in a contraption rigged to Joe's bicycle - but Simon is the more emotionally grounded character who helps Joe through some difficult family issues. These accommodations are constituted as part of a complex human relationship rather than as a burden that is resented by either character. The character Joe is not constructed as a caregiver to Simon. They are friends struggling to make sense of their relationship and of the world around them.

Hollywood movies draw on existing stereotypes which are in the culture (Sutherland 1997) to create representations of the disabled that become part of society's common sense understanding of disability. While some have argued these representations have improved over time (Longmore 1987; Nelson 1994; Norden 1994), we suggest that pity continues to be an organizing principle for how disabled characters are represented in Hollywood film, even in cases where the disabled character is represented in a more positive light. It is important to examine and understand the full range of meanings that are constructed for disability. And we believe relationships of power and how they are figured into representations of disability. Film and the visual representation of people with disabilities will continue to be

important venues for constructing knowledge of disability and the relationship of disability to society.

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Biographical information

Michael T. Hayes is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Washington State University. His current research examines intersections of media culture, social theory and education.

Rhonda S. Black is an Associate Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Her research interests include the use of narrative to promote reflection in teacher education students, and social networks and community integration of individuals with disabilities.