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JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, Volume 58, Number 4, Summer 2019, pp. 145-150 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2019.0044>

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# It's All the Same Movie: Making *Code of the Freaks*

by CARRIE SANDAHL

I have developed a reputation among my students as being a “disability wet blanket.” Why? Because I “ruin movies” that feature disabled characters. Even though my students make these accusations with tongues firmly in check, I take them seriously as compliments and as evidence of the argument that all movies featuring disabled characters are essentially the same movie. Once they see this sameness, they cannot “unsee” it, and unless they develop resistant viewing strategies, these movies do tend to get ruined. Whether disabled characters at the purported center of these narratives are cured, killed, institutionalized, or heroicized, they all serve the same purpose: to inspire nondisabled characters or viewers, or both, to become better people through valuable lessons about life and love learned in their encounters with the disabled Other. Furthermore, the disabled character’s purpose holds true across genre, rendering romance, horror, biopic, action-adventure, and drama practically interchangeable. What differs across specific characters, genres, and time periods are the particularities that these “lessons” teach the nondisabled, as the lessons are specific to the social anxieties of any given time. Disabled characters in mainstream movies reflect little of the interesting complexities of our actual lives. I am not arguing naïvely that the movies should correct this problem simply by representing disability experiences “authentically.” Authenticity is never achievable in any case, and attempts at it can be, frankly, pretty boring. Although I do not believe that authenticity is achievable or even desirable, we can draw on authentic disability experiences and community to begin enlivening alternative representations. We can also learn from the disability community’s viewing strategies to engage critically with existing disability-themed films, rescuing them from total ruin, and we can have fun doing so.

I am part of a collaborative behind the forthcoming feature-length documentary *Code of the Freaks* (Salome Chasnoff, 2019) that takes on the challenge of pointing out how disability functions as a narrative device in mainstream film and how these films affect actual disabled peoples’ lives.<sup>1</sup> Our creative team includes the playwright and novelist

1 At the time of this publication, *Code of the Freaks* is in the final stages of production. Please visit our website, [www.codeofthefreaks.com](http://www.codeofthefreaks.com), for release information. We are also creating curricula for college-level classroom use and for community screenings.

Susan Nussbaum, the disability studies scholar Alyson Patsavas, the feminist documentary film director Salome Chasnoff, and the independent filmmaker Jerzy Rose. Three members of the team identify as disabled themselves and are active members of disability communities. We call ourselves the “WPA” collective. The acronym stands for “What Pa did to Axel,” a line from the almost-universally-hated-by-disabled-people movie *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004).<sup>2</sup> In this movie, the paralyzed boxer Maggie (Hilary Swank) plaintively urges her trainer Frankie (Clint Eastwood) to do to her what Pa did to her pet dog, Axel. In close-up, Eastwood takes a moment to decode her request, his earnest blue eyes pondering while melodramatic music swells against the whooshing of her ventilator and the persistent beeping of her vitals machine. Suddenly, Frankie’s face registers recognition: Maggie wants Frankie to “put her down.” Without saying another word, Frankie’s eyes communicate that killing Maggie is as logical and humane as putting down a dying dog, a logic that equates life with a disability to a death sentence. The WPA collective challenges the logic of such narratives; we channel the disability community’s outrage over this film and others like it, calling out Hollywood for perpetuating the belief that it is better to be dead than disabled. When we show this short excerpt from *Million Dollar Baby* in *Code of the Freaks*, its melodrama practically parodies itself, exposing the narrative’s weak yet pernicious logic.

Our documentary takes its name from Tod Browning’s infamous 1932 movie, *Freaks*, which features a tight-knit community of sideshow freaks who seek revenge on the nondisabled circus performers who have done them wrong. Trapeze artist Cleopatra and her strongman lover, Hercules, have tricked Hans, a little person, into marrying Cleopatra; they have a plan to murder him and steal his inheritance after the wedding. When the freaks discover the couple’s plan, they exact revenge by hunting down and mutilating their deceivers in the dark of a stormy night. We open our documentary with a scene from the film in which a carnival barker explains to an audience that surrounds the sideshow’s newest human exhibit, the “chicken lady,” how the freaks’ revenge is responsible for her hideous deformity. He says, “Their code is a law unto themselves. Offend one, and you offend them all.” Our framing of the documentary with this scene ominously implies that we as the filmmakers, our interviewees, and by extension the entire disability community have been offended and that we are enacting the code of the freaks: this documentary is our revenge. Our representational retribution deforms and “enfreaks” those movies that do us harm. The documentary acts as synecdoche for the disability community itself, which, despite a history fractured by institutionalization, isolation, and segregation, has emerged to build a political and cultural movement.

The film began when Susan Nussbaum, who was working at the Art and Culture Project of Chicago’s Access Living, teamed up with director Salome Chasnoff to put on a salon on disability representation in film for members of the disability community. Nussbaum shares publicly that when she became disabled as a young woman, she had no context for understanding what her life would be like. Her only reference

2 A special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, for example, convened a special forum devoted to disability studies scholars’ responses to the debates around *Million Dollar Baby*. Beth Haller and Corinne Kirchner, eds., “Disability Studies and Technology, Part 2; Freakery, Part 1,” special issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2005), <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v25i3>.

points were Hollywood movies, and the future these representations portended for her was bleak. Her favorite film to hate from this time was the campy classic *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962), in which wheelchair-using Blanche (Joan Crawford) is held hostage and tortured by her insanely jealous and grotesquely mascara-smearing sister, Jane (Bette Davis). In this movie, Jane deprives Blanche of food, water, and access to the outdoors. This movie also addresses institutionalization, as Jane's actions are motivated by the threat of being put into an asylum once Blanche sells their home. Nussbaum's story sets the tone for our project as a whole: the life-and-death seriousness of the movies' impact is exposed through biting humor. As audiences are made aware of the dire situation Nussbaum found herself in after her accident, we laugh along with her as she imagines herself as Blanche. This laughter, though, is haunted by the real threats of victimization, isolation, and institutionalization faced by the physically and mentally disabled of that time—and of ours.

In the initial salon, Nussbaum and Chasoff presented a series of film clips and facilitated a discussion about disability stereotypes and how they affected lived experience. The program was so well received that Nussbaum and Chasoff decided to make a documentary on Hollywood images of disability to extend these conversations. Patsavas and I were enlisted to join the group, bringing to the collective our experience teaching a large disability and American film class at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Over nearly a decade, the four of us conducted research that included literature reviews, archival work, community salons, and watching a lot of movies. The salons were held throughout the city of Chicago in a variety of spaces, including community centers, arts organizations, churches, and universities. We sought out diverse communities of disabled and nondisabled people across spectrums of class, race, and impairment type to ensure a wide variety of perspectives.

In these salons, community members responded to the movie clips in similar ways, but there were also important differences. For instance, in a salon held at a prominent regional theater, one white male wheelchair user recounted how he and other newly disabled people went on an outing from the rehabilitation hospital to see *Million Dollar Baby*. This story garnered a collective gasp of horror from the majority-disabled audience. But he countered our disdain by claiming that seeing this film made him recognize that he had a choice to make about living his life as a disabled person and that he had chosen to live. Although most of us failed to understand his perspective, we did come to recognize that our community is not homogeneous and that it would be important for our documentary to reflect disagreements as well as points of agreement. In another salon, an activist with intellectual disability amended our criticism of how the film *The Other Sister* (Gary Marshall, 1999) infantilizes intellectually disabled people by explaining that the film is a rare portrayal of people in her community as sexual beings. Over time, we learned that even some of the most egregiously offensive and traumatizing films had moments of value for certain members of our community. While we have threaded an argument about the reductive quality of disability representation throughout the documentary, we retain the contradictions and complexity of the salons we held during our research phase.

As a means of capturing the diversity of perspectives, our final roster of interviewees is a diverse one that ranges in age, impairment type, and background. We

are careful to include the voices of academics, artists, and activists. We maintain a conventional “talking head” format, but the interviewees’ commentary cuts across genres and historical periods and through issues of race, sexuality, gender, and class. Interviewees place the images and narratives of disability in the context of both the sociopolitical and the personal. This approach starkly rejects Hollywood’s tendency to isolate disabled people, turning single characters into representatives of all.<sup>3</sup> By putting these characterizations into sociopolitical context, we distance them from nostalgia or harmlessness. And we twist to our own ends Hollywood’s tendency to use disabled characters to teach nondisabled people life lessons. Our interviewees not only school the audience on their own perspectives and experiences of these movies; they also include detail that speaks directly to other disabled people by using cultural references and insider language, which is often politically incorrect. Unlike Hollywood, then, we assume our “general audience” includes people with disabilities.

As we have shown rough cuts of the documentary to various communities, I am always fascinated by how audiences respond. Scenes that might be met by stunned silence from nondisabled, uninitiated audience members can invoke gales of laughter or nods of recognition in disability activist communities. In mixed audiences, different pockets of responses become perceptible and predictable. There may be a group of disabled audience members who snicker at all the insider jokes, making nondisabled audience members aware of their presence. Their laughter decenters assumptions of audience normalcy and homogeneity.

In Hollywood movies, audiences are often asked to identify with what I call the “nondisabled” guide. This guide appears as a character in the film—typically a nondisabled white, cisgender, heterosexual man—who keys audience members to the appropriate emotional responses to the disabled character. Think of Dr. Treves in *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980) or James in *Children of a Lesser God* (Randa Haines, 1986). In our documentary, we—the disabled filmmakers and interviewees—guide the audience to our perspectives ourselves. Without the nondisabled guide, some audience members can become disoriented. Oftentimes, nondisabled audience members express shock at how disabled people respond negatively to movies that they were led to believe were “positive” and inspiring representations. In various discussion sessions, some of these audience members double down on their fealty to iconic films like *The Miracle Worker* (Arthur Penn, 1962), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962), or *A Christmas Carol* (Edwin L. Marin, 1938), films that we argue use disabled characters only in service to teaching nondisabled audiences lessons about kindness, race relations, and generosity.

Other audience members have become angry when they learn that biopics about disabled characters are not really about their eponymous subjects. Instead, filmmakers pick and choose elements of the disabled subjects’ lives that create touchstones for the nondisabled guides’ emotional journeys. Take, for example, *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009), a biopic of Nathaniel Ayers, an African American homeless man who is befriended by the film’s nondisabled guide—white-savior journalist Steve Lopez.

3 Martin Norden explains the isolation of disabled characters in *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

Lopez revitalizes his flagging career by publishing a series of articles on Ayers, who was once a promising cellist derailed by experiences of schizophrenia. Over the course of the film, Lopez learns lessons about mental illness, homelessness, and racism in a way that individualizes them into catalytic episodes that, by increments, transform Lopez into a better father, journalist, and all-around human being.<sup>4</sup>

Others feel frustrated with us for not liking any of these movies or offering explicit “fixes,” which, to me, seems to confirm the expectation that the oppressed are responsible for fixing problems caused by oppressors. Although our creative team refuses to provide easy fixes to the problems Hollywood has created by endorsing any of their films, some of our interviewees point to films that they liked, that were important to their disability identity development, or that they just plain enjoy watching. In our interviews, Patsavas, Nussbaum, and I do discuss progressive, promising moments in the films we critique that might serve as foundations on which to create new, more complex representations.<sup>5</sup> We cannot bring ourselves, though, to “like” any of these films.

The filmmakers and our interviewees revel in collectively “cripping” these movies by pointing out their inherent ableism, witnessing the harm these films have inflicted on our psyches and everyday lives, and mocking them mercilessly.<sup>6</sup> Crippling movies is a viewing strategy that preserves our dignity in the face of films that dehumanize, stereotype, belittle, or demonize disabled lives. One of our favorite crippling strategies is the use of montages that pull together repeating disability tropes from the history of film: little people as magical creatures, nondisabled ladies tending to paralyzed men, blind men comically driving cars, blind women in bathtubs stalked by serial killers, blind people feeling sighted peoples’ faces, disfigured villains plotting to destroy those responsible for their disablement, mercy killings, and disabled characters receiving standing ovations. These montages are overdetermined not only by impairment type (e.g., wheelchair users, facial difference, blindness, intellectual disability, mental illness) but also by their whiteness. In a sea of disability whiteness, a montage of black men with disabilities who teach white communities about racism appears as a stark contrast, a toxic intersection of ableism and racism prettied up as consciousness raising. Our *coup de théâtre* is a montage of nondisabled actors accepting Oscars for their virtuosic

4 For a discussion of how white male protagonists’ encounters with racial and other marginalized Others in Hollywood films transforms them into more sensitive, benevolent patriarchs whose domination remains firmly intact, see Fred Pfeil, “The Year of Living Sensitively,” in *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference* (London: Verso, 1995), 37–70.

5 In the course on disability and American film I teach at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I counter Hollywood’s limiting disability tropes with examples coming from the international disability art and culture movement across artistic mediums. Our creative team decided to focus on Hollywood representation of disability for *Code of the Freaks*, leaving disability self-representation for, perhaps, our next movie!

6 See Carrie Sandahl, “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, nos. 1–2 (2003): 25–56, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9-1-2-25>. In this article, I coined the use of “crip” as a verb to describe representational practices analogous to “queering.” My initial definition is as follows: “Crippling spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects. Both queering and crippling expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity” (36). Since the time of this publication, many scholars have taken up the term, expanding and complicating it, most notably Robert McRuer in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

performances as disabled characters. Each actor performs humility and gratitude in red-carpet finery and extraordinarily able-bodied perfection—a ritual of symbolic cure. The iterative force of these collected clips hyperbolizes, mocks, and exposes the parasitic relationship of the Hollywood’s film industry to actual disabled people, from whose oppression the industry profits.

Not only does crippling the movies bring me joy; this representational retribution also builds community and makes my work in disability studies sustainable. The process of making this movie with my dearest friends and fierce activists blunts some of the pain of ableism. I began the process of crippling representation with my fellow disabled people in graduate school when I was training in theater practice and also was becoming an activist. The ableist exclusion and othering I experienced from the profession that I loved became a process of inclusion and centering in the disability community. I have been teaching a disability and film class for more than ten years and disability in representation for close to twenty, and it is exhausting and demoralizing to see the same type of media representations year after year. I am obligated to watch them. But I watch them armed with community and a glass of wine. The WPA’s work on *Code of the Freaks* has included Twitter snarking our way through *Me before You* (Thea Sharrock, 2016), providing commentary on appalling euthanasia films, and laughing so hard that the wine snorts out my nose. Offend one of us, and you offend us all. The disability wet blanket strikes again! \*

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## Room for (Materiality’s) Maneuver: Reading the Oppositional in Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*

by DAVID T. MITCHELL and SHARON L. SNYDER

In an important work of narrative theory regarding oppositional storytelling, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*, Ross Chambers argues: “For deprivation of the power to speak is most usually not literal: if one excludes infants and animals, and those who are held incommunicado . . . what is usually meant by the phrase is exclusion from the powerful positions of ‘preexisting,’ socially derived authority.”<sup>1</sup> The idea appears as commonsensical enough:

1 Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 14.