

WHY I BURNED MY BOOK

AND OTHER ESSAYS ON DISABILITY

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Screening Stereotypes

Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures

The film reviews in chapter 6 inspected several individual productions in detail. The following essay attempted to explicate some of the major recurring themes about disability and characterizations of people with disabilities in motion pictures and television. Though many of the examples date from the period when this article was written, the same themes and characterizations, the same stereotypes, have persisted up to the present.

When one examines images of people with disabilities in television and film, one encounters two striking facts. First, one discovers hundreds of characters with all sorts of disabilities: handicapped horror “monsters”; “crippled” criminals; disabled war veterans, from *The Big Parade* (1925) to *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to *Coming Home* (1978); central characters of television series temporarily disabled for one episode; blind detectives; disabled victims of villains; animated characters like stuttering Porky Pig, speech-impaired Elmer Fudd, near-sighted Mr. Magoo, and mentally retarded Dopey.

The second striking fact is how much we overlook the prevalence of disability and the frequent presence of disabled characters. Why are

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there so many disabled characters, and why do we overlook them so much of the time? Why do television and film so frequently screen disabled characters for us to see, and why do we usually screen them out of our consciousness even as we absorb those images?

The critic Michael Wood has some useful observations that apply here. "All movies mirror reality in some way or other," he writes.

There are no escapes, even in the most escapist pictures. . . . Movies bring out [our] worries without letting them loose and without forcing us to look at them too closely. . . . It doesn't appear to be necessary for a movie to solve anything, however fictitiously. It seems to be enough for us if a movie simply dramatizes our semi-secret concerns and contradictions in a story, allows them their brief, thinly disguised parade. . . . Entertainment is not, as we often think, a full-scale flight from our problems, not a means of forgetting them completely, but rather a rearrangement of our problems into shapes which tame them, which disperse them to the margins of our attention.¹

Often, as Wood says, film and television programs do touch upon our areas of concern without explicitly acknowledging or exploring them. At other times, for instance in the "social problem" dramas seen during the 1970s and 1980s, the subjects of our worries were addressed, but without deep examination. In such cases, television and film supply quick and simple solutions. They tell us that the problem is not as painful or as overwhelming as we fear, that it is manageable, or that it is not really our problem at all, but someone else's.

Disability happens around us more often than we generally recognize or care to notice, and we harbor unspoken anxieties about the possibility of disablement, to us or to someone close to us. What we fear, we often stigmatize and shun and sometimes seek to destroy. Popular entertainments depicting disabled characters allude to these fears and prejudices, or address them obliquely or fragmentarily, seeking to reassure us about ourselves.

What follows is a brief consideration of the most common screen images of people with physical, sensory, and developmental disabilities and some thoughts about their underlying social and psychological meaning. This article by no means exhausts the range of images or their significance; although it concentrates on live-action fictional depictions, it also compares them to nonfictional images in order to illuminate further the social and cultural attitudes and concerns they reflect and express. Further, it is important to show the connections between recent changes in those characterizations and the emergence of a new socio-

political consciousness about disability, particularly among disabled people themselves.

Disability has often been used as a melodramatic device not only in popular entertainments, but in literature as well. Among the most persistent is the association of disability with malevolence. Deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil.

Richard the Third's hunchback and Captain Ahab's peg leg immediately come to mind, but "bad guys" still frequently have handicaps. Doctor No and Doctor Strangelove both have forearms and hands encased in black leather. The overpowering evil embodied in Strangelove's leather-wrapped hand nearly makes him strangle himself. He is also "confined to a wheelchair." The disabilities of both doctors apparently resulted from foul-ups in their nefarious experiments. They are "crippled" as a consequence of their evil.

One of the most popular adversaries of the TV adventure series *Wild, Wild West* was the criminal genius, yet another doctor, Miguelito P. Loveless, a "hunch-backed dwarf." Michael Dunn, a marvelous and talented actor, spent much of his career relegated to such horrific roles. In one episode, Dr. Loveless says to the story's hero: "I grow weary of you, Mr. West. I weary of the sight of your strong, straight body." This brilliant villain repeatedly hatches grandiose schemes to wreak havoc and overthrow the U.S. government, with an obvious motive: he wants revenge on the world, presumably the able-bodied world. Disabled villains, raging against their "fate" and hating those who have escaped such "affliction," often seek to retaliate against "normals."

Other criminal characters may operate on a less magnificent scale, but act from the same animus. In the "Hookman" (1973) episode of *Hawaii Five-O*, a double-amputee sniper who had lost both hands in a foiled bank robbery blamed the series's hero and pledged to avenge his "maiming" by killing the police detective. Or consider the "one-armed man," the real murderer in one of the most popular series in television history, *The Fugitive*. (Bill Raisch was another handicapped actor confined to criminal roles because of his disability.)

The connection between criminality and disability continues. In 1984, the short-lived series *Hot Pursuit* unsuccessfully tried a variation on the "fugitive" formula. This time an innocent woman accused of murder was chased by the real killer, a one-eyed hit man. Another recent series, a modern-day western, *The Yellow Rose* (1983-1984), featured Chuck

Connors as Hollister, a greedy and vengeful oilman who walks with a limp, supporting himself with a cane. The scene introducing this character made clear the connection between his nastiness and his handicap. An establishing long shot showed him “hobbling” toward the camera, with a cut to a close-up of the “bad” leg and the cane.

Another recent disabled villain—not a criminal, but a “bad guy” just the same—appeared in the popular British miniseries *The Jewel in the Crown* (broadcast on American public television in 1984–1985). This dramatization of the last years of British colonial rule in India revolved around one Ronald Merrick, a police investigator and army intelligence officer who is arrogant, deceitful, and viciously racist. As the result of a battle injury, the left side of his face is disfigured and he loses his left arm. Like Doctor No, Doctor Strangelove, and a number of other maimed or amputee bad guys, he acquires a black leather-covered prosthetic limb. This dramatic device recurs frequently enough that one begins to wonder about the psychosexual significance of the connection between blackness, badness, amputation, and artificial arms.

Giving disabilities to villainous characters reflects and reinforces, albeit in exaggerated fashion, three common prejudices against handicapped people: disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their “fate”; disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them. In historic and contemporary social fact, it is, of course, nondisabled people who have at times endeavored to destroy people with disabilities. As with popular portrayals of other minorities, the unacknowledged hostile fantasies of the stigmatizers are transferred to the stigmatized. The nondisabled audience is allowed to disown its fears and biases by “blaming the victims,” making them responsible for their own ostracism and destruction.

Closely related to the criminal characterization, but distinct from it, is the depiction in horror stories of the disabled person as “monster.” The subtext of many horror films is fear and loathing of people with disabilities. As with the equation of disability and criminality, the horrific characterization long antedates television and persists most frequently in horror films made for theatrical release. Still, television perpetuates the “monster” image not only by broadcasting these theatrical films, but also by producing new versions of horror classics. The most prominent recent examples are the TV movie remakes of those perennial favorites *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1981) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1983).

The most obvious feature of “monster” characterizations is their extremism. The physical disabilities typically involve disfigurement of the face and head and gross deformity of the body. As with the criminal characterization, these visible traits express disfigurement of personality and deformity of soul. Once again, disability may be represented as the cause of evildoing, punishment for it, or both.

Further, the depiction of the disabled person as “monster” and the criminal characterization both express to varying degrees the notion that disability involves the loss of an essential part of one’s humanity. Depending on the extent of disability, the individual is perceived as more or less subhuman. These images reflect what Erving Goffman describes as the fundamental nature of stigma: the stigmatized person is regarded as “somehow less than human.” Such depictions also exemplify the “spread effect” of prejudice. The stigmatized trait assumedly taints every aspect of the person, pervasively spoiling social identity.²

That “spread effect” is evident in an extension of the notion of loss of humanity, the idea that disability results in loss of self-control. The disabled character thus endangers the rest of society. The dangerous disabled person is not necessarily a criminal or a malevolent monster, but may be a tragic victim of fate, as with Lenny in the nonhorror story *Of Mice and Men* (1939, 1969, 1981, 1992). Whatever the specific nature of the disability, it unleashes violent propensities that “normally” would be kept in check by internal mechanisms of self-control.

Violent loss of self-control results in the exclusion of the disabled person from human community. Often in horror stories, and virtually always in criminal characterizations, it is the disability itself and the resultant dangerous behavior that separates and isolates the disabled character from the rest of society. But in some “monster” stories, for instance *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the disabled person is excluded because of the fear and contempt of the nondisabled majority. Still, even when the handicapped character is presented sympathetically as a victim of bigotry, it remains clear that severe disability makes social integration impossible. While viewers are urged to pity Quasimodo or Lenny, we are let off the hook by being shown that disability or bias or both must forever ostracize severely disabled persons from society.

For both monstrous and criminal disabled characters, the final and only possible solution is often death. In most cases, it is fitting and just punishment. For sympathetic “monsters,” death is the tragic but inevitable, necessary, and merciful outcome. Again we can “sympathize”

with the mentally retarded Lenny, while avoiding our fears and biases about him, and escape the dilemma of his social accommodation and integration.

During the 1970s and 1980s, another depiction of persons with severe disabilities emerged: the severely physically disabled character who seeks suicide as a release from the living death of catastrophic disablement. This was the theme of the play and motion picture *Whose Life Is It, Anyway?*, the TV movie *An Act of Love*, and the theatrical drama *Nevis Mountain Dew*. In the first two stories, recently spinal cord-injured quadriplegics request assisted suicide, and in the last, a postpolio respiratory quadriplegic asks his family to unplug his iron lung. The ostensible subject of the first and second dramas is the arrogance and oppressive power of a medical establishment gone wild, which at exorbitant expense keeps alive suffering people who would be better off dead. But just beneath the surface of all of these tales runs a second unacknowledged theme, the horror of a presumed “vegetable-like” existence following severe disablement.

These stories present distinct parallels with the “monster” characterization. Disability again means loss of one’s humanity. The witty, combative central character in *Whose Life Is It, Anyway?* refers to himself as a “vegetable” and says that he is “not a man” anymore. The disabled persons in the other two dramas make similar statements of themselves. Severe disability also means loss of control. Unlike the criminal and “monster” characterizations, it does not mean loss of moral self-control, since the disabled would-be suicides clearly have a moral sensibility superior to those who would force them to live. Rather, disability means a total physical dependency that deprives the individual of autonomy and self-determination.

Disability again results in separation from the community. This exclusion is not presented as necessary to protect society from danger, as with the monstrous disabled character. Nor is it the result of discrimination or inaccessibility. It is portrayed as the inevitable consequence of a serious physical impairment that prevents normal functioning, normal relationships, and normal productivity. All of these dramas distort or ignore the possibilities of rehabilitation and modern assistive technology. They also totally avoid considering what effects the enforcement of antidiscrimination and accessibility laws would have on the activities, identities, and sense of self-worth of disabled individuals.

Finally, as with the “monster” and criminal characterizations, these dramas present death as the only logical and humane solution. But instead of eliminating the disabled person who is a violent threat, it relieves both the individual viewer and society of the impossible emotional, moral, and financial burden of severe disability. The disabled characters choose death themselves, beg for it as release from their insupportable existence. The nondisabled characters resist this decision, but then reluctantly bow to it as necessary and merciful. Once again, the nondisabled audience is allowed to avoid confronting its own fears and prejudices. It is urged to compliment itself for its compassion in supporting death as the only sensible solution to the problems of people with severe disabilities.

Even when bigotry is presented as a fundamental problem confronting severely disabled persons, as in *The Elephant Man* (1980), the final solution, the choice of the disabled character himself, is suicide. Whether because of prejudice or paralysis, disability makes membership in the community and meaningful life itself impossible; death is preferable. Better dead than disabled.

The most prevalent image in film and especially in television during the past several decades has been the maladjusted disabled person. These stories involve characters with physical or sensory, rather than mental, handicaps. The plots follow a consistent pattern: the disabled central characters are bitter and self-pitying because, however long they have been disabled, they have never adjusted to their handicaps, have never accepted themselves as they are. Consequently, they treat nondisabled family and friends angrily and manipulatively. At first, the nondisabled characters, feeling sorry for them, coddle them, but eventually they realize that in order to help the disabled individuals adjust and cope they must “get tough.” The stories climax in a confrontation scene in which a nondisabled character gives the disabled individual an emotional “slap in the face” and tells the disabled person to stop feeling sorry for him- or herself. Accepting the rebuke, the disabled characters quit complaining and become well-adjusted adults.

These portrayals suggest that disability is a problem of psychological self-acceptance, of emotional adjustment. Social prejudice rarely intrudes. In fact, the nondisabled main characters have no trouble accepting the individuals with disabilities. Moreover, they understand better than the handicapped characters the true nature of the problem.

Typically, disabled characters lack insight about themselves and other people, and require emotional education, usually by a nondisabled character. In the end, nondisabled persons supply the solution: they compel the disabled individuals to confront themselves.

The drama of adjustment seems to have developed in the aftermath of World War II, probably in response to the large numbers of disabled veterans returning from that conflict. Note, for instance, that two of the most powerful examples appeared in the films *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and *The Men* (1950). This genre became a staple of television in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Paradoxically, this depiction represents progress in the portrayal of disabled persons. The criminal and "monster" characterizations show that disability deprives its victims of an essential part of their humanity, separates them from the community, and ultimately requires that they be put to death. In contrast, the dramas of adjustment say that disability does not inherently prevent deaf, blind, or physically handicapped people from living meaningfully and productively and from having normal friendships and romantic relationships. But these stories put the responsibility for any problems squarely and almost exclusively on the disabled individual. If they are socially isolated, it is not because the disability inevitably has cut them off from the community or because society has rejected them. Refusing to accept themselves with their handicaps, they have chosen isolation.

A recurring explicit or implicit secondary theme of many stories of adjustment is the idea of compensation. God or nature or life compensates handicapped people for their loss, and the compensation is spiritual, moral, mental, and emotional. In an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*, "Town Party, Country Party" (1974), about a "lame" schoolgirl, Charles, the father, says that many "cripples" seem to have "special gifts." Laura, his daughter, asks if those gifts include "gumption." Yes, he answers, and goodness of heart too. Other stories represent blind people with special insights into human nature (for instance, the blind old black man in *Boone*, a short-lived 1983 TV series) or paraplegic detectives with superior skills (*Ironside*). Far from contradicting the image of the maladjusted disabled person, the notion of compensation reiterates it in yet another way. Compensation comes to those who cope. It is a "gift" to handicapped individuals who responsibly deal with their "afflictions."

Nonfictional television programs, particularly magazine shows such as *That's Incredible*, *Real People*, and *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, frequently

present handicapped individuals who are the opposite of the fictional "maladjusted" disabled person. Repeatedly they recount stories of achievement and success, of heroic overcoming. Over and over they display inspiring blind carpenters, paraplegic physicians, and "handicapped" athletes. These "real-life" stories of striving and courage seem the antithesis of the bitter and self-pitying "cripples" in dramas of adjustment, but both stem from the same perception of the nature of disability: disability is primarily a problem of emotional coping, of personal acceptance. It is not a problem of social stigma and discrimination. It is a matter of individuals overcoming not only the physical impairments of their own bodies but, more important, the emotional consequences of such impairments. Both fictional and nonfictional stories convey the message that success or failure in living with a disability results almost solely from the emotional choices, courage, and character of the individual.

Both the dramas of adjustment and the nonfictional presentations of people with disabilities stem from the common notion that with the proper attitude one can cope with and conquer any situation or condition, turning it into a positive growth experience. Nothing can defeat us; only we can defeat ourselves. This belief in the power of a positive mental outlook, so widely and successfully marketed in therapies, psychologies, and sects, not only currently but throughout American history, suggests a primary reason for the popularity of stories about disabled people adjusting and overcoming. It points to one of the social and cultural functions of that image and to one of the primary social roles expected of people with disabilities: in a culture that attributes success or failure primarily to individual character, "successful" handicapped people serve as models of personal adjustment, striving, and achievement. In the end, accomplishment or defeat depends only on one's attitude toward oneself and toward life. If someone so tragically "crippled" can overcome the obstacles confronting them, think what you, without such a "handicap," can do.

Another obvious social function of the psychologized image of physical and sensory disability is to make it an individual rather than a social problem. Prejudice and discrimination rarely enter into either fictional or nonfictional stories, and then only as a secondary issue. In fictional productions, nondisabled persons usually treat disabled people badly, not because of bias, but out of insensitivity and lack of understanding. It becomes the responsibility of the disabled individual to "educate"

them, to allay their anxieties and make them feel comfortable. For instance, in an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*, "No Beast So Fierce" (1982), a boy who stutters is told that he must patiently help the other children to accept him and then they will stop ridiculing him.

Nonfictional programs also generally avoid or obscure the issue of prejudice. In an interview on *Hour Magazine*, a paraplegic teenage fashion model briefly mentioned repeated professional rejection and discrimination because of her disability. Diverting her from that subject, the interviewer concentrated his questions on her strenuous efforts to learn to walk. (By then she was up to twelve steps.) Presumably, walking would make her a more acceptable and attractive model than using a wheelchair.

Segments about disabled people on magazine shows and news broadcasts frequently focus on medical and technological advances. They also often present "human interest" stories about individuals with disabilities performing some physical feat to demonstrate that they are not "handicapped," only "physically challenged." One could argue that these features demonstrate that medical and technological innovations are increasingly neutralizing physical impairments and that they and the "human interest" stories show that attitudes rather than disabilities limit people. But simultaneously they reinforce the notion that disability is fundamentally a physical problem requiring a medical or mechanical fix. They also suggest that disabled people can best prove their social acceptability, their worthiness of social integration, by displaying some physical capability. Finally, these features also reiterate, with the active complicity of the disabled participants themselves, the view that disability is a problem of individual emotional coping and physical overcoming, rather than an issue of social discrimination against a stigmatized minority.

The reactions of disabled people themselves to "human interest" stories are particularly illuminating. Some praise these features for showing that "physically inconvenienced" folks are as able as so-called "normals." Others criticize such "super-crip" segments for continuing to portray handicapped people as "incredible," extraordinary, or freakish. Both responses, it would seem, stem from the same concern and aim: increasingly and in various ways, for instance, in the debate over the language of disability, people with disabilities are rejecting the stigmatized social identity imposed upon them.³ They are struggling to fashion for

themselves a positive personal and public identity. Whether or not "human interest" stories in fact promote an alternative image, handicapped people themselves clearly intend to oppose stigma and discrimination.

Stigma and discrimination are still especially powerful regarding sexuality and romance. In a sexually supercharged culture that places almost obsessive emphasis on attractiveness, people with various disabilities are often perceived as sexually deviant and even dangerous, asexual, or sexually incapacitated either physically or emotionally. Film and television stereotypes reflect and reinforce these common biases.

Criminal disabled male characters convey a kinky, leering lust for sex with gorgeous "normal" women. Dr. Loveless, the hunch-backed dwarf super-criminal in *Wild, Wild West*, surrounds himself with luscious women. The Nazi dwarf in the film comedy *The Black Bird* (1974) displays a voracious appetite for sex with statuesque beauties. Dr. Strangelove salivates over the prospect of having his share of nubile young women to perpetuate the human race in underground caverns following a nuclear holocaust. "Monster" disabled characters menace beautiful women who would ordinarily reject them. The disfigured phantom of the opera kidnaps a woman who reminds him of his dead wife. Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame, rescues and tenderly cares for a woman with whom he has obviously fallen in love. But there is always an undertone of sexual tension, of sexual danger. We are never quite sure what he might do to her.

Mentally retarded adult men also at times appear as sexually menacing figures, partly because of their supposed inability to control their emotions, to gauge their own strength, and to restrain a propensity toward violence. Thus, George mercifully kills his friend Lenny (*Of Mice and Men*) after Lenny accidentally breaks the neck of a beautiful young woman. Sexual menace, deviancy, and danger stem from the loss of control often represented as inherent in the experience of disability.

In other stories, physical paralysis results in asexuality or sexual incapacitation. The quadriplegic characters in *Whose Life Is It, Anyway?*, *An Act of Love*, and *Nevis Mountain Dew* opt for suicide partly because they believe they have lost the ability to function sexually. Neither of the first two films examines the reality of sexual physiology among people with spinal-cord injuries, or the possibilities of sexual rehabilitation. *Nevis Mountain Dew* inaccurately represents sensory deprivation and sexual dysfunction as consequences of polio. But these individuals, and char-

acters with less severe physical disabilities in other stories, have lost something more important than the physical capacity to function sexually. Disability has deprived them of an essential part of their humanness: their identities as sexual beings. More than one male character with a disability refers to himself as “only half a man.”

Even when a disability does not limit sexual functioning, it may impair the person emotionally. Disabled characters may be quite capable of physical lovemaking but spurn opportunities for romance because of a lack of self-acceptance, a disbelief that anyone could love them with their “imperfections.” Nondisabled characters have no trouble finding the disabled persons attractive or falling in love with them, and have no difficulty in accepting them with their disabilities. From the double-amputee veteran in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to a quadriplegic accountant in “A Marriage Made in Heaven,” an episode of *Highway to Heaven* (1985), disabled characters require convincing that they are loveable and that a romantic relationship is workable despite their disabilities. These depictions fly in the face of the real-life experiences of many handicapped men and women who find that even the most minor impairments result in romantic rejection. Once again, popular entertainments invert social reality and allow the nondisabled audience to disown its anxieties and prejudices about disabled people. The source of the “problem” is shifted to the stigmatized person himself or herself, in another version of blaming the victim.

In the past, most stories presenting a positive image of disabled people and romance have involved blind characters. Recently, a few productions have presented people with physical disabilities as attractive and sexual. Most prominent among these are Jon Voight’s paraplegic Vietnam veteran in *Coming Home* and an episode of the TV situation comedy *Facts of Life* starring Geri Jewell, an actress with cerebral palsy. What distinguishes these and a handful of other portrayals is the self-assurance of the disabled characters regarding their own sexuality and romantic value. They enter relationships out of the strength of their own identities as persons with disabilities.

These romantic portrayals and other new characterizations have slowly begun to appear, partly as a result of the increasing impact of the disability civil-rights movement and the growing media awareness of the disability community. Even while previous stereotypes have persisted, a few productions have struggled to “read” these evolving events

and to respond to a developing sociopolitical consciousness about disabled people. The resulting images are fascinatingly contradictory. Elements of a minority group view of disabled people jostle uncomfortably with the themes of the drama of adjustment.

This complicated trend first appeared in *The Other Side of the Mountain* (1977) and *The Other Side of the Mountain, Part II* (1979). This film biography of Jill Kinmont turned her story into a traditional account of overcoming severe disability, while almost completely ignoring her struggle to combat discrimination in education and employment. However, one important scene showed her confronting prejudice when a professor praises her as an “inspiration” while declaring that she will never get a teaching job. Subsequently, the TV movie *The Ordeal of Bill Carney* (1981) dramatized the “real-life” landmark legal battle of a quadriplegic father to gain custody of his two sons. The characterization of Carney, according to Carney himself, distorted his personal life by fitting it into the stereotype of coping, showing him as frequently bitter and depressed, and particularly maladjusted in a sexual and romantic relationship. In contrast, his paraplegic lawyer was portrayed as having an emotionally and sexually healthy relationship with his wife. More important, the film showed the attorney militantly defending Carney’s legal right to raise his children and the lawyer’s own right of physical access to public places.

Contradictions of characterization and theme have also appeared in episodic television. The *T. J. Hooker* segment “Blind Justice” (1983) presented a blind woman in physical danger because she had witnessed a murder. Here is a recurring stereotype: a blind person in jeopardy, usually a woman, who tells of the terror of “living in darkness.” But in this instance, the stereotype was mitigated and complicated because the woman was also presented as an advocate of the rights of handicapped people, and Hooker was given a speech about the need to end bias against people with disabilities. Similarly, an episode of *Quincy*, “Give Me Your Weak” (1983), showed hundreds of politically active disabled people demonstrating in favor of the “Orphan Drugs Bill” pending in Congress. But the story also followed the descent into self-pity of a woman who succumbed to her disability until her husband rebuked her and demanded that she act responsibly again. An installment of *Alice* (1984) focused on accessibility for wheelchair users, clearly a response to that pressing social and policy question. But it treated accessibility as an act

of generosity that the nondisabled should perform to make things easier for "the handicapped," rather than an issue of the civil and legal rights of disabled people.

A few recent productions have directly dealt with the issue of prejudice. *The Elephant Man* showed the dehumanizing exploitation and bigotry inflicted on a severely disabled man; "Little Lou," an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* (1983), told of a short-statured man denied employment because of discrimination. Unfortunately, instead of showing such bias as widespread, this story had only one prejudiced character, the cartoonishly obnoxious and snobbish Mrs. Oleson. The weakness of both dramas was their indulgence in melodramatic sentimentality.

More realistic was the powerful "For Love of Joshua" on *Quincy* (1983), which examined the denial of medical treatment and nutrition to developmentally disabled newborns and showed the possibilities of independent living for intellectually handicapped people. The story climaxed with an eloquent courtroom speech by a teenager with Down's syndrome protesting prejudice against mentally retarded people. In the theatrical film *Mask* (1985), a teenager with a rare facially disfiguring disease confronts discrimination in education, social ostracism, and romantic rejection. He and his mother militantly resist prejudice. Unfortunately, as in *The Elephant Man*, the movie lets the audience off the hook when the youth dies. It is easier to regret prejudice if its victims won't be around.

If stereotyping of handicapped persons has prevailed in both fictional and nonfictional television programming, the problem in TV commercials has been the total exclusion, until recently, of people with disabilities. Sponsors have feared that the presence of individuals with visible handicaps would alienate consumers from their products. They also have failed to recognize the substantial population of disabled Americans as potential customers. Additionally, they have asserted, not without reason, that by casting performers with disabilities in their commercials they would incur the charge of exploitation. As a result, past efforts to integrate commercials have met with massive resistance.

In 1983, 1984, and early 1985, commercials using handicapped performers began to appear. Departing significantly from past practices, these spots may signal a trend. In mid-1983, CBS broadcast a series of promos for its fall schedule. One showed a paraplegic wheelchair racer. Another had a deaf couple signing, "I love you." "I love you too." Sig-

nificantly, these commercials garnered not only praise from the disability community, but also criticism from at least one nondisabled TV critic who implied that CBS was exploiting handicapped people.

More important breakthroughs came in 1984. Levi's jeans, a major sponsor of ABC's coverage of the 1984 Summer Olympics, presented jazzy spots showing hip young adults, including one with a beautiful woman walking next to a young man in a sports wheelchair who pops a wheelie and spins his chair around. Late in 1984, MacDonald's "Hand-warmin'" commercial featured patrons of the restaurant chain clapping rhythmically and enjoying its food, warmth, and conviviality. One of them is a young woman seated in a wheelchair. In May 1985, network commercials for Kodak and *People Magazine* included wheelchair users, and, most important, a spot for the Plymouth Voyager prominently featured a middle-aged man on crutches praising the car.

These commercials represent a major departure in several ways. Most obvious and important, all include disabled persons in efforts to promote products, whether hamburgers, blue jeans, TV shows, magazines, cameras, or cars. They seek out handicapped Americans as a market and audience; they reject the fear that nondisabled consumers will be distressed or offended. Further, in order to sell their products, these commercials present a new image of disabled persons. They are not portrayed as helpless and dependent, but rather as attractive, active, and "with it," involved and competitive, experiencing "normal" relationships, and in the auto commercial, smart about what they buy. Ironically, these commercials offer perhaps the most positive media images of people with disabilities to date.

Positive images in commercials and other programs reflect the growing sociopolitical perception of disabled people as a minority group and the increasing impact of the disability civil-rights movement. Whether these new depictions will become an important trend depends partly on the response from the disability community itself. Advertisers and broadcasters pay close attention to the reactions of various audiences. They are more likely to expand inclusion of disabled performers in commercials and other programming if they receive positive reinforcement from the disability community. By the same token, they will avoid stereotyping and discrimination only if they know that such practices will evoke a negative reaction from handicapped viewers. It is *organized* constituencies, of whatever size, that have brought about changes in broadcasting and advertising. Although the disability community and civil-

rights movement have slowly been becoming more media conscious, concerted efforts to alter media images have thus far remained on a comparatively small scale.

Meanwhile, representations of people with disabilities in television, film, literature, and the arts needs more detailed investigation. It seems probable that an analysis of not only the “monster,” criminal, and mal-adjusted characterizations, but also other types, would reveal a hierarchy of disability, involving a complex interaction among such factors as visibility, severity, mode of functioning, and proximity to the face and head. Such studies should draw upon psychological and social-psychological explorations of the dynamics of prejudice against disabled people. That linkage would deepen our understanding of both the images themselves and the social and cultural attitudes they express. Students of those images should also examine their historical evolution. How have they changed over time? These historical developments should also be connected with the historical experience of disabled people in various societies and cultures. What was their social and economic condition? How did their societies regard and treat them? In short, we need a social and cultural history of disabled people.

The scholarly task is to uncover the hidden history of disabled people and to raise to awareness the unconscious attitudes and values embedded in media images. The political task is to liberate disabled people from the paternalistic prejudice expressed in those images and to forge a new social identity. The two are inseparable.

Notes

1. Michael Wood, *America in the Movies* (New York, 1975), 16–18.
2. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), 3; Beatrice Wright, *Physical Disability: A Psychological Approach* (New York, 1960), 8.
3. Paul K. Longmore, “A Note on Language and the Social Identity of Disabled People,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 28:3 (January–February 1985), 419–23.

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