Section 6: Cultural representations of disability

Disability and society, 2016

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Why representations matter: Comment on Stella Young’s 2014 Ted Talk « I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much »

https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much
Learning objectives/key points

• Role of cultural representations in the oppression of disabled people
• Cultural disability studies
• Underrepresentation and misrepresentation of disability in media productions
• Common (gendered) stereotypes of disability
• Disability arts and culture
“Assumptions that our lives are not worth living are only possible when our subjective realities find no place in mainstream culture”

Cultural disability studies

• “disability – similar to race and gender – is a system of representation that marks bodies as subordinate, rather than an essential property of bodies that supposedly have something wrong with them” (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p.1557-1558)

• Focus on cultural (mainly nondisabled) representations of disability
Freak shows and the disability spectacle

• Historical fascination with bodily ‘abnormalities’

• «Freak shows»: staged public exhibition of «freaks» for public amusement
Contemporary media stereotypes

*Underrepresentation of disability*

UK studies from the 1980s to the 200s = DP represent around 1% of characters in fictional TV programs (Cumberbatch et al)
Contemporary media stereotypes

*Misrepresentation of disability*

- A narrow range of fictional characters
- DP not depicted as ordinary members of society
- Tendency to mobilize nondisabled experts to talk about disability

(Barnes & Mercer, 2010, p.189-190)
Nondisabled narratives of disability

5 common nondisabled narratives of disability
(Garland-Thompson, 2005)

1. Biomedical
2. Sentimental
3. Overcoming
4. Catastrophe
5. Abjection
Gendered stereotypes

• Media representations of disability tend to favor male characters

• The representation of disabled women as a potential source of conflict within feminism (Morris, 1991, chap.4)
• Beyond content analysis: production and reception as largely uncharted territories

• Changing cultural representations

• Limit of the focus on nondisabled representations of disability → group presentation on disability arts and culture
Group work on cultural representations of disability

Group work on previously selected examples of cultural representations of disability:

1. Discuss each representation:
   • By whom is it produced?
   • How is disability portrayed?
   • What can you guess about the initial aim?
   • What other effects does the representation have?
   • In there disagreement within your group regarding the meaning of this representation?

2. Choose one representation to be presented to the whole group; prepare presentation on the elements listed above
References


