

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”

Jenny Morris, *Pride against prejudice*, 1991

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

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