

Disability and Identity in Film: Finding the Voices of the Disabled in Cinema

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All art forms take some kind of control over the subject matter they represent and identities can be written into and not just onto the text depending upon the authorial subjectivity and the extent to which *any* subject may be objectified. Consequently, what is represented typically has little control over how it is represented beyond the textmakers' methods of description and critique even if that description is grounded in some form of ontological research into that subject. This experience of subjects within a text is something we encounter regularly and it is usually tinged with the ideology of the textmaker, their own identity, and the motives they may have in creating the representation. The autobiography would, on the surface, appear to be an exception to the rule as the author recounts their own subjectivity but I would argue that even this form is not without its objectification of character because the autobiography, even those which purport to be 'warts and all', is fundamentally an egoistic text presenting the author and hero or heroine of their own drama. In addition to this, we also have to recognise the role of ghost writers in constructing the 'official' inner world of many so-called autobiographical texts.

As such, any subject represented in any text is an ideological version of *a* reality – one perceived either by the self writing or the reader reading or through the spectacles of society – and so in the reading *and* the writing of character, subjects are inherently stylised and typed.

Narratology has understood character typing for many years, particularly in the frames of Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell, and genre theory began to expand on the visual framework we expect of certain character types, a framework itself grounded in ideologies, prejudices, favours and longstanding artistic conventions. The representation of the disabled fits firmly into these areas, within a representational language grounded in myth, religion, art and literature before a single frame was seen on film.

This language was typically one of cause and effect – “this character is disabled because...” and often there was a consequence which was transformative such as a heightened extra sense or a supernatural ability of some description. Typically, the ancient representations fell into two camps a) a character's disability was punishment for their own or their parents' 'sins' or b) it was a smoke screen for the ability to go beyond the real world and gain access to a greater truth. In the case of blind characters in religion and myth (such as Tiresius) this was often combined.

The other side of the early conventions of how disability as represented was about the disabled subject as good or evil. In societies which abjected their disabled, which was most, the imperfect body was linked to evil but typically the abject was about deformity and society found uses for the deaf, mute and blind, transforming the evil into good, i.e. usefulness.

In film, these systems of representation are still evident, whether it be Samuel L Jackson's villain in *Unbreakable* or one of the Bond villains, Dr Strangelove or Grendel in Zemeckis' *Beowulf* for the representation of the evil body or, for the transformed, the 'useful' disabled figure, Danny Glover in *Blindness* (note that in the same film, Maury Chaykin's evil blind character is given another evil body, that of the corpulent sinner), Madeline Stowe in *Blink*, Lillian Gish in *Orphans of the Storm* or Forrest Gump (as then ingénue seeing truth amidst the lies society tells itself).

But who has control over these images of the disabled? Whose voices are being manifest? Who controls the means of production and how do we hear them?

The answer is that each fit what Martin F. Norden (1994) calls the 'ableist' agenda and that, played by abled-bodies actors, the representations can only ever have a theatrical voice based on what an able-bodied person has interpreted the disabled experience to be. The means of production are controlled by a paternalistic figure or society and thus we hear these fake voices of society within the context of the pursuit of restoring ability. This trajectory is something Norden describes as the pursuit of 'curability' and is present in many films with disability as a theme but, in recent years, there have been a number of films which have tried to challenge this classical narrative curve and take a character through disability, the attempt to 'fix' the disabled body, and the failure to do so – for example the 1999 film by Irwin Winkler, *At First Sight*, based on Oliver Sachs' account of Virgil Adamson's (Val Kilmer) journey from blindness to sight and back to blindness.

This kind of shift, which attempts to focus on the disabled person's character, rather than mending the body or objectifying the body, represents a larger movement in the representation of many disabled characters in which the disabled character becomes the way in which the film's world is focalised for the audience. This achieves two things – it prevents objectification of the body of the disabled and it permits the character a voice.

These voices, however, are walking the tightrope of empathy, sympathy and literal comprehension and thus there are still very few films in which the disabled lead character's voice is vocally 'difficult'. This, inherently, has led to a limited range of disabilities being represented repeatedly and often verbal eloquence is used to enhance empathy with the majority able-bodies audience. Take, for example, another Oliver Sachs' based narrative, *Awakenings* (1989), in which Robert De Niro's imprisoned self is released with mediation, albeit temporarily, or, to go back to Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932, see Fig. 1), still and likely to remain a problematic film, the presence of fully dramatic dialogue between some of the genuinely disabled performers makes them all the more accessible to audiences and is designed to move beyond the spectacle. Unfortunately, the film does not achieve this, mainly due to the close-ups of the disabled performers doing parts of their side-show routines – which becomes a step backwards within the narrative's erstwhile attempts to 'normalise' the individuals.



Fig. 1
From Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932), which remains a difficult watch for contemporary audiences but, nevertheless, the voices were more authentic as all the performers were from within the sideshow culture. Still however, many of the actors perform the role of interpreter for those who either cannot be heard distinctly or who have no speech. The two women here – known as 'bird women' – are cases in point. The film also betrays issue of the aural spectacle as an early sound film.

This process of 'normalising', creating empathy (rather than sympathy) and giving the disabled character a voice is something which I shall now focus on by discussing two films in particular, both of which represent the voice as 'problem', *Inside I'm Dancing* (Damien O'Donnell, 2004) and *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989).

Comparisons have been drawn between the films before, not least because they are both Irish (and this Irish identity is also important in the construction of disabled subjectivity and agency in the films) but also because the both possess charismatic voices within the narratives – James McAvoy as Rory O’Shea in *Inside I’m Dancing* and, of course, Christy Brown (Daniel Day-Lewis) in *My Left Foot*. *Inside I’m Dancing* is also about an emergent voice, that of Michael Connolly, played by Steven Robertson and I shall discuss him later.

Having referred to the ‘issue’ of autobiography earlier, I want to begin by addressing this factor in Sheridan’s film of Brown’s autobiography in terms of how it conforms to filmic conventions of the biopic and the drama.

Many biopics are framed within a sense of the present and flashbacks are routinely used to shape the relationship between the past and the present. What becomes interesting narratologically is how these transitions are triggered. In *My Left Foot* the trigger is externally activated not by the film’s subject, Christy Brown, but by the woman who later became his wife, Mary Carr, reading his autobiography whilst he waits to go onstage at the launch presentation for the book. Visually, the precise stimulus is the plates of his paintings in the book as she reads. Consequently, the voice of the author, shaping the plot, is simultaneously Sheridan, the actions of Mary and Brown’s text itself. Within the flashbacks, Christy’s voice begins at nothing but gradually becomes articulated once his family realise his not mentally disabled and his voice becomes clearer as a result of Dr Cole’s (Fiona Shaw) speech therapy and her ‘find’ of him as an artist (see Fig. 2) – yet it is never as lucid as it is in the ‘present’ sequences – establishing his articulacy as an ever-‘improving’ voice, even if the voice he uses is fruity, poetic and full of passion. Ironically, however, at the point where Christy’s voice is clearest in the film, and extracts from his autobiography are presented, it is not he who read them but Cyril Cusack as Lord Castlewelland. Christy’s voice is removed.



Fig. 2

Daniel Day-Lewis as Christy Brown with Brenda Fricker as his mother in *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989). Fricker appears in both this film and *Inside I’m Dancing* but the latter is a more negative role as Eileen Sheehy. Similarities can be drawn between Michael and Christy Brown but Day-Lewis’ performance is more visceral and vocally more distinct – the viewer cannot often discern what he is saying at first but Dr Cole’s speech therapy helps him to express himself. Unfortunately, the more he speaks the less he feels his artwork expresses him and ultimately abandons it before deciding to write his story. In contrast, Robertson’s performance as Michael as less method-based and more observation-based: an imitation of the disability rather than an avowed attempt to live within the constraints (Day-Lewis, for example, bound his body to experience the limits in movement)

Of course, though, we must remember that this is an Oscar-winning performance by Daniel Day-Lewis of a real man who had cerebral palsy – a man who fought to be heard and was intensely creative – but it is, nevertheless, still an imitation and, despite Day-Lewis’ method acting and preparation (he bound himself to learn how to move as Christy Brown did), it still fits into narrative

conventions and visual conventions of the journey towards independence – fundamentally it is a classic Greek journey from boy to man – but this boy, this man, has disability to overcome instead of and despite of monsters.

Metaphorically and actually, Christy Brown's own story was about him finding his voice. Day-Lewis' performance is about making that voice something an audience can empathise with and recognise (in his emotions and frustrations) whilst Sheridan's, through the repeated use of point-of-view shots from Christy's perspective, is about making that voice move from silent abjection in the corner, under the stairs, to vociferous challenge at the forefront, on the stage.

Brown was a man who did challenge those around him and demanded that his voice be heard in his art and writing... and in conversation... and this confidence in his own voice is reflected in James McAvoy's performance as Rory O'Shea in *Inside I'm Dancing* (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3
Rory O'Shea (James McAvoy), Siobhan (Romola Garai) and Michael Connolly (Steven Robertson) in *Inside I'm Dancing* (Damien O'Donnell, 2004). Rory is a rebel and lives life to the full in knowledge he may die soon (a knowledge only revealed towards the end of the film). Michael discovers his own independence through Rory but is 'translated' by others throughout most of the film (Rory, Siobhan the carer and later, Peter another carer).

Like Christy Brown, Rory is physically incapable of much movement but, unlike Brown, O'Shea's disability is muscular dystrophy. This means that Rory's voice is his most powerful tool for communication and manifests all his fears, hatred and loves within the world with a directness most people around him find difficult (another echo of Brown). Ironically, it is Brenda Fricker (who played Christy's mother in her breakthrough film role) who is the target of much of this, in the part of the film set at the Carrigmore Home for the Disabled, as Warden Eileen Sheehy. She represents rules whilst everything about Rory's personality and voice is about rebellion.

Like any good interruption to the narrative equilibrium, Rory's dramatic purpose is to shake things up, to bring a little anarchy and humanity into the world in which all the home's residents are infantilised, watching *Bagpuss* on the television and being spoken to like children. As such, whilst Rory is important to *Inside I'm Dancing*, it is not his journey towards a voice which is most important but the journey of his friend, Michael, who, like Christy, as cerebral palsy.

Michael's speech is less clear than Christy's (after speech therapy) and the words are more slurred. In the home, it is evident that only a limited amount of what he says is understood despite the fact he has lived in the home as his life and been cared for by the many of the same people. This is exemplified by the opening of the film as he tries to tell Mrs Sheehy that a cable is dangerously looped around a chair and she only understands in the same instance as one of the carers trips to the ground with a smack. As such, Michael wants to use his voice but does so little of the time. When Rory enters the equation and disrupts the quiet normalities of Michael's life, he is initially

wary of the rebel and Rory calls him 'Mary' as an insult – but an alliance is quickly formed between the two of them on the grounds that Rory fully understands Michael and becomes his 'translator'.

Consequently, whilst the audience 'hears' Michael speak throughout the film and increasingly with confidence, it is through Rory that the audience within and without the film gain access to what he says. However, unlike Day-Lewis' performance of Brown, Robertson is frequently seen in close-ups or extreme close-ups, permitting and encouraging the reading of his facial expressions. This gives the audiences access to Michael's inner world and emotions in a way that Rory's translations of him can only every hint at and it means that Michael's character is given two voices – one which is semiotically readable and the other which is an interpretation.

Between the two young men, they learn how to live independently but they have to admit that independence required support and, for Rory, this is a bitter pill. He rails to their carer Siobhan "I don't want your help" only for the scene to cut to her putting him to bed, lowering the harness and tucking him in. The tension between the adult's concept of the independent self and the infantilised disabled past is an ever-present tension within the film.

Just as Rory's entry destabilised Michael's ideas about what he could do and what we wanted from life, so too does the appointment of Siobhan and their home-help (see Fig. 4 as she walks with Michael). Initially within the film she is objectified by the two men as a pretty girl (as they watch her walking down a street) but this is quickly disabused by having her talk to them as adults in the Dublin bar where they nearly start a fight (she tells them to, basically, grow up). There are two elements at play here in how her presence related to the manifestation of the voice of the disabled – both of which echo from *My Left Foot*. Firstly, the young men have libidinal desires which should be permitted expression, even if misfired. Secondly, that what is on the surface is never what is beneath and how we think somebody 'should' behave, for whatever reason, is no reason to prevent behavioural freedoms. It is only through misbehaving, in other words, that we really learn how to behave.



Fig. 4
Michael falls in love with Siobhan but their relationship is doomed: "What you're feeling is not love, its gratitude" Siobhan later tells him. The point, however, is that this is Michael expressing himself and being permitted a romantic inner-life. The desires of the two men are central to the film's disavowal of the infantilisation of the disabled (manifested through the people in Carrigmore Home for the Disabled watching children's television).

Semiotically, the three – Rory, Michael and Siobhan – are established as a trio early within the film through the visual device of them all being blonde. This might sound a little odd but they are the only characters in the film with white blonde hair and the hair becomes the grounds of the bonding between them individually and as a group. Rory's anarchy, for example, is signified through his punk, bleached, spiked hair and Michael helps him apply gel when the carers at the home refuse to mould his distinctive coiffure. In contrast, Michael's 'pudding-bowl' haircut signifies his control by others

and first Rory, then Siobhan, style it for him, manifesting his growing ideological freedom. Siobhan's hair is untouched (although it is seen in a number of different styles) but she styles both their hair in the intimate scenes as she looks after both of them. Their hair is also part of their voices – it signifies unrest, control, freedom and individuality and by the end of the film, after Rory has died quite suddenly of his muscular dystrophy, Michael's realisation that he can be on his own and be an individual is represented through a return to his original hairstyle – now it is a choice, before it was not.

James McAvoy and Steven Robertson, like Daniel Day-Lewis, are able-bodied actors. Day-Lewis is now 'officially' Irish but was mostly identified with very British characters up to this point (even his role as a gay cockney with badly bleached hair in *My Beautiful Laundrette* - Stephen Frears, 1985 – was a specifically English characterisation but many would have still identified him with his role as the priggish snob Cecil Vyse in *Room with a View* in 1984). McAvoy and Robertson are both Scottish. Acting these disabled characters is about wearing a mask through which to perceive the world differently and Damian O'Donnell has said that one of the purposes of *Inside I'm Dancing* was to get audience to enter another world and to think about the issues of disability from the inside, from the characters' perspectives.

The only way this kind of character alignment can happen is through giving disabled characters and performers centre-stage and a powerful voice. TV is much further ahead than film in having disabled actors present disability authentically and these are often people of small stature of who have Downs' Syndrome. Often, however, it is shows with a forensic focus who explore this – from *The X-Files* 1994/5 episode which centred on a community of former side-show performers (not all of whom were disabled, just as in *Freaks*, to *CSI* and *The Guardian* in US TV, disabled performers have *both* been given voice and examined as curiosities. In the UK, hospital dramas have been the most common places where the representation of the disabled as been viewed as narratively coherent, in shows like *Casualty* and *Holby City*.

Nevertheless, if the voices of the disabled are to be heard, film must navigate a line between reality and drama which means we may never get a film which truly gives us the authentic voice of the disabled.

END OF THE CONFERENCE PAPER



Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) was controversial because it was highly sexualised and was also about the able imitating those who are developmentally disabled in order to 'release' their inhibitions. It is thus both a challenge to ideas about who frames the voices of the disabled and a representation of Kristevan dejection as a choice for freedom from society.



Ben Stiller (Tugg Speedman) and Robert Downey Jr (Kirk Lazarus) in *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller, 2008). The film centres upon two self-reflexive observations: a) that playing a disabled character in some way is often Oscar winning (as Martin F Norden notes was observed in the press even in the early days of the Oscars) and b) method acting can lead to the loss of identity – here to the extent of a return to a now filmic taboo, blacking-up but via plastic surgery. The characters spend

a lot of time discussing the problems of playing flawed characters psychologically to the extent that the line many remember from the film is "Never go full retard". Again this is about shaping the voice of disabled characters through abled perspectives, even when treated ironically and through satire.