

Disability History Month: Dismantling Ableist Narratives and Celebrating Authentic Representations.

By Amelia Raczyńska and Evelyn Heis

This 18th of November marked the commencement of the 12th annual celebration of Disability History Month (18th Nov- 20th Dec). Sitting in the upstairs of a café that can only be accessed via the stairs to write this article, we are reminded of how much there is still left to do in terms of accessibility and awareness for the disabled community. Representation in film and Tv may not be the sole solution, but it certainly begins an imperative conversation.

The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.” This definition, besides being terribly outdated, can be considered problematic for its contribution to the harmful and reductive stereotypes associated with those who are disabled, i.e. assuming that all impairments have a 'negative' effect on their lives.

The negative effects that can arise from living with a disability are often perpetuated by the ableism within society. There has been a refusal to acknowledge and act upon the voices of those with disabilities who wish to raise the point that *a disability does not have to mean an inability*- it is not limiting, they can do anything. Disabled people can excel, especially, if society is willing to implement necessary and accessible measures to cater to their needs, as a pre-requisite, and not as an optional 'extra' or afterthought.

As this definition fails to refer to the visibility or invisibility of impairments, one could infer that it does not encompass those with hidden disabilities, such as learning difficulties or autoimmune and hormonal conditions. Considering that in the UK, more than half of the 13.5 million people who are currently identified as disabled, have hidden impairments, this must be mentioned in order to give adequate recognition to the various ways that disabilities can present themselves.

Living in a society with a considerably high media intake, it is unsurprising that the film and Tv industry are such an influential force when it comes to disability representation, having the power to both challenge and reinforce negative narratives and assumptions. The media we consume affects our perception of the world around us, and in turn, the way we form and feel about our identities. Having a lack of accurate representations on the big screen, then, can easily lead to damaging misconceptions.

In Sia's directorial debut, 'Music', Maddie Ziegler was cast as an autistic character and in her, clearly overexaggerated, performance she mocked non-verbal autistics. In producing a tone-deaf and inaccurate portrayal of an underrepresented community, Sia's take perpetuated the reductive, inauthentic stereotypes that are harmful to both the disabled and abled gaze.

This begs the question; can able-bodied actors do justice to portraying the lives of disabled people on the screen?

Arguably, in the case of Eddie Redmayne, who played Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything* (2014), this is possible. In preparation for his role, Redmayne took the time to learn about Hawking's ALS condition through watching documentaries, working with a choreographer, and meeting Hawking himself on more than thirty occasions to embody such a performance. Despite taking the time to educate himself and provide a respectful tribute, the problem *still* lies in the fact

that Redmayne is an able-bodied actor playing a disabled person on the screen. Was his performance, then, simply *less* problematic than Ziegler's?

Moving forward, there needs to be a greater presence of disabled and neurodivergent actors within the film and Tv industry. It is members of those communities, alone, that can provide accurate self-representation and combat the already established negative stereotypes that reduce the livelihoods of disabled people to one of pervading suffering. For instance, Jojo Moyes' novel, adapted to the big screen by Thea Sharrock, *Me Before You* (2016), presents euthanasia as a 'preferable' alternative to life in a wheelchair.

Whilst life with a disability presents hardships, this does not have to be the sole narrative portrayed within the media; life can still be positive and joyful.

John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* (2018), however, sets a great example for the film industry to follow; casting Millicent Simmonds, a deaf actress, as one of the film's protagonists, Regan Abbot who wears hearing aids and signs ASL. Regan's hearing impairment is inevitably what saves the day in this post-apocalyptic world, with her family's ability to sign ASL to one another, since they are unable to speak (hence, 'A quiet place'), being another central aspect of the film. *A Quiet Place's* ending challenges the notion that living with a disability is a wholly negative experience and it has contributed greatly to the positive representation of those with hearing impairments.

Similarly, Tyler Nilson and Michael Schwartz's *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019) has received countless positive praise for its authentic casting and representation; starring Zack Gottsagen, Shia LeBeouf, and Dakota Johnson in this adventurous comedy about a man with Down syndrome who dreams of becoming a wrestler. Zack Gottsagen, who has Down syndrome, plays the character, Zak, with the same condition, and in contrast to previous films that star a protagonist with a disability, *The Peanut Butter Falcon* focuses more on a light-hearted and comical narrative, than a heart-wrenching and sad story that perpetuates ableist cliches.

Gaten Matarazzo who plays Dustin in the sci-fi series *Stranger Things* (2016-) has publicly spoken about his disability, Cleidocranial Dysplasia, and the ways it affects his day-to-day life, from having multiple dental surgeries to not having collarbones. Writers of the show, Matt and Ross Duffer, integrated Gaten's disability into the show as a way to raise awareness on this rare genetic condition and the show's popularity has contributed greatly to the representation of the CCD community.

In recent years authenticity in the film industry has substantially increased, but there needs to be an influx of actors and films that correctly depict and dispute the narratives society has portrayed when speaking for the disabled community. While we can praise what has been done thus far, it is imperative that we highlight more that needs to be done. The film and Tv industry, as well as other media outlets, have the power to influence discourse and can greatly impact the treatment of people with disabilities, not only through the stories they choose to tell but through who they choose to tell them.

With increasing representation, comes increasing conversation and normalisation, which breaks down previously placed boundaries and bolsters the impetus for change.