

The Image of Disability in the Cinema: Breaking Stereotypes?

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The concept of disability has evolved significantly, and this change has taken place due to the demands of people with disabilities and their families in defence of their rights as citizens. Until not very long ago, disability was considered a person-related problem caused by an illness that required medical care. Currently, environmental factors are considered to be the determinants of both the origin of disabilities and of the solution to the problems they raise. Consequently, the solution to the problems inherent to disability is not only individual but also requires changes in immediate environments (home, school, work, etc.) and also in the community's formal and informal social structures (transport, communications, accessibility and support provided).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been actively involved in efforts towards the development of a new concept of disability. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, proposed by the WHO, focuses on the components of health rather than on the consequences of illness. This change reflects the notion that the concept of disability is a social construction, which implies interaction between the person and the community or society, and which places special emphasis on the promotion of quality of life, self-determination, and participation in the community of people with disabilities.

People with disabilities conform a large part of the population. According to the Survey on Disability, Personal Autonomy and Dependency carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (EDAD-2008), the number of residents in Spanish homes that declare having some type of disability is 3,840,000. Therefore, given their quantitative importance people with disabilities should not be considered as a group lying on the fringes of society, but an integral part of it, with full rights regarding social participation. In this

sense, the media -cinema among them- are to a large extent responsible for the development of the public image society has of disability. To keep up with this, cinema has not disregarded society's view of disability. The cinema largely reconstructs society's perception of people with disabilities and, from its beginning until today, the images reflected by films have evolved towards more positive and normalizing perspectives.

This special edition on disability included in the *Journal of Medicine and Movies* intends to be an approach to the way in which cinema has treated this group. In this sense, the articles focus on analyzing the extent to which films addressing this topic reflect the current model of disability and on whether they favour a positive and normalizing perception.

In the paper titled *Cinema as a resource for learning about people with disabilities: Twenty-five films from the last decade*, films whose main characters are people suffering from various types of disability are analyzed with a view to assessing whether they favour the visibility, normalization and approach to such people.

The purpose of another of the articles, entitled *Of mute servants, deaf young ladies and other stereotypes. People with hearing and language impairments in films*, is to analyze the image cinema projects of people with hearing impairments and to differentiate films that provide a stereotyped and negative image from those that provide a positive and realistic one.

In *The representation of people with visual impairments in films* there is an approach to how cinema portrays people with this type of problem. The aim of this article is to detect to what extent filmography portrays characters suffering from this type of disability from a

positive point of view and to show how, by doing this, it encourages social participation.

Finally, in *The Sea Inside* (2004) there is a critical view of the way the topic of spinal chord injury is dealt with in director Alejandro Amenabar's film, where the negative aspects are highlighted to the detriment of a positive approach to living with this disability.

Of course, cinema, with its long lifespan and abundant production, has -with different degrees of depth and success- dealt with many other aspects related to disability; so we hope that the examples we provide will be a reflection of the impact that the combination of the media, on the one hand, and social reality, on the other, can manage to achieve.

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