

Module Title: Cinema and Disability

Module Code: FLM5064

Credit Value: 15

Level: 5

Pre-requisite modules:

Content Description

The representations of persons with disabilities (PWD) is an emerging area in film studies. The majority of scholarly work on the subject has been published in the past 25 years and reflects a growing awareness of disability as both a social construct and a space of activism. This module gives attention to the many forms and attitudes moving images have given to disability, from narrative cinema and documentary, to animation, artists' moving image, the medical film, and beyond. A series of lectures will consider contemporary and historical representations of physical disability, mental illness and neurodiversity, spanning the work of disabled filmmakers, activists, and collectives, scrutinising pervasive popular culture inaccuracies and stereotypical tropes, and debating what constitutes progressive descriptions.

Current research involving the cinema and disability builds on the disability rights movement of the 1960-1970s and the resultant field of disability studies, which addressed a set of key issues including ableist prejudice, discrimination and exclusion, and societal indifference. However, arguably, mainstream TV and cinema depictions of the disabled continue to reinforce an "ableist" ideology that classifies bodies within a binary of normal or abnormal. Disabled characters are often played by able-bodied actors when actors with those specific disabilities are available and presented as either magical/charmed, pitiable/evil, courageous/inspirational, and/or wise/humorous. A common trope is to have a person's disability as a wholly defining characteristic or a PWD functioning as providing growth and enlightenment to a non-disabled character.

Representations of disability, mental ill health and neurological difference have recently been challenged and changed by disabled activists and makers informed by the 'nothing about me without me' and neurodiversity movements. Concept such as Neuroqueering, models of participatory co-creation, annual events such as Crippling the Comic and the UK Sick! Festival, put forward new ethical considerations of how images of disability are created, and offer a counter to the exclusion of disability-related narratives in cinemas, festivals, television, museums and galleries.

The module will survey milestone films such as *Crip Camp* (Jim LeBrecht. 2020), *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan Supermasochist* (Kirby Dick. 1997), *Yes, We Fuck!* (Centeno/Moreno. 2015), *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019), *ISLAND* (Eastwood, 2018), and give analyses to further titles including *The Tribe* (Myroslav Slaboshpytskyi. 2014), *Le Moindre Geste* (Deligny. 1971), *Coda* (Sian Heder. 2021), contentious titles including *My Left*

Foot (director, year), *The Elephant Man* (Lynch. 1980), *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932) and recent films *Temple Grandin* (Jackson. 2010), *Chained for Life* (Schimberg. 2018).

Weekly sessions will reference a range of academic research, from disability studies, film studies, disability aesthetics, feminist theory and queer theory. Whilst the focus is on disability, neurodiversity and mental health, the course also considers the cultural status, exclusion and inclusion of those with illness and terminal illness, and more broadly concepts of care, empathy and alterity, discourses of pity, issues of cultural accessibility and inclusion, and areas of radical politics centred around corporeality. We will discuss the status and agency of the term 'Crip' as it has been taken up and/or criticised by disabled activists, thinkers and makers.

Module Aims

The primary learning outcome in this module is that you will think about learning as a mindset and a process - it has no end point.

By the end of this module you will:

- Gain a deeper understanding of the forms and attitudes the cinema has given to disability, from narrative cinema and documentary, to animation, artists' moving image, the medical film, and beyond.
- Consider contemporary and historical representations of physical disability, mental illness and neurodiversity, spanning the work of disabled filmmakers, activists, and collectives, scrutinising pervasive popular culture inaccuracies and stereotypical tropes, and debating what constitutes progressive descriptions.
- Question "ableist" ideology towards and pervading tropes regarding persons with disability.
- Examine forms of differently abled cinema in relation to specific genres such as horror or Sci-Fi film, as well as comedy, artists film, and documentary, across international contexts.
- Explore concepts such as Neuroqueering, models of participatory co-creation, new ethical considerations of how images of disability are created, and responses to the exclusion of disability-related narratives in cinemas, festivals, television, museums and galleries.
- Consider the cultural status, exclusion and inclusion of those with illness and terminal illness, and more broadly concepts of care, empathy and alterity, discourses of pity, issues of cultural accessibility and inclusion, and areas of radical politics centred around corporeality.