



Disabilities and Self Image

by Erin

This is Erin's third installment in her "Disability Portrayal in the Media" series. In this installment, Erin has researched (and shares her opinion) about "Disabilities and Self Image". Tell us how you feel about it in the [FORUM!](#)

Alright, I'll admit it. I have this weird thing with movies. After two and a half hours after sitting in a cushy boxed seat I walk out of the movie theater, dazed from the monstrosity of the screen and the light my eyes haven't been exposed to in a good while. More than that, however, I walk out feeling like a new person. Call it an identity disorder, a fantasy, or just plain crazy. Call it what you'd like. But there's something about sleepily viewing a few hours of a beautifully crafted movie with a well identifiable and near-perfect character while stuffing your face with comfort foods that's bound to change your outlook on life (at least for a few hours). Ever After let me experience the royalty of a princess. Cinderella made me feel like an undiscovered beauty. The Last Castle forged feelings of a brave rebel fighting for a lost cause. But Forrest Gump? It gave me the sensation of a simplistic, humored at individual because of my disability. And last year's Unbreakable? That critically acclaimed "movie masterpiece" caused me to withstand the feelings of being wretched and evil thanks to my handicap.

The media is powerful. In my mind, society has recently been blessed with two true movie masterpieces, A Beautiful Mind and I Am Sam, that have showcased the true complexity and even beauty of living with a disability. Most media outlets are not so precise and realistic with their portrayals of true life with a disability, however. Falsehoods regarding disabilities are spoon fed to society at large today, only to be regurgitated as ridiculous pressures on individuals with disabilities to conform to a misleading societal standard of beauty. This third installment of **Disability Culture** will undoubtedly be far more opinionated than the last two, given that research regarding these issues is limited and the fact that society now needs strong opinions unwaveringly voiced regarding this issue. In this article we will explore the effects of internal and external pressures due to the media that damage the self esteem and self perception of individuals with disabilities.

Erroneous messages concerning self image and self esteem plague nearly everyone in our perverse Western culture at one time or another. Society screams that unless you're a gorgeous six foot blonde with a large bust or a steamy male athlete with muscles larger than the weights you lift, you simply aren't acceptable. You aren't normal. Don't you dare be content, you have so far to go to reach that horribly enticing, mesmerizing unrealistic ideal self the media portrays as common. While nearly everyone, whether they have a disability or not, endures internal difficulties with accepting themselves in contrast to our societal standard of beauty, the problem only compounds for individuals with disabilities. Many people have disabilities that in some way alter their physical appearance from what is considered "normal". "Every period of history has had its own standards of what is and is not beautiful, and every contemporary society has its own distinctive concept of the ideal physical attributes. In the 19th Century being beautiful meant wearing a corset - causing breathing and digestive problems. Now we try to diet and exercise ourselves in to the fashionable shape - often with even more serious consequences." rightly claimed an online Canadian publication (Social, 1). How much farther do individuals with a disability have to go to reach the



pinnacle of so called "perfection" the media demands today? Internal pressures to conform are only heightened for those with disabilities.

While the internal, self imposed pressures spurred on by the media vex and contort our self image, outside forces are at work too. Cultural pressure seems to be ever increasing. "Within this culture, having a disability is viewed negatively. This notion is supported by the fact that the lives of . . . (individuals) . . .with different disabilities are not reflected in the media. We are invisible. However, when our lives are spoken of, . . . (they) . . . are distorted through romantic or bizarre portrayals of child-like dependency, monster-like anger or super-human feats." declared an article on a disability website (Cool, 2). Every culture in every time period yet has had certain figures to represent it, be they heroes, political icons, book characters, or in today's society, media figureheads. Whether real life or written by pen, these characters represent certain dispositions of society, and hopefully well at that. While characters with disabilities in the media are seldom portrayed realistically, society toasts the stereotype and immediately pours it out on others with disabilities. This can lead to added pressure on an individual with a disability to perform (in contrast to the stereotype of disabled inspiration), to prove themselves as upstanding members of society (in contrast to the stereotype of disabled evil), or to prove themselves simply human (in contrast to the stereotype of disabled innocence).

I recently read an article in the Fall 2001 edition of Profile, a publication of The Milton J. Dance Jr. Head and Neck Rehabilitation Center. "Patients undergoing treatment (for cancer of the head and neck) often experience changes to body image, speech, and swallowing. Following treatment, public interaction may provide unexpected anxiety and reactions that maybe insensitive. A social worker can help patients to adjust to their new image and/or function, to understand public reaction and to utilize coping strategies." the article read (Self, 1). The cruelty of society still shocks and appalls me. The fact that the treatment by our culture could be so harsh that it would warrant someone to obtain a social worker blows my mind. Adversity from the media directly challenges us to question our self contentment. A society poisoned by media stereotypes in turn asks us to question ourselves. If nothing is done I assure you this will become a perpetual cycle.

Sometimes I wonder why our society's ideals are what they are. Who was originally born blonde and shapely that so attracted someone somewhere to deem him/her society's finest? How did the trend even catch on? What if, far back in time at the foundation of our culture, someone had deemed an individual with a "facial disfigurement" and a cane beautiful? Would society even had considered it a "disfigurement" at all? Societal ideals that cause us to question our self image are nothing more learned traditions and customs passed down through generations. We'll examine the history of the treatment of individuals with disabilities in the next installment of **Disability Culture**.

Bibliography

- Where Do Women with Disabilities Fit In? 21 Jan. 1998. Disability Cool. 02 July 2002 [link](#)
- "Self Image in Head and Neck Cancer Patients: A Social Worker's Perspective." Profile (2001)
- Mirror Mirror. Social Issues Research Center. 02 July 2002 [link](#)