Troubling Signs: Disability, Hollywood Movies and the Construction of a Discourse of Pity

Michael Hayes, Rhonda Black

Abstract

In this article the authors explore images of disability in Hollywood movies. Our analysis draws from the historical-philosophical method of Michel Foucault. We argue that in Hollywood films disability is extricated from its concrete manifestation as a physical or mental condition and treated as a cultural sign. When read across the different movies the signs of disability can be coalesced into what Foucault calls a discourse. Discourses are socially produced ways of talking about an object that situate the object within socially produced relations of power. We argue that when viewed this way disability becomes situated within a discourse of pity. In Hollywood films the discourse of pity articulates disability as a problem of social, physical and emotional confinement. The disabled character's thwarted quest for freedom ultimately leads to remanding the character back to the confines of a paternalistic relationship of subordination.

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In their study of disability, Hollywood movies, and the construction of discourse, Michael Hayes and Rhonda Black argue that “In Hollywood films disability is extricated from its concrete manifestation as a physical or mental condition and treated as a cultural sign” (114). In other words, the idea of disability is not just the state of being disabled; it is much more than that. When read across the different movies the signs of disability can be coalesced into what Foucault calls a discourse. Discourses are socially produced ways of talking about an object that situate the object within socially produced relations of power...In Hollywood films the discourse of pity articulates disability as a problem of social, physical and emotional confinement.