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**Representation of Disability in Visual Media:  
A 'Tragedy' Rocks Shortland Street**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree

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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is to explore the portrayal of the disability image in visual media. Many disabled activists object to the stereotypical format that the media utilises to represent them and their disabilities, arguing that the images are offensive. Previous studies of cultural images of disability have focused on the inaccuracies of the stereotypes. However, the use of stereotypes leads to misconceptions about the experience of disability. The analysis in this thesis is exploratory, moving away from traditional analyses.

A semiotic approach is applied to demonstrate how representation operates as a signifying practice that produces and reproduces the meanings of disability prevalent in media images. Findings suggest that the concept of 'disability' has a variety of constructed meanings that exist within the technical and compositional elements of the Shortland Street Multiple Sclerosis narrative. This is a pivotal point as it exposes the origins of the constructed meaning of disability and serves as a foundation for the re-conceptualisation of an authentic image of disability. It is acknowledged by the broadcasting industry that there is a need to achieve authenticity of the representation of disability images in the media. One of the ways they believe this can be achieved is through increasing the opportunity for disabled actors to be cast in disability roles. Another possibility is incorporating disability into the media, not as an element of difference in a negative sense, but by authenticating the difference of disability. These possibilities have profound implications for the future of the disability image.

But these implications raise further questions as to whether directors and producers of media will accept the challenge and portray disability as an authentic experience. More importantly, would such a development alter the meaning and perception of disability in Western society?

## PREFACE

For the past eight years I have had a keen interest in media production. However, it has only been in the last three years that I have begun to contemplate how the concept of disability is represented in the media and the way in which the representations contribute to the meaning of disability in Western society.

I have Cerebral Palsy, which resulted from a rare undiagnosed blood condition my mother has, now known as Anti Cardio Lupine Lupis Syndrome. This caused blood clots to form, and cross the nutritional barrier in the placenta, causing me to be an underdeveloped foetus. A combination of a low birth weight and under-developed lungs and brain resulted in a series of apnoea attacks, which gradually reduced my motor functioning, shortly after birth. As a consequence of this, I depend on a motorised chair for mobility and have limited use of my hands. I consider myself, to be psychologically well adjusted to my disability, I have high physical functioning, and I have a reasonably good quality of life and independence.

I immediately came under the 1911 Mental Health Act when diagnosed at eleven months of age. The paediatrician informed my parents that I was not only very physically handicapped, but intellectually handicapped as well. My parents were advised to take me to Templeton Hospital, Christchurch and return home, “to get on with their lives” without me. “You can have more children” they were told. Fortunately, embracing their English/Scottish culture, they would not part with me, and resolved to help me to achieve all I wanted to, as far as my disability would allow.

I was unaware of the oppressive structures that dictate the future of many disabled people, as I grew up with a disability in the nineteen seventies to early eighties. However, it was an ongoing battle for my parents to raise their young daughter in a society which decrees that disabled individuals would not benefit from an education, and the expectation was, that they would remain entirely dependent on their families for the rest of their lives. For disabled people the attainment of a sound education and freedom of choice were unrealistic goals. Hence, I had difficulty accessing the

education system, as it was not accepting of disabled pupils. By the time I was ready to attend secondary school, my mother had battled for mainstreaming, to a point where instead of asking permission for me to attend the school, she told them a year prior, to expect me and make the necessary alterations to the building and curriculum. This they did, mostly with good grace, despite many of the staff being actively against mainstreaming of disabled students. As a consequence, I became very self-conscious of my disability, and was very unhappy during my school years. I wanted other people to accept me for who I was as a person, not based on my physical appearance. I felt I needed to emulate 'normality' by denying my identity as a disabled person, if I was to have any chance of being accepted by the staff and pupils at secondary school. I was beginning to experience oppression.

Today, I live in my own home independent of my parents, but with the physical support of caregivers. In May 1996, I was capped with a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Sociology and Media Studies. In May 1999, I will 'walk' across the stage again to receive my Master of Arts degree in Media Studies. I am proud of these achievements and consider myself very fortunate, knowing how my life began, and how different my future may have been, had my parents listened to my paediatrician.

My disability is not the only reason for my research into this area. My interest in the media came from my mother, Grace Moulton, who trained as a journalist and who also worked in television in the early eighties. She wrote scripts and appeared as a guest in several daytime programmes designed to inform parents of the various issues concerning parenting, including issues of raising a disabled child. Alongside these concerns, my mother was politically proactive in changing legislation dealing with issues concerning disability, as well as establishing the Disabled Persons Living Centre in Christchurch. She was inspirational in educating school children and their teachers through her books and teachers' resource kits - 'The Insight Series' (1986). These children's books and teachers' kits dealt with disability awareness and were aimed towards mainstreaming disabled children. My mother and I visited various schools and colleges in New Zealand, giving seminars and workshops increasing disability awareness.

Four years ago, I decided I wanted to produce a video promoting disability issues

thereby raising disability awareness, which would target tertiary institutions. My reasons for the video are that educational resources need to be updated and suit a more mature audience. While I was applying for Television New Zealand's Young Achievers' Awards, for scholarship funding, I began to think critically about the way disability was portrayed by the media, and how such images impacted upon the social perception of disability itself. To be specific, how the popular stereotypical images of disability are a contributing factor determining how disabled people are viewed and treated by their non-disabled counterparts. For example, Barnes (1992 cited in Shakespeare, 1994, p. 286) asserts that:

Disabling stereotypes, which medicalise, patronise, criminalise and dehumanise disabled people abound in books, films, on television, and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily, and contribute significantly to their systemic exclusion from mainstream community life.

At the time, I adopted a belief that the image of a disabled person and/or character in a soap opera, film, drama, situation comedy, or news item required reconstruction. I interpreted this 'reconstruction' to be placed in a context where an individual/character's disability was given significance equal to any other feature (such as skin colour and eye colour) rather than being portrayed in relation to the 'whole person.' If such an image was produced and screened to an audience, then it could alter apprehensive attitudes towards disability. By increasing the regularity of such an image, the social barriers and stigmatisation associated with the concept of disability would gradually be redefined.

After researching the subject in depth, and reflecting on my plan for a video, I realised that I had been incredibly naive and had only begun to ascend something akin to Mount Everest. To begin with, I had to understand what oppression was, and how it could be understood from a theoretical stance, but more particularly from the position of a disabled person – from my point of view. Even though I had experienced oppression during my dealings with medical professionals, the education system, and other non-

disabled people outside the security of my immediate family, I had not begun to consider the justifications underpinning the attitudes and behaviours of others towards me.

In hindsight, as a child I thought such oppressive attitudes were acceptable and that there was nothing 'wrong' with being constantly stared at or being spoken to as if I was intellectually, as well as physically disabled. This was because I have been socialised with my disability and haven't experienced life differently, hence, I assumed these reactions were 'normal'. However, I did not enjoy being treated in this manner, and appealed to my parents for an explanation. Their answer was simple: "People (meaning non-disabled) did not know any better". I internalised this belief and accepted it, to a point where I felt embarrassed if my parents confronted others concerning my welfare, education and future. As the parents of a young disabled child they experienced oppression on a deeper level. From my mother's point of view, she found it difficult when dealing with the ignorant attitudes of others, because her motherly instinct wanted to protect the rights of her child.

However, in writing this thesis, I have become increasingly aware of what it means to be a disabled person in contemporary society. Hence I have included personal anecdotal experiences throughout this thesis.

Writers such as Morris (1991) and Oliver (1983, 1990, 1996) outline points that are fundamental to gaining an insight into the theoretical underpinnings regarding the issues that are associated with disability in western society. However, in my opinion, even though these works provided valuable resources for my research, the tone within these documents articulated a sense of cynicism and bitterness. I gained a new perspective on disability when I discovered that the oppression, which I experience, could be explained through the social model of disability, which removes the responsibility of disability from the individual and relocates it in the heart of society.

The social model of disability serves as an excellent foundation, from which to build a critical analysis of the cultural images of disability. The concept of disability is a social construction shaped by non-disabled people's beliefs, and their interpretation of what the concept of disability means. The media's portrayal of disability is also disabling, as

these beliefs underpin images of disability. Hence, disabled people argue that:

The dominant culture offers distorted and negative images of disability... [and] disability is promoted as a condition to be avoided as much as possible (Stone, 1995,p.416).

Thus, the concept of disability is to be feared and retreated from and becomes stigmatised. This contributes to the way the media constructs disability. As Longmore (1987) suggests, the media confronts society with issues, such as disability, and deals with them in a subtle and indirect way. Therefore, the audience can face them comfortably without a sense of feeling threatened. Thus, the media explores issues of disability through stereotypical and metaphorical images of disability, in the guise of entertainment to meet the interests of the target (non-disabled) audience. Disabled people have argued that their experience of disability is excluded in the media's representation of disability.

Writers such as Morris (1991), Oliver (1990), Longmore (1987), Cahill (1991), Woodill (1994) and Shakespeare (1994) provide a reductionist analysis of the issue of representation and the production of meaning. However, these writers fail to acknowledge the way these images are confined to the codes of each genre. Instead, the analyses focus on the inaccuracies of the stereotypical and metaphorical way the media constructs the image of the disabled person and the way these images invalidate the experience of disability itself. While these political issues of cultural representations are still important, I support Dyer (1993) who asserts that analysing them in this paradigm alone, can exclude what he considers to be the 'real investigation' of political representation.

According to Dyer (1993) a thorough analysis of the cultural images of disability and other oppressed groups involves considering other critical aspects. Dyer (1993) identifies three of these:

- (i) viewing representations as a presentation of reality;
- (ii) considering that the media is restricted by guidelines set down by cultural forms, which dictate what is deemed an acceptable image, and what type of image will attract audience ratings and attract advertisers;

- (iii) images, particularly those of oppressed groups, are subject to a variety of interpretations of meanings, which are governed by technical and compositional elements within the image such as: camera angles, camera shots, lighting, sound and reportage dialogue or type of language used.

My research explores these three aspects and investigates how these elements construct an identity of the disabled person and how it in turn conveys meaning, which is internalised by the non-disabled and the disabled public alike.

Another perspective in examining representation and identity construction of the disabled person is to investigate these images through the application of semiotic analysis. This is valuable, as it opens up a different perspective on viewing images of disability and provides an insight and appreciation into the dynamics of media. It claims that all objects are signs and when placed in a context, those signs become signifiers, that is, they produce meaning. Without a semiotic approach certain aspects (such as eye contact, clothes, or a wheelchair) may have been overlooked. With a semiotic approach the compositional elements can be evaluated to reveal their purpose and the way even the simplest techniques and objects can convey meaning.

A semiotic exploration of meaning and representation as a signifying practice is a beneficial approach to this thesis. This allows more scope to challenge and increase the awareness of the need for an alternative image to represent the concept of disability.

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