

Culture, Disability & Television

Elvira Psaila
Attard, Malta (Europe)

Abstract

Culture surrounds us in every aspect of our daily lives and has a direct effect on our values, beliefs and interactions with others (Peters 2005). Its value, however, is not simply as a record of what is the expected norm in a given society (Markus & Kityama 1991), but also as a form of expression for human thought and imagination. This paper starts with an overview of the multiple meanings of culture and the various forms in which it may be manifested through cultural representations. It then proceeds to give a brief historical background on the expected roles of people with disabilities within society and how the importance of making the 'voice' of people with disabilities heard is conveyed through art and culture, including the Disability Arts Movement. In the paper, it is also argued that although Disability Arts aim to challenge the norms in society and create change, they only reach a select and limited audience. Thus, the paper questions whether more mainstream cultural forms can be used as a tool in giving a more accurate depiction of disability to a larger audience within society. Using current, mainstream English and American television programs, this paper explores whether modern day television programmes are including positive representation of disability, or whether negative stereotypes are still more prevalent. A distinction is made between the presence of people with disabilities in reality series' and the roles ascribed to disabled characters in fictional television serials and both forms are therefore discussed separately accordingly. The paper also covers the issue of crip drag, and its significance to disability activism, but also questions the notion of what is most offensive- a non-disabled actor playing a disabled character, or a disabled actor who states that he sympathises with people suffering from more severe forms of impairment. In conclusion, I've noted that although there is an increase in the presence of people with disabilities in everyday mainstream television, they are still saturated with stereotypes, and only a higher number of people with disabilities in front of and behind the camera can use television as a powerful medium in projecting a positive portrayal.

Keywords:

Disability, culture, television, TV, crip, crip drag, activism, disabled character, mainstream, positive portrayal

Correspondence Information:

Ms Elvira Psaila
elvira.spiteri@gmail.com

Introduction

Culture surrounds us in every aspect of our daily lives and has a direct effect on our values, beliefs and interactions with others (Peters 2005). It is present in various mediums and its presence and worth may only be felt when we are presented with alternatives to what we know as the norm.

This paper starts by giving an overview of what culture means and represents, then proceeds to discuss the effect of culture in the way society views people with disabilities, and how through the use of disability arts and culture, these norms are being challenged. The essay then continues by discussing the representation of people with disabilities in English and American television.

1. Culture

There is no one definition that encompasses the full meaning and complexity of culture. Culture is multi-faceted and has multiple and different meanings in various contexts (Browne 2006). However, many academics agree on the notion that

‘Culture is a set of shared meanings that make it possible for members of a group to interpret and act upon their environment’

(Schein 1984, pp3).

Thus, although culture can be unique to different societies, it determines and influences the attitudes, values and ideas of the individuals and their roles within that community (Barnes 2008 & Markus & Kityama 1991). Although we are all influenced by our culture, it is we, everyday communicators and academics, who give meaning to today’s culture (Baldwin, Faulkner & Hecht 2008). This highlights the fact that culture is flexible, can change and is intrinsic to human nature.

Culture therefore, is not simply a record of how one should live within a given society or what behavior is expected in various circumstances (Markus & Kityama 1991), but is also a form of expression for human thought and imagination. Hence, it embodies what has happened in the past, what is happening in the present, what can happen in the future and what man dreams of. This can be expressed through various mediums, ranging from everyday practices, spoken word, literature, art and dance amongst others. With the increase in technological advances, cultural values and representations have found new windows in which they can be seen, including television, radio and the Internet (Jenkins 2013). The interpretation of the meaning and messages these different media are projecting, are again intertwined with the cultural values of the individual and the society to which they are being presented. It is these cultural values which determine how we interpret the same piece of work, seeing it as political, funny, sad or outrageous, or in any other possible emotion evoked (Jenkins 2013).

The different ways in which culture can be expressed and manifested can be divided into two main areas- high or elite culture and mass or popular culture (Barnes 2008 & Browne 2006). High culture includes theatre, classical novels and classical music, whereas mass culture includes television, magazines and newspapers. These areas of culture and cultural expression have caused a rift between academics with those embracing the elite form of cultural expression considering popular culture as having no significant value and the esthetic qualities equal to that of 'a brick in the street' (Brown 2006, Gass 1968). What one must not forget however is that what today is considered of elite cultural value was intended for the general population when originally produced (Browne 2006), as was the work of William Shakespeare. Also, high culture, as implied by the name itself, is generally only accessible to an elite group of people, unlike popular culture which is available and accessible to a wider audience. Every medium, particularly those of popular culture, are therefore tools that reflect and convey expected social norms and help shape one's own identity (Markus & Kityama 1991).

2. Culture & Disability

As discussed, culture plays an important role in determining the expected role of various members of society. Since early civilization, distinct roles have been assigned to different members of society (Devenney 2004). The dominant role belonged to the able-bodied, Intellectually-gifted male and it included providing food and shelter for his family, together with the responsibility of deciding both for his family and within general society (Lauzen, Dozier & Horan 2008, Lupetow, Garovich-Szabo & Lupetow 2001, Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin 1999). The role of the woman was in the home, caring for children and ensuring all her husband's needs were catered for (Lauzen, Dozier & Horan 2008, Lupetow, Garovich-Szabo & Lupetow 2001, & Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin 1999). People with disabilities, irrespective of their gender, had little or no value within society and were seen as outcasts and were either cared for by their family or left out to die (Devenney 2004 & Barnes 1997). Christianity and the Church offered another perspective- that people with disabilities are in need of charity from all members of society and the notion of cure through divine intervention and retribution of sin. (Devenney 2004). With advances in medicine, the idea that people with disabilities need to be cured and institutionalized emerged.

It was not until the emergence of the Social Model of Disability by UPIAS in the 1970s that such attitudes and values were questioned. The Social Model stated that it was barriers created by society that cause disability rather than the impairment itself (UPIAS 1975). This leads one to question the role culture plays in creating disability and whether it can be stated that it is culture itself that defines disability (Coleridge 2000). It has also been stated that not only is culture an occasion for disability, but that it also 'actively organizes ways for people to be disabled' (McDermott & Varenne 1996). This, compounded by the fact that culture

is not determined by biology but learned through life experience (Coleridge 2000, & Schein 1984), reinforces the idea that our attitudes and representations of people with disabilities are dependent on the society which we live in, and in what we consider as normative or deviant (Armer 2004). This can also be observed in the way the same impairment has a different level of significance and thus leads to a higher or lower degree of disability in different societies.

This learned view of what role is expected from people with disabilities, and the expected attitudes towards them from non-disabled people is also reflected in the various forms of cultural representations, both in art forms partaking to high culture and in media of popular culture. These portrayals, therefore often depict people with disabilities in a negative way stereotypes that Barnes (1991) lists as pitiable and pathetic, an object of curiosity or violence, sinister and evil, the supercripple, as an atmosphere, as laughable, his/her own worst enemy, a burden, as non-sexual and as unable to participate in everyday life. Challenging these depictions, and showing a truer, more realistic view of the lives, expression and capabilities of people with disabilities, is more difficult to achieve as the majority of artists, writers and creators of mainstream cultural representations are non-disabled. Their representations of people with disabilities are therefore seldom based on real, lived experience of disability, but are a reflection of the misconceptions and ideas of superiority and of otherness present in society (Shakespeare, 1994). It is only now, with the 'newer' models of disability, including the Social Model and the Affirmative Model of disability (Swain & French 2000), and the increase in awareness of disability politics that the voice of people with disabilities, both as artists and creators themselves and as audience are being acknowledged.

3. Disability Culture & Arts

The need to make voices heard and to establish the right to show and express emotions and artistic capabilities pushed people with disabilities to create a movement for disability culture and arts (Barnes, 2008). The fact that people with disabilities were and still are highly under represented and misrepresented in mainstream culture continued to reinforce the need for a space where people with disabilities could freely express and identify themselves.(Finkelstein 1987, & Barnes 2008). Thus, what sets apart disability art and culture from the mainstream forms, is that it is heavily influenced by personal and disability politics (Sutherland 2006). One of the central aims of Disability Arts is therefore to challenge the expected norms and to help create and facilitate the changes required in society (Vasey 2000). Still, disability art does not fit into one specific, rigid definition but is a collective space that incorporates different mediums and approaches by people with different forms of disability (Sutherland 2006).

Although disability art aims to create change within society, it still raises a number of questions and issues. First and foremost, it can be argued that the

creation of a movement aimed specifically for disability artists (using any form of art or medium) is a form of segregation. This segregation may mean that the message which is trying to be put across is being restricted to a smaller audience, an audience which probably is already familiar with the issues in disability politics and may not be accessible to the general population in which the required change needs to occur. Another issue which such a movement raises, is whether artists (of various disciplines) having a disability involved in mainstream cultural manifestations and industries offer a less valuable opportunity for change within society. Is their work of less value than that of those involved specifically in disability arts and culture? And is it possible for mainstream cultural forms to pass on a positive representation of disability, or is this solely confined to the disability arts arena? It is with these questions in mind that I chose to explore the representations, values and opportunities for change within society of and for people with disabilities in television.

4. Television

Television is an important and powerful tool for a wide range of people, of different ages and social standings, to access culture (Wilde 2007). In Malta, 77.1% of the population aged from 16 years up, watch at least half an hour of television every day (NSO 2011), with drama serials being the preferred form of programs (NSO 2011). Importantly, nowadays, television series are also accessible globally over the Internet, and are therefore reaching an even larger audience, all from the comfort of one's home, or even on the move through the use of laptops, tablets and smartphones. Locally, according to a survey by the NSO (2011), over 70% of the population aged over 16, has access to the Internet. 55.6% of which claim that they use the Internet for leisure purposes, including watching foreign television series online (NSO 2011).

Television is of particular relevance to people with disabilities for a number of reasons. Studies have shown that due to barriers in accessing other forms of leisure, persons with disability tend to name more solitary activities as a source of leisure, such as watching television (Wilde 2007 & Gay 2009). Thus, the way in which people with disabilities are portrayed in television series may have a direct influence on the person with disability's identity-formation, attitudes towards self and towards others within the community (Wilde 2007). The portrayals of persons with disability, also influences the attitudes of non-disabled persons watching, particularly those who do not have a direct, first-hand experience of disability. It has been shown that persons tend to construct an idea of what disability is, and the implications of certain impairments, on characters they have seen on television (Wilde 2007), so for example, if a television series depicts a person with Asperger's syndrome as being a mathematical genius, persons who have never met someone with Asperger's tend to assume that all persons having Asperger's are mathematical geniuses. Still, television can be an important medium to convey positive depictions of people with disabilities, as will be

discussed in further detail, as slowly a shift from showing people with disabilities only in expected stereotypical roles or in charity telethons, is emerging through the various forms of television programs.

5.1 Reality and Fictional Series

Television programs can take on various formats, including talk shows, documentaries, and programs on current affairs, reality shows and series aimed solely for entertainment purposes, such as sitcoms, comedies and drama serials. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on two main types of programs - reality series and fictional series (mixture of drama and sitcoms) that are being aired currently, as according to statistics these are the most commonly followed television programs (NSO 2011). Cartoon series have not been discussed in this essay as they can be considered as a separate cultural form.

5.1.1 Reality Series

Reality series have taken television by storm in recent years, and they do not only cover the lives of a group of people living together or undergoing challenges, but have branched out to show the reality of living in different minority groups, in various living conditions and even living with a variety of medical conditions (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2007). As reality shows target real life issues, they can be used to challenge misconceptions within society, and are nowadays being used by people with disabilities for this purpose. A number of reality shows, as will be discussed, are either including, or, revolving around people with disabilities and are trying to portray a more positive image of disability. One must also note that a number of these programs are shown locally on foreign TV stations provided by local television service providers, and therefore their message is also reaching the Maltese audience. But how are such shows challenging the stereotypes listed by Barnes (1991)?

As stated, reality series aim to show the lived reality, in this case of living with a disability. Some reality shows are thus aimed at showing that people with disabilities are capable of participating in all aspects of everyday life, and that they are not simply 'an atmosphere' (Barnes 1991) or passive beings in society. Two such shows are 'Little People, Big World' and 'Push Girls'. Both programs follow the daily lives, of the protagonists, a family where the parents and one of four children have dwarfism in the former, and four women with acquired physical impairments in the latter, and show that they are all capable of being independent and autonomous, have relationships and aspirations for their future (McKay 2013). Thus, they show that people with disabilities have the same goals as anyone else and actively challenges the notion that they are a burden on their families or that they are bitter, evil or sinister (IMDb 2014, Adelson 2006). Both programs have garnered positive feedback from both disabled and non-disabled audiences, with 'Little People, Big World' being compared to the 'Cosby Show'

and its effect in challenging Afro-American stereotypes (Adelson 2006) and 'Push Girls' receiving a Critic's Choice Award for Best Reality Show in 2013 (IMDb 2014). My personal criticism, particularly of 'Little People, Big World' is that the family is extremely well-off, and therefore the opportunities and resources available to them are not really available to the majority, and thus can sometimes be unrealistic. It can, on the other hand, serve as an inspiration for people with disabilities by showing that one can still follow the American dream of building a career and business and be financially stable.

Another stereotype which the above shows actively challenge is the belief that persons with disability are asexual (Barnes 1991) and should not be involved in intimate relationships, and programs such 'The Undateables' and 'Sex on Wheels' focus specifically on this theme and in trying to change society's attitude in this regard. This is achieved in a number of ways, particularly in 'The Undateables', where people with disabilities (physical, sensory, mental illness or syndromes such as Tourette's) are matched with non-disabled people, and the dates they organize are the same as any between two non-disabled adults. Singletons with intellectual disability are matched with other singles with intellectual disability, and although a chaperone is present on the date, they are not on the same table as them. What is also very positive in this program is that the parents of the singles with intellectual disability are also often interviewed, and they are all very supportive of the dating and the pursuit of relationships, and this can also serve to pass on a message to other parents having children with disability. 'Sex on Wheels', as the name suggests, is much more sexually explicit and strongly shows people with disabilities as sexual beings, that are not asexual, and that have the same desires, needs and fantasies as non-disabled adults (Chapman 2013, Gilbert 2013). Both programs have been considered as successful in what they are trying to convey by disabled critics, but have received mixed reviews from the non-disabled audience. My concern with such programs is as to what is generating the interest, particularly from the reviews by non-disabled audience who mention words such as 'freak show', 'sad' and 'uncomfortable to watch' (IMDb 2014). People with disabilities are seeking to push the boundaries of what is norm, but is this the same reason such programs are popular with the non-disabled audience? Or is it possible that such programs are popular with non-disabled persons because of curiosity? There is therefore the risk that these programs have become the present day freak shows, which is the complete opposite of what the participants in these programs are trying to achieve.

People with disabilities are not only making their presence felt on the television screen through programs dedicated solely to their issues. An increasing number of persons with disability are participating in competition-format mainstream reality shows, such as 'X-factor', 'Masterchef', and the 'The Glee Project', 'Dancing on Ice' and 'Celebrity Apprentice' and 'American Idol' (Justin 2011, Sjunneson-Henry 2012). Here, persons with disability are affirming themselves as equal to,

or better, in specific abilities - the disability is not the reason why they are on television. Unfortunately, there is still a tendency for the production team to sensationalize their story and highlight the disability, thus creating feelings of admiration and/or pity from the audience. Certain shows may also need to adapt to level the competition, and two shows which did that without compromising the person with disability's integrity and abilities were 'Masterchef' and 'The Glee Project', where an aide was provided to help the visually impaired chef in finding ingredients from the pantry, and by providing sheet music in Braille and adapting the way dance is taught for the visually-impaired singer/dancer in the shows respectively (Sjunneson-Henry 2012).

Another show which featured a contestant with disability was 'America's Next Top Model', where Amanda Swafford (a model with visual impairment) placed third, showing that beauty is not limited to the non-disabled. Of note, is that currently a similar showing is running in Britain, with the difference that all the models competing have some form of impairment. This show aims to challenge the notion of what being beautiful means, and what the ideal body form should look like (O'Halloran, 2013), but, can such a show imply that such models cannot participate with other non-disabled models? This might imply that Amanda's success is partially due to the fact that her impairment is not apparent on camera and on the printed photograph. Still, 'Britain's Missing Top Model' has found positive backing from the disabled audience and has served to bring out the misconceptions and ignorance towards disability present in the fashion world (O'Halloran, 2013). What this leads me to question, is whether there is one balanced formula for reality shows to give a real picture of life and the abilities of people with disabilities. Programs composed of, or revolving around persons with disability only may generate an audience due to curiosity, for the 'freak' factor and may unintentionally stir negative feelings or perceptions (Shakespeare 1994). On the other hand, participation in inclusive shows, tend to sensationalize the stories of the disabled contestants and create feelings of pity or admiration (the supercripple effect). Still, the fact that real people with disabilities are themselves willing to be part of this television phenomenon is a step forward, but is this step being lost in the way people with disabilities are depicted in fictional series?

5.1.2 Fictional Series

Whereas reality series can directly claim that their intention is to break specific stereotypical norms (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2007), and feature actual people with disabilities, fictional series provide a more complex dimension in their role in changing attitudes and norms present in society. The success of fictional series lies in their ability to maintain the audience's interest in the storyline and plot, and through the creation of characters capable to evoking a wide-range of emotions in the viewers. If an attempt is made to challenge the norms in society, it is hidden in the plot and therefore reaches the audience in an indirect manner

through the storyline given to characters with disability and the attitudes of the other characters towards them.

Although still under represented, an increasing number of series are including disabled characters, some of which are central characters. Still, this does not mean that they are being represented positively or are being useful in changing norms, as characters with disability are often less dynamic and have a limited role in comparison to the non-disabled characters (Wilde, 2007). One of the forefront series that have put a spotlight on disability, but is very controversial in the disability arena (Tatum, 2013) is 'Glee', where two of the main characters have a disability and a number of other characters with disability feature in a few episodes. What is interesting is that these characters have been received very differently by the disabled and non-disabled viewers. Non-disabled viewers have applauded 'Glee' for not shying away from including characters with disability and for showing Artie, who has a physical disability and is a wheelchair user, as equal to the other Glee club members. The disabled viewers, however, feel that the character of Artie is saturated with disability stereotypes and is passing on a negative message on what it is like for a teenager with a disability in real life (Sheppard 2011, Gerber 2013, Tatum 2013). This criticism is fuelled further, by the fact that the actor does not have a disability in real life. The other main character, Becky Jackson, has Down syndrome, and is played by Lauren Potter who has the same disability in real life. In this case, her character caused uproar due to the fact that her storyline does not show her in the way persons with Down syndrome are usually portrayed. In one episode, for example, she takes a gun to school and accidentally fires it. This episode was described by members of the Down Syndrome Association in America as 'disgraceful', 'seriously lame' and as 'setting Down syndrome awareness back light years' (Diament 2013). These comments were highly criticized by the actress' mother, who stated that if her daughter's character is to be equally included in the plot, she deserves these kinds of storylines (Sinkhom, as cited in Diament 2013). So can characters with disability pass a universally positive message in such programs, as, if portrayed in the stereotypical norm they are under fire from disability critics, and if not they are criticized by other groups in the audience?

Some series have managed to create characters that give a real and positive representation of a person with disability, with the right attitude from the surrounding characters, thus showing what attitudes society should embrace. These series include 'Breaking Bad', 'C.S.I.', 'The L Word' and 'The Big Bang Theory'. Of note, is that all the actors playing the roles having a disability, bar 'The Big Bang Theory', have the same disability in real life. One might therefore suggest that the lived experience of disability may have translated onto the character, and possibly allow the creators and writers if non-disabled, to have a better understanding that people with disabilities can be equal to their non-disabled counterparts, and hence incorporate this in their work. Also of note, is that the character of Sheldon Cooper, in 'The Big Bang Theory' has never been

said to have a disability by the writers or the actor of the show. However viewers tend to agree that he displays all the characteristics of an individual having Asperger's syndrome, and, both disabled and non-disabled viewers conclude that this character, and the approach of his friends,

'shows us a good example of living with and being around people with Asperger's Syndrome. It shows both the fun side and the difficult side of being with individuals with AS'

(Understanding & Embracing Diversity 2012).

Thus it seems that a possible unintentional portrayal was one of the most positive (Cooke 2011). On a personal review of a number of fictional series, there also seems to be difference in the way different disabilities are portrayed. Although one cannot generalize, it seems that characters with physical impairments are those mostly tied to negative stereotypes and interpretation by non-disabled actors, with writers and creators seemingly more ready to break away from the norm with other forms of impairment.

5.2 Crip drag

Apart from stereotypical representations, the most controversial aspect of fictional series is having non-disabled actors interpret the roles of characters with disability. Such practice is considered to be as offensive as blackface (Gilman 2013, Kociemba 2010) by disability activists, as a non-disabled person can never fully understand what the reality of being a person with disability really entails, and is therefore referred to as crip drag. Besides providing ground for further misrepresentations, crip drag is also denying opportunities in the acting industry for disabled actors (Kociemba 2010), where creators are claiming that the reason why roles are being given to non-disabled actors is that none of the disabled actors, having the same disability as the character, who audition meet all of the criteria the character requires. One such case was the role of Artie Abrams in 'Glee', which was given to a non-disabled actor on the premise that none of the disabled actors who audition had the necessary wheelchair dancing skills and charisma (Gerber 2012). What is interesting and ironic is that this non-disabled actor has a disabled stunt double. So was he really the best choice for the part?

A TV series which clearly showed that disabled actors are as capable as non-disabled actors was 'Cast Offs', a parody of the reality show 'Survivor', where all the actors had a variety of disabilities (Can-do-Ability 2013). Another series considered as giving a positive message both through the storyline and through the use of a disabled actor to interpret a disabled character is 'Breaking Bad'. However, R.J. Mitte, the actor who plays Walter White Jr, in this series, despite having cerebral palsy himself, in an interview claimed that he felt

'bad for people in wheelchairs and people who have to use crutches. I hate being immobile'

(Mitte 2013).

Hence, I ask what is most offensive - a non-disabled actor who interprets the character with a level of respect, despite claims of *crip drag*, or, a disabled actor who claims that he pities persons with possibly more severe forms of disability? The answer, in my opinion, is up for debate, and dependent on a number of factors, including the storyline attached to the character in question.

6. Conclusion

As discussed, culture has a multitude of meanings, but, besides shaping our identity and everyday lives, it directly influences our attitudes towards other members of society. Television, with its widespread access and the variety of formats programs can take, can be instrumental in creating change in society. I started the discussion on the use of television in the disability arena by questioning its ability to provide a voice strong enough to create the necessary change and bring disability issues at the forefront of everyday access to cultural representations. Although steps are being made in the right direction, I believe, that there is still a need for a larger presence by people with disabilities in front of and behind the camera, as currently representations are still saturated with stereotypes. This is possibly most evident by the fact that, whereas persons with disability are seeking to affirm themselves in shows aimed at breaking away from expected norms, the non-disabled audience tends to react better to images of disability that reinforce these stereotypes. This is also apparent in the way non-disabled actors are often chosen to portray characters with disability, but disabled actors are never considered in the interpretation of characters which were written as able-bodied (Yaeger as cited in Gilman 2013), showing that people with disabilities are still largely considered as Others within society and unable to fulfill all required roles. Keeping in mind that 'whoever tells the best story shapes culture' (McManus 2014), all those involved in the television industry must aim to send a message that influences culture, rather than letting culture influence their message (Huckabee 2011), as only by showing an increasing number of positive portrayals can such a powerful medium achieve its full possibility in breaking away from current negative stereotypes and create positive change.

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