

***Disability and Popular Culture: Focusing Passion, Creating Community and Expressing Defiance* by Katie Ellis. Fanham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015, 201 pp. ISBN 978-1-47-241178-5 (HBK)**

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Popular culture is an influential cultural phenomenon that displays how people are represented in society and how people express themselves. From a disability studies perspective, popular culture is a forum for where the societal representation and response of disability can be examined. *Disability and Popular Culture* explores this and it is a great resource for readers who are either experienced or beginners to disability and popular culture scholarship. Katie Ellis is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Internet Studies at Curtin University in Australia and has published several previous works on disability and media, such as the *Disability and New Media* series and *Disability Diversity: The Social Construction of Disability in 1990s Australian National Cinema*, just to name a few. Her vast experience in researching disability and popular culture makes this book an accessible work and makes examining popular culture, as proclaimed by Ellis, a “pleasurable” experience.

In *Disability and Popular Culture: Focusing Passion, Creating Community and Expressing Defiance*, Ellis analyzes from both a social and cultural model lens selected items of popular culture to explore how disability is represented and how popular culture can be a platform for social change. The items Ellis researches are the following: toys, film, television, sports, advertising, and music videos.

Ellis begins her analysis of popular culture by examining children’s toys. These toys range from Barbie to G.I. Joe action figures. Throughout the chapter, Ellis analyzes

where disability toys were present, absent, and how their presence and/or absence was represented. Ellis also outlines for the reader the transition of disability toys from a medical and pediatric setting to popular culture. The importance of disability toys is not only their physical presence or absence, but what their presence signifies ideologically – what messages adults want and choose to give to their children through toys will impact how children will associate with disability. Ellis further explores how children's toys have associated transitory and concrete values (Nachbar and Lause, 1992) and the gender politics behind these values. When popular culture has transitory values the meaning and value given to these items are only objects of their time, whereas when items of popular culture have concrete values their meaning and ideological purpose transcends the period of time in which they were created.

Ellis then explores through critical disability studies scholarship how beauty, fashion and body image are culturally constructed for people with disabilities. Ellis begins this analysis by unpacking the beauty myth in relation to normality and by identifying where disability fits in this assessment. Furthering her analysis, Ellis studies the politics of staring in relation to gender, ability and sexuality. She concludes her assessment by being critical yet optimistic that media campaigns which seek inclusivity and different interpretations of beauty could be forums for “cultural disablement.”

Thirdly, Ellis uses film analysis to critically examine the representations of disability in science fiction cinema, specifically in *Gattacca* and *Avatar*. To begin her discussion, Ellis provides a brief overview of film analysis methodology and stereotypes from a

social-realist perspective. Specifically, she discusses Marten Norden's (1994) cinema stereotype of isolation for disabled characters by using Maggie's representation in *Million Dollar Baby*. Examining the politics of body and "the problem body," Ellis situates the representation of disability into science fiction by using the social and cultural models of disability. Ellis concludes her film analysis by arguing that the science fiction genre is providing an overall positive predictor of what technology advancement and the information age will provide for the future for people with disabilities in society. Ellen follows-up her film analysis by showing how popular television shows (*Friday Night Lights* and *Push Girls*) can showcase disability characters who have both positive and subversive effects through the examination of characters with physical impairments in exclusionary settings and by reviewing issues of community and sexuality in television shows.

In chapter 6, Ellis investigates disability in popular music videos from a music disability studies perspective by studying freak shows and using Lady Gaga's popular music and public persona as examples of otherness and anti-popular culture in the music industry. Refreshingly, Ellis proceeds with her analysis by using fan and anti-fan criticism, looking at Facebook and Twitter platforms – much like in her previous chapter on popular television shows. Ellis also acknowledges in her investigation many musicians who identify as being disabled and their impact in music disability scholarship.

Ellis then focusses on disability and popular sport, specifically the Paralympic games, to examine commercialization and the "construction of ability." By researching the "supercrip" and disabled athletes who participate with able-bodied athletes, Ellis

concludes that sports construct the notion of ability and struggle, showing that both disabled and able-bodied athletes have to fall below or exceed definitions of ability. Ellis continues her analysis by examining inspiration porn in her final chapter. By examining disability in new popular media, such as disability blogging and participation in social media campaigns, Ellis cautiously concludes that these avenues are an effective means for social change.

Ellis provided a full critical analysis of disability and popular culture by not differentiating or solely looking at stark positive and negative representations of disability. Instead, she analyzes producerly texts of disability. Producerly texts can be “considered simultaneously disabling and enabling” (p. 11), depending on their context. The media’s audience plays a large role in this aforementioned context. Therefore, Ellis treats audience members as active participants in their experience. The audience does not unknowingly consume the messages these cultural producers feed to them. Rather, their preconceived notions of disability will be played upon by the media and this will affect the overall effect of these media messages. The “subjects” of the media also have an active role in their portrayal.

Ellis mentions throughout her book how people with disabilities are able to express their own lived experiences and perspectives pertaining to media by using online platforms, which can affect how the media will be received. She is also critical when examining media and avoids portraying the representations of disability in popular culture as a linear and progressive path. Instead, Ellis approaches the selected media as cultural

remnants of their time that have an influential past which determine how they take shape in their present day.

Throughout her book, Ellis is cautiously optimistic of the representations of disability in the above-mentioned products of popular culture. While Ellis examines a diverse sample of popular cultural tokens, unfortunately, this variety makes the overall analysis segmented and detached. Ellis also uses several methodologies and various disability scholar's arguments and approaches within different chapters of her book, which may confuse the reader as to what her own position and opinion are concerning disability and normalcy. Overall, from a social and cultural framework, Ellis effectively shows, with numerous examples, how the presence of disability in popular culture is influential.

References

- Nachbar, J., and Lause, K. (1992). *Popular Culture: An Introductory text*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Norden, M. (1994). *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.