

## Where Have You Gone, Stephen Dwoskin? On Disability Film

Lawrence Carter-Long

Born and raised in New York, avant-garde film director Stephen Dwoskin died of heart failure in 2012 at the age of seventy-three in London, his adopted home. He'd contracted polio during the 1948 epidemic at age nine. Dwoskin, who used crutches and later a wheelchair, never hid the effects or the ever-changing reality of living with polio in his films. In fact, he seemed to revel in it. His life and work were challenging, transgressive, and unpredictable. National Film Theatre curator Allan T. Sutherland once wrote of Dwoskin's *Behindert* (*Hindered*, 1974) that the film's "honesty, accuracy of observation and freedom from oppressive stereotypes of disability demonstrate amply the importance of speaking for ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

Sutherland's assessment could have been written today. Sadly, not much progress has been made in the four decades since Dwoskin broke the mold. Too often, movies with disabled characters or disability themes remain predictably sappy, safe, or sentimental at best. And they are almost never directed, written by, or produced, nor do they often even feature, actual disabled people.

Like Dwoskin's films, any manifesto on cinema and disability requires a deep dive into the prejudices, taboos, and unexamined assumptions that have influenced how concepts about disability have been perceived, and depicted, on film.

Whenever possible, embrace these notions.

When necessary, destroy them.

Our intentions are as simple as they are profound: blaze a bold, new, more accurate, interesting, accessible, and inclusive way forward.

Once upon a time, disability was just a diagnosis. That's all you got. Something to be fixed, cured, cut out, or gotten rid of. Through time, the definition has evolved to mean much more. Nearly three decades after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, ask anyone with a disability who politically, culturally, or artistically embraces the rebellious act of being disabled what the word means to her or him, and you'll most likely hear



The director Stephen Dwoskin, with crutches and camera.

back words like "community," "constituency," and "identity." No handkerchief necessary. No heroism required. By any definition, that's progress. But if we are to expand deeper meaning beyond the flock, these changes must be reflected in the movies we make, the films we watch, how we watch those movies, and perhaps most importantly, who gets to make them.

With that in mind, then, we submit these initial guiding principles.

### Good Intentions Aren't Enough

Borrowed from African AIDS activists, who likely got some version of it from the Poles, who adopted a similar concept in the 1500s, "Nothing about us without us" is a phrase disability rights advocates have literally rallied around since the 1990s. We did this, in part, to push back against the inclination of parents, social workers, medical professionals, and pretty much everyone else to patronize and infantilize us by making decisions about our lives without our input or consent.

This largely unexamined habit exploded on-screen and in society when Ben Stiller's satire *Tropic Thunder* was released in 2008. Unlike the war-veterans filmmakers dutifully consulted (who rejected the original concept of actors getting PTSD while on a film shoot), or the African-American actors who served to call out Robert Downey Jr.'s satirical, ridiculous turn as a white actor who goes to extremes to become a black character during the same shoot on-screen as part of the plot, no one connected with *Thunder* thought to

ask a single disabled person, advocacy group, or audience about its depiction of the intellectually disabled Simple Jack character—until *after* the film was released. Predictably, real-life disabled people rebelled, flexing our political power in protest over the movie’s “satirization without representation” approach to disability. Let this be a lesson. Talk to us before filming. And not just the disabled person you know, please. Rather, ask someone versed in cinema and history, ideally both, and in the stakes and consequences of getting it wrong. The bottom line? “About us without us” is old hat. Ignore this at your peril.

### Do Disability Differently

Take a fucking chance. While feel-good flicks like *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) safely get the lion’s share of mainstream attention, dare to dive into the back catalog of disability cinema and you’ll find a sassy, often subversive cinematic underground more likely to transcend the too-often treacly, cookie-cutter, paint-by-numbers tragic/heroic binary that made Forrest run. From the dawn of cinema, movies like *The Invalid’s Adventure* (1907), *The Thieving Hand* (J. Stuart Blackton, 1908), and *The Electrified Humpback* (Lux, 1909) delighted in their differences. Decades later, in 1977, amputee Jeanne Silver and director Alex deRenzy carried on this tradition in the classic skin flick *Long Jeanne Silver*.

Sadly, perhaps predictably, a quest for respectability and an impulse toward earnestness have dampened the fun ever since. Obscure, irreverent flicks like *Mr. No Legs* (Ricou Browning, 1978), *Tian can di que* (*The Crippled Masters*, Chi Lo/Joe Law, 1979), *Deafula* (Peter Wolf/Peter Wechsberg, 1975)—even a Weng Weng retrospective or Álex de la Iglesia’s gleefully subversive *Acción mutante* (*Mutant Action*, 1993)—are a lot more interesting (and fun) than subjecting yourself to Andrew Garfield in *Breathe* (Andy Serkis, 2017). From grind house to art house, it is a celluloid sin that there has been only one film where the sympathetic protagonist is willing to commit justifiable homicide to get his or her very own wheelchair in order to hang with the cool disabled kids: Marco Ferreri’s dark comedy *El cochecito* (*The Little Coach*, 1960). Expand your horizons. Go deeper. Demand more. The only thing you have to lose is the same story we’ve seen a hundred times before.

### No More Poseurs

Any nondisabled people who pretend to be us—especially during awards season—should be swiftly, painfully initiated

into the actual fold. In the spirit of “Nothing about us without us,” real, live disabled people, accomplices, and coconspirators can do our part by taking matters into our own hands. As Philippe Petit skillfully exploited in his celebrated stroll between New York City’s Twin Towers in 1974, as brought to life for moviegoers in *Man on Wire* (James Marsh, 2008), or in narrative films like *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), nobody suspects a cripple. What with the Trump administration doing everything it can to dismantle Medicaid, *60 Minutes*’ downside-up reporting on the Americans with Disabilities Act, and heavyweights like Al Pacino and Alec Baldwin duking it out for the honors in the “best caricature of disability on film” awards, this may not be true forever. While we can, let’s use it to our advantage.

### Stop Killing Us

By my count, since 1915, approximately thirty-five films have featured disabled characters practically begging nondisabled people to kill them or let them die. Contrary to most movie marketing, reinforcing existing stereotypes about disabled lives not being worth living isn’t romantic, heroic, or compassionate. After seven decades, that oft-traveled terrain is the definition of hackneyed. Worse yet, it’s lazy. And historically speaking, more than a little dangerous. Decades of movie history have—sometimes intentionally, sometimes not—dehumanized disabled people, most notably in the Nazi era. Doesn’t much matter. The effect is the same. The deliberate, explicit goal of the propaganda film *Ich Klage An* (*I Accuse*, Wolfgang Liebeneiner, 1941) was to make the killing of disabled people more palpable to the German public. (Spoiler alert: it worked.)

Sadly, seventy years later, with movies like *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004) and *Me Before You* (Thea Sharrock, 2016), Hollywood is doing the same thing for profit. Pity isn’t progress. Want to break new ground? Introduce movie audiences to the story of the fed-up disabled protesters who occupied FDR’s (himself a wheelchair user because of polio) Work Progress Administration in 1935, during the Great Depression, to fight job discrimination, or the bad asses who in 1977 masterminded the longest occupation of a federal building in the history of the United States.

As protests in the U.S. Congress over proposed cuts to lifesaving supports and services in recent years have shown, real-life examples of heroines both in history and in the present day abound. Most disabled people aren’t trying to make it easier for people to kill us off; there’s quite enough of that

going on already, thanks. Most of us are fighting to live. Do something truly original. Tell those stories instead.

### **And While You're at It, Stop Trying to Cure Us**

When cinema can't kill us, it would just as likely seek to cure us, because people demanding wheelchair ramps, braille menus, and sign-language interpreters are largely considered an inconvenience by people who don't yet need those things. Disabled people also serve as reminders that we all, someday, might have to pester, sue, and protest to get those things for ourselves, too. And that's scary: disability turns normal, average, everyday, garden-variety, able-bodied folks into second-class citizens.

Both mainstream Hollywood and art-house cinema have leaned heavily on the cure narrative, whether it is because most nondisabled people lack the imagination to conceive of anything else or because in terms of storyline disabled people usually don't exist on our own terms; rather, we tend to serve as props in stories designed to make nondisabled people feel better about themselves. But beware, dear viewer: inspiration is more than a warm, fuzzy feeling. In order for it to mean something, in order to matter, inspiration compels a person to change something, to roll up one's sleeves and make an actual difference. No one wants to be inspirational by default—including if not, especially—disabled people.

From this point forward, anyone who waxes poetic about feeling inspired by disabled people must be willing to perspire. That means put in some actual work to improve on the status quo. No more free passes, folks. Inspiration must accompany a commitment to confronting the in-real-life stigma born from antiquated, reprehensible depictions of disability. And inspiration to do things differently. New rule: Before blithely tossing around words like “inspiration,” make sure you're up for what its use requires.

Not inclined to reinvent the wheel? Nicola Griffith offers a genre-busting template filmmakers can adopt in her recent article “Rewriting the Old Disability Script” by evoking the test for disability in fiction put forth by activist and writer Kenny Fries.<sup>2</sup> Based on the Bechdel test (which asks whether a work of fiction or drama features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man), the Fries test asks: “Does a work have more than one disabled character? Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character? Is the character's disability not eradicated either by

curing or killing?” Proactively counterbalancing lazy disability tropes and stereotypes is needed just as much in film.

### **Authenticity (Or Something Like It)**

Unlike in real life, when it comes to cinema, nearly all people with disabilities are somehow independently wealthy. Kristen Lopez, film critic and producer of the feminist film podcast *Citizen Dame*, takes issue with this pernicious, persistent celluloid fantasy: “Whether it's *Me Before You* or *The Upside*, a forthcoming Hollywood remake of the French film *Intouchables* [*The Intouchables*, Olivier Nakache and Éric Tolédano, 2011]”—and unlike real life—“the issue disabled characters have to face in these films isn't monetary. We don't see them struggle with how they're going to pay for health care or medications. In *Me Before You* the man lives in a castle and his only problem is he can't ride a boat anymore.”<sup>3</sup> How about using a few of those millions to bankroll equal access, pal!

Lopez adds:

Many people with disabilities live on severely restricted incomes. . . . They can't marry, have children, work, or buy a car without risking their already meager earnings or benefits being reduced or canceled entirely. Full disclosure: I live on nine hundred dollars a month. Guess my castle and unlimited travel budget got traded in for my wheelchair. Story lines like these perpetuate the belief that people with disabilities are unnecessarily bitter or don't have “real” problems. Lastly, most disability narratives are about white dudes. Audiences expect white men to have a lot of money—not women, or minorities. Underlies a double or triple prejudice that also explains why we don't see an abundance of disabled narratives (stereotypical or otherwise) about women or people of color. Fair warning: the next time you ask me where my millions are because you saw it in a movie about some guy who uses a wheelchair, prepare to get punched.<sup>4</sup>

As a white dude—I enthusiastically, unapologetically concur.

### **Make Access a Priority, Like Color Correction, or Catering**

Cheryl Green, MFA, MS, disabled filmmaker, audio producer, member/owner at New Day Films, and exterminator of inaccessible content whose audio-recorded blog posts, transcribed podcasts, captioned and (often) audio-described films, rants, and raves at WhoAmIToStopIt.com, has stressed that no manifesto about disability in film would be

complete without manifesting equal access. She starts with a history lesson:

Rebroadcasts of Julia Child's *The French Chef* introduced closed captioning to U.S. audiences in 1972. ABC News quickly followed suit. Neither of these programs is known for creating disability-centered or deaf content. As we inch into 2019, unless you are a major streaming site that has been sued by viewers for inaccessibility (we're pointing at you, Netflix!), or a social media outlet that just discovered that hearing audiences watch your videos longer when you provide captions, I've been hard-pressed to find content creators who want to caption their films. Creators say, "It is too expensive!" Sound sweetening and color correction are expensive also. Do you skip them as a rule? Do you really hate to exclude people, or do you despise spending money on an audience you don't value? "Deaf people wouldn't care about my movie!" All types of caption users (it's not just deaf people) are likely to be interested, and they will be acutely aware you did not consider their needs when releasing your film to only part of your target audience. My manifesto considers accessibility a path toward justice, equity, and expanding a film's audience. Made a great movie? . . . Add a line item to your budget for high-quality captions the same way you would for gorgeous cinematography, pristine audio, and postproduction—well, everything. . . . And before getting defensive about the cost, remember that captions are only one type of access that serves some audiences. But we'd be deeply grateful if you'd start there.<sup>5</sup>

Note: Audio description for blind viewers is also needed and available. What is that? Most of you don't even know what visual description is, do you? Learn from Netflix's colossal screw-up on Marvel's *Daredevil*. Look it up. Then provide it. A new standard already exists. Some have been providing it routinely for decades. Ensuring access more broadly—and reaching increased audiences—begins with you.

### While We're on Access, Remember

Wheelchair seating is *not* enough. "Better representation of people with disabilities in the film industry begins with more disabled people in the writers' room, producing, editing, and acting," reminded James L. LeBrecht, Academy member and legendary documentary sound mixer. LeBrecht codirected the feature length doc *Crip Camp* (forthcoming, 2019) with Nicole Newnham, and provides further details:

Ask yourself, how did I build a career in film? One of the most important things a beginner can do is to find community and participate. Film festivals and organizations that support and cultivate filmmakers need to up their game big

time when it comes to including disabled people. Having ADA seating for your audience is not enough. Look at all aspects of your organization. If you're not making sure that people with disabilities are embedded across platforms, teams, and all aspects of production—just as we're doing with other marginalized communities—you're failing. Making sure someone who uses a wheelchair can attend a screening is a low bar, and shouldn't be the standard—though that would be a good start. Instead, consider people who want a career in our field. Don't assume disabled people just want to passively watch your films. Today, disabled people not only watch movies, we make them, too. And we damn sure need to be making more of them.<sup>6</sup>

### A Final Word about the Word

The Americans with Disabilities Act became law nearly three decades ago. If disabled people are not a vital part of your diversity agenda, it is time to expand your definition of diversity. Think of it this way: disability quite literally puts the "D" in diversity, right at the beginning of the nine-letter-word. There's a lot of room for inclusion and collaboration in a word like that. Simply spell it out.

The sexual, racial, and ethnic identities of transgender intersex elderly vegan yuppies are in there, too, as they should be (well, maybe not the yuppies). Disability has earned its evolution and deserves to be recognized, even celebrated, accordingly. To put it simply: A need isn't special if almost everybody else gets to take the same things (an opportunity, a job, an education, a sex life) for granted. That's not special, it's standard. Except some people were left out.

Thankfully, silly euphemisms like "special needs" are also on their way out. Rapidly becoming passé. This manifesto forward proclaims disability loudly and proudly. Front and center. Disabled people have been absent from opportunities—afterthoughts who have had to force our way in, inaccurately depicted and, to paraphrase Sutherland, oppressively stereotyped in film (and in life) for long enough.

### Notes

1. "Interview: Allan Sutherland Talks to Film-maker Stephen Dwoskin about His Career," *Disability Arts Online*, July 22, 2009, [www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/stephen-dwoskin](http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/stephen-dwoskin).
2. Nicola Griffith, "Rewriting the Old Disability Script," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/opinion/telling-new-disability-stories.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/opinion/telling-new-disability-stories.html).
3. Kristen Lopez, personal communication, November 4, 2018.
4. Lopez, personal communication, November 4, 2018.
5. Cheryl Green, personal communication, November 4, 2018.
6. James L. LeBrecht, personal communication, November 3, 2018.