

Viewer Reminiscences on Portrayals about Persons with Disability in Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT This exploratory study uses theme based group discussion, brain storming and focus group techniques on 27 non-disabled multi-lingual college students to evoke their reminiscences on depiction of disability in Indian cinema. The corpus of audio/video recordings were subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis by three independent mutually blinded observers for latency, duration or time lag of respondent recall, dominant content or themes, attitudinal valence, perceived cliché and stereotypes about disability in cinema. Response analysis of attributed features for the film characters with disability was undertaken on major themes. The typical 'pity-sympathy' dimension of viewing the 'hero' as protagonist afflicted with mental illness is the most remembered depiction by female respondents. The most frequently evoked images, themes, language and terminology continue to reflect dismal, negative, struggling, anguished or aggrieved stereotype of contemporary cinema representation on persons with disabilities. These findings on commercial Indian movies are discussed with implications and justification for greater in-depth systematic research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is a powerful medium to mirror the happenings in a society. It is a mechanism that is often caught between the real and surreal, fact and fiction, reality and imagination. Its characters entertain people, educate and transport them into an altogether different realm. Some believe in the power of cinema to tacitly make or break public opinion, initiate group think, shape opinion, process attitude, catalyze social action and change the world. Others state that its chief purpose is to entertain (McCombs 2004; Soroka 2002). As in real life, every movie is typically packed with protagonists—a hero, heroine, villain, vamp, the goodies and baddies. There are characters portraying the rich-poor, powerful or the weak, aged and children, the teens and so on (Gazetas 2008). Historically, the first feature films appeared in the west during early 1900s. As a form of mass media, it emerged after print-

ing; newspaper, magazine, photography, telephone, phonograph and the first advertising agency were invented between late 1400s and 1800s. Thereafter, it had to continually compete or cultivate with its advancing technological siblings in the radio, television, digital, computer and interactive internet devices (Nelmes 2011; Smith 2011; Gerhards and Schafer 2010).

An often portrayed, but least highlighted and still lesser studied, as a segment or subject matter for scientific enquiry is the depiction of persons with disabilities through the medium of popular cinema (Chivers 2011). The disability experience constitutes an important aspect of real life and it is often invoked even into the reel life. The cinema uses characters with disability in myriad forms. It might be depicted as persons who are physically or intellectually challenged, visually or hearing impaired, dyslexic, autistic or even multiply handicapped. Many times the mentally ill are confused with the intellectually disabled (Gabbard and Gabbard 1999). This is apart and distinct from several roles showing individuals as acutely or chronically sick, ill, diseased or disordered. Traditionally, the cinemas have avoided treading into the realm of persons with disabilities and/or the members in their family. Even wherein it is done, they are used to illustrate. Most often, the movies constitute im-

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ages or mapping impressions on how non-disabled view disability (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson 2001).

In recent times, there is a growing trend to highlight the reality of disability experience and the diversity it brings to the world, how coping mechanisms underscore the triumph of spirit over the body and so on. The field of disability-rehabilitation is itself undergoing a great paradigm shift all the world over with respect to its understandings on causes, characteristics, consequences and coping by the affected persons or their families. The earlier 'magico-religious perspectives' (Braddock and Parish 2001) and 'medical models' (Miller et al. 2010) used to explain human disabilities as outcome of insults in ones present or past life is being rejected (Albrecht et al 2001). What is now being reinstated as 'social models' argue that human disabilities are NOT the making or misfortune of an affected gene, a faulty chromosome or by the attack of brain fever in this birth, nor even owing to retaliatory machinations of divine forces for the errors committed by the person in ones past life (Oliver and Sapey 2006; Stroman 2003; Fleischer and Frieda 2001). It is rather the result of intended or unwitting consequence of several barriers imposed by the larger social system on the affected persons (Fougeyrollas and Beauregard 2001).

Their barriers, restrictive environments, poor accessibility, imposed or institutionalized discrimination, enforced exclusion, enfeeblement instead of enablement, combined with faulty attitude, imagery, myths, misconceptions, nomenclature or labeling, stigma and stereotyping are to be faulted than their actual impairment, disability or handicap (Venkatesan et al. 2012). The ten commonly recurring disabling stereotypes in mass media view the disabled person as 'pitiable or pathetic, an object of curiosity or violence, sinister or evil, the super cripple or freak, laughable, aggressive avenger or his/her own worst enemy, burden, invalid or outcast, non-sexual or incapable of worthwhile relationships and being unable to participate fully in everyday life' (Church 2011; Markotic 2008; Ellis 2007). Among the very few investigators who have delved into the nexus between disability-cinema, Khan (2007) lamented about the prevailing negative, unrealistic, and sorry state of affairs with regard to depiction of persons with dis-

ability or their issues in contemporary commercial cinema in the country. Others have highlighted how popular media aggravate the already prevailing stigma associated with mental disorders (Pandve and Banerjee 2007), or that there is no sanity in the cinematic delineation of insanity (Swaminath and Bhide 2009).

Going by the rather meager scientific enquiry that has gone into the subject matter of cinema and disability, especially in our country, which is evidently overwhelmed each time there is release of a commercial movie, it becomes a need, rationale as well as justification to how viewers carry impressions on the subject. Against this rather shaky and never-tread background, it is aim of this preliminary investigation to gather some indicative impressions and viewer reminiscences about the problems, predicament or perspectives of persons with disability after viewing the movies made in India.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This exploratory study uses evocative techniques to undertake a cross sectional mapping of randomized viewer reminiscences for representations on or about persons with disability as depicted in Indian cinemas from a representative sample of college students.

Operational Definitions

A key variable addressed in this study is '*Indian Cinema*'. While the term 'media' in general encompasses any or all means of carrying or communicating information; more specifically, the term 'mass media' refers to certain specific forms which are designed or designated to transmit or reach out to a large section of the population. These various media forms are: radio, press-newspapers, magazines, print-books, television, internet and/or advertising, films or cinematography (Agarwal 2002). In turn, there can be many formats of films, such as, art and feature films, fiction or non-fiction, biographical, motivational or educational films, documentaries, advertising visuals, mainstream or commercial cinema, etc. This study seeks to focus only on commercial cinema in any Indian language. Reminiscence is generally described as "the volitional or non-volitional act or process of recollecting memories of oneself in the past" (Buck and Levin 1998). The term '*viewer reminiscences*' as used in this

study refer to 'audience memories' or 'informational reminiscence' (Gerfo 1980) of scenes, situations or sketches of character representation on or about disability in Indian cinemas. From the respondent perspective, they are to be deemed as entirely subjective, often judgmental, private or personalized narrations without any attendant predetermined right or wrong answers. Thus, the underlying premise is that the same visual or film may evoke different remembrances from the same or different viewers which then become the data units for this inquiry.

Participants

The participants recruited in this study to evoke their reminiscences on or about disability portrayal in Indian cinema were 27 non-disabled multi-lingual college students including 6 males (Mean Age: 22.84 years; SD: 4.70) and 25 females (Mean Age: 25.01 years; SD: 7.15) pursuing institute or university affiliated under graduate diploma, graduate as well as post graduate programs majoring psychology, speech-hearing and human development. The Department of Clinical Psychology in All India Institute of Speech and Hearing, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, located in Mysore, Karnataka (India), provides opportunity for students from a wide variety of disciplines in the field of disability-rehabilitation to undergo internship training for short periods of time ranging from few weeks to months. This occasion and opportunity was used to organize interactive group sessions under the individualized as well as combined anchoring of the investigators between June-December, 2012. The heterogeneous group of participants included students hailing from rural (N: 8), semi-urban (N: 7) and urban (N: 12) areas. Apart from English as their medium of instruction, all the multi-lingual participants reported being conversant with at least two more languages (Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and/or Hindi).

Tools and Techniques

In order to evoke the respondent reminiscences of representations on or about disability as depicted in the Indian cinemas, the study made use of multi-pronged tools and techniques including socio-demographic data sheet, theme based group discussion, non-directive open

ended in-depth interviews, reflective self reports, informant narratives, brain storming and focus group techniques. In actual use of all these data collection procedures, the participants were instructed to recollect titles or details of commercial cinemas that depicted themes, saga, incidents, songs, music, narrations, characters, events, episodes, or just about anything portraying on screen persons with disabilities. They were encouraged to elaborate, expand, expatiate or enunciate their impressions, opinions or comments in an uninterrupted free flowing manner. All interactions were voice recorded on standard instruments after assuring confidentiality, anonymity and obtaining the prior permission or informed consent of the participants as mandated by 'Ethics Committee' in the institute (Venkatesan 2009).

Procedure

The corpus of audio-recorded transcripts containing the respondent reminiscences of representations on or about disability in Indian cinema were collected and compiled. The data base was subjected to inter-observer reliability check by involving three mutually blinded and independent reviewers to undertake classification of the respondent expressed sentiments into 19 objective and well defined categories as given on a glossary that could be scored (Table 1). The collected data as raw scores on respondent ratings were compiled and subjected to statistical analysis by using SPSS/PC (Carver and Nash 2009).

RESULTS

The results of this study on the viewer reminiscences or expressed audience sentiments about representations of disability in Indian cinemas are presented and discussed sequentially under the following heads:

- (a) Cinema Characteristics;
- (b) Audience or Viewer Characteristics;
- (c) Inter-Reviewer Reliability Estimates; and,
- (d) Recurrent Themes and Stereotypes

Cinema Characteristics

On the whole, the 27 respondents in this study listed 77 movies (Mean: 2.85) as reminis-

cences depicting disability characters. For this sample, most of the recalled film titles were drawn from commercial Hindi cinema (N: 30/77; 38.96%), followed by those in Kannada (N: 27/77; 35.07%), and Tamil language (N: 27/77; 35.07%). Despite instructions to the contrary, many respondents named titles of films which depict characters with 'mental illness' (N: 25/77; 32.47 %) before being followed by recall of roles that portray persons with multiple disabilities (N: 15/77; 19.48%), visual impairment (N: 13/77; 16.88%) and/or mental retardation (N: 13/77; 16.88%). Their recall of movies showing physical disabilities, hearing loss, speech impairments, ad multiple handicaps are fewer. Further, it is seen that they recall 'hero/heroines' (N: 61/77; 79.22%) as protagonists followed by fewer 'villain' characters (N: 9/77; 11.69%) and 'others' (N: 7/77; 9.09%). As a matter of routine observation, Indian movies are typically replete with side actors as well as comedians donning the roles of persons with dis-

abilities to incite mirth and laughter. However, this audience did not call to mind any of such characters. Evidently, with recency effect in action, this sample of young respondents could only remember movies belonging to the era post-millennia (N: 69/77; 89.6%). However, none of these preliminary trends except the preponderance of recalling more number of commercial Hindi movies in preference for movies from other languages ($p < 0.05$), all the other variables are found to be statistically insignificant ($p > 0.05$) (Table 2).

Viewer Characteristics

Although the sample size for female respondents (N: 21) in this study is 3 and a half times the males (N: 6), the number of film titles recalled by them is 4 and a half times (N: 63/77; 81.82%) as many as their male counterparts (N: 14/77; 18.18%). Likewise, there are no statistically sig-

Table 1: Glossary on major audience sentiment expressed by respondents

<i>Code</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
S ¹	Advocacy	Act of pleading for, supporting or recommending; Active espousal;
S ²	Charity	Generous actions, favor or benevolent giving in to person in need;
S ³	Comedy	Pertaining to actions provoking laughter, humor, fun and comedy (Syn. Caricature; Comic; Fun)
S ⁴	Dramatic Convenience	Recreation or twists that saves or simplifies work, adds ease, advantage or comfort to the ongoing plot or theme;
S ⁵	Enablement	To give or provide adequate power, authority, means and opportunity;
S ⁶	Ethical	Pertaining to or dealing with law, morals, principles, standard practices of right-wrong conduct (Syn. Legal)
S ⁷	Evil	Depiction as morally wrong or bad, immoral, inherently wicked, harmful and injurious;
S ⁸	Fiction	Imaginative, invented, made-up or feigned narration without basis in reality;
S ⁹	Heroism	Exhibiting/bringing out qualities of courageous endurance, action or conduct (Syn. Brave; Determined);
S ¹⁰	Horror	Depiction as frightening, shocking, terrifying, revolting, shuddering or sense of aversion;
S ¹¹	Liability	Something disadvantageous; an onus, responsibility, load or weight to be carried with difficulty (Syn. Burden);
S ¹²	Medicalization	Pertaining to the science or practice of medicine, cure, therapy or treatment;
S ¹³	Patronage	Displaying an offensively condescending or giving in from a position of superiority, descent or dignity;
S ¹⁴	Pity	Sympathetic or kindly sorrow evoked by the suffering, distress or misfortune of another and often leading one to give aid or show mercy;
S ¹⁵	Revenge	Act of taking out vengeance for suffered insults;
S ¹⁶	Ridicule	Speech or action intended to cause mockery, contemptuous laughter at a thing or person; derision;
S ¹⁷	Romantic Love	Expression and pleasurable feeling of ardent emotional attachment or involvement between people
S ¹⁸	Tragedy	Reflecting somber or solemn seriousness as though the character is destined to undergo the experience by some overpowering force as fate or society to downfall or destruction;
S ¹⁹	Victimization	Depiction as deceived, cheated, sacrificed or being rendered scapegoat by his/her own emotions, ignorance, fate, or predicament or by some impersonal agency;

Table 2: Distribution of respondent reminiscences based on cinema characteristics

Code	Major sentiment	Language				Type of Disability						Protagonist				Year			
		Hi	Ka	Ta	Te	Ma	P	V	H	M	MD	MI	He	Vi	Sa	Co	O	<2000	>2000
S ¹	Advocacy ^{a0%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ²	Charity	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
S ³	Comedy	3	1	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	1	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	4
S ⁴	Dramatic convenience	2	2	5	-	1	-	2	-	1	-	6	10	-	-	-	1	2	8
S ⁵	Enablement	7	-	1	-	-	3	3	-	1	-	1	5	2	-	-	1	-	8
S ⁶	Ethical	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
S ⁷	Evil	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
S ⁸	Fiction	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2	-	-	-	-	1	2
S ⁹	Heroism	-	-	2	-	1	-	1	-	1	1	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	2
S ¹⁰	Horror ^{a0%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ¹¹	Liability ^{a0%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ¹²	Medicalization	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	2	-	-	-	1	1	2
S ¹³	Patronage ^{a0%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ¹⁴	Pity	9	7	6	1	1	4	6	5	4	1	4	15	6	-	-	3	2	22
S ¹⁵	Revenge	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
S ¹⁶	Ridicule	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
S ¹⁷	Romance/Love	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
S ¹⁸	Tragedy	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	3	-	-	-	-	-	3
S ¹⁹	Victimization	5	6	-	-	-	1	1	1	4	-	4	9	1	-	-	-	2	9
Total		30	27	15	2	3	9	13	10	15	5	25	61	9	-	-	7	8	69
X ²		7.01	4.88	0.88	0.28														
Df		2	5	1	1														
Probability		0.03	0.43	0.34	0.86														

Language Key: Hi-Hindi; Ka-Kannada; Ta-Tamil; Te-Telugu; Ma-Malayalam)(Type of Disability Key: P-Physical; V-Visual; H-Hearing; M-Mental Handicap; MD-Multiple Disability; MI-Mental Illness; He-Hero/Heroine; Vi-Villain/Vamp; Sa-Support Actor/Actress; Co-Comedian; O-Others
^a%Indicates categories which were defined and listed in the glossary but were NOT identified or indicated by the respondents in this study;

nificant differences in the reporting or frequency counts of movie reminiscences in relation to associated variables like age, domicile (area of residence) and/or mother tongue ($p: >0.05$). It appears that education variable alone influences the reminiscences of respondents since undergraduate students report far lesser number of movies depicting disability (N: 26/77; 33.77%) than graduates (N: 51/77; 66.23%) ($p: < 0.05$) (Table 3).

Inter-Reviewer Reliability Estimates

The tripartite inter-reviewer agreement as measured by Fleiss Kappa for multiple raters (contrasting Cohen's Kappa applicable only for two raters) (Fleiss 1981; Fleiss and Cohen 1973) was 0.91 which is interpreted as 'almost perfect agreement' (Landis and Koch 1977). Content validity or item total percentage agreement consistently measured range of high values between 95-97 percent between the 19 identified list of major audience sentiments used in this study for the three raters, thereby indicating high internal consistency ($p: < 0.01$). Face validity is found to be high for the classification of major audience sentiment expressed by the respondents.

Recurrent Themes and Stereotypes

The frequent themes evoked from the corpus of narratives and the provisional filmography on disability as given by participants in this study is analyzed in terms of how they interpreted their chosen movie narratives, objects, events, occasions and/or opportunities. The listed film characterization of persons with disability in most movies was presented as objects of pity, sympathy, or misfortune. The plots are viewed as one of victimization and great personal tragedy. The depiction of women with disability is viewed by the audience as burden to self, family and society. They were shown as dependent physically, emotionally as well as economically and hence requiring protection without which they succumb to vices or sexual exploitation. Wherein the hero as a central character of a film was afflicted with disability, the respondents reported how such films showed them as super-brave, achievers against all odds being fighters and steadfast till the end of the movie. The respondent showed no amusement or unreality in portrayal of the hero at times using a ploy, ruse

or alibi to pretend disability in order to win the heart, love or sympathy of the heroine in some movies. Wherein the heroine was shown as disabled, the respondents were impressed by the humility, simplicity, and sub-ordination of such roles to the caring and benevolent demeanor of their male protagonist.

DISCUSSION

Although the respondents listed films, wherein the storyline involved dramatic recoveries, magic cures, reversal of permanent disabilities, and/or dramatic convenience, they showed no surprise or loathe to the unrealism shown in such movies. Despite common knowledge of such movie stereotypes (Virdi and Crrekumur 2006) in the derived corpus of data from respondent reports, there were no reflections on or about characters, situations, themes, or representations involving on screen desexualization of the person with disability, showing such persons as comedians or villains, beggars or police informants, criminals or charlatans, maladjusted or disgruntled elements, fearsome or awe-inspiring, etc. Many films are wont to portray disability condition as *justified natural or preternatural punishment* in the second half of the movie for all the ill doings of certain villainous, lecherous, evil, diabolic, scheming, or vindictive characters in the first half of such movies. For example, a debauchery is converted into a repentant do-gooder character albeit with a disfigurement or disability in the next half. Thus, the affliction (or infliction!) of disability in a reel character, as also in real life, is viewed as an occasion or opportunity to repent, reform, or reconstruct their past misdeeds. The audience carries home an implied message to behave well in their own personal lives or be prepared for the dreaded consequence of suffering a life long disability. Surprisingly, the respondents in this study, who were aspiring professionals in the field of disability-rehabilitation for the country did not display concerns about the Indian cinemas failing to highlight upcoming rights based problems or issues of persons with disabilities, such as, involving advocacy, empowerment, enablement, mainstreaming, non-discrimination, disabling barriers, enabling environments, prejudice, stigma, and others (Darke 2003; Longmore 2003; Ghai 2002).

Table 3: Distribution of respondent reminiscences based on viewer characteristics

Code	Major sentiment	Gender		Age		Education		Domicile			Mother Tongue		
		M (N: 6)	F (N:21)	<25 (N:20)	>25 (N:7)	UG (N:5)	G (N:22)	R (N:8)	SU (N:7)	U (N:12)	Ka (N:22)	Ta (N:1)	Ma (N:4)
S ¹	Advocacy ^{a%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ²	Charity	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	-
S ³	Comedy	2	2	3	1	3	1	-	-	4	4	-	-
S ⁴	Dramatic convenience	1	9	3	7	7	3	2	3	5	8	2	-
S ⁵	Enablement	-	8	1	7	2	6	1	1	6	6	1	1
S ⁶	Ethical	-	1	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	1	-	-
S ⁷	Evil	1	1	-	2	-	2	1	1	-	1	1	-
S ⁸	Fiction	-	2	1	1	-	2	-	1	1	1	1	-
S ⁹	Heroism	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	-	1	2	1	-
S ¹⁰	Horror ^{a%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ¹¹	Liability ^{a%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ¹²	Medicalization	1	2	1	2	-	3	3	-	-	2	1	-
S ¹³	Patronage ^{a%}	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
S ¹⁴	Pity	3	21	7	17	5	19	15	5	4	14	7	1
S ¹⁵	Revenge	1	1	2	-	2	-	-	-	2	1	-	1
S ¹⁶	Ridicule	2	-	2	-	-	2	-	-	2	1	-	1
S ¹⁷	Romance/Love	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-
S ¹⁸	Tragedy	-	3	1	2	1	2	2	1	-	2	1	-
S ¹⁹	Victimization	1	10	3	8	2	9	2	2	7	6	3	2
	Total	14	63	28	49	26	51	29	14	34	51	8	8
	X ²	0.48	0.17	4.96	5.45	3.90							
	Df	1	1	1	2	2							
	Probability	0.83	0.89	0.03	0.06	0.14							

Gender Key: M-Male; F-Female;(Age in years)(Education Key: UG-Under Graduate; G-Graduate; PG-Post Graduation

Domicile Key: R-Rural; SU-Semi Urban; R-Rural)(Mother Tongue Key: Ka-Kannada; Ta-Tamil; Ma-Malayalam

^{a%}Indicates categories which were defined and listed in the glossary but were NOT identified or indicated by the respondents in this study;

CONCLUSION

In sum, some key prescriptions that emanate from this study for media makers are that the accuracy in portrayals is extremely important. There is need to shun one dimensional characterization of persons with disabilities who-like everybody else, can and do have complex personalities capable of full range of emotions. The representations are often perceived and shown as being on the receiving end, while there is need to show them as equal partners capable of giving as well as receiving. Cinema ought to refrain from sensationalizing, endowing persons with disabilities as having superhuman attributes, depicting them as non-sexual entities or objects of curiosity, victims or perpetrators of violence, objects of pun, ridicule or being made the butt of jokes. Other forms of disability delineation involve use of offensive titles of films and/or terminology having negative connotations or double entendres in dialogues, such as, idiot, imbecile, moron, feeble-minded, deaf, dumb, blind, lame, crippled, dwarf, handicapped, infirm, invalid, victim, crazy, mental, mad, etc. It would be worthwhile and preferable to prepare a bigger filmographic listing than what has been possible in this investigation before undertaking a bigger and broad based historical-empirical analysis of the thematic trends and changes therein over the century particularly in relation to disability portrayals in Indian cinema.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There was expressed opinion that films need to show persons with disability as sharing the ordinary pulls and pushes of life in loving relationships and expressing themselves by means of a wide range of sexual needs and desires as non-disabled people. Media focus on disability in our country is yet to blossom or mature even in comparison to the contemporary and ongoing focus on caste, gender, or religious equality. It is not only in content, but also, the form, imagery, language, sound track or background music, terminology, positioning of elements in a scene, camera angle or distance, colors and lightings used that lend to the overall audience appraisal or impacting of the delineation on or about disability through cinema. Admittedly, for the moment, these dimensions have not been the focus of this study.

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