

Martina MARTAUSOVÁ

Authenticity in Representations of Down Syndrome in Contemporary Cinema: The “Supercrip” in *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019)

Abstract: The issue of disability and its representation in the media offers a useful example for studying the relationship between hegemonical discourses and marginal narratives. Disability has been used previously to identify the workings of a dominant ideology (Mitchell 17), but its role as an experience of social and political dimensions has been largely neglected in the cultural field. Disabled characters have been a potent narrative source, but their representation has been limited to undesirable identities, often associated with degeneracy and infirmity (Rodan, Ellis, Lebeck 16). This study examines the issue of disability as reflected in a recent American cinema production, *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019). In the film, a Down syndrome actor, Zack Gottsagen, plays himself, performing with actors like Dakota Johnson and Shia LaBeouf. Validating Zack’s personal experience allows an emphasis on disability in terms of its own significance, an approach which appears to be a response to a broader call for emancipated portrayals of the disabled on screen. A focus is placed on mechanisms that disregard the socially constructed representation of Down syndrome to offer a more progressive portrayal of the disabled, while also considering the dominant narrative’s role through the film’s exploitation of its contrastive efficiency (Mitchell 28), thereby echoing the workings of the structural limitations that draw upon a long history of cultural trivialization.

Keywords: American cinema, disability, Down syndrome, narrative prosthesis, masculinity.

Introduction

In his seminal work *The Myth of Total Cinema* (1967), André Bazin observed that, before cinema evolved into a medium with the principal function

Martina MARTAUSOVÁ

Pavol Jozef Šafárik University,
Košice, Slovakia
martina.martausova@upjs.sk

EKPHRISIS, 1/2021

COUNTERDISCOURSES AND
COUNTERPUBLICS IN CINEMA, ART,
MEDIA AND LITERATURE
pp. 26–40

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.25.3

Published First Online: June 21, 2021

of entertaining, its discovery and development were motivated by the desire to reproduce reality. The ideal of the total representation of reality sustained by modernist ambitions activated technological and ideological processes upon which cinema has long since operated. In line with its technological advancement, Bazin proposes, cinema evolved into an “ideological phenomenon” that relies on the “preconceived ideas of the inventors” (18); in other words, technological advancement comes in second place to idealization. The question of whether cinema is capable of the total representation of reality and what mechanisms would be required to meet this aim has been debated ever since Bazin’s first commentaries on the correlation between cinema and authenticity. Dudley Andrews explains cinema’s position in this relation as an asymptote of reality—a parallel experience that is forever dependent on reality—standing alongside reality or resembling reality through the subjective perspective of its interpreter/filmmaker (138). And because contemporary cinema is an endless source of alternative realities that need to be “true both to our everyday perception of life and to our social situation” in order for them to be recognized as such by viewers (Andrews 106), the asymptote analogy seems to be apt.

The analysis of cinematic constructions of reality, within which the focus on the cultural representation of identities plays a considerable role, reveals the mechanisms used by meaning-making processes that suggest potential social and political implications. An examination of the construction of identities is especially relevant when it comes to the representation of marginal communities and minority or alternative groups whose portrayal in the media has been framed by dominant norms and restricted by the exclusionary practices of hegemonic discourses. The relationship between marginal narratives and predominant discourses has been the focus of interest in much postmodern cultural analysis which has developed under the influence of identity politics; but, while social and cultural analyses have been preoccupied with categories such as race, gender and class, the representation of disabilities or the disabled has been largely overlooked or underrated. This is partly the result of a prevalent lack of interest in representing this specific marginal group on-screen due to the perceived aesthetic and social preferences of mainstream audiences. In their study *Cultures of Representation*, Rodan, Ellis and Lebeck suggest that “viewing the disabled on screen was considered aesthetically challenging and/or inappropriate” (18). Until the late 20th-century, disabled characters in cinema were largely depicted as objects of marginalization, bearing the characteristics of a social malady, and narratively destined for “rehabilitation and erasure” (Fraser 8). In cultural analysis, representation practices that objectify the disabled are often compared to those previously employed in the objectification of women, with many noting that alternative identities of women in the past were also either omitted, trivialized, or condemned (Davis; Mitchell and Snyder). Rodan, Ellis, and Lebeck also emphasize that, while “the majority of characters and participants [in the media] are non-disabled, slim and young [,] characters with disability [who] are represented [in the media], are often victimized,

isolated, or shown in supporting roles” (18), with these types of portrayals having substantial implications for the social understanding of disability.

Recognized as “a social, cultural and political category” (Rodan *et al.* 10), disability has been regarded a social construction (Shakespeare; Davis; Waldschmidt) and Waldschmidt argues that its lack of representation or, alternatively, its culturally pre-determined portrayal in the media and literature implies three assumptions:

First, disability is a form of social inequality and disabled persons are a minority group that is discriminated against and excluded from mainstream society. Second, impairment and disability need to be distinguished and do not have a causal relation; it is not impairments *per se* which disable, but societal practices of ‘disablement’ which result in disability. Third, it is a society’s responsibility to remove the obstacles that persons with disabilities are facing. (20–21)

As Waldschmidt also points out, it is the underestimation of “cultural practices and their influence on our understanding of disability” (20) that contributes to the ways in which practical politics and society approach the concept. Popular representations exert a strong influence on the limitations of individuals and their social recognition; therefore, a fuller awareness of disability as a cultural construct, as Couser also explains, “enables us to understand and deconstruct the procedures by which some bodies are privileged over others” (112). Cinema, being a “powerful cultural tool,” as Norden points out, “has played a major role in perpetuating mainstream society’s regard for people with disabilities and more often than not the images [...] differed sharply from the realities of the physically disabled experience” (1).

The growing awareness of disability as a social and cultural construct became apparent with the development of Disability Studies, a separate field of Social and Cultural Studies that emerged in the 1980s and that focused on the analysis of cultural representation of the disabled in addition to other approaches. Lennard J. Davis saw the emancipation of Social Studies’ approach to disability or impairment as being related to its growing recognition in the media. As he explains, “first, institutions had to set standards of normalcy to distinguish abnormalities” (115), and this pattern is also evident in relation to the media representation. However, the process of establishing norms, or as Davis proposes “normalcy,” also suggests the functioning of structural limits (115) that have reinforced the emphasis on difference by using disability in “countless forms of abnormal bodies” throughout the past three centuries (115), including various cinematic demonstrations. The growing interest of cinema in portraying disability in a more or less authentic manner since the 1980s is also a result of what Davis identifies as “paradoxical aestheticizing” (49), the contradiction between earlier perceptions of disability, either emphasizing its wondrous qualities or rendering it entirely invisible and non-existent, and its advancement to a “modality [that is] used to explain a great deal” (49); in essence, the application of disability as a symbolic narrative device.

21st-century cinema has developed its own strategies of representation and, in addition to its changing approach to other marginalized communities, it has strengthened its focus on disability through the recognition of agency. It does so by shifting the position of characters with physical or mental disability from supporting to lead roles. In this regard, it is European cinema which has demonstrated the most progressive approach, placing a particular focus on Down syndrome. Films featuring actors with Down syndrome in leading roles, such as *The Eighth Day* (1996, FR/BLG/UK), *Yo También* (2009, ES), *Coming Down the Mountain* (2007, UK), *Café De Flore* (2011, FR), or more recently *Mio Fratello Rincorre I Dinosauri* (2019, IT/ES), have done much to challenge the predominant perspective of the able-bodied majority towards this specific minority group. American cinema is also gradually beginning to embrace this approach through films such as *Girlfriend* (2010, USA), *Any Day Now* (2012, USA), or *Where Hope Grows* (2014, USA), and *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019, USA), in an effort to counter the prevailing politics of representation and confront the social model that presents disability as a social and political problem (Davis 33). The casting of Down syndrome actors not only questions the relevance of prevailing stereotypes that target the apparently inevitable limits to their agency but, more importantly, denounces cultural constructions that frame Down syndrome as an undesirable identity using strategies of symbolic annihilation (Rodan *et al.* 16).

This study examines the latest and, as of 2021, the only mainstream American production that stars a Down syndrome actor, Zack Gottsagen as Zak,¹ in *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019), whose personal experience was the principal motivation for the film. Playing himself, Zack performs with the established actors Dakota Johnson (Eleanor) and Shia LaBeouf (Tyler), and the fact that the filmmakers—Tyler Nilson and Michael Schwartz—acknowledge that the film is based on Gottsagen's real life experiences makes the film a valuable subject for the analysis of authentic representations of disability in cinema.

The study explores the function of disability in this film narrative not only through the apparent liberation of the character—the validity of the portrayal of Down syndrome as reflected through Zack's personal experience—but also due to the specifics of the use of the syndrome in an otherwise standard two-level narrative structure. By examining the mechanisms that maneuver Zak through his relationships with the able-bodied characters of Eleanor and Tyler, the study investigates the narrative use of disability in order to comply with the wider cultural demand for more progressive representations of disability on-screen, noting, however, that it does so by exploiting narrative strategies that draw on a long representational history of trivialization. The analysis therefore focuses on the role of disability in the narrative through the correlation between what can be considered normalcy and what can be considered diversity, and the implications which this correlation has on the construction of Zak's identity in the film. And finally, I attempt to contribute to a more extensive discussion about the ways in which on-screen disabilities are produced

and reproduced, and ultimately examine whether the frame of reference they provide seeks out authentic depictions, in an effort to demystify Down syndrome, or whether it merely perpetuates the contrast between the able-bodied majority and the ‘Other.’ In order to determine this more specifically, it is essential to examine the causal connections between the disabled and non-disabled characters and to analyze whether the outcomes of this relationship epitomize social and political conclusions drawn from interactions between the able-bodied majority and the disabled minority.

Typically recognized as a form of degeneration, impotence or some other form of physical limitation, disability has long been presented as a contrast to healthy bodies, bearing what David T. Mitchell describes as a “symbolic potency of the message” when a healthy subject “fails to achieve the symbolic effect without the disabled counterpart” (28). When disability is compared with a muscular, symmetrical and aesthetically pleasing body, the narrative is using them as textually marked subjects, validating the abnormality to “justify the telling of the story” (Mitchell 22). As Mitchell explains further, physically anomalous subjects have the potency to bring additional value to the narrative, primarily in cases when disability is portrayed as a condition that evokes astonishment or awe and attracts the attention of viewers whose process of identification with the subject is shaped through the establishment of the ‘Other’ and confirmed by the Lacanian gaze (22-23). This study considers this symbolic potency when examining the portrayal of Zak’s character within the film’s overall strategy of representing Down syndrome.

The ‘Badass’ Supercrip

Disability has always been systematically differentiated from a socially and politically constructed able-bodied norm. One type of disability narrative that exploits this opposition and offers an emancipation that reflects the demand for the depathologization of disability in the media is the “supercrip” narrative. The supercrip is a common stereotype that became particularly popular through the *X-Men* (2000–2019), *Iron Man* (2008–2013) and *Dark Knight* (2008–2012) series of films, or other examples of the large body of films in which the preoccupations of American postmillennial superhero fiction are made manifest. The supercrip narrative uses what Stuart Murray observes as “the productive power [of] cultural representation” (49). None of these characters can be considered disabled or impaired in the truest sense, but many of them suffer from physical or mental injuries that boost their superpowers and allow them to overcome their initial limits in order to eventually save the whole world, thereby elevating them to the level of supercrip. The figure of the supercrip is also a common stereotype in sports narratives, albeit with somewhat more realistic connotations. Narratives of this type are often constructed to celebrate Paralympian athletes whose impressive feats are made even more remarkable when compared to those of non-disabled

athletes. The 'superhuman' performance by an impaired human demonstrates the possibility of overcoming physical limitations, and this display is usually followed by the athlete becoming an icon of empowerment who is presented as a role model for the impaired (Grue 215). In such cases, the supercrip narrative legitimizes disability as a "cause of [the athlete's] achievement and transformative experience" (Grue 215). As Grue points out in his essay on disability, the defining feature of the supercrip narrative is the "rationalization and legitimization of impairments as *positive attributes*" (original emphasis) (203). Disability or impairment is, according to this hypothesis, a condition which can encourage a cause-and-effect process. Simultaneously, the cause is the disability or impairment itself, and the effect is the superhuman performance. The appearance of the trope in realist cinema, however, is less associated with an apparent break from realism and the tendency to transcend the mundane, ordinary condition towards the extraordinary, and focuses instead on a combination of authenticity, physical limitations and their eventual surmounting that creates the cause-and-effect chain much favored by the American Dream narrative. Whether monetary, social, or individual, the success story is an intrinsic part of the American canon, celebrated by Hollywood and independent cinema alike.

The Peanut Butter Falcon works with this cause-and-effect chain to propose a supercrip character whose disability radically limits his autonomy. But Zak's Down syndrome is not only a source of his limitations but also of admiration. Introduced as an undisciplined but still rather appealing internee in a retirement home, the audience is immediately confronted with the question Zak asks his caretaker and supervisor, Eleanor: "Why am I here?" Frustrated with his situation and unwilling to meekly accept his fate, Zak resolves to pursue an alternative existence for himself, in the course of which he will be confronted with and confront the social boundaries determined by his condition. The empathic narrative focus on Zak's ambition to instigate changes in his life gradually shifts from the emphasis on the physical struggles of a Down syndrome individual in real life towards the confrontation with the social implications of its cultural constructions, an issue which emerges as the central point of the narrative as the film progresses. Lennard J. Davis explains that the emphasis on disability as a physical or mental condition is not "necessarily bad," but it can become an obstacle when such a focus places real limits on the lives of the disabled; for example, when an individual's condition leaves them "discriminated against, unemployed, poor, and blocked by bad laws, architecture, and communication" (5). Zak is continually confronted with structural limits in the form of laws that deprive him of his legal autonomy and which repeatedly remind him of his inferior status in society due to hostile comments both from within the circle of 'his world' in the retirement home and from the wider society beyond its walls. Despite his own comfort with his body and his admirable self-confidence, he is often called derogatory names and becomes an easy target for hostility and hatred that, the narrative seems to suggest, imposes real limitations on an otherwise fulfilling life.

Zak is relentless, fearless, and continually attempts to overcome all of the physical barriers which he faces despite his clumsiness, which, according to Davis's explanation, is a demonstration of the "body's unruly resistance to cultural desire to enforce normalcy" (17). Zak refuses to authorize institutions to take full control over his autonomy and challenges standard perceptions of the Down syndrome condition through his rebellious attitude. The film culminates with Zak's realization of the dream he has held throughout the film: he performs in a wrestling match, a public display that specifically manifests his confidence with his bodily form and his ability to surmount the prejudices stemming from prevailing social and cultural stereotypes. In tandem with their initial awe, as Zak appears on stage wearing falcon-like wings that correspond with his wrestling alter-ego, The Peanut Butter Falcon, the viewers of the film are confronted with the skepticism of the wrestling match audience and may share their reservations in accepting a Down syndrome wrestler on stage. As might be expected, the match is transformed from a contest of physical skill into a battle for Zak's social rehabilitation. The scornful comments from his opponent Samson ("I've been doing this for 38 years, and guess what! This isn't the Make-a-Wish Foundation," or "The Peanut Butter Falcon? Are you ser... How about Tweety Bird?", "You stupid little punk," "Retard," or "Get your stinking ass out of the ring") only pushes Zak to achieve even greater heights. For this moment alone, the narrative leaves aside the realism to which it has adhered thus far and allows the Down syndrome character to overcome his limitations and give a heroic performance of physical prowess. With this finale, the narrative concludes Zak's development into a hero, building on his contribution to the general social rehabilitation of Down syndrome. However, while Zak's transformative journey is of key importance in the film, the main narrative focus is placed on the audience's confrontation with the realities of Zak's existence, an individual who has been largely overlooked or ignored, and whose life experience has been sharply restricted by institutionalization, mechanical collectivization, and determined by social constructivism. Nonetheless, Zak's eventual autonomy depends less on his own empowerment and more on the social recognition and acceptance that permits him to exercise more control over his life than he could when confined to an institution. The cause-and-effect hypothesis, according to which Zak's disability is the cause of his eventual (yet also initial) empowerment, also supports the initiative to challenge cinematic representations of Down syndrome that are marred by social and cultural determinism.

The narrative uses the characters of Tyler and Eleanor to embody the prevalent social reactions towards Down syndrome individuals and create a dialogue aimed at stimulating the rehabilitation of the perceptions of the disabled community among the able-bodied majority. The narrative firmly insists on this dialogue not only as a means of destigmatizing the condition and liberating social reactions but also as a way of reconciling with the stigmatization of disability as a category that was "created to serve the interests of the dominant ideology and its privileged classes" (Jeffreys 33). It does so through the dialogue

established between the three main characters, the attitudes of whom exemplify the standard models of the social recognition of disability. Zak occupies the central position in the film, serving as a representation of the disabled community with an authentic personal experience that Garland-Thomson identifies as an essential part of destigmatization and that validates his “individual experience and consciousness” (Jeffreys 33). The other two main characters show contrasting attitudes to the recognition of the disabled. Eleanor is a responsible, humanitarian figure with a somewhat patronizing and overprotective approach, who represents the system, while Tyler’s unconstrained, indifferent position towards disability identifies him as the most progressive figure who can exert a strong rehabilitating effect. Tyler’s approach is narratively predetermined by his generally careless behavior and criminal activities that confirm his unconcerned attitude. His disregard for rules and lack of respect for social norms is a result of injuries which he has suffered in the past and which have left him drifting aimlessly through life, without goal or purpose. Tyler’s official position on life as one who “do[esn’t] give a shit” corresponds closely with the desired attitude which the film advocates in respect to the disabled community. Tyler’s indifference is presented as an optimal approach for bringing rehabilitation to the disability discourse, aimed at convincing the viewer of the aptness of this model. Tyler’s acknowledgment and recognition of Zak as a regular individual, ignoring the limitations he faces in this respect, are revealed by means of their shared disrespect for institutionalization, norms, and standardization imposed by the social structures which have stigmatized them both. And so, like two outcasts, Tyler and Zak become buddies and set out on a journey to fulfill Zak’s dream, with the film using this relationship as a means of providing “access to disabled peoples’ subjectivities” (Fraser 30).

The “supercrip” narrative that stimulates Zak’s process of self-empowerment also adheres to the continuum from the state of being out-of-control towards that of being in-control. We can see the effect of the out-of-control body state in Zak’s institutional supervision, in which the authorities deem his condition as needing guidance. Labeled “a flight risk” and seen as a disobedient internee, Zak’s freedoms are restricted in an attempt to discipline his behavior, a poor decision whose consequences eventually lead to even more restrictive limits on the control which he can exercise over his own life. The institution therefore heavily compromises Zak’s self-autonomy because, as the narrative suggests, it fails to recognize Zak’s capacity to control his own life. The imposition of institutional authority over his actions and his lack of control over his own body also jeopardizes Zak’s confidence. Constantly reminded of the limitations imposed by his condition, Zak is left feeling incompetent. When the process of re-acquiring control over his body is initiated with the planning of his escape, it is accompanied by Zak’s gradually growing confidence and is assisted by the able-bodied characters with whom he comes into contact. First, Rosemary, who, in exchange for Zak’s pudding, agrees to distract the supervisors’ attention in the retirement home canteen,

then Carl, his roommate, who breaks the bars over the window and smears grease over Zak's body to enable a smooth passage out of the window, towards his triumphant escape. For the rest of the film it is Tyler and Eleanor who assist and encourage Zak's physical and mental empowerment. The acknowledgment of the able-bodied characters is the key factor which ultimately legitimizes Zak's authority to take control over his life. But, while Zak's independence is conditioned by the escape from the institutionally normalizing practices that enforce overwhelming paternalist and overprotective attitudes and constant supervision, the constant assistance of the able-bodied majority additionally emphasizes the dichotomy between disability and normalcy and inevitably reinforces the separation between marked and unmarked subjects or between the norm and digressions from the norm. Despite Zak's progress from the out-of-control state towards the in-control situation, on both the individual and social level, the recognition of his own abnormalcy, suggests an approach which is binary, rather than axiomatic. Operating on two narrative levels, the film exploits Down syndrome as an exceptionality that draws attention and adds interest to an otherwise familiar romantic story. David Mitchell recognizes this use of disability for narrative purposes as a process in which the narrative "establishes [the] exceptionality of its subject matter" to justify the story's telling (21). Zak's story of empowerment is gradually accompanied by the developing romantic relationship between Tyler and Eleanor. With this narrative overrun, the representation of the emancipation of a Down syndrome individual through his journey towards self-autonomy is critically compromised. And so, while the film's invitation to reassess individual perceptions of disability echoes the general demand of disability scholarship to transcend culturally determined representations, the traditional narrative strategies employed by the film emphasize the dependency of the disabled minority, instead of celebrating their self-sufficiency and independence as a result of this dichotomy.

The relationships in the film are also defined by the lack of a foundation such as a family in the lives of the individual characters. This need structures the pattern of the narrative and leads the characters towards an ideal form by emphasizing the initial absence. Tyler's lack of family is demonstrated through the responsibility he feels for his brother's accidental death, caused by their reckless behavior; Eleanor's lack is explicit in her position as a widow, but is also strongly supported by her nurturing capacity and her affectionate attitude towards the residents of the nursing home; and Zak's own family has disowned him, denying all responsibility for him, which in Zak's reality means that he has been deprived of freedoms that his relatives could have otherwise guaranteed him. The focus on the family is significant because it is the only foundation that can substitute for the institutionalized supervision of a Down syndrome individual. But, while institutional care is dependent on regulations and norms, behavior patterns within the family are usually free from cultural determinism. While still in the retirement home, Zak is constantly reminded that he is forced to remain an

internee because he has no family that could provide supervision for him. Even the staff in the home use derogatory terms towards him, and, as Zak reveals throughout the story, he had faced severe ridicule throughout all of his life.

Moreover, Tyler's lack of family and his concomitant need for contact also demonstrate the missing sense of purpose in his life. The character is introduced as a lost and hopeless individual who is searching for an aim in his life, one that he eventually finds in the pursuit of Zak's wrestling dreams. As he realizes the depth of Zak's commitment to his dream, Tyler also adopts the goal, accepts responsibility and is granted a temporal purpose in his life, an undertaking which becomes permanent with Eleanor's participation. In this process, Zak's influence proves crucial, and he takes on the role of the instigator of Tyler's recovery from a helpless, jobless drifter to a figure of moral authority. The narrative use of Zak's ability to "dream big" despite his significant physical limitations contrasts with Tyler's inability to "get his life together" by legal means and, more importantly, through his own volition. It is Zak's vision, life expectations and determination that complement Tyler's temporary infirmity. Tyler's inability to reclaim his own life without the help of his disabled counterpart suggests that the film is employing the symbolic potential of a condition such as Down syndrome. The visibly disabled character of Zak aids the visually ideal but momentarily paralyzed character of Tyler, thereby reclaiming his authority by instigating the recovery of his moral values.

Down syndrome and the limitations which the condition places upon its sufferers thus commit Tyler to a moral obligation, which emerges as a vehicle to compensate for the death of his brother. Zak's need for protection and supervision becomes the dominant motivation for Tyler's characterization. Mitchell identifies the use of disability for narrative purposes as an "opportunistic metaphoric device," when disability becomes the motive force of the desired depiction. Due to the inherent vulnerability which his disability imposes upon him, Zak completes Tyler's sense of lack, not the other way around. In their seminal work *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), Mitchell and Snyder propose the use of "narrative prosthesis," to define this function of disability in narratives that suggests the digressive nature of such a device. As a prosthesis, disability in traditional narrative structures helps the main male character to retrieve qualities which would be otherwise irretrievable; for example, the masculine prowess that is usually rewarded with the restoration of manly authority, as demonstrated through romantic closure. The visually aesthetic character thus acquires qualities needed to restore the status quo, while the disabled character remains suspended in the position of helper. In *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, however, it is not only the sense of responsibility and the revitalized purpose in Tyler's life that Zak motivates through his fearless determination, but more importantly, it is Tyler's stimulation of confidence which shifts the social reaction towards Zak's condition in the right direction, with this aspect gaining the real narrative emphasis. Freed from any unnecessary pathologization that stems from socially and culturally determined preconceptions, Tyler's behavior towards Zak sets the example of an

emancipated response to Down syndrome individuals in society that ultimately restores his own authority.

The film also places its portrayal of physical disability in sharp contrast with the aesthetic ideal of the proportionate masculine body, which Shia LaBeouf's physique undeniably embodies, a device clearly intended to differentiate its subjects visually. Mizi Waltz points out that such a distinction means the association of the disabled character with the loss of masculine prowess (97). Rodan, Ellis, and Lebeck also point out that the visual presence of impairment predicates the absence of hegemonic masculinity (16), which in *The Peanut Butter Falcon* means that the Down syndrome character could easily be associated with the loss of masculinity. And, because disability in the filmic narrative is often demonstrated as a barrier to sexuality and romance (Waltz 97), Zak's position on this narrative level, or on the axis of desire, is that which Mitchell and Snyder call a "symbolic vehicle" (1). The moral and sexual innocence which Down syndrome bestows upon Zak and which is validated by his visually unattractive body creates a visual opposition to the aesthetic of the real masculine hero. As Waltz aptly points out, this type of narrative strategy follows "a larger cultural narrative that associates personal independence, efficacy, and success with inhabiting an idealized body" (97). Thus, in order to achieve a successful narrative closure for the film that simultaneously develops a romantic layer to justify the supercrip story narrative, Zak's pre-defined innocence reduces his emotions to something resembling the affection between parent and child. The absence of a romantic life of Zak's own is substituted by the romantic relationship between Tyler and Eleanor that eventually grows into a family-like bond with Zak occupying the position of the child. Zak thus aids the progress of the two visually aesthetic characters who represent traditional models of femininity and masculinity and who ultimately develop a maternal and paternal inclination towards him. In drawing the audience towards an emotionally satisfying romantic closure, the narrative adheres to a rigidly conventional development—while the feminine aspect compromises some of her patronizing and overly protective behavior, the male character softens some of the macho characteristics that demonstrate his 'badass' type of masculinity to allow their gradual approximation.

Tyler's 'badass' characterization is also a crucial determinant in the development of the supercrip narrative. It serves as a model identity that Zak attempts to be associated with through his ongoing rebellion against institutionalism and his disregard for the socially imposed normative behavior that he is expected to conform to. It also offers a common narrative strategy of counter-discourses that attempt to challenge the hegemony of the mainstream representation of marginal groups. Rebellion allows the possibility of emancipation and reparation, which, in the case of *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, not only promises Zak's ultimate liberation but also leads to the realization of the kind of social recognition the audience believes he deserves. The 'badass' Zak is admirable for his childlike

naivety and heroically dauntlessness due to his obliviousness to his social circumstances. Because of Tyler’s genuine ignorance of the limitations which Down syndrome imposes upon its sufferers, Zak’s representation is strongly dependent on the depiction of the conflict that the dichotomy of social denial/acceptance of Down syndrome offers. Nevertheless, the overall absence of pity in Tyler’s behavior towards Zak invites the viewer to reconsider their perspective on disability and associate such a condition with positive connotations.

Conclusion

The *The Peanut Butter Falcon*’s strategy of depathologizing disability depends on its ability to evoke respect for Zak rather than a sense of sympathy that would counterproductively encourage compassion instead of admiration. The “supercrip” narrative emphasizes this feeling of respect by focusing on the disabled character’s achievement, as accomplishments of this nature can generally be considered positive (Grue 204); hence, the cause of the accomplishment—Zak’s ability to overcome the limitations of Down syndrome—is also perceived as being not necessarily negative. As Grue points out, by “embracing an affirmative model, disabled individuals assert a positive identity” (Swain and French in Grue 205), which is essential for the further “repudiat[ion] of the dominant value of normality” (205). In other words, the supercrip character must overcome his or her disability to “earn the viewer’s respect” (Fraser 5). The supercrip is a common stereotype in the disability narrative, representing an individual who can overcome the limits of their disability or impairment in an inspiring way. However, in sports, the supercrip identity has been criticized for encouraging further separation through its glorification of heroic effort (Martin; Berger); or, more specifically, the way in which it emphasizes the transcendence or defeat of disability as opposed to the recognition and acceptance of its constraints as part of a disabled individual’s identity. The result of such incentive is the reinforcement of the contrast between non-disabled and disabled individuals that encourages the persistent struggle to confront the boundaries of a disabled individual’s abilities. The supercrip example thus “unrealistically raise[s] expectations for all people with disabilities” (Martin), which raises questions about the purpose of such representations of the disabled and its potential to inspire both able-bodied and disabled audiences.

The Peanut Butter Falcon also features another aspect that contributes to the seemingly authentic representation of the disabled. The fact that Zack Gottsagen plays himself in the film adds credibility to the representation of Down syndrome, a perception that the film producers followed up on in promotional interviews for the film in which Zack Gottsagen and Shia LaBeouf revealed the close relationship that had developed between them during the making of the film. The validation of authenticity is reinforced thanks to the relevance of

the limitations imposed by Down syndrome in the film itself. In one such interview, which is available on YouTube, the reporter commented on Shia's invaluable experience in shooting *The Peanut Butter Falcon*:

Reporter: Shia, I've heard something that you said this project sort of changed your life, and it seems to have had a really profound effect on you [...]. What it was about this experience that meant so much to you?

Shia LaBeouf: Not even the experience, just being around Zack. Like, he softened me, and if you were around Zack long enough, he'd soften you too. [...] I was raised on Nirvana and the Simpsons and I have like a really cynical gene in me that sort of overwhelms the naive, cutesy part of me. And then you get around Zack long enough and you start feeling the effects. Zack has an effect on everyone around. And it is a softening effect.

The reporter goes on to underline the real outcome of the film production and the effect which Zack's friendship has had on Shia:

Reporter: [...] There is this one thing we take for granted, as audience members—friendship. It is the friendships that come from this [from shooting of a film]. We just see what's on the screen. But one of the things I guess you've both taken from this project is this friendship that you've developed.

The on-screen relationship between the characters of Tyler and Zak is intensified by the clearly authentic off-screen affection which exists between the actors Shia LaBeouf and Zack Gottsagen. The audience's awareness of the authenticity of their mutual respect intensifies the effect of the film's call for the depathologization of disability; an approach which serves as a rationalization for Tyler's unscrupulous behavior in the film and his obliviousness to the limits of Down syndrome, which ultimately encourages the destandardization of social and cultural reactions to disabilities.

In this interview, Shia LaBeouf also comments on how Zack Gottsagen answers the reporter's questions by acknowledging Zack's unexpected responses as specific features of Zack's medical condition. When Zack appears to ignore the reporter's questions and talks instead about different subjects, LaBeouf praises Zack's way of doing things and acknowledges his independence and autonomy that is beyond that which a normatively affected non-disabled individual could exhibit. Zack's physical and mental limits are neither social nor normative. Like a 'badass' who ignores social expectations, Zack is his own person, freed from the (in)significance of social norms. LaBeouf's recognition of this aspect of Zack's character is demonstrated in his comment on his experience with Zack's uncontrolled reactions, saying that "what just happened, [on set] we would go with his idea. Which actually brought some of my best stuff. I think I get in my own way and he [Zack] buffered me from myself" (Shia LaBeouf and Zack Gottsagen Interview, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*).

This recognition of Zack’s unique and valuable contribution within both the film narrative and in real life ultimately reinforces the positive representation of Down syndrome; I might even suggest that it is more effective in encouraging audiences to reassess the significance of Down syndrome in our own life experiences than the film itself.

Authenticity is a significant aspect of the representation of disability in this film. On the one hand, the narrative relies on the authenticity of the disabled actor who can (and does) demystify Down syndrome condition, but it is also part of the extrafilmic experience that transcends the usual impact of the representation of disability on audiences. The supercrip narrative experience is the main element which signifies the urge to challenge the typical understanding of disability as a condition that prevents individuals from pursuing their ambitions and successfully construct a purpose in their lives. However, while the supercrip narrative complements the authenticity of the film, it simultaneously complicates the attempt to achieve a realistic depiction of Down syndrome. By placing the Down syndrome actor into a contrast with two able-bodied, physically symmetrical, and aesthetically attractive characters, a focus is placed on the supercrip achievement objective and the altruistic support which Tyler and Eleanor provide to that end, rather than on a realistic depiction of the needs of the disabled. And, as the narrative gradually shifts in favor of the romantic storyline, Tyler and Eleanor’s support not only loses its altruistic aspect, but Tyler’s advocacy for Zak becomes more of an opportunistic vehicle by which to win Eleanor’s affections. The film narrative plays with the normal/abnormal dichotomy ultimately suggesting that, despite the effort to provide an authentic representation of Down syndrome and challenge mainstream perspectives of the able-bodied majority, it is in fact the able-bodied perspective constrained by the hegemonic discourse that creates the prism through which the viewer is encouraged to view Down syndrome. As Davis explains, this able-bodied majority perspective frames our understanding of the norm (33). And, with disability used as a “metaphoric signifier” for narrative purposes, rather than as an experience of “social and political” dimensions (Mitchell 15-16) through the contrast of the norm and a difference, the perspective which the film offers ultimately remains that of the able-bodied majority.

This research was supported by the VEGA project 1/0447/20 “The Global and the Local in Postmillennial Anglophone Literatures, Cultures and Media,” granted by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

End Note

1. The spelling of Zak, the name of the character in *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, differs intentionally from the spelling of the actor’s name, Zack Gottsagen.

Works Cited

- ANDREW, J. Dudley. *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- BAZIN, André. *What is Cinema?*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- BERGER, R. J. “Agency, Structure and the Transition to Disability: A Case Study with Implications for Life History Research.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2008. Published online 2 Dec. 2016, pp. 309–333. DOI: 10.1111/j.1533-8525.2008.00117.x. Accessed January 5, 2021.
- COUSER, Thomas G. “Signifying Bodies: Life Writing and Disability Studies,” in Sharon L. Snyder *et al.* (eds.), *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. The Modern Language Association of America, 2002, pp. 109–117.
- DAVIS, Lennard J. *Bending over Backwards Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*. TPB, 2002.
- FRASER, Benjamin (ed.). *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- JEFFREYS, Mark. “The Visible Cripple (Scars and Other Disfiguring Displays Included),” in Sharon L. Snyder *et al.* (eds.). *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, The Modern Language Association of America, 2002, pp. 31–39.
- MARTIN, Jeffrey J. *Handbook of Disability Sport and Exercise Psychology*. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2017. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190638054.001.0001. Accessed December 12, 2020.
- MITCHELL, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. The University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- MURRAY, Stuart. *Disability and the Posthuman: Bodies, Technology and Cultural Futures*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020.
- NILSON Tyler and Michael Schwartz. *The Peanut Butter Falcon*. Armory Films, 2019.
- NORDEN, Martin F. *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- RODAN, Debbie *et al.* *Disability, Obesity and Ageing: Popular Media Identifications*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014.
- SHAKESPEARE, T. “Art and lies? Representations of disability on film,” in Corker, Mairian and Sally French, *Disability discourse*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999, pp. 164–172.
- “Shia LaBeouf & Zack Gottsagen Interview: *The Peanut Butter Falcon*.” Youtube. Published online October 15, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8JW-vl3wz4>. Accessed March 22, 2021.
- SNYDER, Sharon L. *et al.* (eds.). *Disability Studies: Enabling Humanities*. The Modern Language Association of America, 2005.
- WALDSCHMIDT, Anne. “Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool,” in Berressem, Hanjo and Moritz Ingwersen (eds.). *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxs3r.1>. Accessed January 4, 2021.
- WALTZ, Mitzi. “Fearful Reflections: Representations of Disability in Post-War Dutch Cinema (1973-2011),” in Fraser, Benjamin (ed.). *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts*. Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 93–109.