

Media Representations: Disability

ECAY5005

2023

Clips from Channel 4's 'The Undateables'

- Please watch the following clips









How does the Channel 4 show 'The Undateables' encourage us to view the disabled?

Two Views of Disability- Recap

- **Medical Model** - Disabled by physical/mental impairment and need caring for, they are dependent on the able bodied
- **Social Model (Disablism)** - Disabled people are disabled by society through prejudice and discrimination reinforcing the belief they are dependent on the able bodied



Disablism

- The social barriers that arise when an able-bodied person views someone with an impairment with prejudice and treats them in a discriminatory way.
- **Shakespeare (2000)** found that the media representations of disabled people still relied on old stereotypes of twisted villains, plucky heroes and weak victims.
- He argues that the mass media encourages the able – bodied population to view people with disabilities as ‘other’ – an abnormal group that is not part of mainstream society.



Content Analysis

- According to Barnes (1992), there are a range of images of the disabled.
- Content analysis of electronic and print media identified 'the disabled person as.....'

- pitiable and pathetic
- an object of violence
- sinister and evil
- atmosphere or curio
- 'super cripple'
- an object of ridicule
- their own worst enemy
- a burden
- sexually abnormal
- incapable of participating in community life

Which of these were reflected in what was seen in the Undateables?



The Effect of Telethons (Charity fundraising)

- Roper (2003) – mass media representations of people with disabilities on telethons can create problems for the disabled
- Rely on ‘cute’ children which are not representative of the population
- Implies that charities, not governments, should be responsible for providing for the disabled, doesn’t ask why these people are disadvantaged
- Roper (2003) argues that media representations end up creating beggars
- Telethons are aimed at allowing the public to alleviate guilt and relief that they’re not disabled, not informing on the facts

(Roper, 2003 cited in Paton, 2007)



The Effect of Telethons (Charity fundraising)

- Karpf (1988) – there is a need for charities, but telethons act to keep audience as givers, whereas recipients are kept in place as grateful etc
- Telethons entertain the public not inform them about disability
- Therefore, representations confirm prejudices, e.g., people with disabilities being dependent

The views of people with disabilities (Ross, 1997)

- Carried out a qualitative study of 384 disabled viewers' attitudes towards media representations of the disabled
- Found these disabled viewers were overwhelmingly critical of way disabled characters featured on mainstream television. They objected to:

- Infantilization of disabled characters
- Unrealistic and sanitized portrayal of disability
- Persistent use of wheelchairs, white sticks and guide dogs to denote disability
- Associations with disabled roles such as anger and bitterness
- Restricted repertoire of character types
- Lack of first-hand experience by media practitioners
- Failure to present disabled people as able to have an ordinary life

TALKING DISABILITY IN FILM AND TV





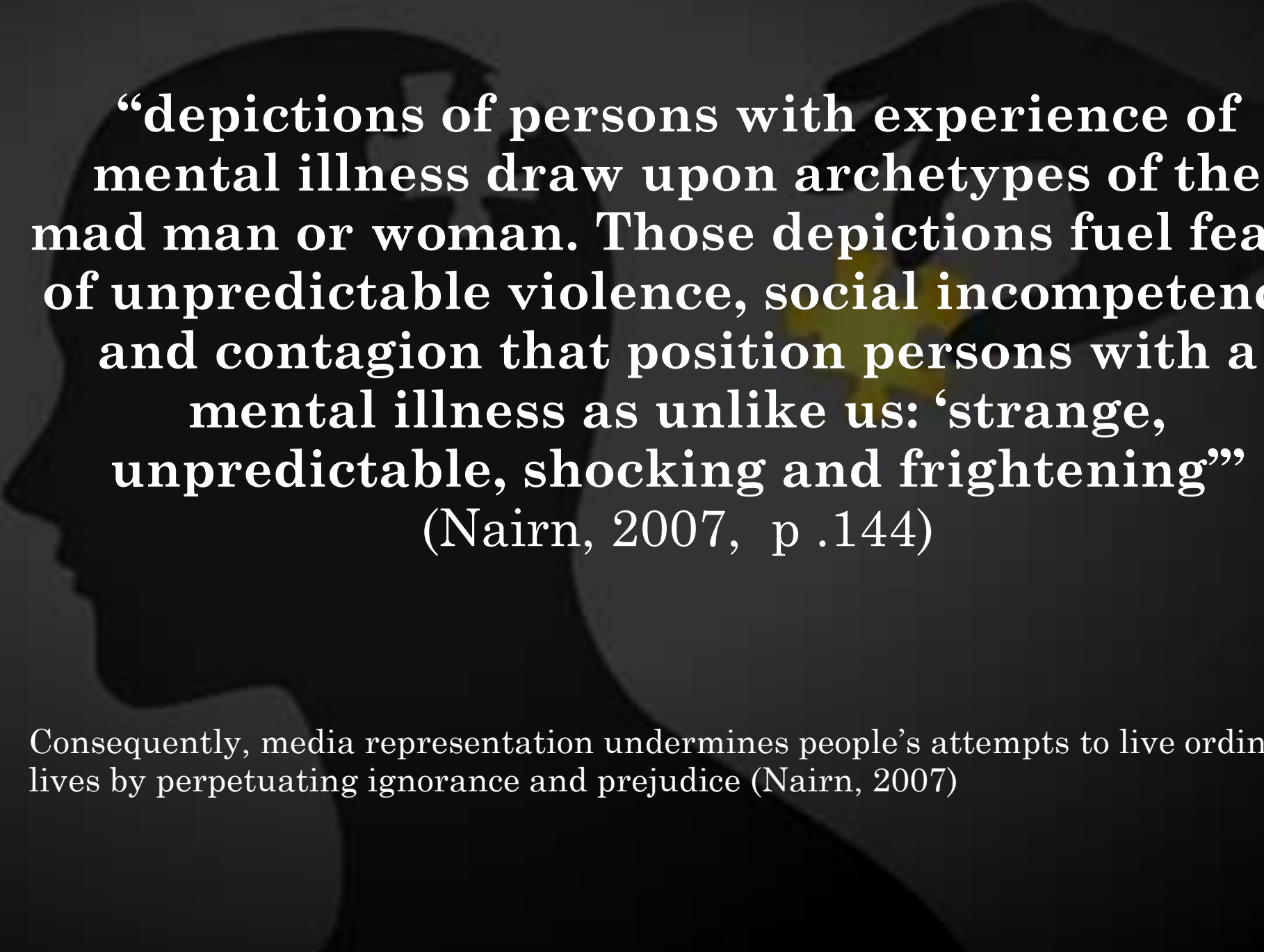
Zu is newly sober when she receives news that she is to become the sole guardian of her half-sister named Music, a young girl on the autism spectrum.

The film explores two of Sia's favourite themes: finding your voice and creating family

Representations of people with mental disabilities

- Glasgow University Media Group (Philo, 1996): television and press reporting often focuses on violent incidents
- Concluded that a high proportion of able-bodied people felt fear and anxiety when in proximity of those with mental health problems, because media coverage associates mental illness with violent behaviour
- Also claimed this could supersede personal experience





“depictions of persons with experience of mental illness draw upon archetypes of the mad man or woman. Those depictions fuel fears of unpredictable violence, social incompetence and contagion that position persons with a mental illness as unlike us: ‘strange, unpredictable, shocking and frightening”
(Nairn, 2007, p .144)

Consequently, media representation undermines people’s attempts to live ordinary lives by perpetuating ignorance and prejudice (Nairn, 2007)

Newspapers

- Content analysis of the Guardian and The Times between 1989 and 2009.
- Decline in stereotypical words such as 'brave'.
- However, stereotypical representations were still present in 2009. Journalist assume disability is tragic.
- Disability is not regarded as newsworthy.

(Williams-Findlay, 2009)



Newspapers

- Compared tabloid media coverage in 5 British newspapers in 2010-2011 and 2004-5.
- There had been an increase in reporting on disability. However, some groups (those with 'hidden' impairments and mental health conditions) were presented as 'undeserving'
- Disabled portrayed as welfare scroungers undeserving of benefits with the focus groups believing that 70% of benefit claims were fraudulent
- (Watson, Philo and Briant, 2011, p. 4)



“Disabled people are feeling threatened by the changes in the way disability is being reported and by the proposed changes to their benefits and benefit entitlements. These two are combining and reinforcing each other”

(Watson, Philo and Briant, 2011, p. 5)





BENEFITS BRITAIN: LIFE ON THE DOLE

5

BENEFITS STREET

JAMES TURNER ST.

References

Barnes, C. (1992) *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People*. Halifax: Ryburn Publishing

Karpf, A. (1988) *Doctoring the Media: Reporting of Health and Medicine*. London : Routledge

Nairn, Raymond G. , 'Media portrayals of mental illness, or is it madness? A review', *Australian Psychologist*, 42 (2), pp. 138 – 146 DOI: 10.1080/00050060701280623

Paton, R. (2007) Fundraising as Marketing: Half A Truth is Better Than None, in Mordaunt, J. and Paton, R. (Eds.) *Thoughtful Fundraising: Concepts, Issues and Perspectives*. London: Routledge

Philo, G. (1996) *Media and Mental Distress*. London: Longman

Ross, K. (1997). But where's me in it? Disability, broadcasting and the audience. *Media, Culture & Society*, 19(4), pp. 669–677.

Shakespeare, T. (2000) *Help (Imagining Welfare)*. London: Venture Press

Williams-Findlay, R. (2009) Is there evidence to support the view that the language and subject matter selected by the Times and the Guardian in relation to disabled people has changed over the last twenty years? Available at: <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/williams-findlay-RWilliams-DisabilityDissertation-200372855-3.pdf> (Accessed 21st February 2021)

Briant, E., Watson, N. and Philo, G. (2011) Bad News for Disabled People: How the Newspapers are Reporting Disability. Available at: <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/57499/1/57499.pdf> (Accessed 21st February 2021)