

# Disability Studies and Cultural Analysis of Disability



*Points of convergence and divergence*

**Dr Mitzi Waltz**  
**Senior Researcher**  
**Disability Studies in Nederland**  
**Universiteit van Amsterdam, 26 May 2016**

# A story about disability and film

- Disability in Dutch-language films tends to follow the same themes (Waltz, 2016):
  - Disabled people are angry, sad or manipulative
  - Disabled people cause harm or distress to 'normal' people
  - Disability makes life not worth living
- A recent example: *Nena* (dir. Saskia Diesing, 2014)

# A Disability Studies approach or a Cultural Analysis of Disability approach?

- I've chosen this example because it provides an opportunity to consider the merits of the "traditional" Disability Studies approach to film and other cultural texts, and the Cultural Analysis approach to texts when focused on disability
- In the clip you're about to see (warning: sexual content), film of Nena with her lover and her disabled father with his attendants is juxtaposed using fast cuts that invite you to make a comparison between their bodily experiences

*Nena*



# Disability Studies in a nutshell

- Disability Studies originated from discourses put forward by disabled people themselves, to counter hegemonic medicalised discourses about disability and disabled people. It has always had an explicitly emancipatory, and therefore political, side.
- Disability Studies is “the study of the various forces; economic, political, and cultural, that support and sustain ‘disability,’ as defined by the disabled peoples movement, in order to generate meaningful and practical knowledge with which to further its eradication” (Barnes, 2003: p. 9).
- Barnes’ quote is based on the key Disabilities Studies concept of the **social model of disability**, which separates *impairment* (physical or mental ill health or debility) from *disablement*, the process of putting barriers in front of people who experience impairment, thereby limiting their life choices and causing them harm and distress (oppression). It is this disabling process that Disability Studies seeks to eradicate.

# Doing Disability Studies research

- Disability Studies values non-oppressive research methods, such as participatory and emancipatory research.
- Research should produce outcomes that involve and improve the lives of disabled people.
- Research tends to be materialist in orientation, with a focus on power dynamics and identity, and can be seen as analogous to other forms of critical theory, such as critical race theory.
- However, there has also been a significant influence from post-structuralism and feminist scholarship (Thomas, 2007).

# A Disability Studies approach to *Nena*

- Focus on how disability is represented in the film. Are the representations realistic?
- Focus on whether or how disabled people were involved in making the film.
- Does the film present a message that counters or bolsters dominant cultural beliefs and behaviours around disability?
- What is the cultural and personal impact of this message for disabled people and non-disabled people?

# Cultural Analysis

- Cultural Analysis is based on the idea that cultural phenomena are a location where where meaning is created. It is based on a post-structuralist paradigm, and is widely used by queer and gender theorists, amongst others.
- Post-structuralism is a philosophical movement that interrogates the way Western culture tends to use binaries to explain cultural phenomena. In post-structuralist textual analysis (of which cultural analysis is an extension), post-structuralists focus on how texts are read and received, rather than how they are written. Meanings therefore shift depending on individual and cultural context.

# Doing Cultural Analysis (of disability) research

- A very broad range of such phenomena (texts such as films, books, images, computer games, or cultural practices in an anthropological sense) can be investigated using the analytical tools employed via Cultural Analysis.
- These tools are, for the most part, qualitative research forms borrowed from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and literary and film studies.
- Cultural Analysis values an interdisciplinary approach to reading and understanding cultural practices and forms.
- Researchers are expected to employ a critical perspective and to make their personal standpoint explicit.

# A Cultural Analysis of Disability approach to *Nena*

- How did viewers perceive the representations of (“read”) the disabled and non-disabled characters in the film?
- How does the film’s narrative about disabled people’s lives and euthanasia fit within common or counter-narratives within Dutch culture? What assumptions are evidenced in these representations?
- What impact did the film have artistically, culturally or individually?

# From Disability Studies to Cultural Analysis of Disability

- In the 1990s, there was a marked “cultural turn” in Disability Studies, championed primarily by US-based theorists and academics such as Lennard Davis, although it had some influential European proponents, including Marion Corker (Barton, 2006). These individuals and others questioned the structuralist and materialist orientation of traditional Disability Studies scholarship.
- As Jay Dolmage puts it in *Disability Rhetoric* (2014), this “‘cultural turn’ offers strategies and foci through which disability can be studied as medicalizing, individuating, hinged, or unhinged from materiality or the social. Cultures and their expressions can be studied for their role in making bodies, and bodies and their expressions can be studied for their role in making cultures” (*ibid.*, p. 100).

# What's the difference?

- To spot points of convergence and divergence, these questions are helpful:
  - Who decides what should be researched?
  - Who carries out the research?
  - Whose interpretations are valorised?
  - What is the purpose of the research—what are its intended results or end products?

# Key difference: The purpose of research

It is in the answers to these questions more than any specific research method or theoretical point of view that the differences between Disability Studies and Cultural Analysis of Disability come into full view.

- Not all Disability Studies research lives up to the goal of putting disabled people themselves in the driver's seat, furthering their goals or chipping away at disability oppression, but it is a core value, and Disability Studies research and researchers who fall short are often criticised (for example, Sheldon, 2006).
- While scholars using Cultural Analysis as a method are expected to state their standpoint, there is an assumption that this is an individual standpoint, rather than an attempt to articulate or further a movement. There is no "right" way to read a text.

# Cultural Analysis of Disability: SWOT analysis

- There are strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats inherent in the Cultural Analysis of Disability approach.
- Strengths and opportunities include opening up more nuanced, intersectional lines of analysis, and questioning the binaries and assumptions that some theorists see as inherent in the social model of disability itself.
- Weaknesses and threats include the diminishment of organic intellectual contributions to and from the Disabled People's Movement, and career-making through flights of abstract theorising, potentially at the expense of actual disabled people (a charge that has also been levelled at Disability Studies scholars, of course...)

# Disability Studies: SWOT analysis

- There are also strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats inherent in the Disability Studies approach.
- Strengths and opportunities include grounding work in the lived experience of disability, providing opportunities for disabled people to drive research priorities and practices, and the potential of creating a research foundation for social change.
- Weaknesses and threats include the potential for politicised, one-dimensional interpretations that may not capture all the nuances and contradictions of human lives and cultures.

# Where do Disability Studies and Cultural Analysis of Disability come together?

- There are intersections between the two approaches that go beyond methodology:
  - One point of intersection that could fulfil some socio-political goals of the Disabled People's Movement is Cultural Analysis work that reveals how all bodies, including disabled bodies, are constructed to some extent through the production and consumption of cultural practices.
  - Both approaches also engage with the concept of *biopower* (Foucault, 1976): the technologies of power that cultures use to police and subjugate various human populations. Coming at this topic from different directions can be very productive!

# Where do Disability Studies and Cultural Analysis of Disability come together?

- Disability Studies can in turn potentially inform Cultural Analysis, with its insistence on constantly considering *who and what research is for*, and its attempts (though often partial or flawed) to take research out of the academy and into “real life.”

# Discussion

- I'd like to know more about what you think about this subject.
- Some of you have completed the recent Cultural Studies of Disability seminar at the UvA, some have read Disability Studies texts, and for others this may be a new topic.
- On your seat you will have found a card with a number on it – please join the group that corresponds with that number and quickly discuss the questions you will receive! We will reconvene in 15 minutes for a brief discussion.

# References

- Barnes, Colin (2003) “Disability Studies: What’s the point?” Amended version of presentation to the Disability Studies: Theory, Policy and Practice conference, 4 September 2003, Lancaster. Online at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1323&context=gladnetcollect> [Accessed 11 April 2016]
- Barton, Len (2006) *Overcoming Disabling Barriers: 18 Years of Disability & Society*. London: Routledge.
- Dolmage, Jay Timothy (2014) *Disability Rhetoric*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1976) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sheldon, Alison (2006) “Disabling the Disabled People’s Movement? The influence of Disability Studies on the struggle for liberation.” Presentation to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Disability Studies Association conference, 18-20 September, Lancaster. Online at: <http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/Sheldon-disabling-the-dps-movement.pdf> [Accessed 11 April 2016]
- Thomas, Carol (2007) *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Waltz, Mitzi (2016) “Fearful reflections: Representations of disability in Postwar Dutch cinema(1973-2011)” in: Benjain Fraser (ed.) *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press/Wallflower Press.