

Hey Timmy, How Many Able-bodied People Does it Take to Screw in a Light Bulb?: The Troublesome Subversion of Disability Stereotypes

Rebecca Mallett: r.mallett@shu.ac.uk

*Division of Education and Humanities,
Sheffield Hallam University*

Inaugural Cultural Disability Studies Research Network Conference, Liverpool John Moores University, 26th-27th May 2007

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1987 Kriegel (1987:32) declared that:

"In the history of Western literature [...] there is little to be added to these two images [Richard III first as 'damned cripple' and then as 'pitied man'], although there are a significant number of variations upon them".

This declaration neatly articulates an assertion which prompted a search for 'stereotypes of disability'.

But what I want to talk about today is not related to adding to this search for 'stereotypes', or even to prove that they do or don't exist, but ...

to explore **how the idea of 'stereotypes' allows the practice of disability-criticism to frame its explanations of 'representations of disability'** and, in particular, **how the concept of 'stereotypes' enables and/or restrains disability-criticism.**

To do this I am going to contrast: (a) disability-criticism which searches for stereotypes of disability in order to lambaste them as negative and/or bad representations with; (b) disability-criticism that attends to the subversion of stereotypes and therefore doesn't consider 'stereotypes' to be *always* negative and/or bad representations...and that is when South Park comes in.

I start with the first: disability-criticism that went on a search for stereotypes.

2. SEARCHING FOR STEREOTYPES

(a) Count and Categorise

The search for stereotypes has taken a number of forms and often results in accounts which **count and categorise** the text – to give a few examples...

Longmore's (1987:67) essay found **3** stereotypes: "disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their 'fate'; disabled people resent the non-disabled and would, if they could, destroy them".

Kriegel (1987) identified **4**: the demonic cripple; the charity cripple; the realistic cripple and the survivor cripple.

In 'Disabling Imagery and the Media' Colin **Barnes** (1992) cites **11** 'commonly recurring media stereotypes' including:

the **Pitiable and Pathetic** Barnes speaks in relation to TV charity shows (such as Children In Need) and 'sentimentality' in literature (such as Tiny Tim in the Christmas Carol).

and the **Super-Cripple**. Here Barnes uses the example of blind people who are portrayed as visionaries with a sixth sense or extremely sensitive hearing. Later I'll talk about Christopher Reeve/Superman in these terms.

Others hint at such a concept.

For instance Dahl (1993) uses 'metaphor', 'convention' and 'typification' to the same effect.

Biklen (1987:515) also speaks of "key literary themes" offers loose categories of stereotypes of disabled people as "recipients of charity, as clients of professional care, or as people who may be expendable from the mainstream" (ibid).

Each of these accounts use the idea of 'stereotypes' as a **tool** (or a **Technique of Commentary**) that allows criticism to "exorcise the chance element" within 'disability' texts and gain control of the text. And this is what I'm interested in - how stereotypes *help* us read representations, how stereotypes give us control over representations.

(b) Stereotypes as a 'Technique of Commentary': Simplify and Fix

For Stuart Hall (1997b:258 emphasis in original), stereotypes:

"get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognised' characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and *simplify* them, and *fix* them".

So by saying it is a stereotype (which ever one it is) enables the interpreter to carve up the text into reduced, simplify and fixed categorisations which are more easy evaluate as either good or bad.

To do this, the simplified and fixed categorisations that have been identified in the text are evaluated by being split along either/or lines.

(c) Stereotypes as a 'Technique of Commentary': Splitting Either/Or

Again, Stuart Hall (1997b:258) describes stereotypes as setting:

"up a frontier between 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological', the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable' [...] between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them".

These are oppositional categories and when applied by disability-criticism they can help split the text along either acceptable or unacceptable lines. But to do this criticism has to decide what is acceptable or unacceptable.

(d) Stereotypes as a 'Technique of Commentary': Constituting Un/Acceptability

In this instance, I would suggest that stereotypes of disability are deemed to be: **Either Unacceptable** and in line with Medicine's tendency to 'particularise' and 'pathologise' and therefore 'negatively' associates impairment with incomplete/incapacitated selves/souls.

Or Acceptable and in line with a humanist conception of the whole, true 'human being', where wholeness is associated with acceptance and fulfilment of self *regardless* of impairment.

If I'd had more time I would explore these ideas and unpack them a little but instead let me very briefly offer a handful of examples of how this technique of commentary works in practice.

e) Stereotypes In Practice

There are at least, 3 strands of critique which use stereotypes in this way.

These can be delineated as

- (I) Whole Selves
- (II) Acceptance and fulfilment of self
- (III) Self defined by absence

And I'm quickly going to go through each one.

(e) Stereotypes In Practice I, II & III

(I) Whole Selves

Two examples of criticism which uses this idea are as follows:

"The cripple is the creature who has been deprived of his ability to create a self" (Kriegel, 1987:33).

"A cripple is still a man, but, as it were, on a smaller scale. His totality is diminished, his image is distorted. He is not whole" (Battye, 1966: www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk).

These comments are all made in relation to literary representations of disabled people and both work on the idea that disabled characterisations are not fully developed characterisations or that characters are described as having an incomplete selves because they have an incomplete/not fully-functioning body. In turn, both share the presupposition that not affording disabled characters the possession of a unified, completed self means it is a negative/bad representation.

(II) Acceptance and Fulfilment of Self

Deborah Kent, for example, relates the 'isolation' of many disabled literary characters to the desire for potentials to be fulfilled – for 'whole' people to be allowed to flourish. When discussing 'marriage' as a resolving theme[1] in literature Kent (1988) explores how the widely held consensus that disabled women are unable to achieve feminine fulfilment" (Kent, 1988:93) results in few writers choosing to "depict women with disabilities" as heroines. She states:

"[b]ut if love and marriage were out of the question, I would have been thrilled simply to read of a disabled woman who found other forms of fulfilment - through friendships, work, appreciation of nature and art. The heroine I sought needed only to feel good about herself" (Kent, 1988:93).

So here, for Kent, it is 'unacceptable' for representations of disabled women to suggest an inability to accept and fulfil themselves and works on the idea that, instead, disabled characters must be portrayed as being accepted by others as well as accepting and fulfilling themselves.

The third strand...

(III) Self Defined by Absence

The association of disability with varying degrees of 'evil' can be seen as another part of this concern with the 'full human being'.

In his discussion of the 'demonic cripple' category Kriegel (1987:34) explores how the 'cripple' in literature, in his words:

"must accept definition from outside the boundaries of his own existence [...] His wound is not only the visible manifestation of his condition, it is also the symbolic correlative of that existence. Without it, he does not exist – indeed, he cannot exist".

So for Kriegel the 'crippled' character is *defined* by his/her absence and/or insufficiency. To illustrate he points to how Captain Ahab's amputation becomes his selfhood, which leads him to embark on a "quest for vengeance".

(f) Stereotypes as a 'Technique of Commentary': Evaluated

Although disability-criticism has widened from these positions, such a discourse of critique - such a way of interpreting - continues to be used.

For example, when the BBC's Director of Programming presented one of the corporation's initiatives to improve the portrayal of disabled people, she stated: "disabled people need to be shown less as minorities with issues and problems, and more as people with lives as rich or as complex as the rest of society" (Jana Bennett, c.2003 quoted in Bewick, 2005:28). In others words, not as stereotypes.

And more recently in *The Times*, when highlighting a new sitcom on BBC Three called *I'm with Stupid*, the show's creator is quoted as saying:

“it is an attempt to ‘show disabled people as real people, rather than putting them on a pedestal” (Batey, 2006:50). In other words it’s an attempt to show people as full human beings and not as stereotypes.

The strength of this type of critical discourse, and the reason why it remains in currency, is in its clear line of argument. ‘Stereotypes’ enable criticism to state that: **many representations of disability are simplified, negative, bad stereotypes - they should be revealed as such and replaced by more complete, positive representations if ‘we’ are to change attitudes about disability/disabled people.**

Now you might say - well that sounds sensible BUT one major problem with such criticism is that it can only accommodate ‘representations of disability’ within a discourse which *negates* difference - which tries to cancel out it out. In other words, as a technique of commentary, ‘stereotypes’ can only go as far as condemning simplified, generalised and incomplete portrayals as negative.

Secondly, its reliance on the idea of **universal humanity** further reveals its limits as strategy of criticism: it cannot offer a political position in terms of supporting a strongly-defined ‘them’ category (disabled people), nor does it offer theoretical positions based on ‘disability’ being a differentiated category of study. It can only attempt amelioration, leaving no room for revolution, and this presents problems, particularly when disability-criticism is met with a text like *South Park* - where condemning simplified, generalised and incomplete portrayals would not amount to criticism but would amount to not understanding the text.

3. SUBVERTING STEREOTYPES: SUPERMAN COMES TO SOUTH PARK

In contrast with the ‘search for stereotypes’ a more recent strand of criticism acknowledges that ‘stereotypes’ are not exclusively a ‘negative’ form. I’m interested here in what this means for an effective future for disability-criticism and to explore this I’m going to use the example of the US cartoon-series *South Park*.

I’m very quickly going to outline 3 examples of how commonly identified ‘stereotypes’ are evident but are transgressed and subverted, making it problematic to simply claim that these are ‘negative’ or ‘bad’ representations of disability. All of them are from an episode which was first aired in 2003 and is called ‘Krazy Kripples’.

(a): Deflecting “the stigmatizing definition back to the offenders”

An example of such subversion of stereotypes in *South Park* occurs in the following scene, which takes place as Jimmy and Timmy approach Cartman, Stan and Kyle while they play in the snow with their toy trucks.

“Jimmy: Say, would you guys like to join our club? Oh, I’m sorry. You can’t. You aren’t crippled. *[Start laughing. The boys go back to playing with their trucks.]*

Kyle: What?

Jimmy: To be on our club, not only do you have to be c-c-crippled, but you have to have been *born* that way. Do you know what that means? No butthole Superman asswipe Christopher Reeve!

Stan: That's nice guys. We're just gonna stay out of this one. *[Jimmy and Timmy turn and walk away.]*

Cartman: *[Jumps up and catches up to them.]* Hey, wait a minute! *[Timmy and Jimmy stop.]* You guys can't just start a club and tell me I can't be in it!

Jimmy: Sorry, able-bodied, you can't join.

Cartman: Can too!

Jimmy: *[Turns to Timmy.]* Hey Timmy, how many able-bodied people does it take to screw in a light bulb? One. *[Begins to laugh. Timmy begins to laugh as well.]* You know what you call an able-bodied guy on the doorstep? Whatever his name is. *[He and Timmy laugh, then walk away laughing.]*

Cartman: Oh God-damnit!!!"

For White (2005:69), by using "well-known jokes previously applied to disability and other groups" Jimmy's retorts serve to "transgress and subvert stereotypes about disability and turn them onto the 'normate', the able-bodied". Mitchell and Snyder (2001b:209) describe such a transgressive move as deflecting "the stigmatizing definition back to the offenders" which "shames the dominant culture into recognition of its own dehumanizing precepts".

b) Swapping Between Stereotypes

The last scene made reference to the 'celebrity' in the episode: Christopher Reeve who is, at various stages, characterised by all the main disability stereotypes. Firstly, Reeve is established as the 'super-crip' stereotype, for instance in the Mayor's introductory remarks:

"Mayor McDaniels: And so without further ado, here's the most courageous, most amazing man on the planet, Christopher Reeve"

Quickly his 'super-crip' status is subverted by an appearance on *Larry King Live* - in which he extols the virtue of stem cell research by taking a foetus, cracking it open, sucking out its contents and declaring: "[a]nd now you can see, my arms have better movement" (*South Park*: Episode 702: 'Krazy Kripples') - thereby morphing from the 'super-crip' into the 'disability as evil' and 'disability as revengeful' stereotypes.

At this point I'm just going to outline Reeve's widely unquestioned position as a 'super-crip' - for those of you how may not know. His status was never more evident than in the weeks following his death. In a journal article Goggin and Newell (2004) offer an array of press headlines from the weeks following Reeve's death. They include "Incredible Journey: Facing tragedy Christopher Reeve inspired the world with hope and a lesson in courage" (from *People* magazine) and "Reeve: The Real Superman" (from the *Hindustani Times*). The 'super-crip' rhetoric is also one that Reeve himself was happy to enter into, entitling his autobiographies *Still Me* (1998) and *Nothing is Impossible: Reflections on a New Life* (2002). This is continued in the titles of a number of biographies which take Reeve as their subject, such as Havill's *Man of Steel: The Career and Courage of Christopher Reeve* (1996) and Wren's *Christopher Reeve: Hollywood's Man of Courage* (1999).

South Parks' subversion certainly gives credence to White's (2005:67) assertion that observations about the show have included "[s]hocking, irreverent, obscene, politically incorrect and offensive". But this offence should not be interpreted as an attack on Christopher Reeve and everything he represents, such as the assumption that disabled people want to be 'normal'.

(c) Not One-way

South Park's disability-related subversions are not aimed exclusively at the 'normate' and their assumptions about disabled people. *South Park* isn't attacking one-way. The show also deals with issues *within* 'disability' circles. For instance, in the same episode, the claim for authenticity between those born with and those who have acquired their impairments is dealt with.

When everyone chooses to go to Reeve's speech rather than attend his comedy show, Jimmy asks "Why is a celebrity who became crippled more important than us that were born that way" (*South Park*: Episode 702: 'Krazy Kripples') not only questioning the relationship between celebrity and disability but also articulating the (occasional) division between those with acquired and those with congenital impairments.

With Jimmy calling Reeve a "crippled wannabe" and a character called 'Tall Crip' stating that "you can't become a Crip by accident, fool!" (*South Park*: Episode 702: 'Krazy Kripples') this episode succinctly satirises struggles over ontological categories currently proceeding within Disability Studies and the Disabled People's Movement(s).

4. SO HOW SHOULD WE READ SOUTH PARK?

I do not intend to suggest that what we should afford *South Park* with more leeway – allow it to get away with more. Instead, I want to use *South Park* to demonstrate that by simplifying, fixing and splitting texts into either good or bad representations (whichever criteria is used), criticism closes down its own theoretical and political force.

This can be seen to be particularly problematic when disability-criticism tries to account for modes of representation such as 'humour'.

In a *Disability Now* article about the number of 'disability' jokes on television, Nuala Calvi (2003:14) acknowledges that: "[t]he lines become more blurred when comedians claim satire and parody as tools for exposing the stupidity of others"

She's talking about the lines between good and bad representations and begs the question - is it ok to parody disability issues if the intention is to parody the 'stupidity' of disability-prejudice?

Usually the answer here is to say that it's ok as long as the **author** of the parody is disabled themselves and/or if the **clear intention** is to parody the 'stupidity' of disability-prejudice

However, in 2005 the *South Park* character Timmy - “the wheelchair-using character with learning difficulties” (OUCH, 2005a: www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/yourspace/tvvote/timmy) - was voted ‘the greatest disabled TV character’ by readers of the OUCH website (OUCH, 2005a). In second place came Brian Potter (*Phoenix Nights*) and third place went to Andy Pipkin (*Little Britain*).

None of these shows are written or directed by people known to be impaired nor have they openly claimed to be parodying the ‘stupidity’ of disability-prejudice?

In fact in ‘vote analysis’ published on the OUCH site it is contended that: “[f]or disabled people, Timmy from *South Park* was absolutely streets ahead of the nearest competition [...] Many non-disabled people would consider *South Park* - and especially Timmy - to be mocking disabled people - but disabled TV viewers seemingly don't appreciate safe and cute storylines any longer.”

This raises important questions not only to do with how we deal with shows like *South Park* (i could equally have talked here about *Little Britain* or *Phoenix Nights*) but also important questions to do with what tools, or techniques of commentary, we are using to deal with ‘representations of disability’ in general.

As long ago as 1999, Tom Shakespeare (1999:172) wrote:

“[i]f disabled activists want the broad message about prejudice to be taken on board [...] then it may be necessary to take a more positive and less one-dimensional view of representation, lest we are accused of failing to see the wood for the trees, or even of being prejudiced ourselves” (Shakespeare, 1999:172).

I would suggest that, ‘we’ (whoever we are) are in need of a broader debate about disabling representations which is about the practice as well as the findings of disability-criticism - deciding how to read *South Park* is part of understanding of *how* disability-criticism opens up and/or closes down its own theoretical and political force.

References

- Barnes, C. (1992) *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People*, Halifax, BCODP/Ryburn Publishing.
- Batey, A. (2006) ‘Multichannel Choice: I’m With Stupid’ *The Times: The Knowledge*, September 9th p.50-51.
- Battye, L. (1966) ‘The Chatterley Syndrome’ in P. Hunt (ed.) *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, Chap.2 [online] PDF Document available from www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/archframe [15/06/05].
- Bewick, M. (2005) ‘Smile, you’re on TV’ *Lifestyle*, 48, pp.28-33.
- Biklen, D. (1987) ‘Framed: Print journalism’s treatment of disability issues’ in A. Gartner and T. Joe (eds.) *Images of Disability, Disabling Images*, New York/London, Praeger, pp.79-98.
- Calvi, N. (2003) ‘It’s no joke’ *Disability Now*, July, p.14.
- Dahl, M. (1993) ‘The role of the media in promoting images of disability - disability as metaphor: the evil crip’ *Canadian Journal of Communications*

18:11 [online] WWW document available from www.wlu.ca/~wwwpress/jrls/cjc/BackIssues/18.1/dahl [11/12/02].

- Foucault, M. (1981) [1971] 'The Order of Discourse' in R. Young (ed.) *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, London, Routledge/Kegan & Paul, pp.48-78. Trans: I. McLeod.
- Hall, S. (1997) 'The spectacle of the "other"' in S. Hall (ed.) *Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London, Sage, pp.223-291.
- Kent, D. (1988) 'In search of a heroine: Images of women with disabilities in fiction and drama' in A. Asch and M. Fine (eds.) *Images of Women with Disabilities in Fiction and Drama: Essays in Psychology, Culture and Politics*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, pp.90-110.
- Kriegel, L. (1987) 'The cripple in literature' in A. Gartner and T. Joe (eds.) *Images of Disability, Disabling Images*, New York/London, Praeger, 31-46.
- Longmore, P. K. (1987) 'Screening stereotypes: Images of disabled people in television and motion pictures' in A. Gartner and T. Joe (eds.) *Images of Disability, Disabling Images*, New York/London, Praeger, pp.65-78.
- Melville, H. (1988) [1851] *Moby Dick*, Oxford, Oxford University Press: Edited with an introduction and notes by T. Tanner.
- OUCH (2005a) 'Greatest Disabled TV Character: Timmy' [online] WWW Document available from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/yourspace/tvvote/timmy> [25/02/06].
- OUCH (2005b) 'Greatest Disabled TV Character: Vote Anal' [online] WWW Document available from http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/yourspace/tvvote/vote_analysis [25/02/06].
- Shakespeare, T. (1999) 'Art and lies? Representations of disability on film' in M. Corker and S. French (eds.) *Disability Discourse*, Buckingham, Open University Press, pp.164-172.
- *South Park* (2003) 'Krazy Kripples' Episode 7.02: originally aired 26th March [online] WWW Document available from www.twiztv.com/scripts/southpark/season7/southpark-702 [26/02/06].
- White, J. (2005) "Krazy kripples": Using South Park to talk about disability' in L. Ben-Moshe, R. C. Cory, M. Feldbaum and K. Sagendorf (eds.) *Building Pedagogical Curb Cuts: Incorporating Disability into the University Classroom and Curriculum*, Syracuse, The Graduate School, Syracuse University, pp.83-91.