

Narrative – Expectation – Experience:

How performers' intellectual/learning disabilities shape the reception of the theatre performance and movies

With a summary in Easy Language

Society at large holds unconscious perceptions and prejudices towards people with intellectual disabilities and unexpected **experiences with them can turn them visible and accessible to critical reflexions**. The audiences do not quite expect a person with disability to play more than a token character and are taken by surprise when they encounter a person with intellectual disability lead the play/film. The EEE study focuses on such theatre performances and films. Such texts do not focus on disability as a means and end to tell a story, but rather incorporate disability as just one of the aspects of their theme and the actor. They focus on a wide variety of subjects with disability being just one of the facets of the protagonist's life.

One of the initial premises of the study is the following: The intellectual disability of the actors has a lasting impact on the viewers, shapes their perception, emotions and interpretation of the text. On the stage and in the film, the fictional and real-world overlap, meshing them inseparably; with the performers being perceived simultaneously as both, characters and as persons. This begets the question : How can this be used to initiate a constructive dialogue between the audience and their perceptions of intellectual disability? The analyses of a wide range of theatre performances and films aids in exploring this.

Initially, a slice-of-life depiction of mental disability is presented- the images of mental disability from everyday life. These veer towards negative and stigmatising. The interactions between people with and without disabilities is tense and awkward to begin with. There are ambivalent feelings punctuated with internalised ableism and general lack of know-how with respect to seeing people with disabilities as multifaceted individuals. Intellectual disability is seen as a problem, a hurdle, an obstacle to leading a 'normal life' and not as 'just another way of life riddled with its own set of complexities as that of any other individuals'. Intellectual disability is seen as an affliction, with those suffering from it resigned to their fate of sadness and depression. Historically, the mainstream imagination of intellectual disability falls short of imagining people with intellectual disabilities being able to lead their lives with joy and satisfaction. -To this end, common images of "mental" disability from everyday life are first presented. They are generally negative and stigmatising. The interaction between people with and without disabilities is tense and characterised by ambivalent feelings and taboos. This is because "intellectual" disability is seen as a problem and not as a special way of life with its

~~own room for manoeuvre. Those affected are seen as suffering from their own fate, sadness and depression rather than joy and satisfaction with their own lives.~~

~~With this contextual understanding of representation of intellectual disability in the everyday world, the texts are analysed from different perspectives: Narratives, Expectations and Experiences. Against the background of these images from the everyday world, the texts are now analysed from different perspectives: Narratives, expectations and experiences.~~

- **Narratives** form the context that structures the perception of people with "intellectual" disabilities. Narratives show an individual with an "intellectual" disability in a specific environment. In this context, the disability can mean different things.
- **Expectations** arise from the audience's prior knowledge (extra-textual expectations, everyday knowledge) and from the structure of the texts (intra-textual expectations, e.g. familiarity with genres and narrative patterns). Surprises are only possible through expectations, because expectations can be fulfilled or unmet .
- **Experiences** are created through the cognitive and emotional appropriation of the works by the audience. The narrative and expectation structures of theatre performances and films make certain emotions and evaluations likely that correspond or contradict the common conceptions of "intellectual" disability. New affective experiences with people with "intellectual" disabilities become possible.

Two theatre performances and two films, both with narratives of varying levels of complexities are examined in detail. One of the plays, *La perspectiva del suricato* (*The perspective of the meerkat*, Compañía Deconné, 2020) is a parable of self-discovery of an individual who accepts himself as 'strange'. The second play, *Un Peepshow per Cenerentola* (*A Peep-Show for Cinderella*, Teatro La Ribalta - Art of Diversity, 2020) is an eroticised fairy tale that addresses desire, appearance and beauty standards. **It criticises the subjugation of man to mutilating and equalising ideal norms.** On the films front, *Théo et les métamorphoses* (*Theo and the Metamorphoses*, directed by Damien Odoul, 2021) is a tale of the transformation of man on the wings of his imagination erasing the differences between genders (man and woman) and species (man and animal). *Olvido y León* (*Olvido and León*, directed by Xavier Bermúdez, 2021) is a grotesque social drama.

The findings demonstrate that a complex, multi-faceted representation of intellectual disability occurs when the disability is presented neither as an unsolvable nor as an already resolved or an irrelevant problem. Loose frameworks for evaluation and interpretation, along with experiences that disrupt common perceptions of intellectual disability are most complex. New, positive perceptions are generated by foregrounding the latent, negative perceptions about intellectual disability **(in order to confront the viewer with them consciously)**, by offering

alternative perceptions that expand on possibilities of experiences **and by** disturbing automatisms that lead to stereotypical perceptions.

~~Overall, it can be said of the corpus of theatre performances and films that they cover almost the entire spectrum between mainstream and arthouse film. There are no dominantly negative stories to be found. On the contrary, people with "intellectual" disabilities are generally portrayed as active, cheerful people with completely normal needs. In the film, the feel good movie even predominates. The complexity of society's treatment of people with "intellectual" disabilities is rarely mentioned. Each work expands stereotypical ways of perceiving, thinking and feeling and is a tightrope walk between trivialisation and excessive problematisation.~~

~~The study concludes with a comparison of the possibilities of theatre and film at the production, work and reception level to change perceptions of "mental" disability. The fundamental challenges are also addressed: to convince aesthetically, to expand the opportunities for participation of the performers and to lead from a general conception of "disability" to an individual conception of a "person with a disability". The tasks of theatre and film analysis, in turn, lie in expanding the analytical tools for sensitising people to the representation of disability and in mediating between the work and the audience by working out specific ways of reading the texts, with which a new "emotional practice" towards people with "intellectual" disabilities becomes possible.~~

~~The monographmonography concludes with a summary of the structure and results of the study in plain language.~~

The study concludes by comparing the possibilities that theatre and films offer at every level - pre and post production along with reception to change the perceptions of 'intellectual disability'. It is addresses challenges that arise during production: the form and aesthetics of realising the subject, how to incorporate inclusivity while casting, how to enrich the reception for disabled audiences, how to distil the concept of disability at the individual's level - person with disability, where disability is a facet of their identity and not the whole of it. The goal of theatre and film analysis is to develop analytical tools, frameworks and guidelines that foster greater sensitivity and awareness towards representation of disability. It also aims to act as an intermediary between the work and audience by helping the audience develop skills to read the texts, grounding them in exercising 'emotional practise' through new techniques of reception and interpretation towards people with intellectual disabilities.

The monograph concludes with a summary of frameworks, structures employed in the study as well the results in Easy language.