

Images, Ideals, and Intentions: History and Disability on Screen

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Abstract: Scholars of history, disability, and popular culture have spent the last few decades examining, critiquing, and unpacking the meaning and impact behind representations of disability in television and cinema, both past and present. While their source material varies, their basic arguments do not; scholars argue that the majority of incidents of disability on screen are reductive, inauthentic, stigmatizing, and repetitive. This essay examines CBS Television's The Waltons as a case study in disability and American cultural history and contends that, by and large, representations of disability on screen are indeed problematic for the very reasons that scholars have so thoughtfully articulated. However, the following article argues that to properly understand the history of disability on screen and to effectively mitigate its stigmatizing legacy, scholars must look beyond the images of disability that have long graced television screens and consider the people and production processes that brought them to light [1]. Popular entertainment does not exist in a vacuum; the finished product of a television series is a visual artifact at the end of a long and complex production process.

Disability on screen has a long and storied history, and understanding that history might be the key to creating more inclusive, representative, and nuanced portrayals of disability in the future.¹ In an essay originally published in 1985, disability studies scholar Paul K. Longmore urged

¹ Studies of disability and popular culture have not been limited to discussions of disability on screen. One of the most widely explored topics related to disability in popular culture is the pejoratively-termed 'freak show'. Leslie Fielder's 1978 work *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* is among the earliest scholarly treatments of disability in popular entertainment and culture. Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), and more recently Nadja Durbach's *Spectacle of Deformity* (2009) have all advanced the discussion of society's relationship to disability through popular culture. Scholarly works that explore cultural representations of people with disabilities as found in art, imagery, literature, and public forum have also received scholarly attention. Edited works such as Eli Bower's *The Handicapped in Literature: A Psychosocial Perspective* (1980), Alan Gartner and Tom Joe's edited collection *Images of the Disabled/Disabling Images* (1986), David Hevey's *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (1992), Dennis Casling's "Cobblers and Song-birds: The Language and Imagery of Disability" (1993), Tom Shakespeare's "Cultural Representations of Disabled People: Dustbins for

representations of people with disabilities in television, film, literature, and the arts needs more detailed investigation ... Such studies should draw upon psychological and social-psychological explorations of the dynamics of prejudice against disabled people.²

The value of this undertaking “would deepen our understanding of both the images themselves and the social and cultural attitudes they express.”³ Since then, a respectable body of literature has emerged which addresses Longmore’s concerns.⁴ Scholars of history, disability, and popular culture have spent the last few decades examining, critiquing, and unpacking the meaning and impact behind representations of disability in television, cinema, and other forms of popular culture, both past and present. While their source material varies, their basic arguments do not; most incidents of disability in popular culture are reductive, inauthentic, stigmatizing, repetitive, and produced by and aimed at the non-disabled. This essay contends that representations of

Avowal?” (1994), Ann Pointon and Chris Davies’ *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media* (1997), Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006), Carol Poore’s *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (2007), and the edited collection by Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson *Re-presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum* (2010) have all advanced understanding of the way disability rightfully permeates broader culture.

² Paul Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures,” in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, ed. Paul Longmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 146.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lauri E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1988); John S. Schuchman, *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Guy Cumberbatch and Ralph Negrine, *Images of Disability on Television* (London: Routledge, 1992); Martin Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: a History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Susan Crutchfield and Marcy Epstein, eds., *Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Christopher E. Smit and Anthony Enns, eds., *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001); Steven Brown, *Movie Stars and Sensuous Scars: Essays on the Journey from Disability Shame to Disability Pride* (New York: Universe, Inc., 2003); Beth Haller, *Representing Disability in an Ableist World: Essays on Mass Media* (Louisville: Advocado Press, 2010); Marja Evelyn Mogk, ed., *Different Bodies: Essays on Disability in Film and Television* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2013).

disability on screen are, by and large, problematic for the very reasons that scholars have previously articulated. However, I push this thinking further and argue that to properly understand the history of disability on screen and to effectively mitigate its stigmatizing legacy, scholars must look beyond the images of disability that have long graced television screens and consider the people and production processes that brought them to light.

As an avid consumer of 1970s television, *The Waltons* had long been on my 'to watch' list. Yet, watching *The Waltons* turned out to be anything but an end-of-the-day retreat from the heaviness of my doctoral studies. I was instead struck that, from the show's outset, *The Waltons* put disability front and center in many of its storylines. Case in point, the premiere episode "The Foundling" (September 14, 1972) revolved around a young deaf girl and her family coming to terms with her deafness and learning sign language. The next week's episode "The Carnival" (September 21, 1972) featured Billy Barty, a well-known performer with dwarfism and advocate for disability rights. *The Waltons* premiere season concluded with a special two-hour episode entitled "The Easter Story" (April 19, 1973), in which matriarch Olivia Walton contracted polio and dealt with temporary paralysis. Such spotlights on disability continued throughout the series' run. The popularity of this critically-acclaimed TV program throughout its original run from 1972-1981 makes *The Waltons* a strong source on which to anchor a case study of disability in American culture.⁵

Methodology: Disability On and Behind the Screen

By the grace of the television DVD boxset, I was able to watch the entire series in sequence over a short period of time. I observed that disability remained a consistent theme throughout the series' original nine-year run. Having viewed all 221 original episodes of the series, I next rewatched and critically assessed all episodes relevant to disability. What I discovered in deconstructing these episodes supported my earlier

⁵ Series creator Earl Hamner Jr. recalled fondly: "By the end of the [first] season *The Waltons* was number one in the ratings and when the Emmys were handed out in May of 1973, Cecil Smith wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, '*The Waltons*, to nobody's surprise, was voted the best series and won five other awards' ... The series would stay on the air for nine full seasons. On some Thursday nights it was seen by as many as fifty million viewers. It won many awards in the years to come." Earl Hamner Jr., as quoted in Earl Hamner and Ralph Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy: A Celebration of an American Family and the Values That Have Sustained Us Through Good Times and Bad* (Naperville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2002), 64.

argument—representations of disability on television are problematic. Admittedly, the show did not propagate egregiously offensive or deliberately discriminatory images of disabled people. Rather, it appeared the opposite was intended by these disability-themed episodes. The issue was that these episodes relied on a series of tropes and inauthentic casting in their storylines that contributed to the legacy of problematic portrayals of disability on screen. I could not ignore the problems with the material before me, nor could I censure a television series without understanding how and why these transgressions occurred. Popular entertainment does not exist in a vacuum and the finished product of a television series or film is a visual artifact resulting from a multifaceted and complex production process. Each person involved in this process has a distinct job to accomplish, a chain of command to follow, and a set of personal and professional circumstances that inform the decisions they make and ultimately shape the final products for audiences. Thus, it is incumbent upon historians to examine more deeply the context behind some of the most enduring images of disability on screen.

This is precisely what I did in the case of *The Waltons*. I connected with nearly all of the surviving original cast members, as well as some writers, directors, producers, and production assistants of the series. I inquired generally about the work they did on the series and specifically about the series' disability-themed episodes. From these interviews, I unearthed the story of how and why, under unique cultural circumstances and at the hands of certain groups of people, specific ideas and images filled our television screens. Most significantly for me was that the binary, which I had naively presumed to exist between television as power structure and disabled people as its hapless casualties, eroded as I became familiar with the cast and crew and their stories. The rest of this article elaborates on these discoveries and demonstrates that the circumstances leading to the production of images and ideas are just as significant as the images and ideas themselves.

This case study advocates for a focus on lay Americans and their everyday encounters with disability rather than on individuals with disabilities, disability stakeholders, or events and things generally regarded as the purview of disability. The choice to produce a disability history in which historical actors with disabilities are largely absent is controversial. Among the most popular of theoretical frameworks for discussing disability is the social model, which centers the experiences of those with disabilities. The social model of disability is predicated on the belief that disability is experienced as a result of encounters with

systemic barriers, negative attitudes, environmental obstacles, and sets of assumptions made by the wider society in which the supposedly disabled individual operates. That is, disability is not the result of individual bodily impairments or specific functional limitations, but the result of a society which does not always account for disability. In placing disabled people at the center of the narrative, these issues become all the more cogent. That being said, I do not identify as a person with a disability. Therefore, I chose to comment on the non-disabled hegemony and its role in complicating and obscuring the disability experience rather than on that experience itself. Far be it for me to try to recreate the disability experience. The decision to frame my work in this way is also methodological. By rights, many disability histories describe actors who are either disabled themselves or are well-versed and/or invested in the social status of disability. As a result, these approaches reveal little about perceptions of disability among the uninitiated or how physical, mental, and/or sensory differences are represented and negotiated in the wider culture. Thus, I made the choice to frame this study around subjects who had a hand in propagating specific and sometimes erroneous ideas about disability. The majority of my subjects did not identify as disabled. Shifting the lens from individuals with disabilities to the non-disabled hegemony may appear counterintuitive in defining a new frontier of disability studies, but I contend that it is a necessary exercise in reconstructing and understanding the world in which disabled people live. As disability activist and scholar Frank Bowe explained in 1978 during the nascent days of the social model of disability:

We must see that each of us—salespeople, merchants, bankers, architects, writers, lawyers, doctors, policemen, administrators, social workers, nurses, students, teachers, therapists, advertisers, disabled people themselves and their employers, co-workers, families, friends, and neighbours—has played and plays a role, however small, in creating these obstacles, and that each us can contribute to their removal.⁶

The disability experience is neither universal nor trans-historical, as it is rooted in and influenced by specific social and cultural conditions. However, while the forms of discrimination and stigmatization of disabled people change over time, their presence transcends and endures. If disability is defined as the everyday social experiences of an ‘impaired’ individual as shaped by the attitudes and approaches of the dominant

⁶ Frank Bowe, *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled People* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1978), vii-viii.

culture, then historians must investigate the various processes by which these conventions are shaped. This paper isolates a specific historical interval—the 1970s—and examines this era’s approach to disability through a popular medium—television—to shed light on how and why certain constructs of disability existed and persisted in the wider culture at the time. Scholars need to consider anew the relationships between the aggrieved—the disabled—and their historical aggressors—the non-disabled people who impinge on their world. A deeper understanding of the history of transgressions and microaggressions against disabled people in popular media is a fundamental step towards reconciling these issues.

Walton’s Mountain: Scaling a New Mountain in Disability History

Created by Earl Hamner Jr. and based on his own family’s history, *The Waltons* was an American television series about a multigenerational family living through the Great Depression in rural Virginia. The show aired from 1972-1981, but depicted events from 1933-1946, making it a unique television series positioned temporally in two distinct historical eras. As such, *The Waltons* represents a complicated meta-history of disability because it purported to be telling stories about the 1930s and 1940s, but its production was firmly ensconced in 1970s American culture. The result was a complex rendering of disability as both an historical experience and a contemporary topic.

Film historian Robert Niemi explained that treating film—or television, in this case—as an artifact means

dealing with the aesthetic, personal, and political character of the people who conceived it, the historical moment in which it was spawned, the film’s genre kin and antecedents, the resources the filmmaker had at hand, the commercial requisites that shape tone and narrative structure, the concrete circumstances of the film’s production, and the sort of critical and popular reception it received.⁷

In other words, what audiences see on television is filtered through the various constraints and influences always acting on television production—time, money, competing visions and interests, personal experience and frames of reference, availability of resources, etc.—and therefore the final product is a mediated version of an artistic vision. In

⁷ Robert Niemi, *History in the Media: Film and Television* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), xxii.

the case of *The Waltons*, portrayals of disability were further mediated by the fact that storylines had to bear some historical authenticity per the show's setting. However, these narratives were crafted by people living through and experiencing the culture of the 1970s and were intended to resonate with the contemporary audience. Therefore, one cannot assume that a given portrayal of disability on *The Waltons*, or any other television series, is an accurate reflection of a production team's intentions and ideals. Rather, it is an amalgam of professional needs, interests, experiences, and constraints.

To effectively understand and critique on-screen images, scholars must know the context behind their production. Therefore, one must go beyond the images to consider their architects, or *mediamakers*.⁸ According to Philip Elliott, who penned one of the first television production case studies in 1972,

The self-denying ordinance which has kept sociologists from studying the artist, has led to a concentration on the artistic output ... Simplification and generalization are inherent in this approach of examining artistic content for its social meaning.⁹

Considered only for its artistic output, *The Waltons* could be misconstrued as simply a discourse on life in the 1930s and 1940s. However, while the storylines themselves took place in the 1930s and 1940s and were meant to reflect the personal experiences of series creator Earl Hamner Jr., the series was not solely a commentary on the American family during the Depression and WWII. How could it have been, when it was conceived, financed, produced, and watched during the 1970s? I argue that a more complicated reading of disability on screen emerges from *The Waltons* than when its artistic output is taken at face value.¹⁰ The show, in fact, was a unique *mélange* of storylines

⁸ Carlos E. Cortés, professor of history specializing in diversity, wrote that *mediamaker* is "a term that I adopted simply because I could not find another word for the idea that I wish to convey. By *mediamakers* I simply mean those people who contribute substantively to the process of creating media content ... I have found no word that encompasses all of these contributors in all media. Therefore, I have adopted the term *mediamakers* as my shorthand to allow me to make broader generalizations about all of those involved significantly in the creation of media that deal with diversity." Carlos E. Cortés, *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach About Diversity* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2000), xviii-xix.

⁹ Philip Elliott, *The Making of a Television Series: A Case Study in the Sociology of a Culture* (London: Constable, 1972), 8-9. Coincidentally, Elliott published his study the same year that *The Waltons* premiered on television.

¹⁰ Martin Norden explores both images of disability on screen, and the time periods and industries within which they were created. However, Norden focused only on physical

featuring historically-rooted disability experiences from the 1930s and 1940s, informed by the current events and sensibilities of the 1970s.

For example, in the final episode of *The Waltons* first season entitled “The Easter Story,” matriarch Olivia Walton contracted polio and experienced paralysis of her legs as a result. It is common for television series to feature their most dramatic and engaging story-lines during the season’s finale. The idea is to make an impression on viewers that will leave them wanting more and encourage them to tune in when the next television season begins.¹¹ Stretched into a two-hour special, “The Easter Story” was such a case, and the deployment of illness and disability for ratings was a success, as this episode was number one in the ratings that week.¹² Polio and paralysis made for good dramatic fodder but importantly, the experience of disability as a result of polio was a legitimate historical experience for many Americans in the 1930s. Incorporating historically-specific experiences and concerns into the narrative—such as the debilitating effects of polio—was as much about authenticating the story of an American family as it was about TV drama.

Of this episode, series writer John McGreevey recalled, “We researched polio and what treatments were available in the thirties.”¹³ Evidently, the production team were keen to recreate an authentic historical experience in which disability played a part. As stated, *The Waltons* was a fictionalized rendering of series creator Earl Hamner Jr.’s coming-of-age experiences; Hamner’s own grandfather, like tens of

disabilities in his work, and his work was concerned with the film industry, which, as his book makes clear, is in many ways distinct from the television industry. In Norden’s words, he “attempted to account for the fluctuating relationship between mainstream American society and its physically disabled minority, how the movie industry’s evolving portrait of people with physical disabilities has reflected and contributed to that relationship, the major movie-industry people responsible for this imagery, and a sense of the form (especially as it relates to issues of audience positioning), content, and general popularity of the films themselves.” Martin Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), x.

¹¹ In the 1970s, most season finales aired in May, which was a key month in a television industry invention known as ‘sweeps’. Historian Sally Bedell explains that ‘sweeps’ are “Heightened ratings contests during the months of February, May, and November, when ratings services measure audiences in more than 200 cities to allow local stations to set advertising rates. Networks try to inflate sweeps viewing by larding specials”—and by extension, ‘special episodes’ featuring high drama—“and blockbuster movies.” Sally Bedell, *Up The Tube: Prime-Time TV and the Silverman Years* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), 313.

¹² John McGreevey, as quoted in Hamner and Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy*, 86.

¹³ Ibid., 85.

thousands of other Americans, contracted polio and lived with its physical effects for the rest of his life.¹⁴ The use of disability in this case, even if manipulated for maximum ratings, was nonetheless an interpretation of a family's very real historical experience. Disability is often appropriated to infuse drama into television series, but the experience of contracting polio in the 1930s was a dramatic turning point in the lives of many Americans. Therefore, on the surface, "The Easter Story" was a sentimental and idealized depiction of disability, but it also portrayed a historically and personally-informed disability experience.

Predictably, Olivia Walton's ability to walk was restored by the episode's end. However, Michael Learned, who portrayed Olivia, revealed that the original resolution for her character was even more maudlin and unbelievable than the one that eventually aired:

When [executive producer] Lee Rich told me that, "Olivia's paralyzed for life, and then we're going to have you wheeled up, up in your wheelchair to the top of Walton's Mountain as the sun is rising over the horizon, and the hallelujah chorus is singing in the background, and you will rise up out of your wheelchair and walk ..." I just looked at him and said, "You're shittin' me."¹⁵

Producer Rich and writer McGreevey ultimately agreed to revise the script to mirror the experiences of Learned's own father, who also had polio as a child. According to Learned's father, the most effective therapy in learning to walk again after polio was having the urgent need to do so. He claimed that the first time he walked following his bout with polio was in the middle of the night when he woke up needing to use the bathroom. Only semi-conscious, and therefore not over-thinking the mechanics of walking, Learned's father got up, used the facilities, and never looked back.¹⁶ Olivia's recovery in "The Easter Story" was much the same, but instead of a full bladder, it was the call of her child in distress in the middle of the night that roused her to walking. Learned admits that there was likely some exaggeration in her father's recollection, but it is nonetheless his impression of his own disability experience and therefore represents a real-life response to disability.

The idea of 'relevance programming' gained popularity in the early 1970s, and though in many respects this historically-situated family drama defied the tenets of such programming, *The Waltons* was not

¹⁴ James Person Jr., interview with the author, September 2016.

¹⁵ Michael Learned, interview with the author, July 2016.

¹⁶ Ibid.

without its forays into ‘relevant’ social issues.¹⁷ Premiering in 1972, the show aired Thursday evenings at eight o’clock and provided a welcome break between the six and eleven o’clock evening newscasts, which emphatically covered the Vietnam War, Nixon’s scandal and resignation, and political protests throughout America concerning race, gender, sexuality, the economy, and the environment. The 1970s was also a watershed for disability civil rights in the United States. *The Waltons* held its position on the airwaves during the passage of the Rehabilitation Act by Congress in 1973, the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, the forging of the disability rights protest known as the ‘504 sit-in’ in 1977 (so named for its protest against delays in implementing and enforcing section 504 of the aforementioned Rehabilitation Act), and the start of the Independent Living movement, which advocated for the right to independence and self-determination for those with significant disabilities.

In this context, no production team could entirely escape its presentist bias, and few audiences would have stayed tuned to a programme which bore no correspondence or relevance to their real lives. Due to a significant population of Vietnam veterans returning from service with disabilities throughout the 1970s, the rights and needs of Americans with disabilities became a national concern, just as they had been following the civil and world wars. Given the parallels between the injured WWII veterans of the on-screen *Waltons* world and the injured Vietnam veterans of the 1970s, the show inevitably evoked disability in storylines as a proxy for relevance. *The Waltons* writer Michael McGreevey recalled of the series “I did have a conversation, I think, with Ernie Wallingren [fellow *Waltons* writer], about ... the fact that we were mirroring [the 70s], even though it was the 40s.”¹⁸ Wallingren’s mother Claire Peterson, also a *Waltons* writer, noted “There were many parallels to returning Vietnam vets, and I’m sure Ernie, who was drafted very early in the war but flunked the physical, was aware of this as he wrote [for *The Waltons*].”¹⁹ Notably, Wallingren later lived with and died from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and in the intervening years he used his platform as a screenwriter to bring awareness to the disease and its physical affects.²⁰

¹⁷ Bedell, *Up the Tube: Prime-Time TV and the Silverman Years*, 47.

¹⁸ Michael McGreevey, telephone interview with the author, August 2016.

¹⁹ Claire Peterson, email correspondence with the author, September 9, 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

In “The Obstacle” (January 11, 1979), *The Waltons* told the story of Mike Paxton, eldest Walton son John-Boy’s former college roommate. Newly paraplegic due to an injury sustained during military service, Mike despaired that he might never fulfill the coveted roles of productive worker and romantic partner. Feeling hopeless upon his release from a veterans’ rehabilitation center, Mike absconded to the Walton homestead, where he remained in a self-imposed exile. The storyline, which focused on Mike’s feelings about his return from service, mirrored the experiences of many Vietnam veterans in the 1970s. This episode also bore similarities to some popular and critically-acclaimed films of the 1970s, such as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *First Blood* (1982), all of which addressed the difficulties of readjustment to civilian life following the Vietnam War, and emphasised the challenges of physical and psychological disabilities resulting from military service. Whereas “The Obstacle” mostly focused on physical disabilities, *The Waltons* also explored the highly relevant and pressing matter of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in “The Tempest” (February 5, 1981), which chronicled the psychological effects that military service wreaked on Curtis Willard, husband of eldest Walton daughter Mary-Ellen.

Film critic Lauri Klobas argued that the problem with most portrayals of people with disabilities on screen is that “their social problems and individual idiosyncrasies are ignored, while easy emotional stories of ‘bitterness’, ‘overcoming’, and ‘courage’ abound.”²¹ Admittedly, *The Waltons* relied on certain reductive tropes to tell these stories. For instance, “The Obstacle” suggested a kind of redemption for disabled people who find the ‘courage’ to ‘overcome’ their disabilities. Though Mike Paxton despaired over his situation at the outset of “The Obstacle”, with a bit of ingenuity and a lot of faith, the Walton family encouraged Mike to ‘overcome’ his disability by finding new ways to navigate the world as a wheelchair-user and thus to fulfill his desired roles. Audiences watched as Mike became a gainfully employed member of the Walton Mountain community and as his romantic prospects buoyed by a flirtation with middle Walton daughter Erin. By contrast, in “The Tempest,” Curtis Willard remained committed to his feelings of ‘bitterness’, and therefore remained permanently estranged from his wife and her family.

Disability scholar Paul Longmore’s work “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion

²¹ Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film*, xii.

Pictures” demonstrates how these and other repetitious tropes on television have served to create reductive and often negative images of people with disabilities.²² Scholars generally agree that disabled people’s stories are largely presented with non-disabled audiences in mind. They are sometimes appropriated for purely dramatic purposes and other times invoked to assuage non-disabled audiences of their fear of disability. Such narratives are designed to entertain, educate, alleviate, or even to absolve non-disabled audiences of their feelings about disability, but they rarely aim to depict authentic and affirmative disability experiences. While the above examples make clear that *The Waltons* engaged in these kinds of problematic storytelling practices, nonetheless the series’ relationship to disability was surprisingly complex. Given how the show deployed disability as both an historical device and as a proxy for relevance, it is clear that episodes revolving around disability were about the larger sets of historical circumstances of which disability was an important part.

Regardless of what inspired or what was intended by *The Waltons* disability-themed episodes, their reach was vast and the impressions they created were enduring. The lasting influence of *The Waltons* and its disability story-lines is evident. Specifically, in March of 2018, The Waltons’ Mountain Museum, in partnership with The Walton-Hamner House, hosted an event in celebration of *The Waltons* premiere episode “The Foundling.” This episode, in which a deaf character took centre stage, is regarded as both a strong storyline and a thematically congruous narrative in terms of the overall *Waltons* oeuvre. Waltons International Fan Club president Carolyn Grinnell recalled “in the Walton home there was always room for ‘one’ more whether it be a stray animal or a stray person.”²³ The ‘stray’, in this case, was a six-year-old deaf child who was abandoned at the Walton’s doorstep by an anxious mother overwhelmed at the prospect of raising a disabled child. Of “The Foundling,” Grinnell went on to say,

The home on Walton’s Mountain was indeed a home where love permeated the atmosphere, as was evident in this very special

²² According to Longmore, portrayals of disability in the media almost always ascribe to one of the following tropes: the maladjusted disabled person; an emotional education by a nondisabled character; the problem of disability resting squarely on the individual with a disability; compensation in the form of ‘gifts’/‘talents’ for coping with a disability; the ‘supercrip’ and overcoming; a positive growth experience; the responsibility of the individual with a disability to educate; medical and technological advances; and/or stigma and sexuality. Longmore, “Screening Stereotypes,” 131-146.

²³ Carolyn Grinnell, as quoted in Hamner and Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy*, 66-67.

episode for me. It was with ‘hands of love’ that a little girl learned to understand and be understood.²⁴

Grinnell’s recollection connects with the themes of love, family, home, and community commonly associated with *The Waltons*.

The resonance of this episode was apparent even at the time of its production. “The Foundling” was not originally intended as the premiere episode, but emerged as such a strong and appealing episode that the network and producers elevated its position in the line-up. Series lead Richard Thomas, who portrayed protagonist John-Boy Walton, recalled, “‘The Foundling’ was really a show that featured the whole family, it was more of an ensemble piece and so it was a good way to introduce everybody because everybody had good stuff to do.”²⁵ He elaborated,

in retrospect I thought it was a good show to begin with because ... [o]ne of the recurring strains in the series was the family in relation to someone from the outside. Whether it was a different culture, a different religion, a different economic class, a different race, all that stuff we did a lot of.²⁶

Some forty-six years after it originally aired, fans of the series gathered to meet the stars of this particular episode and to revel in its history. The legacy and impact of *The Waltons* on viewers’ lives supports an in-depth re-examination of history’s most enduring television artifacts, their portrayals of disability, and the circumstances shaping their production.

Following past approaches to historical analyses of disability on screen, it is easy to level criticism at “The Foundling” because this beloved episode featured problematic portrayals of disability on screen. For starters, the deaf protagonist of the episode, Holly, was played by hearing actress Erica Hunton, making the rendering of the deaf character neither authentic nor representative. Though, it bears noting that casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles was common practice at the time and not specific to *The Waltons*. However, this show also broke this mold with the casting of Billy Barty as a character with dwarfism and the continued casting of Ellen Corby in the role of Grandma Esther Walton, after the actress sustained a stroke mid-way through the series. It is no surprise that disability affected the ensemble cast at different times during the show’s nine-year run, the most poignant of which being Corby’s experience with disability. She acquired permanent speech and mobility disabilities as a result of the stroke and the reintegration of

²⁴ Carolyn Grinnell, as quoted in Hamner and Giffin, *Goodnight John-Boy*, 66-67.

²⁵ Richard Thomas, interview with the author, January 2017.

²⁶ Ibid.

Grandma Walton as a disabled character in the season six episode “Grandma Comes Home” (March 30, 1978) was a landmark event, both in television and disability history. In accommodating both Corby as a performer and Grandma Walton as a character, *The Waltons* production team has been credited for increasing the visibility of stroke survivors in particular and aging bodies in general.²⁷

Returning to “The Foundling,” the presence of a deaf character on Walton’s Mountain lasted for only one episode. Deafness was deployed to add drama to one particular episode and then abandoned when the episode reached a pat conclusion about how best to address this disability. The deaf character’s identity and experiences were limited to her ability to hear and as a result, viewers were given a one-dimensional and unsustained perspective of deafness. However, when one moves beyond what viewers saw in “The Foundling” and explores some of the stories behind its production, a different picture emerges. Preparation for this one-hour episode began well in advance. Many of the Walton cast members remembered being trained in American Sign Language (ASL) to film the episode and all recalled the experience fondly. In a 2016 interview with me, Kami Cotler, who portrayed the youngest Walton on the series, remembered,

It was so exciting, this magical thing that I was learning! I just remember, I had my little cards with all the letters. And I loved it and I remembered it. Like, I held onto it, and if I was bored I would just sign the alphabet.²⁸

At this, Cotler demonstrated her fingerspelling abilities and enacted the impact that early exposure to sign language had on the young cast member. Actress Erica Hunton, who played the deaf character in the episode, also remembered some of the signs she picked up while filming “The Foundling.” She noted:

I think it’s stuck with all of us, I think that particular episode, this was the first big job for most of the younger actors in that show and then we all had to learn sign language as a part of the storyline. So, I think it just sort of left an impression on everybody.²⁹

²⁷ Ellen Corby, as quoted in Sue Reilly, “The Wonderful Walton Women: As Michael Sobs So Long, The Waltons Face Life as a One-Parent Family,” *People*, 11, no. 4 (January 29, 1979), <http://people.com/archive/cover-story-the-wonderful-walton-women-vol-11-no-4/>.

²⁸ Kami Cotler, interview with the author, August 2016.

²⁹ Erica Hunton, interview with the author, 2016.

ASL had only recently been affirmed as a legitimate language following the publication of William Stokoe et al.'s 1965 *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*, making the fact that the producers of *The Waltons* featured sign language positively on the series and educated the cast about the language extremely significant. When a deaf fan met actor Richard Thomas after a 2012 Broadway show, Thomas too was able to remember basic ASL, and communicated with the deaf fan—yet another testament to the positive and lasting effects of the cast's exposure to ASL while filming "The Foundling."³⁰



Figure 1: Gienow-McConnell and Richard Thomas in Schuyler, VA at *The Waltons Mountain Museum* in front of a replica of the Walton homestead, 2017.

Though she was grateful for the job, Hunton agreed that casting a hearing actor in a deaf role in "The Foundling" was problematic. She recalled,

For a number of years, because that episode still continues to air with some degree of regularity and it's sort of a very well-known episode, for many years after people would come up to me and asked me if I was really deaf.³¹

This assumption sometimes rendered her an outsider in school, as peers assumed she was deaf. In other cases, teachers familiar with Hunton's experience on *The Waltons* would pair her up with deaf students, assuming that her knowledge of sign language was sufficient to have a

³⁰ The author and her deaf husband attended a performance of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* in 2012, after which they met the show's star, Richard Thomas, who then demonstrated his sign language abilities.

³¹ Erica Hunton, interview with the author, 2016.

meaningful relationship with these students. Both of these scenarios made Hunton uncomfortable and they exposed her to a valuable lesson about affirmative and authentic casting. Hunton now works as a successful talent agent in Hollywood and an advocate for her disabled clients, in part because of her experience working on *The Waltons*. Of her disabled clients, Hunton explains,

I'm willing to push the envelope for them so if it doesn't say that they should be able-bodied, that doesn't [trailed off] ... If they are somehow physically disabled, or they're deaf, or they're blind, I'm not going to let that prevent me from submitting them on a regular role.³²

As an example, Hunton revealed, “I used to represent a little person and she frequently auditioned and booked jobs that didn't initially call for a little person.”³³ Once-upon-a-time, Hunton was cast as a disabled character, despite not being disabled herself. Presently, she is advocating for disabled actors to earn disabled roles, as well as advocating that disabled talent to be recognized for roles that do not specify disability. Hunton provides an ideal example of an individual recognizing how they contributed to a problem in the past—namely inauthentic representation—and learning from that mistake, as she currently uses her power to address and correct this problem.

The redeeming stories from behind the scenes of *The Waltons* do not negate that what audiences saw when they viewed this episode was an adorable little waif of a would-be deaf child, tugging at America's heartstrings with her silent stare and cherubic innocence. In this character, viewers saw that deafness was a noble problem to overcome and that sign language, sensitivity, and understanding were mechanisms for addressing that problem. Ultimately, viewers learned nothing about deaf culture or disability rights. According to “The Foundling,” the main problems confronting deaf people stemmed from communication barriers and that with sign language and a little love the deaf could be redeemed. While the use of sign language and the presence of supportive parents can mitigate the challenges of deafness, they do little to combat fallacies about deaf people or stigma and discrimination in the wider community.

In an interview with cast member Eric Scott—middle son Ben on the series—I mentioned the tendency to dispense with disabilities and

³² Erica Hunton, interview with the author, 2016.

³³ Ibid.

resolve their associated conflicts within a single episode. Making an important point, he replied,

I think that's not giving a fair chance ... We always said that the shows were filmed as individual movies, so you didn't look at the week before. You didn't look at the week after ... It was its own story ... So, you didn't have to have any backstory, you really didn't have to have any forward story. It had its beginning, it had its end.

He was keen to point out, "That was the formula they used on the show ... I wouldn't put it as a disability thing."³⁴ Indeed, a 1973 *New York Times* review of *The Waltons* was hip to this formula and observed:

The Walton show, which must produce a full-hour length story every week, has found a very successful formula for easily capturing our attention. To Walton's Mountain come all kinds of strangers, all of them troubled outcasts, fragmented or harmed by the value systems, the dizziness of the world beyond this sweet rural community ... The single characters themselves are somewhat healed by their contact with the Waltons and the simple values the Waltons exude.³⁵

While "The Foundling" and other disability-related episodes presented overly simplified commentaries on disability, one cannot say that this was a function of the cast and crew's feelings about disability. Rather, it was a specific product of terminal storytelling present in 1970s television culture, in which all plotlines, about job loss, first love, race-relations, a house fire, alcoholism, a land dispute, and so on, were hamstrung.

It would be a stretch to say that *The Waltons* presented the best possible televised representations of disabilities within the psychic and material constraints under which the show was produced. However, *The Waltons* undoubtedly deserves credit for devoting considerable attention to the topic of disabilities, for using real-world circumstances to shape its stories, and for creating positive reverberations in the television culture. Contrasting her experience on *The Waltons* to the status of deaf and disabled characters today, Hunton noted:

If you compare the episode of *The Waltons* where it was ... almost a pitiful story where Holly was an outcast because nobody understood what was wrong with her, she was deaf ...

³⁴ Eric Scott, interview with the author, August 2016.

³⁵ Anne Roiphe, "Ma and Pa and John-Boy in Mythic America," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1973, <http://www.nytimes.com/1973/11/18/archives/the-waltons-ma-and-pa-and-johnboy-in-mythic-america-the-waltons.html>.

to today, where you have kids and people interacting in normal everyday situations and the difference is that they talk with their hands ... Wow.³⁶

Hunton marveled that, “We’ve come a long way when you compare it, on a linear process. We still have a long way to go, but yeah, it’s really kind of amazing when you compare the two ends of the spectrum there.”³⁷ My analysis of this ‘spectrum’ has demonstrated that the path to positive disability representation on screen starts first with acknowledging its problematic history, then with understanding the reasons behind that history, and finally with eliminating the conventional barriers that create and preserve these issues.

Cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan famously declared that “the medium is the message,” meaning that

the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.³⁸

In framing various media as extensions of humanity and arguing that the nature and status of said media conveys some kind of message independent of its content, McLuhan opened up the field of cultural studies to new forms of media. Television studies, in particular, benefited from McLuhan’s analysis. Geoffrey Cowan, a specialist in communications studies, recalls that his award-winning television producer mother “was convinced that broadcasting, as a commercial mass-market medium, would never achieve true excellence.”³⁹ Despite her successes in the television industry, Polly Spiegel Cowan struggled to reconcile her feelings about the medium, as did many others in the industry.⁴⁰ Considered purely for its content, it is easy to understand why early critics of television struggled to take the medium seriously. Let us not forget that one of the most successful television programs in TV’s earliest years starred a freckle-faced, plaid-shirted puppet with the unlikely name of Howdy-Doody.⁴¹ McLuhan argued, however, that such

³⁶ Erica Hunton, interview with the author, 2016.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 1.

³⁹ Geoffrey Cowan, *See No Evil: The Backstage Battle over Sex and Violence in Television* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Stephen, Davis, *Say Kids! What Time is It? Notes from the Peanut Gallery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987).

content was a red herring for the deeper and more meaningful consequences of the (television) medium itself on human affairs. He stated that “Indeed, it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium.”⁴² In McLuhan’s work, critics and scholars interested in the medium were freed from the constraints of its content, and able to conceive of television more broadly. I take umbrage with McLuhan’s assertion that the contents of a given medium are immaterial and instead hold that the contents of a medium are signifiers of the larger cultural forces which gave way to the medium in the first place. Nonetheless, McLuhan’s work made possible studies such as my own, which eschews a purely textual reading of television content, for a more holistic approach to television as a unique study. As this article has demonstrated, applying this logic to *The Waltons* reveals new and surprising things about the television industry and its historical relationship to disability.

Conclusion

The subject of this study is timely and relevant because today increasing attention is being paid to diversity, or lack thereof, in the media. For instance, the social media movement *#OscarsSoWhite* critiqued the 2016 Academy Awards for disproportionately favouring white nominees over nominees of colour. While the 2017 Academy Awards saw a marked improvement in the representation of people of colour, the Academy’s attempts at increasing diversity overlooked disability. Disability activist Gregg Beratan laments,

As long as Hollywood prefers caricatured performances by nondisabled actors crippling up, we will be denied the opportunity of seeing the many wonderful disabled actors display their talents and earn acting awards.⁴³

Beratan went on to explain that, even in instances where characters with disabilities are featured in significant storylines, such stories inevitably default to one of three major tropes: “‘You can’t love me because I’m disabled!’ ‘Heal me!’ or ‘Better off dead.’”⁴⁴ Such statements show that

⁴² McLuhan, *Understanding the Media*, 2.

⁴³ Gregg Beratan, as quoted in Maysoon Zayid, “Disability and Hollywood, a Sordid Affair,” *Women’s Media Center*, February 8, 2017, <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/disability-and-hollywood-a-sordid-affair>.

⁴⁴ Gregg Beratan, as quoted in Zayid, “Disability and Hollywood, a Sordid Affair.” Some recent examples of these pitfalls include: the 2016 film *Me Before You*, based on the novel by JoJo Moyes, is a classic and injurious example of the ‘better off dead’ trope. The 2017 biopic *The Greatest Showman* is a version of the ‘heal me’ trope. It features

people with disabilities are not content with representation on screen—they desire authentic and affirmative representations of their experiences, as well as inclusive and representative casting of performers with disabilities.

Recently there have been some authentic, multi-dimensional, and affirmative portrayals of disability in various entertainment media.⁴⁵ On television, ABC's *Speechless* and Freeform's *Switched at Birth* have contributed positively to the canon of disability on screen because they both feature major characters with disabilities, portrayed by disabled actors. While the former focuses most on the experience of cerebral palsy and the latter delves into deafness, both shows incorporate a variety of disabilities into their storylines in nuanced ways. They demonstrate how disability can represent a significant facet of a person's life, but they eschew the fallacy that disability is definitive. In other words, storylines

Hugh Jackman as P.T. Barnum, cast as the able-bodied saviour of those performers with disabilities whom he employed in his circuses. Another common issue with disability on screen is that actors with disabilities are seldom hired to fulfill the roles of characters with disabilities. The films *Wonderstruck* (2017) and *Blind* (2017) received backlash from disability communities for hiring actors without disabilities for the principle disabled characters in the films. It should be noted that in the case of the former, a deaf youth was hired to portray the younger version of Julianne Moore's deaf character in the film. In television, the Netflix series *Atypical* (2017), about a character on the autism spectrum, received criticism for both its casting of an actor not on the spectrum, as well as its inauthentic portrayal of autism. ABC's drama *The Good Doctor* (2017) has raised concerns among disability activists. The network is quoted in Zayid's piece, saying that the titular character is "alone in the world and unable to personally connect with those around him" and he "uses his extraordinary medical gifts to save lives and challenge the skepticism of his colleagues." Critics have pointed out that this description is alienating, and marginalizing to people on the autism spectrum. Further, they cringe at the suggestion that disability is an 'extraordinary gift' rather than a matter-of-fact aspect of a person's identity.

⁴⁵ In television, *Sesame Street* recently introduced Julia, a muppet with autism, to its cast. *Sesame Street* is no stranger to the organic incorporation of disability on its series. Deaf performer Linda Bove was cast as Linda the Librarian in 1971, and held that role until 2002. A 2017 episode of Netflix's *Master of None* titled "New York, I Love You" garnered attention and praise for its portrayal of an ASL-using deaf character. The character was shown to be a woman of colour, a bodega worker, a New Yorker, a friend, and a lover, who just happened to be deaf. On stage, a wheelchair-using actor with muscular dystrophy was cast alongside Sally Field in *The Glass Menagerie* (2017) on Broadway. And for the first time in its professional stage history, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night* (Indiana Repertory Theatre, 2017) will feature an actor with autism in the role of Christopher, himself a character with autism. In film, an actor with Down Syndrome has been hired to portray a major character in the Hollywood feature *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2017), while deaf actor and comic C.J. Jones was recently seen in the blockbuster film *Baby Driver* (2017).

are rarely *about* disability but rather about family, education, economics, romance, current events, community, and the ways in which disability is delicately, and sometimes unconsciously, entwined in daily life. Such storytelling is accomplished by employing actors with disabilities and hiring disability consultants who ensure that the on-screen rendering is authentic and affirmative. Disability activist and father to a son with Down Syndrome, David M. Perry notes,

the creators of *Speechless* and the family drama *Switched at Birth* ... are talking to people with lived experience with disability, casting disabled people to play disabled characters, and using the structure of their respective genres to tell stories that ring true to a parent like me.

Perry explained,

by incorporating unconventional families—which resemble my own in their battles over access and stigma—into classic American television genres, they are directing contemporary dialogues about disability straight at a mainstream audience.⁴⁶

The significance of these kinds of portrayals cannot be underestimated. Citing a study conducted by psychologists Michelle Clare Wilson and Katrina Scior in 2014, *The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television* found that:

Positive attitudes [towards people with disabilities] were contingent on exposure and interaction. The more time someone spent with people with disabilities, the more their implicit associations improved. These results contribute to the body of evidence that has been amassed since the 1950s, when Gordon Allport proposed the ‘contact hypothesis’. Broadly speaking, the hypothesis “suggests that increased contact with out-group members can help to improve attitudes towards them.”⁴⁷

If positive portrayals of disability engender favourable perceptions of people with disabilities, then hostile or stereotypical images of the disabled negatively impact their status in society. Entertainment media which fails to include people with disabilities in its casting and

⁴⁶ David M. Perry, “The Shows Shaking up Disability Representation on Television,” *Pacific Standard*, March 7, 2017, <https://psmag.com/news/the-shows-shaking-up-disability-representation-on-television>.

⁴⁷ Danny Woodburn and Kristina Kopic, The Ruderman Family Foundation, *The Ruderman White Paper on Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television*, (July 2016), 4, http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TV-White-Paper_final.final_.pdf.

production processes ultimately excludes people with disabilities from affirmative self-representation. Speaking on behalf of the Ruderman Family Foundation, Kristina Kopic and Danny Woodburn—a popular entertainer with dwarfism—articulated,

This is nothing short of a social justice issue where a marginalized group of people is not given the right to self-representation. We must change this inequality through more inclusive casting, creating ability using Computer Graphics (CG), teaching the media to hold the industry responsible, avoiding stereotypical stories, and ultimately through the telling of stories that depict people with disabilities without focusing on the disability.⁴⁸

The Ruderman Family Foundation (2002)—a philanthropic foundation which promotes disability civil rights—and USC Annenberg’s School for Communication and Journalism (1971) through their Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative (2007) have been instrumental in identifying media shortcomings in representations of disability. The goal of these organizations is not simply to find fault but to provide practical solutions and support for media outlets to make proactive and meaningful change in their portrayals. Providing a roadmap for how to improve disability on screen is important, but it is difficult to convince people to change their practices without understanding why they initially engaged in those practices. As disability scholar Kim Sauder put it, “we need to know what happened so we can challenge it.”⁴⁹

Television continues to be one of America’s key cultural forces. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics’ 2016 time-use survey, “[t]elevision is America’s number one leisure activity.”⁵⁰ Given its prominence in our daily lives, “it becomes clear that television is not merely entertainment, but also a lens through which we view the world.”⁵¹ Therefore, those who make television ought to take care to create fictionalized worlds which appeal to and reflect the best of reality, but too often *mediamakers* fall short in this aim. By relying on *The Waltons* as a rich and representative case study, this article has revealed some of the forces that created a certain set of disability images at a

⁴⁸ Woodburn and Kopic, “The Ruderman White Paper,” 2.

⁴⁹ Kim Sauder, “No, Bad TV Portrayals of Disability are Not Good Learning Opportunities,” *Crippledscholar*, <https://crippledscholar.com/2017/08/25/no-bad-tv-portrayals-of-disability-are-not-good-learning-opportunities/>.

⁵⁰ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, as quoted in Woodburn and Kopic, “The Ruderman White Paper,” 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

specific time in American history. Ideally the revelations contained herein will serve as a bridge between disability interests and rights, as well as media interests and commercial art, and will establish common-ground on which to predicate a new frontier of popular entertainment that welcomes people with disabilities.

Bibliography

Figures

Figure 1: *Gienow-McConnell and Richard Thomas in Schuyler, VA at The Waltons Mountain Museum in front of a replica of the Walton homestead*, 2017. Photograph from author's personal collection.

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