Enabling Texts

Lennard J. Davis

Binghamton University

Some scholars who work in the humanities doing disability studies feel the need to argue for the value of their endeavor. The strange thing, I suppose, is that this argument has to be made at all. While it is now common to attack the past discourse on disability as being largely a medicalized one - that is, the province of medical professionals, health-care providers, and institutions involved in the disability business - it is less acknowledged that disability studies in its new incarnation has largely been dominated by sociologists, political scientists, economists, social psychologists, and so on. Indeed, the major journals in the field, both in the US and the UK, are edited by and largely print the work of people in the social sciences. The names that have stood out - Erving Goffman, Harlan Hahn, Paul Longmore, Michael Oliver, Adrienne Asch, David Pfeiffer, Michelle Fine, Harlan Lane - are affiliated with this camp of academic investigation. While I have only high praise for the ground-breaking work done by these scholars, I am aware that from the socio-political model, endeavors like literary or cultural criticism appear to be acceptable but "soft" ways of viewing the world. Indeed, when the work of cultural critics are included in these journals, my sense is that they are included in the way that one invites an artist or an actor to a dinner party - more for fun and diversity than for real dialogue. So, what I am saying is that the "arts" tend not to get central stage or funding.

In fact, at the 1997 meeting of the Society for Disability Studies, a session entitled "Literature" was originally scheduled for Sunday morning at 8:00 AM, a time when many conference-goers would have been brushing their teeth rather than attending. It is the fate of the marginal discourse to be assigned by conference organizers the Sunday morning graveyard plot, and only late wrangling changed the time and perhaps focus of the session. Recent grants for disability-studies curricula, too, have tended to go to the social-science sector.

I am not expressing sour grapes here, but I do want to point to a problem in the field. And I do not want to be in the position of asking or begging for recognition from the social-science camp. Rather, what I would like to do is to lay out in a propaedeutic way the rationale for cultural critique within disability studies. First, it is important to understand that literary texts and cultural productions are not simply the window dressing, the bright lights, of a culture. This would be the National Endowment for the Art's approach to justifying its existence. Rather, cultural productions are virtually the only permanent records of a society's ideological structure. If we acknowledge that communal behaviors and thought processes have a material existence, then that existence coalesces in the intersection

between the individual mind and the collective market. No where can we understand this intersection better than in literary and cultural productions. I would like to add that if normalcy is produced, and if disability is constructed, then one of the best places to see that activity frozen in a kind of amber is by looking historically and contemporarily at texts of all kinds.

Perhaps part of the prejudice against literary interpretation is based on the wrong kind of stereotypes about the nature of this activity. Traditionally, literary or cultural analysis has taken a text and shown how badly the disabled character is represented. This is what I would call a kind of necessary Phase I of any emergent social movement. (1) Thus we have early feminist, class, and racial critics pointing to stereotypes, and so on. Naturally, such a criticism produces rather little yield, and thus makes literature or cinema or art seem marginal, by being simply illustrative, to the general critique.

Phase II, however, then engages promulgating more positive images by denouncing previous portrayals and seeking positive images in texts. This phase also allows for the production of new literature with positive role models by formerly shunned writers, artists, film makers, etc. In addition, critics seek ways of reenvisioning traditional stereotypes in a positive light. Thus we can have work in which a character with a disability, formerly seen in Phase I as degraded by his or her position, is now seen as subverting a power structure or resisting definition by the dominant culture. This phase tends to be archival in nature, in the sense of going back in history and finding texts that were discarded for prejudicial reasons, etc.

The Third Phase, the one I believe is beginning now in disability cultural studies, is an avowedly theoretical phase which seeks to recast the whole way the culture has conceived of the emergent category (in this case disability). While the first two phases more or less confine themselves to character analysis (positive or negative) - and thus work within the discursive paradigms of the previous oppressive culture, the third phase examines the nature of representation and cultural production itself - the whole system that permits knowledge about what is known. Here is the point at which the social scientists and the literary types begin to converge and need each other. In the case of disability studies, the work might or will focus around the social function of the aesthetic - seeing the aesthetic not as the window dressing, but as the window itself. Art is not for art's sake but for all our sakes. The question of normalcy comes in here. We must examine the process by which normalcy, taken for granted by definition, is shaped into a hegemonic force that requires micro-enforcement at each and every cultural, somatic, and political site in the culture. How do we learn what is normal, what constitutes a disability - but through texts? Before we ever see other bodies, we see them in books held on our laps, on children's television, in images hung around our cribs. In a consumer

249

culture, people realize themselves through consumed cultural artifacts. So the Third Phase, in which we are now engaged, is necessary to recast what we know (the obvious, the ideological) so that it includes, and is therefore transformed by, the rejected politico-socio-concept (disability) which it has so rigorously avoided.

My final point is that the basis by which literary/cultural critiques of disability have been marginalized within the disability studies arena, seen as of personal, human interest or simply as window-dressing, now becomes central. The basis of the *de facto* denigration of such activity has been in some sense its lack of utility (i.e. the arts are enjoyable but not useful). I want to point out that a critique based on utility is in fact one that is frozen in Phase I and II since it is part of utilitarian, enlightenment project. Indeed, we must remember that the very basis of ableism is rooted in notions of utility as they apply to social planning, Fordism, welfare-politics, and so on. The Third Phase I am describing is one in which notions like that of utility will be interrogated, and in so doing, one hopes that the artificial fire wall built between socio-economic critiques and literary/cultural studies will fall since it will be no longer clear which is the fire and which is the wall.

At the same time, texts are not simple affairs; they are complex productions. They have to be really since they do double and triple duty as entertainment, enforcing, normalizing mechanisms, and finally - and importantly - as sites of transgression and resistance. Thus reading is not simply the passive taking in of propaganda or stereotypes, but is actually an involuted process of decoding, adapting, resisting, submitting, and so on.

Notes

1. Here I am reworking in a very loose way Frantz Fannon's description in *The Wretched of the Earth* of the development of a national culture in three phases: 1) the subaltern intellectual's adoption and assimilation of the occupying power's culture; 2) aspirations to some positive vision which reconciles oppressor and oppressed; 3) the recognition of an intellectual leadership role through writing revolutionary literature. While not exactly the same, my three phases correspond in the sense that the first phase of finding negative stereotypes shows that the emergent critic has assimilated the body of literature and can critique it on its own terms. Phase 2 leads to notions of positive images in a utopian sort of way. Finally, Phase 3 recognizes the need to recast the cultural apparatus into a new and revolutionary mode that supersedes what has come before and transforms the very categories of thought, judgment, and system.