

The Cultural Turn of Disability

By Rebecca Robinson

In light of UK Disability History Month, which runs from 18th November to 18th December, this piece will provide information on a historically marginalised section of culture: disability culture. This concept of disability culture was developed in the 1980s and is used to describe the differences in lifestyles that disabilities cause or promote. These cultures can manifest themselves in arts movements, dance, poetry, and performance pieces to name a few, with the overarching theme being community. This still remains a relatively under-explored and marginalised culture, but its importance has never been greater.

It is important to remember that disability culture cannot be pinned down to a specific definition, like most cultures its fluid nature means it alludes fixed descriptions or languages. The themes mentioned above (art and community) are blended and made complex via the repurposing and re-presentation of their meanings. This is a key theme of disability culture; seeking to redefine the word 'disabled' itself. Through the efforts of disabled people participating in this culture, the word 'disabled' represents a social identity that's rooted in empowerment. This is a dramatic cultural shift from the traditional definition rooted in capitalist ideals of a body unable to participate in production (unable to go to work). Carol Gill, an academic studying disability culture, says that its core values are "an acceptance of human differences, an acceptance of human vulnerability and interdependence, a tolerance for a lack of resolution of the unpredictable in life, and a humour to laugh at the oppressor or situation, however dire it may be". She goes on to say "The elements of our culture include, certainly, our longstanding social oppression, but also our emerging art and humour, our piecing together of our history, our evolving language and symbols, our remarkably unified world view, beliefs and values, and our strategies for surviving and thriving". Gill makes it clear that the cultural turn of disabilities has marked a new wave of acceptance and inclusion, something that academic Steven Brown also speaks on; "[disabled people are] a group that has long been described with terms like 'in-valid', 'impaired', 'limited', 'crippled', and so forth. Scholars would be hard-pressed to discover terms of hope, endearment or ability associated with people with disabilities".

Looking at one specific example; the group 5D is a collective that allows people with disabilities, visible or invisible, to partake in the cultural sector, whether that be behind the scenes or as an active member. The group have produced multiple plays that feature disabled actors alongside non-disabled actors and have developed art installations that involve theatrical encounters with the public. They have a short film on YouTube called SEMTEX in which actor Eric explores life with this cerebral palsy and the loneliness that can come with living with it. 5D also advises cultural festivals on how to make their spaces accessible for disabled people. This is the perfect encapsulation of disability culture as it combines art and performance pieces to create a community of inclusion and gives opportunities to disabled people that they might otherwise struggle to get, such as the chance to act and create art. It also allows non-disabled people to challenge their perceptions and misconceptions of disabled people, especially in the arts and cultural sector, which is something that needs continual work in order to narrow the marginalisation between disability culture and mainstream / popular culture. Below are some photos of the group.



Taken by Saris and Den Engelsman



Taken by Rene den Engelsman

Disability culture should be viewed as a movement, rather than a fixed idea, as it continues to change the perceptions of disabled people and bring their work into the mainstream. From Disability History Month and beyond, this is something that disabled people will continue to fight for in order to make sense of and find purpose in what can be a very alienating world.