DISABILITY AND COMEDY: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES ONSCREEN

Sara Martínez-Guillén

ABSTRACT

Characters with disabilities or any type of impairment have been present in film productions since the early stages of cinema. However, they seldom become main characters in mainstream media and in particular in comedy films, as their body doesn't belong to the acceptable norm. Comedy has been known as a tool to challenge the system and yet it seems scarcely used to represent disabilities, drama being the preferred choice for narratives revolving around disabled protagonists. This article focuses on two films in which comedy and drama are combined to tell stories centred, indeed, on people with a disability (*Come as You Are* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, both released in 2019). Using different humour strategies such as incongruity and superiority, their main characters successfully challenge society, its conventions and its stereotypes—with incongruity mechanisms the films deal with what is considered "normal" and with superiority mechanisms they challenge power relations. The analysis will show how comedy is a genre capable to give its disabled characters the possibility to express themselves for an audience that is also being represented on screen—whether it is disabled viewers who can identify with the protagonists or abled ones who see their behaviours challenged onscreen.

Keywords: disability studies, humour studies, film studies, stereotypes, incongruity.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2023.4.2038

Over the years, plenty of films whose main focus has been characters with disabilities have been produced, from the early stages of cinema, for instance the film *Freaks* (1932), to more recent productions as the winner of the best feature film award in the 2022 Oscar ceremonies, *Coda* (2021). The presence of the disabled body in mainstream cinema is undeniable and the diversity characterising this group can offer has also been portrayed, spanning from physical disabilities to cognitive ones. To this, the depiction of mental health issues can also be added, which has been brought to the attention of many filmmakers due to the growing awareness shown in Western society in recent years. Hence, the representation of an array of disabilities has been present throughout the history of cinema.

However, it can be argued that the presence of disabled bodies in film representation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has mostly been circumscribed

to fleeting moments and rarely delved into. Likewise, the public presence of actors with disabilities has been scarce and their roles have been invisibilised. For example, when Zack Gottsagen—the main star of the film *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019)—appeared on the stage at the Oscars ceremony in 2020, it was the first time that an actor with Down Syndrome officially participated in the event. Although he was there to simply introduce an award and was not nominated for one himself, he was received with a standing ovation and gave visibility to disabled people in the entertainment industry.

At the same time, while audience members can find many examples of the disabled body disseminated on screen, few of them centre their narratives on disabled protagonists and even less storylines go beyond overly dramatic tones and struggle stereotypes. In this paper I analyse two films, both described as dramedies (a blend of comedy and drama usually with a happy ending), arguing that the combination of these two macrogenres gives the films room to create different associations with disabilities and more nuanced representations—thus allowing the narrative to challenge and problematise expectations and stereotypes that have become commonplace in mainstream US culture.

The examined films were both released in 2019 and both include characters with some type of disability as their protagonists: *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (*TPBF* henceforth) and *Comes as You Are* (*CAYA*). The first one follows Zak (Zack Gottsagen), an orphan with Down Syndrome, whom the healthcare system has confined in a retirement house. To follow his dream of becoming a professional wrestler, he manages to escape with the help of his roommate. While being chased by Eleanor, a worker in the retirement house (Dakota Johnson), Zak meets fisherman Tyler (Shia LaBeouf) who is also on the run and helps him reach his destination: Salt Water Redneck's school, a wrestling institution that has been closed for some time. Still, the three characters find a way for Zak to wrestle, becoming a family in the process. Conversely, *Come as You Are* tells the story of three disabled friends who go on a road trip to a brothel in Canada to lose their virginity. The film follows visually impaired Mo (Ravi Patel), Harry (Hayden Szeto), who has a non-specific degenerative illness and needs a wheelchair, tetraplegic Scotty (Grant Rosenmeyer), and their driver Sam (Gabourey Sidibe). As they decide to flee without informing their families, the group goes to extreme lengths to avoid being traced. However, and to their surprise, when their plan is discovered their parents do not oppose it, thus allowing them to reach their destination.

On the topic of disability and film, it is important to take into account the perspective through which the movies are told. Films can, for example, rely on a constructionist approach that sees "disability as a social process in which no inherent meanings attach to physical differences other than one assigned by a community" (Davis 1995, 504). In other words, people with any impairment that skews from the "norm" are labelled as "disabled" by society because their bodies do not belong to what the community has established as the standard or "normal" body. The films examined challenge the

establishment of the socially constructed normal body, they do so through the perspective of disabled characters and the development of their narrative, starting from the premises of their plots. In *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, Zak has no place in society because he has no known relatives that could take care of him and he has Down Syndrome, hence he is not allowed to live independently. Even though he is a self-sufficient adult, he is permanently incapacitated by the system. In *Come as You Are*, the three friends have to go on a journey to experience their sexuality, as the notion of disability often neglects the possibility of a functioning sex life, as well as the existence of sexual needs.

1. Humour Theories

Besides highlighting their constructionist approach, to understand how these films and their main sequences work their use of humour has to be analysed as well. Comedic events can be explained through three main theories related to the notions of superiority, incongruity and relief. Furthermore, it is fundamental to understand that "there are three available positions in a joking exchange—teller, audience and butt" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 8). This means that a subject can be the one telling the joke, listening to it or the object of humour, and according to Helen Davis and Sarah Ilott "more than one position can be adopted by the same person in a given exchange" (8).

The relevance of the positions in a joking exchange is observed in superiority theory. John Morreal defines this theory as the one that sees "laughter as expressing our feelings of superiority, over someone else or over a former state of ourselves" (2005, 65). Davis and Ilott focus on a more negative aspect by seeing "laughter as aggressive and deriving from a sense of superiority in the self in comparison with the inferiority of those forming the butt of the joke" (2018, 7). Hence, two branching categories of superiority can be distinguished. On the one hand, in "aggressive superiority . . . the target can clearly be identified: a so-called butt of the joke" (Vandaele 2002, 239), that is to say, the direct object of mockery. On the other hand, "affirmative superiority" in turn is divided into "circumstantial superiority, humor solving and institutionalized humor" as they all "affirm rather than destroy" (Vandaele 2002, 241). This type of humour can be defined by power relations and thus points at the superiority a social community may have over another (able bodies against disabled bodies), but it can also "denote moral superiority by laughing at sexist, racist, or homophobes" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 8).

Another important theory regarding humour is related to incongruity, which can be defined as the mechanism that "sees laughter as arising from the connection of something that fails to match up to people's expectations, according to how they have been conditioned to experience the world" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 9). This kind of joke interprets a situation as humorous when "there is something odd, abnormal or out of place, which we enjoy" (Morreal 2005, 66). While in most situations a simple contradiction, an unexpected one-liner, may make us laugh, there are other instances when Incongruity Theory

alone cannot explain humour. To explain this, Jeroen Vandaele (2002) gives the example of stutter, which in itself is not amusing but this speech disorder can be turned into a joke by considering the theory of superiority as a trigger of humour (228).

Finally, the last approach is relief theory which became popular thanks to Sigmund Freud's work, and it is "based on the idea that laughter releases a form of nervous energy" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 10). Freud distinguished "innocent" jokes from "tendentious" ones (Freud 1962, 91–92). The latter is the one that breaks the restrictions from oneself and the conventional boundaries that society is setting (Davis and Ilott 2018, 10). As Davis and Ilott highlight, Freud also examined how humour could function as a "rebellion against social structures" (10), which could also mean destroying stereotypes. It is through this theory that the ultimate goal of the comedy of these films can be understood because it can be used to rebel against stereotypes and the normalisation of the body.

2. Humour and Disability

Humour can thus be used to tackle taboos in society regarding minorities and the body and these two films do not miss the chance of using humour as a tool to challenge stereotypes. The first two theories mentioned above (incongruity and superiority) are important because they help explain how comedy is used to challenge what has been defined as the "normal" body. It is important to note that the idea of a normal or healthy body has been challenged by the development of the field of Disability Studies. It is worth mentioning in this sense Rosemarie Garland Thomson's book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disabilities in American Culture and Literature* (1997), in which she coins the term "normate"; and Lennard J. Davis's book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deformity and the Body* (1995) which introduces the term "normalcy."

By considering humour as a taboo-breaker, the first clue explaining why incongruity theory is important is found: the protagonists of the films analysed represent a type of body which is not normalised. In her book, Alison Wilde (2018) states that she tends to "lean towards a preference for incongruity-based explanations, in the belief that we need to illuminate how people have been misrecognised, as a prerequisite for representational change" (33). So, tackling taboos through comedy can be a good device to break or at least challenge stereotypes. The most evident characteristic of these narratives is the fact that their protagonists are all disabled characters. As Wilde argues, usually "supporting roles are where many disabled characters are to be found" (2018, 20). Hence, simply by having a story centred on characters with impairments is per se breaking the norm, as they are protagonists expressing their needs and their articulated personality, whose identity escapes the stereotyped moulds that disabled secondary characters usually fall into.

However, analysing the films only through the perspective of incongruity would be incomplete. I would argue that including the other two theories give a more detailed and

deep analysis of the power comedy can have. Especially by focusing on superiority theory, it can be observed how humour is not only a weapon for the films but also for the characters they represent. As mentioned above, a "moral superiority" stance (Davis and Ilott 2018) is used to laugh at those who usually assume to be superior. Hence, superiority in humour can also come from the member of a minority. It is, however, less common to see because in order for this to happen there needs to be a shift in power relations. Usually, the member of a minority is placed in an inferior position within the group and thus has more chances of becoming the butt of the joke—but sometimes the tables can be turned. Films like the ones analysed, which are developed from the perspective of disabled characters, allow for the power relation to change slightly and so create comedy leveraging different configurations of superiority. This means that the abled bodies are expected to become the butt of the jokes as, in this recentred narrative, the disabled ones are in a dominant position of superiority.

Moreover, for many audience members, this type of humor "can seem odd and disturbing" because western society "equates disability with personal tragedy" (Bingham and Green 2016, 6). The equation of disability with tragedy leads viewers to find it inconceivable to create humour with impairments, and as such to ignore the possible power comedy can entail for this group. When describing the humour of a stand-up comedian who has a disability, Shawn Chandler Bingham and Sara E. Green (2016) argue that "his set is a mirror and a measuring stick, provoking not only laughter but also thought and discomfort" (2). This ultimately leads the viewers to reconsider their "preconceived notions of what disability is and is not" (Bingham and Green 2016, 2). Hence, the use of humour can be twofold: entertainment and eye-opening. For a group, like the disabled, belonging to a minority, humour can become a weapon. By presenting a relaxed, seemingly naïve, setting comedy "provides tension relief, ammunition for attack or acceptance into a group, and a way to challenge and unveil social norms" (Bringham and Green 2016, 16). Similarly, after interviewing stand-up comedians, Sharon Lockyer (2015) argues that their comedy had secondary functions "related to the different ways in which disability can be affirmed through comedy via increasing understanding and educating audiences about disability" (1404). Hence, humour can serve non-disabled audiences to learn that "the problem is not the impairment *per se*, but the attitudes and structures that render the impairment disabling" (Reid et al. 2006, 630)

Furthermore, Rebecca Mallet (2010) argues that "mainstream disability comedy is the product, the symptom, and the cause of negative and discriminatory attitudes, with only certain sort of comedic utterances from certain sorts of comedic authors being deemed acceptable" (paragraph 10). Therefore, two different types of humour in regard to disability can be identified. On the one hand, Tom Coogan (2013) distinguished between "disablist humour" and "crip humour." The former can be defined as the "faux transgressive humour" while the latter as the "humour that expresses and helps

constitute group solidarity and values" (Coogan 2013, 8). I believe that these two films are using crip humour to support the visibility of disabled people. Although it may not be clear if the protagonists' actions are heroic or still tragic, the films are using humour to increase the awareness of disability rights and improve the representation of the reality of disability. Nevertheless, as Janine Natalya Clark (2022) comments "whether humour is constructed as offensive will often depend on many different factors, including an individual's particular circumstances, the context in which comments are made and the intent behind them" (1544).

However, it is important to note that the line between humour and offence can be very thin, and sometimes what one considers funny others can regard as offensive (a disparity existing even among people belonging to the same social or cultural group). As Michael Biling (2005) argues "it is necessary to understand the context in which a joke is told and not just determine its meaning in the abstract" and it is important to understand it as "a more general ideological or political context" (32). One such context can be national or cultural which "plays a part in what is *marked* as humorous, whether it is received as such or not" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 15). There are, however, more limited context because "there is a difference between a joke between friends, and the utterances of a famous comedian on a weekly panel show" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 16). This brought the need to differentiate between comedy and humour. While humour "infiltrates every area of social life and interaction, even rearing its head in situations where it is not normally regarded as appropriate," comedy is a "more formal staging in club venues, broadcasting or film" (Lockyer and Pickering 2005, 3). What is more, this division, as Davis and Ilott state quoting Hans Robert Jauss (2000), "'horizon of expectations': audiences will expect to find cause for laughter in the way the world and its inhabitants are represented" (6). Specifically, *TPBF* and *CAYA* showcase two different ways in which to represent disabled characters in comedy not as the butt of the joke. This is accomplished through the creation of crip humour thanks to a shift in power relations.

The films analysed in this paper showcase forms of crip humour where the use of humour serves the filmmakers to challenge the norms in Western society. The use of incongruity mechanisms is used to criticise some stereotypes usually associated with disabled people, mainly incapability and, in the specific case of *CAYA*, sexlessness. Power relations are opposed using superiority mechanisms. And, lastly, *CAYA* is the only one with some comedy associated with relief theory and here it can observed how it is used to express frustration and possibly anger of Scotty. Through the analysis of some scenes and sequences in the films, I try to demonstrate how these films find a way to use humour as a positive aspect for disabled characters.

3. The Power to Make Rules: *The Peanut Butter Falcon*

The opening scene in *TPBF* shows Zak's unhappiness and the wish to live his life outside of the retirement house. His plan consists of convincing an elderly woman to create a distraction so that he can run to the main exit and escape. Even though they put all their efforts into carrying out the plan, Zak is caught seconds after he crosses the door. Their facial expressions and body language—as they are clearly trying not to look suspicious—suggest that the sequence could be related to a prison escape, the only difference being that the characters involved are a disabled young man and an elderly lady at a retirement home. The comedic effect is thus accomplished by having unexpected people recreate a kind of scene that usually would belong to an action prison-escape film with athletic, non-disabled, young characters. In this scene, the plan is represented with a simple drawing made by Zak (fig. 1) and the payment for his accomplice is just some pudding. The seriousness of their expressions while making sure that nobody can see them, is in stark contrast with the way the unfolding of the plan is represented. In order to avoid speaking, he draws a sketch to explain what he needs from the elderly woman and what her compensation would be. Showing this drawing only adds to the incongruity embodied by the scene and helps to make the opening scene of the film funnier. The drawing, however, seems to be made by a child and connects with the idea of Zak being permanently seen as a child.

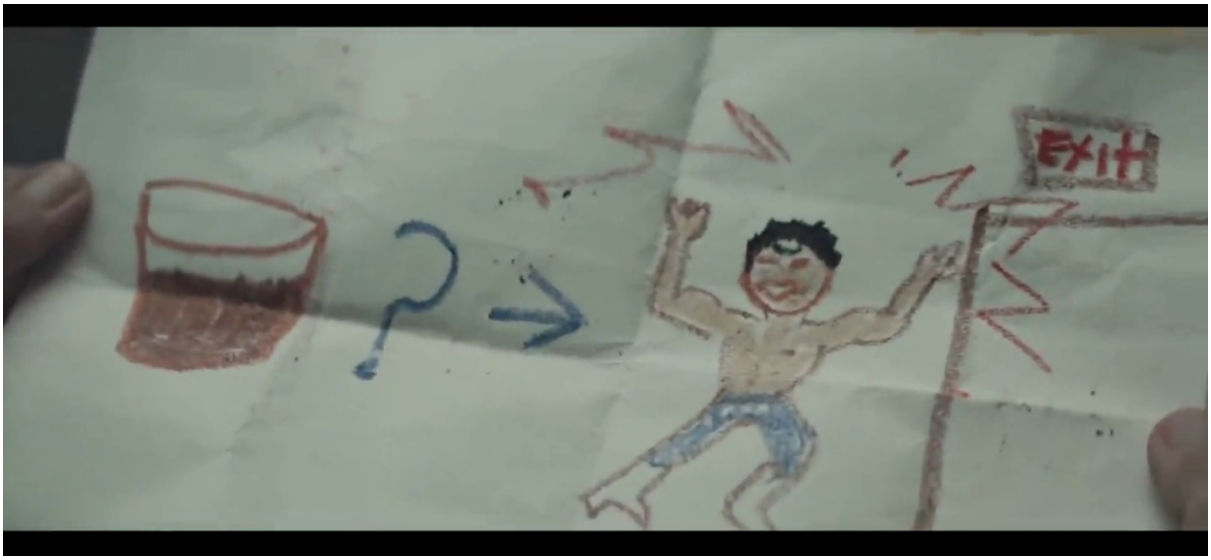

Figure 1 Zak's drawing, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, 2019.

Throughout the narrative, Zak goes through a process of growth. The first half of the film shows how Zak is considered unable to do certain things that in reality he can carry out by himself. Along the journey, he shows (both to himself and the people around him) that he is much more dependable than the healthcare system made him be. Zak escapes the

retirement house by sliding through the bars of the window but for that, he needs to take his clothes off to favour the sliding, as if he was being born again. Zak finds himself walking around wearing only his white underwear which resembles a diaper. Due to the social censure of nakedness, Zak walking around in his underwear may create a feeling of awkwardness in the audience which leads to comedy. Moreover, as Lockyer (2015) asserts, this humour can have the ultimate goal of making the American audience think of the current situation of people with Down Syndrome in the United States. His nakedness could be considered a representation of the lack of protection the care system has to offer for people with Down Syndrome or other disabilities. Whether intentionally or not, the progress from going naked to being fully clothed parallels the protagonist's process of growth. Zak goes from being treated like a dependent child to being a dependable adult, which is only allowed once he escapes the retirement house to follow his own path/dreams.

In addition, his relationship with Tyler and Eleanor is a fundamental factor in this process. While Eleanor believes that the best place for Zak is the retirement house where he can be taken care of, Tyler considers that Zak has to be free to live every experience he wishes to try and hence helps him reach his destination. The differing attitudes lead Eleanor and Tyler to engage in several arguments regarding how they should treat Zak. Following this infantilising representation of Zak, Eleanor and Tyler seem to behave like his parents assuming and making decisions on what is "best for him." Zak is allowed to show his independence because Tyler opposes Eleanor's views. However, both characters seem to treat Zak as a child—incapable of deciding anything relevant on his own—by not including him in these discussions. A good example of this dynamic is when, while on a raft, Tyler and Eleanor tell Zak to practise holding his breath underwater so that meanwhile they can talk about him, giving him no chance to participate in the conversation (fig. 2).

In this sequence, Zak continues to be portrayed as a dependent child whose parents, Tyler and Eleanor, seem to be the ones who know better. The seriousness of the scene is interrupted by Zak who takes his head out of the water with a fish that he catches. Aside from the comedy created by the unexpected interruption, having Zak fishing with his mouth offers some tension relief for the audience. After giving the audience two different positions in the debate over the protagonist, the film presents them with some comedic exchange to lighten the tone. At the same time, by having Zak interrupting the argument the film puts him to the centre of the narrative again, as the audience focuses their attention on him and not on Tyler or Eleanor. Whilst representing one more step of the process of growth for Zak—in which he can prove his dependability—it is also a process of learning for Tyler and Eleanor, who ultimately create a bond with Zak based on respect. Similarly, the film takes the viewers through a similar journey of understanding as they are introduced to Zak's perspective.

Figure 2 Tyler and Eleanor talking while Zak has his head under water, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, 2019.

While incongruity mechanisms in *TPBF* are used to challenge the inabilities—or, rather, the stereotypes and assumptions—usually associated with disabled people, superiority mechanisms are used to challenge power relations. After agreeing to help Zak reach his destination, Tyler informs him that there are two rules he has to follow: to avoid slowing his own journey down and that he is in charge and leads the way. Zak immediately accepts these two rules, knowing that Tyler is going to help him reach his destination. However, when Tyler starts walking Zak waits a few seconds before following him, which frustrates Tyler because he has to stop and wait for him. When asked again what rule number one was, Zak responds "Party." Considering how easily the rules were accepted by Zak, the audience expects to hear a repetition of the first rule which would assert their positions: Tyler as the one in charge and Zak as the naïve companion who follows suit. Conversely, what Zak accomplishes with this simple word is to challenge who is in charge. By "stealing" the role of rule maker from Tyler and thus challenging his power, Zak turns their power positions on their head. Zak is stealing the rules from Tyler, thus not letting him take charge of the journey. Although the answer seems childish, he is in fact challenging Tyler's power over him. And he is most successful here, Tyler being one of the few characters that treats him as an equal on most occasions from the start. Although the butt of the joke is Tyler in this exchange, Zak doesn't retain a great superiority over him as Tyler is frustrated and keeps thinking that Zak should not slow him down.

4. Neglected Needs: *Come as You Are*

As in *TPBF*, the adult characters in *CAYA* are also trying to run away from home. Nonetheless, for Matt, Scotty and Mo their escape is temporary as they intend to lose their virginity and return home. Similar to Zak's escape, the characters in this film also elaborate

a plan, which makes them behave as sort of secret agents as they only have the chance to talk about it when their parents are not around. One of these moments is the sequence in which they go to their rehabilitation centre. In one sequence, Matt and Scotty meet at the entrance door of the centre where they have discuss details of their plan. In this shot it can be seen how they give each other a quick update in front of the rehabilitation centre. In order to avoid being suspicious, they stay next to each other and avoid eye contact while using sentences like "leave no trace" [00:20:20] (fig. 3). They also need the help of Matt's sister to buy some things they need or Scotty needs Mo to help him pack his luggage and Scotty is very keen on naming their escape plan "operation copulation [00:22:53]. The only difference between this film and any other involving a secret escape or plot, and hence what creates incongruity, is that the ones plotting it are disabled characters.

Figure 3 Matt and Scotty secretly talking about their plans, *Come as You Are*, 2019.

Aside from the escape plan, the film presents some more incongruous situations opposing the expectations that Western society has created about disabled people. The first and the most obvious stereotype tackled in this film is that disabled people as sexless or asexual. The wish to express their sexual desire for these characters becomes itself a sign of rebellion because American society does not consider sex as a necessity for disabled individuals. Hence, their families do not see the need to engage with that aspect of their lives. Moreover, being the mastermind behind the trip, Scotty is introduced as the character with more sexual desire and the most outspoken one about it. Therefore, watching porn is the first thing he does when he finds himself in a motel room without any supervision. Visually impaired Mo, however, can't see what is going on in the video, and although he is not so outspoken about his sexual needs, his curiosity is piqued.

Consequently, Scotty begins to describe to Mo what the porn actors are doing on screen. Due to the stereotype that imagines disabled people as sexless, having Scotty and Mo watch porn creates per se an incongruous situation for the audience. On top of that, to have Scotty describe it to Mo makes the sequence even more incongruous.

A few minutes later, the characters realise that they have been traced and thus need to hide from their parents, but as their driver is absent, they have no alternative to escape than driving the van themselves. Here the audience witnesses how the protagonists struggle and use their disabled bodies to find a way to drive a car that is not built for drivers with any kind of impairment. Matt and Scotty become the eyes and Mo the hands and legs, all of them working together to become one body and manage to drive. This sequence is meant to be comical because it creates a completely unexpected situation, paired with the unspoken understanding that someone with disabilities can't and is not supposed to drive a vehicle. The frame construction of the shot of the three in the van, Mo being unsure but Scotty and Matt trying to ensure him that everything is going to be all right is possibly another reason why this scene is comical (fig. 4). Their failure to arrive at their destination is expected, but their goal was escaping, and they are more than successful in achieving their escape. It is interesting to realise that most of the unexpected moments follow the contrast between reality—characterised by ingenuity and diverse capabilities—and a mainstream belief of what a capable body is and what it should look like.

As Wilde (2018) argues, the stereotypes and narrative tropes usually associated with disabilities can be acknowledged through incongruity and only by analysing them and becoming aware of them might there be any change. Comedy in this case, although it may look insignificant, is a powerful weapon to criticise the norms and beliefs in Western society.

Figure 4 Matt, Mo and Scotty driving the van, *Come as You Are*, 2019.

After driving the van to a ditch next to the road, Mo, Scotty and Matt are found by a confused police officer. Being the police officer the embodiment of authority, the audience would expect him to be the one in control of the situation. In this specific case, however, the police officer finds himself overpowered by the three disabled characters. The stereotypes embedded in his perception of disabled individuals lead him to not fully understand the situation he faces, as he does not fully understand how three disabled people were capable of driving a van. Mo, Scotty and Matt take advantage of his confusion and snatch the position of power from him by using sarcasm. The three protagonists are consciously lying to him, aware that he does not know how to talk to them as peers and opposing them would put him in an awkward situation. It is this uneasiness that makes Scotty smile and gives wings to his superiority as can be seen in his facial expression (fig. 5).

Being in this position the three characters find their confidence and correct the officer regarding the terms he uses to define them. Scotty corrects his use of "handicapped gentlemen" because he should use "persons with disabilities." Mo corrects his use of "blind person" by saying "Excuse me, it's visually impaired" [00:46:26]. The number of corrections leaves the police officer even more confused and he seems to seek their approval when he calls a tow truck for their van. Aside from showing the importance of inclusive language, the film chooses to have the police officer represent the ignorance of most abled bodies by having him be the butt of the joke. The choice of the authoritative figure as the object of comedy is relevant as it shows how stereotypes and ignorance are embedded in almost every strand of society. Still, the most relevant feature of this scene is that the comedy is being created by the disabled characters who feel powerful enough to mess with the police officer.

Figure 5 Scotty, Mo and Matt talking to the police officer, *Come as You Are*, 2019.

The police officer comes across as even more ignorant when he states that "my cousin's brother-in-law is Down Syndrome, so I know" [00:47:36]. On the one hand, this scene exposes the commonly applied logic fallacy—possibly shared by members of the audience—undergirding the assumption that because one knows of a person with disabilities (in no way related to them) they can understand the experience that all persons with disabilities including these three characters are living. Hence, the film is using both the police officer and the audience itself as the butt of the joke. On the other hand, such a misguided conviction on the fictional character's part lends more power to the three protagonists, because he clearly did not even consider that he had to be corrected. As much as the police officer tries to regain power by appearing as someone who "knows" about disabilities, he only exposes his inferior position in terms of knowledge, inclusivity, and respect.

The protagonists find themselves surrounded by people's ignorance, those who pretend to understand what their lives are like, but they still do not feel like their needs are taken into consideration. Hence, their need to escape their parents' homes to visit a brothel in Canada to satisfy their sexual needs, which are completely ignored by everyone around them. By analysing humour through relief theory, the frustration felt by the characters due to their situation can be highlighted. At the same time, by considering relief mechanisms, the audience might observe more examples of power relations shifts or stereotypes criticisms.

I argue that these mechanisms are mostly used through the character of Scotty, who shows his frustration in life with sarcastic comments. His main objective on this trip to Canada is to prove that he can be independent and that he can carry out more tasks without the constant help of his mother. As he is a tetraplegic, he needs constant help from a caretaker, whether it is to eat his meals or to get out of bed. In his specific case the caretaker is his mother, who seldom gives him privacy. Not only does he want to lose his virginity, but he also wants to gain some independence. Given the tone of the film, it is no wonder that he transforms that frustration into sarcasm. Hence, some of his comments can be understood to be a release of his feelings, inner fears, or insecurities. By using some undertones of aggressiveness in his humour he gains power over the people he unleashes sarcasm onto. For instance, Scotty is unable to move most parts of his body and, when he meets Matt, he notices his athletic body and that his chair is not the right size for him. He resentfully names him "Biceps" and makes fun of his wheelchair. This somehow annoys Matt, but not enough to call him out. It does, however, show that Scotty is taking something that would make Matt "more able" than him and turns it into an object of laughter. A similar example could be observed in the police officer conversation (explained above), where Scotty is purposely trying to make him feel uncomfortable. By having other characters feel uncomfortable he gains some power over them and reduces his own feeling of non-belonging. In a conversation between these two characters, Scotty

apologises to Matt by expressing how spending time with him and Mo has made him feel included [01:14:30]. Hence the frustration the character feels as—no matter what he did—he did not feel like he could belong anywhere. Throughout the trip, he grows to understand that the anger or frustration he might experience possibly hinders him from enjoying his life to the fullest. That is why towards the end of the film this humour mechanism is less present. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how Scotty's attitude may lead the audience to keep thinking about the real situation of disabled people in the United States. At times, those sarcastic comments or looks might be directed at both the character on the screen and the viewers. It is no longer about making the audience slightly smile or about allowing them to laugh, it is more about the reality of the situation these characters go through. However, it is important that while he is using his sarcasm in conversations, he is also trying to gain the upper hand (again a great example is the conversation with the police officer), and in that sense, it is impossible to not consider the type of humour intrinsic to superiority mechanisms.

5. Disability Humour in Context

It is quite clear that the audience is receiving permission to find humour in what they are watching, but the question that one should be posing is: who is giving this permission? And in the case of these films, context is extremely relevant and connected to the different layers that configure these two narratives. On the one hand, the social context is set by the film. That is, the characters on screen represent the roles in the joking exchange and the situation they find themselves in is their specific social context. In that sense, if the disabled character is the one creating the humour, It could be understood that permission is given by that character. However, focusing on the "party" dialogue in *TPBF*, I would argue that the audience *is* laughing at Zak's reaction, not so much laughing *with* him. One could also say that Zak is willingly messing with Tyler, in which case the butt of the joke could be Tyler and not Zak. In this case, is quite difficult to determine who is the butt of the joke from the audience's perspective and so it is to determine who is giving permission to the viewers to laugh. That is why the socio-cultural context where the film has been produced needs to be considered. In the United States there have been several social movements asking for a wider range of disability representation in films or series. These two films respond to that request and present some disabled characters challenging the way the healthcare system and US society in general have been managing their disability and everyday existence. The question that really interests this study to fully understand if the films are successful in creating crip humour, is whose permission should the analysis focus on: the one coming from the characters or the one coming from the creative team? As Coogan said "is it possible for a non-disabled person with a disability sensibility to utilize crip humour?" (2013, 8).

When analysing the different approaches to humour in the films, it is not difficult to realise that the films are trying to break taboos and the stereotypes associated with disabled bodies. Because of this, I argue that the films analysed create crip humour. However, it is also relevant to consider different aspects that would make one reconsider this argument. To begin with, as I have mentioned above, the representation of Zak as a child in need of education can lead to not perceiving any shift in power between Tyler and him, as his answer might be considered childish and powerless. This is an important issue because, from my point of view, it is through this shift that these characters gain some power to create the sort of comedy that suits them or that represents them. However, according to the directors of this film, the line "Party!" was an improvisation by the actor himself (Cooper 2019), which could change the interpretation of the scene. It is no longer a decision made by a writer, but rather of a disabled actor who thought that a specific word was perfect for the moment and was also given the freedom to play his character in whichever way he thought fit. Therefore, one could argue that even though the directors and the rest of the cast were able-bodied, Gottsagen's voice was relevant in the characterisation of Zak. Similarly, although the cast was non-disabled actors, *CAYA* was based on Asta Philpot's real-life story, which was also the subject of a documentary and a Belgian film that ultimately led to the production of this American film. When he went on holiday to Spain with his parents, Philpot discovered a brothel where he lost his virginity; it was after this experience that he felt the need to make a documentary, "because there are so many barriers and taboos not only surrounding disability but surrounding pretty much every aspect of life that people are just so uncomfortable talking about" (Myers 2020). *CAYA* was successful in reproducing Philpot's intentions to break stereotypes and taboos and it chose to do it through comedy. The most important aspect these two films share is that one way or another, both of them include the voice of a person with disabilities. Nevertheless, *CAYA* missed the chance of hiring disabled actors which could have given more power to the humour used in the narrative.

In conclusion, humour can be a powerful weapon to tell stories of disabled people. It is not a matter of becoming the hero of their own story but, rather, of showing abled bodied people their own ignorance. A good way—and a possibly easy way, considering the reach of popular culture products such as films—to make people listen to you is when you use a comedic tone, everything becomes less serious but more real. I argue that it is through the use of humour, following the three theories that the films are capable of challenging what has been socially and culturally normalised regarding people with disabilities. Furthermore, the most important feature highlighted by the films is the possibility of changing the power relations and hence giving power to the not normalised body. In order to do that, the films have to create crip humour, so as to not be offensive or insulting toward their own protagonists. The representation provided by these two films in the humour might have been mostly written and scripted by non-disabled people but with the

intention to listen and give voice to disabled people. Without their voices and their stories, films about disabilities would be incomplete. *Come as You Are* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon* are two important examples of disabilities in film because they don't just prove that these stories need to be told in the genre of drama, but they also show how humour can be more than laughter but a weapon to fight against taboos and stereotypes.

Works Cited

Biling, Michael. 2005. "Comic, Racism and Violence." In *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, edited by Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, 25–44. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bingham, Shawn Chandler, and Sara E. Green. 2016. *Seriously Funny: Disability and the Paradoxical Power of Humor.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Clark, Janine Natalya. 2022. "On disability, humour and rabbit holes: A personal reflection." *Disability & Society* 37 (9): 1541–45.

Come as You Are. 2019. Directed by Richard Wong. Chicago Media Angels.

Coogan, Tom. 2013. "Usually I Love the Onion, but This Time You've Gone Too Far." *Journal of Literature & Cultural Disabilities Studies* 7 (1): 1–17.

Cooper, Freda. 2019 "Interview: Writers/Directors Tyler Nilson & Mike Schwartz On 'The Peanut Butter Falcon.'" *Hollywood News*, 19 Oct 2019, https://www.thehollywoodnews.com/2019/10/16/interview-writers-directors-tyler-nilson-mike-schwartz-on-the-peanut-butter-falcon/. Accessed 12 Sept 2022.

Davis, Lennard J. 1995. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*. New York: Verso.

Davis, Lennard J. 1999. "Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies." *American Literary History* 11 (3): 500–12.

Davis, Helen and Ilott, Sarah. 2018. "Mocking the Weak? Context, Theories, Politics." In *Comedy and Politics of Representation: Mocking the Weak*, edited by Helen Davis and Sarah Ilott, 1–24. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Freud, Sigmund. 1963. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious.* Translated by James Strachey. New York: Norton

Garland-Thomas, Rosemarie. 1997. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia Press.

Jauss, Hans Robert. 2000. "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature." In *Modern Genre Theory*, edited by David Duff, 127–47. London: Routledge.

Lockyer, Sharon and Pickering, Michael. 2005. "The Ambiguities of Comic Impersonation." In *Beyond the Joke: The Limits of Humour*, edited by Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, 180–97. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lockyer, Sharon. 2015. "From comedy targets to comedy-makers: Disability and comedy in live performance." *Disability & Society* 30 (9): 1397–412.

Mallet, Rebecca. 2010. "Claiming Comedic Immunity Or, What Do You Get When You Cross Contemporary British Comedy with Disability." *Review of Disability Studies* 6 (3): n.p.

Morreal, John. 2005. "Humour and the Conduct of Politics." *Beyond the Joke: The Limits of Humour*, edited by Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, 63–78. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Myers, Scott. 2020. "Interview with Asta Philpot." *Go into the Story*, 14 Feb 2020, https://gointothestory.blcklst.com/interview-asta-philpot-50e23469dad9 accessed 12 September 2022.

The Peanut Butter Falcon. 2019. Directed by Tyler Nilson and Michael Schwartz. Armory Films.

Reid, D. Kim, Stoughton, Eddy Hammond, and Smith, Robin M. 2006. "The humorous construction of disability: 'stand-up' comedians in the United States." *Disability & Society* 21 (6): 629–43.

Robillard, Albert B. 1999. "Wild Phenomena and Disability Jokes." *Body & Society* 5 (4): 61–65.

Vandaele, Jeroen. 2002. "Humor Mechanisms in Film Comedy: Incongruity and Superiority." *Poetics today* 23 (2): 221–49.

Wilde, Alison. 2018. *Film, Comedy, And Disability: Understanding Humour and Genre in Cinematic Constructions of Impairment and Disability*. New York: Routledge.