



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Lara Lengel,
Bowling Green State University,
United States

REVIEWED BY

Spemba Spemba,
University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
Berit Sandberg,
Berlin University of Applied Sciences-
HTW Berlin, Germany

*CORRESPONDENCE

José Manuel Hernández Garre
✉ jmhernandez@ucam.edu

RECEIVED 13 June 2026

REVISED 23 August 2026

ACCEPTED 31 August 2026

PUBLISHED 15 September 2026

CITATION

Gómez de Maya V, Hernández Garre JM
and de Maya Sánchez B (2026)
Anthropological analysis of functional
diversity paradigms in cinema: a
diachronic study of the transformation of
models and stereotypes.
Front. Commun. 11:1908211.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2026.1908211

COPYRIGHT

© 2026 Gómez de Maya, Hernández
Garre and de Maya Sánchez. This is an
open-access article distributed under
the terms of the [Creative Commons
Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other
forums is permitted, provided the
original author(s) and the copyright
owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is
cited, in accordance with accepted
academic practice. No use, distribution
or reproduction is permitted which does
not comply with these terms.

Anthropological analysis of functional diversity paradigms in cinema: a diachronic study of the transformation of models and stereotypes

Verónica Gómez de Maya¹, José Manuel Hernández Garre^{2*} and
Baldomero de Maya Sánchez³

¹PhD Program in Social Work, Faculty of Social Work, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain, ²Social Anthropology Area, Department of Health Sciences, Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia (UCAM), Murcia, Spain, ³Department of Health Sciences, University of Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain

This study examines the representation of disability/functional diversity in cinema as a historically situated construction of social imaginaries, stereotypes, and disability paradigms. Drawing on Disability Studies, film studies, and non-disciplinary film anthropology, it analyses 105 feature-length fiction films released between the 1920s and the 2020s in which disability plays a significant narrative role. The study combines qualitative film content analysis with descriptive quantitative comparisons across decade, cinematic movement, genre, nationality, and type of disability. The results show a diachronic shift from exclusionary, eugenic, and medical-rehabilitative frameworks toward more social, relational, and subjective forms of representation. However, this evolution is not linear: the medical-rehabilitative model appears in 70 films and the social model in 63, often coexisting within the same film. Stereotypes also change over time. Explicitly stigmatising figures such as the villain or avenger become less frequent, while more socially valued figures, especially the noble warrior, the sage, and the superstar citizen, gain prominence. This suggests that stigma is not simply eliminated, but often reformulated through narratives of resilience, inspiration, or exceptional achievement. The findings also reveal persistent gender asymmetries, limited inclusive casting, and uneven narrative focalisation from disabled characters' perspectives. Overall, contemporary cinema has moved toward more inclusive representations, but this transition remains incomplete.

KEYWORDS

cinema, disability, disability studies, film representation, functional diversity, social model of disability, stereotypes, visual anthropology

1 Introduction

Disability—also referred to in some Spanish-speaking contexts as functional diversity—does not merely constitute a biological or clinical reality. It is also a historical, social, cultural, and symbolic construction whose meaning has changed according to dominant ideological frameworks, institutional practices, and forms of collective imagination. Across history, disability has been interpreted through different paradigms, ranging from exclusionary, charitable, or eugenic views to medical-rehabilitative approaches and, more recently, to social and rights-based understandings

(Ferraro, 2001; Palacios, 2008). From this perspective, disability is not only a condition attributed to bodies or minds, but also a field of social meaning shaped by stigma, ableism, stereotypes, norms of normality, and unequal access to recognition and participation (Casaú Guirao et al., 2021; Goffman, 1963).

Communication media play a central role in the production and circulation of these meanings. In contemporary societies, audiovisual media do not simply reproduce already existing ideas about social groups; they contribute to making certain bodies, behaviours, identities, and forms of dependence or autonomy culturally intelligible. Cinema occupies a privileged position within this process because it combines narrative, image, sound, performance, and affect. Through characters, plots, genres, visual styles, and modes of spectatorship, films participate in defining what appears ordinary or abnormal, desirable or threatening, autonomous or dependent, included or excluded.

This study is situated at the intersection of Disability Studies, film studies, and non-disciplinary film anthropology. These three perspectives are not treated as separate or merely additive frameworks. Rather, they jointly inform the analysis. Disability Studies provides the conceptual vocabulary for examining disability paradigms, stigma, ableism, autonomy, dependency, inclusion, exclusion, and representational inequality. Film studies makes it possible to analyse how genre, cinematic movement, narrative structure, *mise-en-scène*, character function, and visual conventions shape the meaning of disability on screen. Non-disciplinary film anthropology provides the epistemological basis for treating fiction films as cultural artefacts through which historically situated imaginaries of difference, normality, vulnerability, and social belonging can be examined.

The objective of this article is therefore to analyse fiction film as anthropological material in order to study the archetypes, worldviews, paradigms, and social ideologies projected onto disability/functional diversity in cinema. The study does not assume that films directly mirror social attitudes. Rather, films are understood as cultural refractors: they condense, reorganise, dramatise, and sometimes contest broader social discourses. From this perspective, a diachronic analysis of cinema makes it possible to examine how the representation of disability has changed across cinematic history, and how these changes relate to broader transformations in disability paradigms, cultural stereotypes, film genres, national cinemas, and visual regimes of normality.

1.1 Cinema as a cultural apparatus of representation

Cinema did not always hold the position of cultural legitimacy it is accorded today; in its infancy, it was considered a minor form of entertainment, dismissed by both ruling elites and certain artistic sectors, who reduced it to a popular spectacle or a mere reproduction of theatre (Ferro, 2008). However, its rapid expansion transformed it into one of the most influential media for communication and cultural dissemination in the contemporary era, capable of reaching vast audiences and functioning not only as entertainment but also as a tool for

communication, education, and symbolic production (González López, 2008).

From a historical perspective, cinema is the result of a long process of technical innovation linked to the development of photography, motion capture, and sound synchronisation. Its consolidation occurred at the end of the 19th century with the invention of the cinematograph and the famous first screening by the Lumière brothers in 1895—a moment widely regarded as foundational in the history of the medium. From that point, cinema quickly branched into two major initial orientations: one closely tied to the recording of reality, and the other associated with fiction, illusion, and artifice, paradigmatically represented by Georges Méliès, whose work inaugurated many of the narrative and visual resources of fantasy cinema (Costa, 1991).

The evolution of cinema throughout the 20th century was marked by several decisive transformations. The first major stage was the silent film era, characterised by the absence of synchronised dialogue, the use of intertitles, and a highly pronounced visual and gestural expressiveness. This period consolidated cinematographic language and gave rise to the first star culture, particularly in Hollywood, where figures such as Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, or Swanson defined highly influential narrative and acting models. The advent of “talkies” (sound film) in the late 1920s brought about a profound aesthetic and industrial restructuring, transforming acting styles, *mise-en-scène*, the international circulation of films, and production systems themselves. Later, the widespread adoption of colour cinema and, more recently, the digital revolution, once again modified the expressive, technical, and commercial possibilities of the medium, enhancing its capacity to construct complex visual worlds and reinforcing its dimension as a global cultural product.

Beyond these technical advancements, what remains relevant to this study is that cinema has established itself as a privileged space for social representation. Within it, imaginaries, stereotypes, norms, and values are articulated, contributing to the configuration of the collective perception of phenomena such as disability. As Costa (1991) notes, cinema combines the objectification of the event with the fascinated restitution of experience, thus becoming an apparatus capable of making a specific interpretation of the world visible. In this sense, it is not merely an artistic or industrial form, but a cultural practice that actively participates in the symbolic organisation of social reality.

The progress of the medium, from silent film to the contemporary digital ecosystem, has expanded its reach and daily presence, especially with the recent expansion of streaming platforms. This transformation has further intensified its role in the circulation of cultural models and the construction of collective imaginaries. For this very reason, cinema constitutes an especially valuable source for studying how representations of disability have changed over time and how different historical, aesthetic, and technological contexts have conditioned the modes of narrating it.

In this sense, cinema is relevant not only because it portrays disability, but because it provides culturally recognisable forms through which disability becomes narratively meaningful. The disabled character may be positioned as an object of pity, fear, admiration, desire, rejection, or identification depending on the visual and narrative codes through which the film organises the spectator's gaze.

1.2 Cinematic movements

Cinematic movements may be understood as aesthetic and narrative shifts that, since the emergence of the cinematograph, have contributed to the construction of audiovisual language. Each movement proposes a specific way of representing reality and articulating technical, visual, and expressive resources. In this sense, these movements do not merely organise cinematic styles; they also condition the construction of characters, conflicts, and frameworks of meaning. Consequently, they are particularly relevant for a historical analysis of the representation of disability.

Among the early avant-gardes, German Expressionism stands out, emerging in the Weimar Republic following the First World War. Its aesthetic is characterised by somber atmospheres, unreal and distorted sets, lighting contrasts, exaggerated gestures, and a preference for the fantastic, the monstrous, and the uncanny. Rather than reproducing objective reality, Expressionism sought to externalise the inner anguish of characters and their historical context (Sánchez Noriega, 2018). Distinct, yet equally decisive, was the contribution of Soviet Cinema, which placed montage at the centre as an ideological and emotional resource. Born in the heat of the 1917 Revolution, this cinema conceived the image as an instrument of political mobilisation and developed new ways of constructing meaning through visual juxtaposition, as evidenced by the works of Eisenstein or the famous Kuleshov effect (Prigorian, 2008; Sánchez Noriega, 2018).

Classical American Cinema constituted, for its part, the great aesthetic matrix of studio-system Hollywood. Rather than a movement in the strictest sense, it was a narrative and industrial system based on plot clarity, visual continuity, and the so-called “invisible mise-en-scène”, in which all formal resources are subordinated to the story (Pérez Rufi, 2017; Zavala, 2005). Within this framework, Classical American Comedy also developed, characterised by the elegance of its mise-en-scène, the centrality of dialogue, and the construction of humorous situations based on misunderstandings, social contrasts, and stereotyped characters. This model coexisted with other significant European forms, such as Surrealism—which privileged the irrational, the dreamlike, and the rupture of conventional narrative logic—or Italian Neorealism, born after the Second World War, which approached the daily lives of the working classes through location shooting, non-professional actors, and a marked testimonial vocation.

Other movements are equally relevant for their attention to ordinary life and social conflict. Japanese Shomin-geki focused on everyday stories of the middle and lower classes, while British Free Cinema and Social Realism explored, from a critical perspective, the experiences of the working class and marginalised subjects. The French Nouvelle Vague, for its part, introduced a decisive break with traditional filmmaking, opting for formal freedom, shooting in real locations, and a more mobile, spontaneous camera. These movements contributed to shifting interest from grand narratives and classical heroes toward more fragmentary, intimate, and socially situated experiences.

From the 1960s and 1970s onwards, so-called Modern Cinema questioned the narrative and moral transparency of classicism, incorporating ambiguous characters, more explicit sexuality and

violence, and greater directorial autonomy. Subsequently, Postmodern Cinema combined classical and modern elements, accentuating self-referentiality, temporal fragmentation, and the hybridisation of styles. Finally, movements such as Dogma 95 reacted against the technological spectacularisation of contemporary cinema, advocating an austere aesthetic focused on performance, real locations, and the reduction of artifice.

Taken together, these movements demonstrate that the history of cinema cannot be understood as a linear evolution, but rather as a succession of aesthetic, ideological, and industrial responses to different historical contexts. For this reason, they constitute a fundamental analytical variable for studying how representations of disability are configured and transformed over time (Costa, 1991).

For the purposes of this study, cinematic movements and genres are not used merely as descriptive labels. They are treated as interpretative variables that shape the representational possibilities available to disability. A horror film, a melodrama, a social realist drama, a postmodern comedy-drama, or a war film do not construct disability through the same narrative expectations, visual codes, or emotional regimes. Genre and movement therefore help explain why similar types of disability may be represented as threat, tragedy, innocence, resilience, social exclusion, or ordinary human experience depending on the cinematic framework in which they appear.

For this reason, cinematic movement is treated in this article as an analytical variable. The classification does not imply that each film belongs to a closed or purely stylistic category. Rather, movements are used as broad film-historical frameworks that help explain how different periods and aesthetic traditions have made disability visible, intelligible, or symbolically problematic.

1.3 Cinematic genres

Cinematic genres facilitate the classification of films based on their themes, settings, narrative styles, or formal conventions. These are not closed or mutually exclusive categories, as a single work can participate in several genres simultaneously, giving rise to subgenres or hybrid forms. Their utility lies not only in organising film production but also in providing frameworks of expectation for the spectator and conditioning the construction of characters, conflicts, and modes of representation. As Romaguera (1999) points out, genres emerged from the need to organise diverse cinematic proposals according to observable traits and recurrent thematic cores. Similarly, Sánchez Noriega (2018) distinguishes between canonical genres, hybrid genres, and intergenres, highlighting the flexibility of these categories and their historically variable nature.

In analytical terms, genres are relevant because they influence how certain social phenomena, including disability, are represented. Each genre selects specific conflicts, atmospheres, and character models that condition the narrative's meaning. Thus, comedy tends to construct light or absurd situations aimed at eliciting laughter, although it may also harbour social criticism or more sophisticated variants. Conversely, drama privileges grave conflicts, moral dilemmas, and greater emotional intensity, making it one of the most frequent genres for narrating suffering, vulnerability, or overcoming adversity.

Thrillers and horror share the capacity to generate tension, intrigue, or unease, though the former focuses more on narrative uncertainty and the latter on emotional disturbance and fear. For its part, film noir articulates stories linked to crime, corruption, and moral ambiguity, while war cinema positions conflict as the plot's central axis, allowing for the exploration of trauma, camaraderie, or structural violence (Sánchez Noriega, 2018).

Other genres further expand the field of representational possibilities. Science fiction and fantasy allow action to be situated in unreal, supernatural, or technologically altered contexts, albeit through different logics: while science fiction relies on plausible hypotheses linked to scientific advancement, fantasy resorts to magic or an overt rupture of the laws of the real world. The musical, by contrast, integrates songs and choreography into the plot, generating particular forms of emotional spectacularisation. Action and adventure cinema is organised around feats, risk, heroism, and confrontation; the crime genre shifts the focus toward offences, mafias, or investigations; and philosophical or existential cinema privileges questions regarding the meaning of life, identity, death, or subjective experience. Alongside these, hybrid genres and intergenres—such as comedy-drama (dramedy), the road movie, or the revenge film—demonstrate the extent to which generic classification is dynamic and permeable (Sánchez Noriega, 2018).

Taken together, cinematic genres do not merely fulfil a classificatory function; they act as narrative and symbolic frameworks that guide cinematic representation. Therefore, they constitute a variable of particular interest in this study, as they allow for the observation of how the treatment of disability changes according to the type of story in which it is embedded, the conflicts it mobilises, and the cultural expectations associated with each generic form.

1.4 Film anthropology

Visual anthropology, situated within social anthropology, studies cultures through images and examines how visual practices participate in the construction of social meanings. Its development has been closely linked to photography, cinema, video, television, and other audiovisual technologies, which have expanded the possibilities for documenting, analysing, and representing social life. From this perspective, visual media do not merely transmit information; they also participate in the production of values, behavioural models, identities, and collective imaginaries (Collado-Vázquez et al., 2010; Rodríguez Herrero, 2012).

Film anthropology may be understood as the use of cinema as a source and medium for the anthropological study of human cultures, social relations, symbolic systems, and forms of representation (Grau Rebollo, 2012). Within this field, a distinction can be drawn between approaches centred on ethnographic or documentary filmmaking and those that use fiction films as cultural texts and sources for anthropological analysis (Grau Rebollo, 2012). The ethnographic tradition has a well-established genealogy, extending from the earliest uses of moving images in anthropological fieldwork to foundational productions such as *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922), and

subsequently to the work of researchers and filmmakers such as Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and to later developments in visual anthropology (Henley, 2001). These contributions progressively consolidated film not merely as a means of recording cultural practices but as a medium capable of producing anthropological knowledge (Grau Rebollo, 2012; Henley, 2001).

The branch of particular relevance to this study is non-disciplinary film anthropology. This approach assumes that fiction films, although not ethnographic records in a strict sense, are not detached from the social world. They condense lifestyles, values, anxieties, norms, beliefs, stereotypes, power relations, and collective tensions. For this reason, fiction cinema can be analysed as a cultural apparatus capable of both reflecting and producing social imaginaries. As De la Peña Martínez (2014) argues, fictional films may constitute highly valuable ethnographic material when they are examined as cultural forms rather than as transparent reproductions of reality.

This article applies non-disciplinary film anthropology to the study of disability representation. The anthropological dimension of the analysis lies in examining how cinema constructs difference and normality, autonomy and dependency, inclusion and exclusion, stigma and recognition. These broad concepts are operationalised through observable filmic indicators: the narrative role of the character with disability, the degree of agency granted to them, the presence or absence of subjective focalisation, the relationship with family and institutions, the use of pity, fear, ridicule, heroism, or infantilisation, and the way the character is visually framed within social space.

In this sense, the anthropological analysis is not limited to identifying whether disability appears in a film. It examines how disability is made meaningful: whether it is presented as tragedy, threat, moral test, medical problem, heroic achievement, social barrier, ordinary experience, or human diversity. Fiction cinema is therefore treated as a privileged material for analysing how each period symbolically organises the boundaries between normality and difference.

1.5 Functional diversity

Functional diversity constitutes a social, historical, and cultural reality of great magnitude. According to international estimates, approximately 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability or functional limitation, making disability one of the largest minority experiences worldwide (United Nations, n.d.; WHO, 2023). Beyond its biological or clinical dimension, disability is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon shaped by the interaction between bodily, sensory, intellectual, or mental characteristics and the social conditions in which people live (Padilla Muñoz, 2010).

In the Spanish-speaking context, the term functional diversity was proposed by the Independent Living Forum in 2005 as a non-pejorative alternative to deficit-based and medicalised terminology (Romañach and Lobato, 2005). Its aim was to move away from expressions historically associated with inferiority, lack, abnormality, or reduced human value. The term emphasises diversity in human functioning and seeks

to recognise bodily, sensory, intellectual, and mental difference as part of human plurality rather than as a deviation from an assumed norm.

However, in this article functional diversity is not used as a separate theoretical framework that replaces Disability Studies terminology. Rather, it is used as a culturally situated terminological and normative-political concept, while the analytical framework remains aligned with international Disability Studies. For this reason, the article also uses established terms such as disability, disabled people, impairment, disability representation, ableism, stigma, and social model of disability. The distinction is relevant: impairment refers to bodily, sensory, intellectual, or mental characteristics; disability refers to the social, material, institutional, and symbolic restrictions that emerge in interaction with environments; and ableism refers to the normative system that privileges certain bodies and capacities while devaluing others.

This conceptual position is consistent with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001), which understands disability not as a fixed individual essence but as a situation resulting from the interaction between body functions and structures, activities, participation, and environmental factors. It is also consistent with the social model of disability, which shifts attention from individual deficit toward the social barriers, institutional arrangements, cultural expectations, and normative assumptions that produce exclusion (Palacios, 2008).

The historical consideration of disability has varied substantially. In ancient and medieval societies, disability was frequently interpreted through religious, moral, charitable, or exclusionary frameworks, although practices of care and assistance also coexisted. In the contemporary era, the development of medicine, psychiatry, rehabilitation, special education, and social policies progressively transformed these meanings. The medical-rehabilitative model represented an advance over purely exclusionary perspectives, but it also maintained forms of paternalism, institutionalisation, dependency, and bodily normalisation. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, especially through disability rights movements and Independent Living approaches, disability began to be understood increasingly as a question of autonomy, accessibility, dignity, equality, participation, and rights.

Stigma is central to this historical process. Following Goffman (1963), stigma may be understood as a socially discrediting attribute that marks individuals as inferior, abnormal, or less socially valuable. In the case of disability, stigma has operated through pity, fear, ridicule, infantilisation, desexualisation, dependency, monstrosity, pathologisation, and heroic compensation. Cinema has participated in this process by reproducing, transforming, or contesting such images. Consequently, analysing disability in film requires attention not only to the presence of disabled characters, but also to the symbolic frameworks through which their bodies, voices, agency, relationships, and social value are constructed.

Taken together, the terms functional diversity and disability are used in this article in a complementary but differentiated way. Functional diversity expresses the normative horizon of recognising human variation beyond deficit-based language, whereas disability and related Disability Studies concepts

provide the analytical vocabulary used to examine representational paradigms, stereotypes, stigma, ableism, and social exclusion in cinema.

1.6 Disability and cinema: research background

The relationship between disability and cinema has received increasing, although uneven, attention within Disability Studies, film studies, communication studies, education, and visual culture. Throughout cinematic history, disability has not constituted a stable film genre of its own; rather, disabled characters have appeared recurrently across diverse genres, movements, national cinemas, and historical contexts (López Gómez, 2010). These appearances have been closely linked to the dominant imaginaries of each period, so that cinema has variously reproduced, reformulated, or challenged social models of disability.

Early cinematic treatments often associated disability with marginality, monstrosity, mendicancy, dependency, moral deviance, or social threat. During much of the silent era and the early decades of sound cinema, characters with disabilities frequently appeared as objects of pity, fear, curiosity, spectacle, or narrative compensation. Longmore (1985) argued that filmic representations of disability frequently reinforced exclusionary assumptions about social, educational, and occupational participation. These patterns can be related to traditional, eugenic, and early medicalised paradigms of disability, in which disabled characters were commonly represented as isolated from ordinary life or as symbols of abnormality.

One of the most influential contributions to this field is Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation* (1994), which analysed the history of disability representation in cinema and identified recurrent stereotypes such as the innocent, the villain, the avenger, the wise figure, and the “superstar” citizen. Safran (1998a) also reviewed disability representations across the first century of cinema, highlighting the persistence of pity, stereotyped figures, and the frequent casting of non-disabled actors in disabled roles. Darke (1998), from another perspective, conceptualised disability cinema as a “normality drama”, arguing that disability often functions on screen as a disruption of hegemonic normality. These studies remain central because they show that disability in cinema has historically been less a neutral character trait than a symbolic device through which societies negotiate the boundaries of normality.

Further research has examined more specific dimensions of disability representation. Chivers (2011) explored the intersection of ageing and disability in film, showing how both are often visually and narratively connected to decline, dependency, and bodily vulnerability. Ban (2015) approached disability as a communication problem, noting that many films continue to use disability more as a narrative resource than as a complex human experience. Bradford et al. (2024) have more recently shown that representations of intellectual disability remain limited and stereotyped, with a predominance of white male characters and persistent clichés. These studies demonstrate that representational change does not affect all disability types equally.

Empirical studies with explicit coding procedures are particularly relevant for situating the present article. [Black and Pretes \(2007\)](#), for example, analysed 18 films released between 1975 and 2004 in which a main character had a physical disability. Their study examined themes such as personality, community integration, and interpersonal relationships, together with stereotypes including the pitiable figure, the supercrip, the sinister or criminal character, the “better-off dead” stereotype, the burden to family or society, and the figure unable to live a successful life. Although their corpus was smaller and focused specifically on physical disability, their work is important because it provides explicit selection criteria, rating rubrics, film-level information, and a consensus-based review process.

More recent empirical research has continued to show the persistence of stereotypes in contemporary cinema. Botha and Harvey’s study ([2024](#)) on acquired physical disability in contemporary film is especially relevant because it demonstrates that negative stereotypes remain active even in recent productions, although some films also begin to challenge these representational patterns. This line of research is significant for the present article because it confirms that contemporary cinema does not simply abandon stigma; rather, it often transforms or reconfigures it through new narrative expectations, including resilience, inspiration, adaptation, and exceptional achievement.

In the Spanish-speaking context, several contributions have addressed the relationship between disability and cinema from historical, educational, communicative, and representational perspectives. [Benito de Gil \(1987\)](#) offered one of the earliest panoramic approaches to the subject, while [Alegre de la Rosa \(2003\)](#) proposed a periodisation of disability representation in cinema with particular attention to its educational and inclusive potential, although her analysis did not extend to films produced after 2000. [Aparicio and Jordán \(2014\)](#) examined the representation of disability in cinema together with associated accessibility resources. [Jiménez Acevedo \(2015\)](#), with the support of the Fundación ONCE para la Cooperación e Inclusión Social de Personas con Discapacidad, compiled an extensive corpus of films dealing with disability and distinguished between characters portrayed by actors with and without actual disabilities. Within Spanish academic research specifically concerned with disability and audiovisual representation, [Senent Ramos \(2015\)](#) analysed functional diversity in Spanish cinema from a gender perspective, whereas [Areces Gutiérrez \(2016\)](#) examined the representation of disability from the field of audiovisual communication.

Beyond the Spanish-speaking context, institutional research has further documented the persistent underrepresentation of disability in mainstream cinema. The [Annenberg Inclusion Initiative \(2018\)](#), for example, highlighted both the limited presence of characters with disabilities in commercial film and the restricted participation of actors with actual disabilities in such roles.

Taken together, the existing literature confirms that cinema is a privileged space for the production of disability imaginaries. However, several gaps remain. Some studies focus on specific disability types, such as physical or intellectual disability; others analyse limited periods, particular national cinemas, or smaller samples; and many studies foreground stereotypes without

integrating them into a broader diachronic comparison of disability paradigms, film genre, cinematic movement, nationality, gender, narrative focalisation, representational authenticity, and social environment.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing a broad diachronic corpus of 105 feature films released between the 1920s and the 2020s. Its contribution lies not only in the scale of the corpus, but also in the integration of multiple analytical dimensions: disability paradigms, stereotypes, gender representation, narrative focalisation, actors with actual disabilities, relationship with the social environment, decade, genre, cinematic movement, nationality, and type of disability. This multidimensional framework makes it possible to examine not only whether disability representation has changed, but how, when, and under which cinematic and cultural conditions that change takes place.

2 Methodology

2.1 Study design

This study was designed as an integrative, theory-guided qualitative film content analysis, complemented by descriptive quantitative comparisons across decades, film genres, cinematic movements, national cinemas, and types of disability. The research is situated within the framework of non-disciplinary film anthropology, which understands fiction films not as direct ethnographic records, but as cultural materials through which social imaginaries, symbolic hierarchies, stereotypes, and historical constructions of difference can be examined.

The interdisciplinary framework combines three complementary perspectives. Disability Studies provides the conceptual basis for analysing disability paradigms, stigma, ableism, autonomy, dependency, inclusion, exclusion, and representational inequality. Film studies informs the analysis of genre, cinematic movement, narrative construction, character function, mise-en-scène, and visual representation. Non-disciplinary film anthropology offers the epistemological justification for treating fiction cinema as a cultural artefact capable of refracting historically situated understandings of bodily, sensory, intellectual, and mental difference.

The study therefore does not aim to measure audience reception or to infer direct social attitudes from films. Rather, it examines how disability is narratively and visually constructed within a broad diachronic corpus of fiction films, and how these constructions vary across historical periods, aesthetic traditions, film genres, national contexts, and disability types.

2.2 Terminological clarification: disability and functional diversity

The term functional diversity is used in this article as a terminological and normative-political concept that emerged in the Spanish-speaking Independent Living movement as a non-pejorative alternative to deficit-based language. It emphasises the diversity of human functioning and seeks to move away from

exclusively medicalised or reductive understandings of bodily, sensory, intellectual, or mental difference.

However, the analysis remains aligned with international Disability Studies terminology, particularly concepts such as disability, disabled people, impairment, disability representation, ableism, stigma, and the social model of disability. In this sense, functional diversity is not used as a separate analytical framework competing with Disability Studies, but as a culturally situated terminological choice that coexists with the established conceptual vocabulary of disability research.

For methodological clarity, the coding categories refer primarily to disability paradigms and disability representation. The term functional diversity is retained when referring to the broader normative aim of recognising human diversity beyond deficit-based or exclusively medical models.

2.3 Film selection and corpus

The corpus consisted of 105 feature-length fiction films released between the 1920s and the 2020s. Films were identified through specialised film databases, including IMDb, The Movie Database, FilmAffinity, and the database of classified films of the Spanish Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) feature-length fiction films released in commercial circuits; (2) the presence of at least one main character or narratively significant supporting character with a physical-motor, physical-organic, sensory, intellectual, mental, or multiple disability; and (3) disability having a relevant function in the narrative construction of the film.

Films in which disability appeared only incidentally, decoratively, or as a background element were excluded. Series, documentaries, short films, and productions in which disability did not significantly affect the plot, character construction, symbolic framework, or social relations of the film were also excluded.

The final corpus was built through a purposive and theoretical sampling strategy. Homogeneity was ensured by selecting only commercially released fiction feature films in which disability played a narratively relevant role. Heterogeneity was sought by including films from different decades, national cinemas, film genres, cinematic movements, and disability types. Saturation was understood as the point at which the inclusion of additional films no longer generated substantially new representational patterns, analytical categories, or interpretative dimensions relevant to the study.

Borderline cases were assessed according to the narrative significance of disability. When disability appeared briefly but had no meaningful impact on the plot, character construction, social relations, or symbolic representation of normality and difference, the film was excluded. When disability shaped the character's narrative role, agency, conflict, relationship with the social environment, or position within the film's representational structure, the film was retained.

The full list of the 105 films is provided as [Supplementary Table S1](#), including title, director, year of release, country of origin, film genre, cinematic movement, and type of disability represented.

2.4 Analytical procedure

The analysis combined deductive and inductive strategies. First, a set of *a priori* categories was established on the basis of previous theoretical and empirical literature on Disability Studies, disability paradigms, cinematic stereotypes, gender representation, stigma, and visual/film anthropology. Second, these categories were contrasted with the empirical material extracted from the films through an inductive process inspired by grounded theory. This allowed the initial coding framework to be refined and enabled the identification of emergent analytical dimensions.

The analytical procedure was developed in three stages:

First, each film was systematised according to descriptive variables: decade, year of release, country of origin, film genre, cinematic movement, type of disability, and narrative relevance of the character with disability.

Second, each film was analysed through intra-film categories. This stage focused on the narrative and visual construction of disability, including the disability paradigm, stereotype, gender perspective, narrative focalisation, presence of actors with actual disabilities, and the relationship between the character with disability and the social environment. The analysis considered visual representation, body language, dialogue, mise-en-scène, narrative centrality, character agency, and interactions with family members, medical professionals, institutions, peers, and the broader community.

Third, the coded data were compared across inter-film categories in order to identify diachronic and cross-sectional patterns according to decade, cinematic movement, film genre, nationality, and type of disability represented.

2.5 Coding process and reliability strategy

The initial coding was conducted by the first author using a structured film-level coding matrix. This matrix included both descriptive variables and analytical categories. The coding decisions were subsequently reviewed by the co-authors. Borderline cases, ambiguous classifications, and films in which more than one paradigm, stereotype, genre, movement, type of disability, or relational pattern appeared were discussed collectively until consensus was reached.

The coding was interpretative rather than statistical in nature. Therefore, the study did not aim to calculate inter-rater reliability coefficients. Instead, methodological consistency was strengthened through the use of explicit operational definitions, a stable coding matrix, co-author review, consensus-based resolution of disagreements, and an audit trail of film-level coding decisions.

This audit trail is provided in [Supplementary Table S2](#), which presents the film-level coding overview used for the analysis, including the main descriptive and analytical variables applied to each film.

In addition to the main coding framework, an original exploratory adaptation of the Bechdel-Wallace Test was developed to examine the narrative representation of disability. The adaptation was inspired by the conceptual logic of the original Bechdel-Wallace Test, as described by [Freitas et al. \(2016\)](#). While the original Bechdel-Wallace Test evaluates female representation through three criteria (the presence of at least two named women, interaction between them, and conversations about topics other than men), no comparable instrument was identified for assessing the narrative

representation and agency of characters with disabilities. Therefore, the original logic of the test was reformulated by replacing its gender-specific criteria with three disability-oriented indicators: whether the character with a disability is identified by name, whether the character discusses topics beyond their disability or medical condition, and whether the character actively influences the plot or decision-making processes that shape the course of the story. Because this adaptation was conceived as an exploratory methodological contribution, it was used as a complementary analytical tool and is reported separately in [Supplementary Table S2c](#).

Several categories were not mutually exclusive. This was particularly relevant for disability paradigms, film genres, cinematic movements, types of disability, stereotypes, and relationships with the social environment. A single film could therefore be coded under more than one disability paradigm when different layers of the narrative simultaneously reflected, for example, medical-rehabilitative and social-model elements. Similarly, a film could include more than one type of disability or more than one form of interaction with the social environment. In these cases, percentages refer to the number of films in which a given category was identified, not to mutually exclusive categories. For this reason, totals may exceed 100%.

2.6 Operationalisation of the anthropological framework

To make the link between the anthropological framework and the film analysis explicit, broad concepts such as normality, difference, autonomy, dependency, inclusion, exclusion, stigma, and agency were translated into observable narrative and visual indicators. This operationalisation made it possible to connect the theoretical framework with concrete filmic elements.

A shortened version of this operationalisation is presented in [Table 1](#). A more detailed version is included in [Supplementary Table S3](#).

2.7 Analytical categories

The coding framework combined intra-film and inter-film categories. The intra-film categories were:

Disability paradigm: traditional/exclusionary, eugenic, medical-rehabilitative, or social model.

Stereotype of the disabled character: innocent, victim, villain, avenger, noble warrior, sage, superstar citizen, comic figure, or no fixed stereotype.

Gender perspective: gender of the disabled character and patterns of victimisation, infantilisation, sexualisation, desexualisation, normalisation, or subordination.

Narrative focalisation: whether the film was narrated from the perspective of the disabled character or primarily from the viewpoint of non-disabled characters, family members, institutions, or external observers.

Presence of actors with actual disabilities: whether the character with disability was performed by an actor with lived experience of disability.

Relationship with the social environment: support, rejection, integration, overprotection, or mixed relational patterns.

The inter-film categories were:

Decade.

Year of release.

Country of origin.

Film genre.

Cinematic movement.

Type of disability represented.

The classification of cinematic movement was based on film-historical criteria derived from the film studies literature and applied according to the film's period, aesthetic features, production context, and dominant narrative style. Categories such as Classical Hollywood Cinema, Modern Cinema, and Postmodern Cinema were used as broad film-historical groupings rather than rigid stylistic labels. Because such

TABLE 1 Operationalization of anthropological concepts into observable filmic indicators.

Anthropological concept	Operational meaning in the analysis	Observable filmic indicators
Normality/difference	How the film constructs disability in relation to dominant bodily, sensory, intellectual, or mental norms	Framing of the disabled body as ordinary, deviant, threatening, pitiable, exceptional, or integrated
Autonomy/dependency	Degree to which the character with disability is represented as capable of decision-making and self-direction	Independent decisions, control over personal life, reliance on others, medical or family authority, decisions made on behalf of the character
Inclusion/exclusion	Position of the character within family, community, institutions, and social life	Social participation, rejection, segregation, institutionalisation, accessibility barriers, integration into ordinary life
Stigma	Presence of symbolic devaluation linked to disability	Ridicule, fear, pity, monstrosity, moral punishment, infantilisation, pathologisation, heroic compensation
Agency	Capacity of the disabled character to influence the plot and express subjectivity	Narrative centrality, dialogue, point of view, voice-over, subjective scenes, transformation of other characters or events
Overprotection	Supportive relationships that restrict autonomy	Excessive family control, paternalism, infantilising care, restriction of movement, speech, sexuality, or decision-making
Social environment	Type of relational response surrounding the character	Support, rejection, integration, overprotection, institutional control, community acceptance
Representational authenticity	Whether disability is embodied by actors with lived experience of disability	Presence or absence of actors with actual disabilities in roles representing disability

assignments may involve interpretative judgement, the film-level classification is reported in [Supplementary Table S2](#).

2.8 Descriptive quantitative treatment

The quantitative component of the study was descriptive and exploratory. Absolute frequencies and percentages were used to summarise patterns across the corpus. Since several categories were not mutually exclusive, percentages were interpreted as the proportion of films in which a given category appeared.

For diachronic comparisons, special caution was taken because the number of films varied substantially by decade. Therefore, results by decade should be interpreted as qualitative historical tendencies supported by descriptive counts, rather than as statistically generalisable differences. In the revised results, percentages are accompanied by absolute counts and denominators wherever possible, especially in decades with small subsamples.

No inferential statistical tests were conducted, as the aim of the study was not to establish statistically representative associations, but to provide a diachronic, comparative, and interpretative synthesis of disability representation in a broad film corpus.

The diachronic analysis does not assume a direct causal equivalence between filmic representation and broader social disability discourses. Rather, films are treated as culturally situated artefacts that refract, condense, and reorganise dominant and competing social meanings. Therefore, the historical patterns identified in the corpus are interpreted as changes in cinematic representation, not as direct measurements of social attitudes toward disability.

2.9 Ethical considerations and limitations

As this study is based on publicly available fiction films, no human participants were involved and no ethics committee approval was required. Nevertheless, the analysis was conducted from a critical and respectful perspective, avoiding the

reproduction of pejorative or outdated terminology and contextualising each representation within its historical and cultural framework.

The study has several limitations. First, the corpus is not statistically representative of all films about disability, but rather constitutes a purposive, broad, and diachronic sample designed to identify long-term representational patterns. Second, the analysis is interpretative and therefore necessarily involves researcher judgement, although this was addressed through explicit coding definitions, co-author review, consensus discussion, and the provision of film-level [supplementary material](#). Third, the corpus focuses on films in which disability is explicitly represented as a narratively significant condition. It therefore excludes incidental disability, background characters, documentaries, television series, short films, superhero bodies, cyborg or posthuman embodiments, prosthetic enhancement, and other forms of bodily or cognitive non-normativity not explicitly framed as disability within the plot. These areas constitute relevant directions for future research.

3 Results

3.1 Descriptive results: historical evolution of the representation of disability

The final corpus comprised 105 feature-length fiction films released between the 1920s and the 2020s. The distribution by decade was uneven: two films from the 1920s, four from the 1930s, five from the 1940s, nine from the 1950s, 10 from the 1960s, 10 from the 1970s, eight from the 1980s, 13 from the 1990s, 16 from the 2000s, 20 from the 2010s, and eight from the 2020s. This uneven distribution is important for interpreting the diachronic findings. Accordingly, the results by decade are presented primarily as historical and qualitative tendencies supported by absolute counts, rather than as statistically generalisable differences between periods. A synthetic overview of these diachronic patterns is provided in [Table 2](#).

TABLE 2 Diachronic evolution of disability paradigms and cinematic stereotypes, 1920–2025.

Historical period	Films in corpus	Main representational tendency	Prevalent stereotypes	Relationship with the environment
1920s–1930s	6	Early coexistence of medical-rehabilitative, traditional/exclusionary, and eugenic elements	Villain, Innocent, victim, no fixed stereotype	Criminalisation, pity, paternalism, rejection
1940s–1950s	14	Strong predominance of the medical-rehabilitative model	Innocent, victim, war hero/noble figure	Dependency, rehabilitation, support, overprotection
1960s–1970s	20	Transitional period: coexistence of medical-rehabilitative and social-model elements	Victim, innocent, sage, avenger	Institutional criticism, rejection, partial support
1980s–1990s	21	Increasing complexity and visibility of the social model, with persistent medicalisation	Noble warrior, sage, superstar citizen, innocent	Support, integration, overprotection, social ambivalence
2000s–2010s	36	Consolidation of the social model and expansion of subjective and relational narratives	Noble warrior, sage, superstar citizen, innocent	Autonomy, support, integration, persistent paternalism
2020s	8	Incipient normalisation and reduction of fixed stereotyping	No fixed stereotype, noble warrior, innocent	Everyday life, desire, support, integration, overprotection

This table is prepared by the authors based on the analysis of the 105-film corpus. Categories are not mutually exclusive; therefore, a film may contain more than one paradigm, stereotype, or relational pattern.

The diachronic analysis refers to changes in cinematic representation, not to a direct measurement of broader social attitudes toward disability. Films are treated here as culturally situated artefacts that refract, condense, and reorganise dominant and competing social meanings. Therefore, the patterns identified in the corpus should be understood as transformations in filmic representation, interpreted in relation to wider historical and cultural contexts.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the corpus includes a small number of films, but they already reveal two important representational poles. On the one hand, disability appears associated with abnormality, criminalisation, fear, corporeal deformity, or moral threat, as in *The Man Without Legs* (1920) and *M* (1931). On the other, it is represented through sentimental, compassionate, or paternalistic narratives, as in *Lucky Star* (1929) and *City Lights* (1931). In the 1920s, both films analysed include medical-rehabilitative elements, while one also presents a traditional/exclusionary framing. In the 1930s, the medical-rehabilitative model appears in three of the four films analysed, while eugenic and traditional/exclusionary elements appear in more specific cases. Given the small size of these subsamples, these findings should be read cautiously, but they indicate the early coexistence of compassion, correction, exclusion, and threat.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the medical-rehabilitative model becomes the dominant framework in the corpus. It appears in four of the five films from the 1940s and in eight of the nine films from the 1950s. This period is strongly marked by narratives of illness, war injury, rehabilitation, dependency, and social readaptation. Under the impact of the Second World War and the post-war period, disability becomes more visible as a consequence of bodily loss, trauma, or acquired impairment. However, this visibility remains largely conditioned by clinical authority, compassion, dependency, and overprotection. Films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Johnny Belinda* (1948), and *The Men* (1950) illustrate the complexity of this period: they grant greater narrative importance to disabled characters, but still tend to organise their representation around rehabilitation, care, moral dignity, and reintegration.

A progressive transformation is observed from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. In the 1960s, the medical-rehabilitative model appears in eight of the 10 films analysed, while the social model appears in five. In the 1970s, the medical-rehabilitative model appears in seven of the 10 films, while the social model appears in four. These decades therefore do not show a simple replacement of one paradigm by another, but rather a period of coexistence and tension. Within the broader context of civil rights movements, feminism, psychiatric criticism, anti-war sentiment, and debates on institutionalisation and social exclusion, cinema begins to represent disability not only as an individual condition but also as a relational, institutional, and social experience. Films such as *The Little Coach* (1960), *Persona* (1966), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) open a more critical space in which the environment, institutions, and social norms increasingly shape the meaning of disability.

During the 1980s and 1990s, this transformation becomes more visible, although the medical-rehabilitative model remains present. In the 1980s, the medical-rehabilitative model appears in seven of the eight films analysed, while the social model appears in five. In the 1990s, the social model appears in 11 of

the 13 films, while the medical-rehabilitative model remains present in nine. This indicates that the consolidation of social-model elements does not eliminate earlier frameworks. Rather, cinema begins to combine rehabilitation, bodily limitation, and diagnosis with autonomy, social barriers, subjective experience, and demands for recognition. Films such as *Mask* (1985), *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), *Rain Man* (1988), *My Left Foot* (1989), *The Piano* (1993), *The Eighth Day* (1996), and *Gattaca* (1997) reflect this shift toward more complex and socially situated representations.

In the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the movement toward the social model becomes more pronounced. In the 2000s, the social model appears in 12 of the 16 films analysed; in the 2010s, in 19 of the 20 films; and in the 2020s, in seven of the eight films. These decades show an increasing presence of narratives centred on autonomy, inclusion, sexuality, accessibility, social participation, communicative rights, and representational authenticity. Films such as *The Sea Inside* (2004), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), *Me Too* (2009), *The Intouchables* (2011), *The Theory of Everything* (2014), *Champions* (2018), *Sound of Metal* (2019), *CODA* (2021), *The Rite of Spring* (2022), *Champions* (2023), and *Deaf* (2025) point toward a more ordinary, relational, and less paternalistic representation of disability. Nevertheless, this progress remains incomplete: medicalised elements, overprotection, gender asymmetry, heroic compensation, and renewed forms of symbolic normativity continue to appear within contemporary cinema.

3.2 Descriptive results: cinematic movements and representational trends

The representation of disability also varies according to cinematic movement. In this study, cinematic movements are used as broad film-historical categories that help situate films within aesthetic, narrative, and industrial traditions. These classifications are interpretative and, in some cases, non-mutually exclusive; therefore, the film-level assignments are provided in [Supplementary Table S2](#).

In the 1920s and 1930s, markedly different visual and narrative constructions coexist. German Expressionism tends to associate bodily or psychic difference with sombre atmospheres, stylised settings, visual distortion, and symbolic threat. This is visible in *The Man Without Legs* (1920) and *M* (1931), where disability or psychic abnormality is connected to fear, criminality, or social unease. By contrast, Classical Hollywood Comedy and early Classical Hollywood Cinema tend to frame disability through sentimental legibility, compassion, and emotional restitution, as in *Lucky Star* (1929) and *City Lights* (1931). These films do not necessarily produce social-model representations, but they soften the threatening figure through tenderness, romance, or moral innocence.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Classical Hollywood Cinema consolidates a mode of representation based on narrative continuity, emotional clarity, and moral legibility. Films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Johnny Belinda* (1948), and *The Men* (1950) place disability within narratives of rehabilitation, social readaptation, moral dignity, and family or community support. However, other film traditions introduce

more sober or critical approaches. The neorealist register of *The Young and the Damned* (1950), the British Social Realism of *Mandy* (1952), the Shomin-geki framework of *The Shinomi School* (1955), and the Free Cinema perspective of *Together* (1956) situate disability within everyday life, poverty, education, marginality, and social relations, thereby anticipating later social and environmental readings.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Modern Cinema becomes especially relevant for the representation of disability. Its formal ambiguity, psychological depth, institutional criticism, and interest in alienation allow disability to be represented as part of wider conflicts with normality, social discipline, and subjective fragmentation. This is observed in *The Little Coach* (1960), *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), *Persona* (1966), *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1968), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). In these films, disability is not only a physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental condition; it also becomes a way of making visible social discomfort, exclusion, institutional control, or the fragility of normative identities.

From the 1980s onwards, Postmodern Cinema becomes the most frequent film-historical category in the corpus. This movement is associated with genre hybridisation, emotional realism, subjective experience, and more intimate forms of character construction. Films such as *Rain Man* (1988), *My Left Foot* (1989), *The Piano* (1993), *Gattaca* (1997), *The Sea Inside* (2004), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), *The Intouchables* (2011), *Still Alice* (2014), *Sound of Metal* (2019), *CODA* (2021), and *Deaf* (2025) show how disability increasingly becomes part of identity, desire, communication, family life, autonomy, and social participation. At the same time, postmodern cinema also strengthens the figure of the noble warrior, suggesting that

contemporary representation often legitimises disabled characters through resilience, emotional intensity, or exceptional achievement.

Taken together, these results indicate that cinematic movements do not merely provide aesthetic context; they also modulate the symbolic position of disability. Classical forms tend to organise disability through moral clarity and emotional order; modern cinema intensifies rupture, critique, and estrangement; and postmodern cinema expands subjective and relational representation while also producing new forms of heroic or inspirational normativity.

3.3 Comparative synthesis of the corpus

The comparison across decades reveals a clear but non-linear evolution in the cinematic representation of disability. Figure 1 summarises the diachronic evolution in the prevalence of the medical-rehabilitative and social models. In the 1920s, the two films analysed show contrasting but complementary logics. *The Man Without Legs* (1920) associates disability with bodily deformity, criminality, and punishment, while *Lucky Star* (1929) presents a more compassionate and romanticised representation. In both cases, however, disability remains framed as a condition that limits social value until it is corrected, compensated, or emotionally redeemed.

This heterogeneity continues in the 1930s. *City Lights* (1931) constructs blindness through innocence, fragility, and sentimental idealisation. *M* (1931) links psychic abnormality to threat and social danger. *Freaks* (1932), however, constitutes a particularly significant exception because it complicates the logic of monstrosity: rather than locating moral deformity in disabled bodies, the film displaces it onto the non-disabled characters who

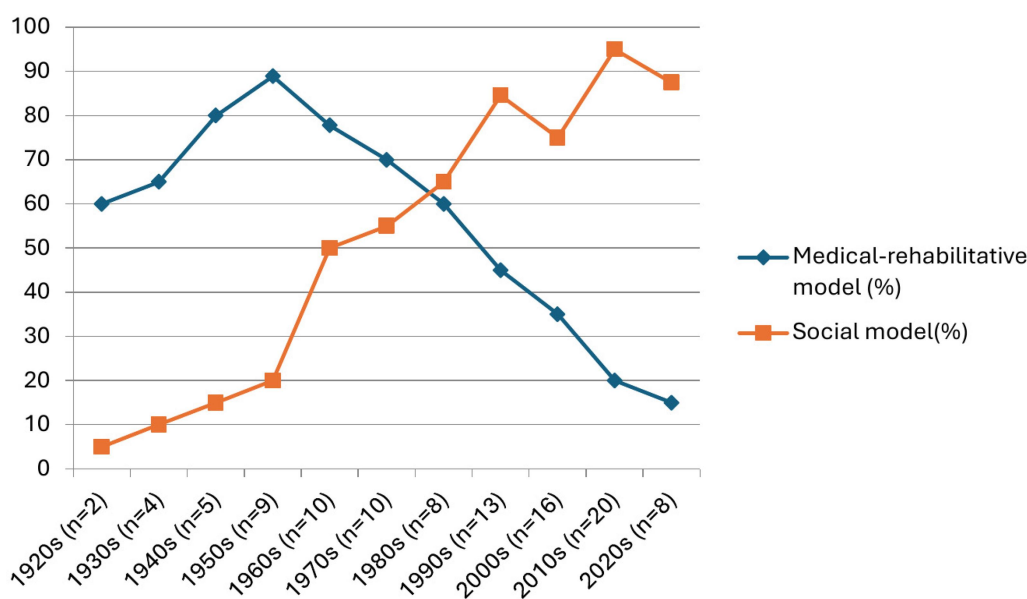


FIGURE 1

Diachronic evolution of the prevalence of medical and social models. Percentages indicate the proportion of films in each decade in which each model was identified. Categories are not mutually exclusive, as the same film could include both medical-rehabilitative and social-model elements. Given the uneven number of films per decade, these values should be interpreted as descriptive tendencies rather than statistically generalisable differences.

exploit and exclude them. This makes the 1930s especially relevant despite the small number of films analysed.

The 1940s present greater formal cohesion under the influence of Classical Hollywood Cinema, although not all films represent disability in the same way. *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942) heroises illness through moral endurance; *Johnny Belinda* (1948) combines sensory disability with victimisation and vulnerability; and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) offers one of the most complex representations of the period by including an actor with an actual disability and by linking bodily injury to post-war readaptation, masculinity, work, intimacy, and social reintegration. In this decade, the medical-rehabilitative model appears in four of the five films analysed, confirming the centrality of rehabilitation and readaptation.

The 1950s function as a transitional decade. The medical-rehabilitative model appears in eight of the nine films, but the films do not all reproduce the same paternalistic logic. *The Men* (1950), *Home, Sweet Home* (1952), and *Mandy* (1952) remain closely linked to rehabilitation, education, and dependency, whereas *The Young and the Damned* (1950), *The Shinomi School* (1955), and *Together* (1956) begin to place disability within social environments marked by marginality, class, communication, institutional care, and everyday life. Thus, even before the clear rise of the social model, the corpus already contains films in which disability is not reducible to individual impairment.

In the 1960s and 1970s, representational complexity increases. The victim appears in films such as *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971), and *Coming Home* (1978), while the innocent remains visible in *The Miracle Worker* (1962), *The Wild Child* (1970), and *Being There* (1979). At the same time, films such as *The Little Coach* (1960), *Persona* (1966), *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1968), *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) shift attention toward exclusion, institutional control, social rejection, subjectivity, and resistance. These decades therefore represent a moment of unstable coexistence: medicalised, paternalistic, and victimising representations persist, but they increasingly coexist with social critique.

From the 1980s onwards, the representation of disability becomes more humanised, central, and narratively complex. The 1980s include films such as *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Mask* (1985), *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), *Gaby: A True Story* (1987), *Rain Man* (1988), and *My Left Foot* (1989). These films grant greater visibility and dramatic centrality to disabled characters, but they also consolidate stereotypes with higher symbolic prestige, such as the sage, the superstar citizen, and the noble warrior. This indicates progress in terms of dignity and complexity, but not necessarily the disappearance of stereotyping.

In the 1990s, the social model becomes more structurally visible, appearing in 11 of the 13 films analysed. Films such as *Scent of a Woman* (1992), *The Piano* (1993), *The Eighth Day* (1996), *Gattaca* (1997), and *The Bone Collector* (1999) represent disability through autonomy, desire, social barriers, identity, or capacity. However, this decade also retains threatening or pathologising representations, particularly in relation to mental health, as seen in *Misery* (1990) and *Girl, Interrupted* (1999). Disability cinema therefore ceases to be exclusively tragic or

paternalistic, but remains marked by ambivalent images of vulnerability, exceptionality, danger, and social recognition.

In the 2000s and 2010s, narrative centrality and representational diversity expand. Films such as *The Sea Inside* (2004), *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004), *Ray* (2004), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), *Me Too* (2009), *The Intouchables* (2011), *The Sessions* (2012), *The Theory of Everything* (2014), *Still Alice* (2014), *Champions* (2018), and *Sound of Metal* (2019) articulate disability through love, autonomy, sexuality, humour, communication, rights, care, and social participation. Nevertheless, the noble warrior becomes especially prominent in the 2010s, suggesting that contemporary cinema often replaces overtly degrading stereotypes with more socially acceptable expectations of resilience, inspiration, and exceptional achievement.

Finally, in the 2020s, the corpus points toward more intimate, everyday, and less typified representations. In four of the eight films analysed from this decade, no fixed stereotype was identified. *CODA* (2021), *The Rite of Spring* (2022), *Champions* (2023), and *Deaf* (2025) present disability as part of family life, communication, sexuality, community, and ordinary human experience. Although the small number of films requires caution, these cases suggest an incipient movement toward representational normalisation. At the same time, films such as *The Whale* (2022) and *Angel of My Life* (2020) show that victimisation, pathologisation, innocence, and emotional excess remain present in contemporary cinema.

Overall, the comparative synthesis shows that disability representation in cinema has evolved from abnormality, threat, pity, and correction toward more social, relational, subjective, and ordinary forms of representation. However, this process is neither linear nor complete. Older paradigms persist within recent cinema, and new forms of normativity emerge through resilience, inspiration, heroism, and emotional utility.

3.4 Analytical results

The analytical results show that the cinematic representation of disability is determined by the combined effect of historical period, cinematic movement, film genre, nationality, and type of disability, rather than by a simple chronological progression.

Across the overall corpus ($n = 105$), the medical-rehabilitative model appears in 70 films (66.7%), while the social model appears in 63 films (60.0%). These percentages are not mutually exclusive. They refer to the number of films in which each paradigm was identified, not to separate groups of films. A film could therefore be coded as both medical-rehabilitative and social when different layers of the narrative simultaneously presented disability as bodily loss, diagnosis, treatment, or rehabilitation, and as a condition shaped by social barriers, autonomy, exclusion, accessibility, rights, or participation. Traditional/exclusionary elements appear in five films (4.8%), while eugenic elements appear in four films (3.8%). Although these latter categories are less frequent in the corpus as a whole, they are symbolically significant in earlier decades and in specific narratives where disability is linked to marginality, undesirability, threat, or social burden.

The distribution of stereotypes confirms a significant transformation in the symbolic construction of disability. The most frequent stereotypes are the innocent, identified in 31 films

(29.5%), and the noble warrior, identified in 30 films (28.6%). These are followed by the sage in 16 films (15.2%), the victim in 14 films (13.3%), the superstar citizen in nine films (8.6%), the villain in five films (4.8%), and the avenger and comic figure in two films each (1.9%). In 11 films (10.5%), no fixed stereotype was identified. These findings suggest that explicitly degrading stereotypes have declined, but they have not simply disappeared. Rather, they are often replaced by more prestigious and socially acceptable figures, especially the noble warrior, the sage, and the superstar citizen.

Gender asymmetry remains significant. The main or narratively most relevant disabled character is male in 71 films (67.6%) and female in 34 films (32.4%). Female characters with disabilities are more frequently framed through victimisation, infantilisation, dependency, or emotional vulnerability, whereas male characters more often occupy positions associated with heroism, wisdom, resilience, competence, or exceptional achievement. This indicates that the improvement in disability representation does not automatically imply an equivalent improvement in gender representation.

As a complementary exploratory analysis, an original disability-oriented adaptation of the Bechdel-Wallace Test was applied to examine the narrative representation of characters with disabilities (Supplementary Table S2c). Across the corpus, 103 of the 105 films (98.1%) featured a disabled character identified by name, 100 films (95.2%) portrayed the character discussing topics beyond their disability or medical condition, and 103 films (98.1%) represented the character as influencing the plot or decisions affecting the course of the story. These findings suggest that, although disability is frequently represented through narratively active characters, this does not necessarily eliminate stereotypical, paternalistic, or medicalised forms of representation, which continue to coexist with greater narrative agency.

Narrative focalisation from the perspective of the disabled character appears in 56 of the 105 films (53.3%), while 49 films (46.7%) primarily construct disability through an external perspective, such as that of family members, medical professionals, institutions, romantic partners, or the broader social environment. This shows a movement toward greater subjective access, but not a complete displacement of external gazes. In several films, the disabled character remains narratively central while still being interpreted, explained, cared for, or judged by others.

Actors with actual disabilities appear in 25 of the 105 films (23.8%), including cases in which only some disabled roles are played by performers with lived experience of disability. This finding shows that representational authenticity has increased, especially in recent decades, but remains limited and uneven across the corpus. The data therefore do not support the idea of a fully inclusive transformation in casting; rather, they indicate an incomplete and historically uneven process.

The relationship between disabled characters and their social environment is also ambivalent. Support appears in 52 films (49.5%), rejection in 34 films (32.4%), integration in 33 films (31.4%), and overprotection in 31 films (29.5%). These categories are not mutually exclusive. A single film may combine family support with social rejection, or integration with paternalistic overprotection. This coexistence is analytically

important because it shows that inclusion is often partial, conditional, or mediated by tutelary relationships.

Cinematic movement modulates these patterns. Classical Hollywood Cinema tends to organise disability through emotionally legible and morally controlled narratives, often linked to care, compassion, dependency, rehabilitation, or social readaptation. Modern Cinema introduces more conflictual and critical representations, especially through alienation, victimisation, institutional critique, and social discomfort. Postmodern Cinema expands the range of subjective, relational, and everyday representations, but also consolidates the noble warrior as a dominant figure, indicating that contemporary visibility often remains tied to resilience, inspiration, or exceptional achievement.

Film genre also influences the representational logic of disability. Drama is the dominant genre in the corpus and remains the main vehicle for representing suffering, vulnerability, care, moral conflict, recognition, and overcoming adversity. Comedy and comedy-drama more often allow disability to be placed within social participation, community life, and everyday interaction, particularly in recent films. Thriller and horror retain stronger links with fear, threat, confinement, abnormality, and symbolic disturbance, especially in relation to mental health or bodily non-normativity. Adventure and action cinema tend to encode disability through capability, resistance, and extraordinary performance, reinforcing the noble warrior archetype.

Nationality introduces further variation. US cinema is the largest national group in the corpus and combines both medical-rehabilitative and social-model elements, although it frequently retains individualised narratives of injury, loss, rehabilitation, resilience, or exceptional achievement. Spanish cinema, by contrast, shows a stronger recent alignment with the social model, integration, everyday life, and inclusive casting, especially in films such as *Me Too* (2009), *Champions* (2018), *The Rite of Spring* (2022), and *Deaf* (2025). French and British productions occupy intermediate positions, combining medical, social, intimate, and relational approaches depending on period, genre, and narrative focus.

The type of disability represented is one of the strongest differentiating variables. Physical-motor disability is the most frequent category and is strongly associated with both rehabilitation and resilience narratives. It often appears through bodily loss, adaptation, autonomy, effort, and social reintegration, which explains the prominence of the noble warrior stereotype in this group. Sensory disability presents a more varied representational field, moving from vulnerability and communicative isolation toward subjectivity, desire, linguistic identity, and community belonging. Intellectual disability is increasingly associated with the social model and with integration, but it remains strongly linked to innocence and infantilisation, showing that inclusion does not necessarily eliminate paternalistic framing. Mental health disability remains the most stigmatised category, more frequently associated with pathologisation, victimisation, villainisation, instability, rejection, or symbolic threat. This confirms that the movement toward inclusive representation has advanced unevenly across disability types.

Taken together, the results indicate that the representation of disability in cinema has undergone a substantial historical

transformation. The general trend points toward greater social inscription, more narrative centrality, increased subjective focalisation, and a partial weakening of overt stigma. However, this evolution remains incomplete. Old stigmatising images are often replaced by new normative expectations of resilience, inspiration, emotional utility, or exceptional value. In this sense, contemporary cinema does not simply eliminate stigma; it often transforms its form.

4 Discussion

The results show that the cinematic representation of disability has changed substantially over time, but not through a simple or linear substitution of one paradigm by another. Rather, the corpus reveals a prolonged coexistence among traditional/exclusionary, eugenic, medical-rehabilitative, and social-model elements. This coexistence is one of the central findings of the study: cinema does not simply abandon previous disability paradigms when new social discourses emerge; instead, it reorganises them, overlaps them, and often incorporates them into hybrid narrative forms.

This point is especially relevant for understanding the diachronic dimension of the analysis. The historical patterns identified in the corpus should not be interpreted as direct measurements of social attitudes toward disability. Films are not treated here as transparent mirrors of society, but as cultural artefacts that refract, condense, dramatise, and sometimes contest broader disability discourses. In this sense, the transition from medical-rehabilitative to social-model representations observed in the corpus reflects changes in cinematic representation, while also resonating with wider transformations in disability rights, accessibility, institutional critique, and social understandings of normality and difference.

The findings are consistent with previous research that has identified pity, dependency, threat, isolation, and moral abnormality as recurring forms of disability representation in cinema. Norden's (1994) analysis of the "cinema of isolation" remains particularly relevant, as several of the stereotypes identified in this study—such as the innocent, the villain, the avenger, the sage, the noble warrior, and the superstar citizen—confirm the persistence of typified narrative roles in the history of disability cinema. Similarly, Longmore (1985), Safran (1998b), and Darke (1998) showed that disability has often functioned not merely as a character trait, but as a symbolic device through which cinema negotiates the boundaries of normality, dependency, productivity, and social value.

At the same time, the present study extends this line of research by analysing a broader diachronic corpus and by integrating several analytical dimensions that are often examined separately. Compared with studies based on smaller or more narrowly defined samples, such as Black and Pretes' (2007) analysis of films centred on physical disability, this article incorporates a wider chronological range, multiple disability types, film genres, cinematic movements, national cinemas, narrative focalisation, gender representation, inclusive casting, and relationships with the social environment. The contribution of the study therefore lies not only in confirming the persistence of stereotypes, but in showing how these stereotypes vary

historically and according to cinematic, national, generic, and disability-specific variables.

One of the most significant findings is that the decline of explicitly degrading stereotypes does not necessarily imply full de-stereotyping. In earlier cinema, disability was more frequently associated with threat, pity, dependency, abnormality, or moral punishment. In contemporary cinema, these representations become less dominant, but they are often replaced by more socially acceptable figures such as the noble warrior, the sage, or the superstar citizen. This shift represents an improvement insofar as disabled characters are more often portrayed as active, central, competent, and socially legible subjects. However, it also introduces a new normative expectation: disability is frequently legitimised through resilience, dignity, inspiration, productivity, or exceptional achievement.

This finding connects the corpus to debates on the "supercrip" logic. Contemporary cinema often appears to move away from overt stigma while retaining a demand that disabled characters become admirable, inspiring, or extraordinary in order to be narratively validated. In this sense, stigma does not simply disappear; it changes form. Older representations based on monstrosity, pity, or dependency are increasingly replaced by narratives of heroic compensation, emotional usefulness, or exemplary overcoming. This is particularly visible in the prominence of the noble warrior stereotype in recent decades. Such representations may seem positive, but they can also restrict the symbolic possibilities available to disabled characters by making social acceptance conditional upon exceptional performance.

The analysis by disability type confirms that representational change is uneven. Physical-motor and sensory disabilities are more frequently associated with support, autonomy, integration, and subjective experience, although they also remain linked to rehabilitation, bodily loss, and narratives of overcoming. Intellectual disability shows a strong movement toward the social model and community integration, but remains closely associated with innocence and infantilisation. This finding is consistent with Bradford et al. (2024), who emphasise the persistence of limited and stereotyped representations of intellectual disability. Thus, greater inclusion does not automatically eliminate paternalistic framing; a character may be socially integrated while still being denied full adult agency, sexuality, complexity, or narrative authority.

Mental health disability remains the most resistant to inclusive transformation. Within the corpus, it is more frequently associated with pathologisation, instability, victimisation, villainisation, rejection, and symbolic threat. This suggests that the social model has advanced unevenly across disability categories. While some forms of bodily or sensory difference have become more narratively integrated, mental health continues to be represented through frameworks of fear, danger, medical control, or emotional disturbance. This persistence indicates that the cinematic destigmatisation of disability has not progressed equally across all forms of non-normative embodiment or experience.

The findings also support Botha and Harvey's (2024) argument that negative stereotypes remain active in contemporary cinema, even when they appear in more subtle or updated forms. The corpus analysed here shows that recent

films may challenge older stereotypes while simultaneously producing new expectations of normalisation, autonomy, resilience, or emotional acceptability. This ambivalence is central to the discussion: contemporary cinema often represents disability with greater dignity and complexity, but it still tends to regulate which forms of disability are acceptable, desirable, inspiring, or socially intelligible.

Cinematic movement and genre also play an important role in this process. Classical Hollywood Cinema tends to organise disability through emotionally legible, morally ordered, and often rehabilitative narratives. Modern Cinema introduces greater ambiguity, institutional critique, alienation, and discomfort, allowing disability to become a site of conflict with social norms and systems of control. Postmodern Cinema expands the range of subjective, affective, and relational representations, but also reinforces the prominence of the noble warrior and other figures linked to resilience and exceptional achievement. These findings suggest that film-historical categories are not merely contextual labels; they condition the visual, narrative, and emotional frameworks through which disability becomes meaningful.

Genre operates in a similar way. Drama remains the dominant genre because it provides a privileged narrative structure for representing suffering, vulnerability, care, moral conflict, recognition, and transformation. Comedy and comedy-drama appear more open to everyday interaction, community participation, and social integration, especially in recent cinema. By contrast, horror and thriller continue to mobilise disability more frequently through fear, threat, confinement, abnormality, or symbolic disturbance. Adventure and action cinema tend to incorporate disability through capability, endurance, and exceptional performance, reinforcing the heroic or supercrip dimension of representation. Therefore, genre does not simply contain disability; it actively shapes the type of disability narrative that becomes possible.

The national comparison also reveals important differences, although these must be interpreted cautiously because the corpus is not statistically representative of global cinema. US cinema is the largest national group in the sample and frequently combines medical-rehabilitative and social-model elements with individualised narratives of loss, rehabilitation, resilience, and exceptional achievement. Spanish cinema, by contrast, shows a stronger recent tendency toward social-model narratives, integration, everyday life, and inclusive casting, particularly in films such as *Me Too*, *Champions*, *The Rite of Spring*, and *Deaf*. This does not imply that Spanish cinema is uniformly more inclusive, but rather that within this corpus recent Spanish films appear especially relevant for analysing normalisation, community life, and representational authenticity.

The results also reveal persistent structural asymmetries. Male characters with disabilities continue to predominate, while female characters with disabilities remain less frequent and are more vulnerable to victimisation, infantilisation, dependency, or emotional vulnerability. This finding indicates that progress in disability representation does not automatically entail progress in gender representation. The social model may challenge certain forms of ableism while leaving patriarchal narrative structures intact. Therefore, disability representation must be analysed intersectionally, taking into account how gender

conditions visibility, agency, sexuality, vulnerability, and narrative authority.

Inclusive casting and narrative focalisation also show partial but incomplete progress. The presence of actors with actual disabilities has increased in recent decades, but remains limited and uneven across the corpus as a whole. Similarly, narrative focalisation from the perspective of disabled characters is more frequent than in earlier cinema, yet external viewpoints remain highly significant. Many films grant disabled characters narrative centrality while still filtering their experience through family members, medical professionals, romantic partners, institutions, or non-disabled observers. This suggests that representation is not only a matter of presence, but also of perspective: who speaks, who interprets, who decides, and whose experience organises the narrative.

The relationship with the social environment further confirms the ambivalence of contemporary inclusion. Support and integration appear more frequently than in earlier cinema, but rejection and overprotection remain significant. Overprotection is especially important because it represents a softer and more socially acceptable form of inequality. Unlike explicit rejection, overprotection may appear benevolent, but it can restrict autonomy, adult identity, sexuality, and decision-making. In this sense, the movement from exclusion to support does not always imply full inclusion; it may also produce tutelary forms of belonging in which disabled characters are accepted only under conditions of care, supervision, or emotional dependence.

A further issue concerns the boundaries of the corpus and the concept of functional diversity. This study focuses on films in which disability is explicitly represented as a narratively significant condition of a character. This criterion was adopted in order to maintain coherence in the coding of disability paradigms, stereotypes, narrative focalisation, inclusive casting, and social environment. However, it also means that other forms of cinematic non-normativity fall outside the present corpus. These include incidental disability, background disabled characters, superhero bodies, cyborg or posthuman embodiments, prosthetic enhancement, technologically modified bodies, and other forms of bodily or cognitive difference that are not explicitly framed as disability within the plot.

This limitation is especially relevant because contemporary visual culture increasingly represents non-normative bodies through the languages of super-ability, enhancement, prosthesis, posthuman transformation, and superhero exceptionality. These figures are closely related to debates on normality, impairment, ableism, supercrip narratives, and the boundaries of the human, but they operate through different generic and symbolic frameworks from those analysed in the present study. The exclusion of such material was therefore a methodological decision, not a denial of its relevance. Future research should examine how disability, enhancement, posthuman embodiment, and superhero narratives intersect in contemporary cinema and audiovisual culture.

Overall, the study shows that the cinematic representation of disability has moved from abnormality, defect, threat, pity, and rehabilitation toward more social, relational, subjective, and ordinary forms of representation. However, this transition remains incomplete and uneven. Contemporary cinema has expanded the visibility and dignity of disabled characters, but it

often continues to legitimise them through resilience, inspiration, exceptional achievement, emotional utility, or controlled integration. The main contribution of this study is to show that disability representation has not simply improved in a linear way; rather, it has been historically reconfigured through changing paradigms, stereotypes, genres, movements, national contexts, disability types, gender asymmetries, and degrees of narrative authority.

5 Conclusions

This study shows that the cinematic representation of disability has evolved from predominantly exclusionary, paternalistic, and medicalised frameworks toward more social, relational, subjective, and inclusive forms of representation. However, this transformation has not been linear, homogeneous, or complete. Rather than replacing one another in a clear sequence, traditional/exclusionary, eugenic, medical-rehabilitative, and social-model elements coexist throughout much of the corpus.

First, the findings confirm the prolonged predominance of the medical-rehabilitative model, especially in the first half of the 20th century, and the increasing visibility of the social model from the 1990s onwards. Nevertheless, these paradigms frequently overlap within the same films. This confirms that cinema does not simply abandon previous disability frameworks when new social discourses emerge; it reorganises and combines them in hybrid narrative forms.

Second, the study identifies a clear transformation of disability stereotypes. Explicitly stigmatising figures, such as the villain or avenger, become less frequent over time, while more socially valued figures, such as the noble warrior, the sage, and the superstar citizen, gain prominence. This indicates representational progress, but not the disappearance of stereotyping. Contemporary cinema often replaces older forms of stigma with new expectations of resilience, inspiration, emotional usefulness, or exceptional achievement.

Third, the type of disability strongly conditions representation. Physical-motor and sensory disabilities are more frequently associated with support, autonomy, and integration, although they remain linked to rehabilitation and overcoming. Intellectual disability shows greater alignment with the social model, but continues to be shaped by innocence and infantilisation. Mental health disability remains the most stigmatised category, maintaining stronger associations with pathologisation, victimisation, villainisation, rejection, and symbolic threat.

Fourth, cinematic movement, genre, and nationality significantly shape the representation of disability. Classical Hollywood Cinema tends to organise disability through moral legibility, emotional order, and rehabilitation; Modern Cinema introduces conflict, alienation, and institutional critique; and Postmodern Cinema expands subjective and relational representations while also consolidating the noble warrior figure. Genre also matters: drama remains the dominant vehicle for representing disability, while comedy-drama appears more open to integration and everyday life, and thriller or horror maintain stronger links with threat and disturbance. National cinemas also show different tendencies, with recent Spanish cinema in

this corpus appearing especially relevant for social-model narratives, inclusive casting, and normalisation.

Fifth, the study confirms persistent structural asymmetries. Male characters with disabilities continue to predominate, while female characters with disabilities remain less visible and more vulnerable to victimisation, infantilisation, dependency, or emotional vulnerability. Inclusive casting and narrative focalisation from the perspective of disabled characters have increased, particularly in recent decades, but remain limited and uneven. These findings show that greater visibility does not automatically entail full agency, authenticity, or equality.

The study has several limitations. The corpus is broad and diachronic, but it is not statistically representative of all films dealing with disability. It focuses on feature-length fiction films in which disability is explicitly represented as a narratively significant condition. Therefore, it excludes documentaries, series, short films, incidental disability, background disabled characters, superhero bodies, cyborg or posthuman embodiments, prosthetic enhancement, and other forms of bodily or cognitive non-normativity not explicitly framed as disability within the plot. These exclusions were necessary to maintain analytical coherence, but they also open relevant directions for future research.

Future studies could expand the corpus to include audiovisual formats such as television series, streaming productions, documentaries, and short films; examine reception by disabled audiences; analyse specific national cinemas or historical periods in greater depth; and explore the representation of superheroic, posthuman, prosthetic, or technologically enhanced bodies in relation to ableism, supercrip narratives, and contemporary visual culture. In sum, cinema does not merely reflect social visions of disability; it actively participates in shaping them. It defines who is represented as dependent or autonomous, ordinary or exceptional, vulnerable or threatening, included or excluded. Contemporary cinema has moved toward more inclusive and socially situated representations, but this transition remains unfinished. Disability is increasingly visible on screen, yet it is still often legitimised through suffering, heroism, inspiration, or emotional utility rather than being fully normalised as part of human diversity.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary Material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

VG: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BM: Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. OpenAI's ChatGPT (web version accessed September 8, 2026; GPT-5 model; OpenAI; <https://chatgpt.com>) was used to assist with English translation, language editing, stylistic refinement, and proof correction. All

AI-assisted output was critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the published content.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2026.1908211/full#supplementary-material>

References

- Alegre de la Rosa, O. M. (2003). *La Discapacidad en el Cine*. Barcelona: Octaedro.
- Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. (2018). *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative*. Los Angeles, CA: USC Annenberg. Available online at: <https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/aii> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Aparicio, D., and Jordán, B. (2014). Cine y Discapacidad. [Dossier]. Servicio de Información sobre Discapacidad, Instituto de Integración en la Comunidad, Facultad de Psicología. Available online at: <http://sid.usal.es/docs/F8/FDO26710/dosiercineydiscapacidad.pdf> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Arecas Gutiérrez, R. (2016). *La discapacidad en el cine* (Doctoral dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid). Available online at: <https://eprints.ucm.es/42223/> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Ban, Y. (2015). The representation of disability in movies: disability as a problem of communication. *Jpn. J. Commun. Stud.* 43 (2), 109–124. doi: 10.20698/comm.43.2_109
- Benito de Gil, J. (1987). *Entre la Soledad y el Terror. Minusválidos en el Cine*. Madrid: Popular.
- Black, R. S., and Pretes, L. (2007). Victims and victors: representation of physical disability on the silver screen. *Res. Pract. Persons. Severe. Disabl.* 32 (1), 66–83. doi: 10.2511/rpsd.32.1.66
- Botha, S., and Harvey, C. (2024). Disabling discourses: contemporary cinematic representations of acquired physical disability. *Disabil. Soc.* 39 (1), 62–84. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2022.2060801
- Bradford, G., Schwab, T., Hourston, S., Abbinanti, A., and Jones, K. (2024). Film representation and stigma of individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Ann. Fam. Med.* 22 (Suppl 1), 6854. doi: 10.1370/afm.22.s1.6854
- Casaú Guirao, A., Hernández Garre, J. M., and De Maya Sánchez, B. (2021). El cuerpo negado: discapacidad como pretexto de la no-existencia. *Antropol. Exp.* 20, 405–417. doi: 10.17561/rae.v20.30
- Chivers, S. (2011). *The Silvering Screen: Old age and Disability in Cinema*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Collado-Vázquez, S., Cano de la Cuerda, R., and Jiménez-Antona, C. (2010). Deficiencia, discapacidad, neurología y cine. *Rev. Neurol. Cine* 51 (12), 757–763. doi: 10.33588/rn.5112.2010638
- Costa, A. (1991). *Saber ver Cine*. Barcelona: Editorial Paidós.
- Darke, P. (1998). "Understanding cinematic representations of disability," in *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. T. Shakespeare (London: Cassell), 181–197.
- De la Peña Martínez, F. (2014). *Por un Análisis Antropológico del Cine: Imaginarios Fílmicos, Cultura y Subjetividad*. Mexico City: Ediciones Navarra.
- Ferraro, L. P. (2001). *Derechos Humanos y Discapacidad*. Buenos Aires: Humanitas.
- Ferro, M. (2008). *El Cine, una Visión de la Historia*. Madrid: Akal.
- Flaherty, R. J. (Director). (1922). *Nanook of the North* [Film]. Révillon Frères/Pathé Exchange.
- Freitas, J. N., Rosenzvit, M., and Muller, S. (2016). Automatización del test de Bechdel-Wallace. *Ética Cine J.* 6 (3), 35–39. doi: 10.31056/2250.5415.v6.n3.16498
- Goffman, E. E. (1963). *La Identidad Deteriorada*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu Editores.
- González López, P. (2008). *El Cine Mudo*. Barcelona: UOC.
- Grau Rebollo, J. (2012). Antropología audiovisual: reflexiones teóricas. *Alteridades* 22 (43), 161–175. Available online at: http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0188-70172012000100011&lng=es&tlng=es (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Henley, P. (2001). Cine etnográfico: tecnología, práctica y teoría antropológica. *Desacatos*. 8, 17–36. doi: 10.29340/8.1189
- Jiménez Acevedo, L. A. (2015). *La Discapacidad en el Cine 363 Películas*. Madrid: Fundación ONCE. Available online at: <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/la-discapacidad-en-el-cine-en-363-peliculas-847284/> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Longmore, P. K. (1985). Screening stereotypes-images of disabled people. *Soc. Policy.* 16 (1), 31–37. Available online at: <http://people.tamu.edu/~dscott/340/U7%20Readings/6%20-%201985%20Longmore%20Screening%20Stereotypes.pdf> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- López Gómez, A. M. (2010). Discapacidad y tarea educativa en el relato cinematográfico. *Rev. Int. Comun. Audiovis. Publ. Lit.* 1 (8), 15–25. doi: 10.12795/comunicacion.2010.v01.i08.02
- Norden, M. F. (1994). *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Padilla Muñoz, A. (2010). Discapacidad: contexto, concepto y modelos. *Derecho Int.* 16, 381–414. Available online at: http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1692-81562010000100012&lng=en&tlng=es (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Palacios, A. (2008). *El Modelo Social de Discapacidad: Orígenes, Caracterización y Plasmación en la Convención Internacional Sobre los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad*. Madrid: CERMI. Available online at: <https://www.cermi.es/sites/default/files/docs/coleccion/ElModelosocialdediscapacidad.pdf> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Pérez Rufi, J. P. (2017). El género cinematográfico como elemento condicionante de la dimensionalidad del personaje en el cine clásico de hollywood: características de los personajes redondos y planos [Cinematic genre as a conditioning element of character dimensionality in classical hollywood cinema: characteristics of round and flat film characters]. *AdMIRA* 5, 1–33. doi: 10.12795/AdMIRA.2017.02.02
- Prigorian, N. (2008) Cine soviético. *Cuad. Unimet.* 16, 9–11. Available online at: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=3998389> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Rodríguez Herrero, V. (2012). Cine, sociología y antropología. La construcción social de la ficción cinematográfica. *Gazeta Antropol.* 28 (1), 13. doi: 10.30827/Digibug.20643
- Romaguera, J. (1999). *El Lenguaje Cinematográfico: Gramática, Géneros, Estilos y Materiales*. Madrid: Ediciones de La Torre.
- Romañach, J., and Lobato, M. (2005). Diversidad funcional, nuevo término para la lucha por la dignidad en la diversidad del ser humano. *Foro Vida Independiente* 5, 1–8. Available online at: http://forovidaindependiente.org/wp-content/uploads/diversidad_funcional.pdf (Accessed September 8, 2026).

- Safran, S. P. (1998a). Disability portrayal in film: reflecting the past, directing the future. *Except. Child.* 64 (2), 227–238. doi: 10.1177/001440299806400206
- Safran, S. P. (1998b). The first century of disability portrayal in film: an analysis of the literature. *J. Spec. Educ.* 31 (4), 467–479. doi: 10.1177/002246699803100404
- Sánchez Noriega, J. L. (2018). *Historia del Cine. Teorías, Estéticas y Géneros*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Senent Ramos, M. (2015). La diversidad funcional en el cine español [Tesis doctoral, Universitat Jaume I].
- United Nations. (n.d.). United Nations disability inclusion strategy 2022–2025. Available online at: <https://unsdg.un.org/es/resources/estrategia-de-inclusion-de-la-discapacidad-2022-2025-por-la-oficina-de-coordinacion-del> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- World Health Organization. (2001). *Clasificación Internacional del Funcionamiento, de la Discapacidad y de la Salud: CIF [International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health: ICF]*. Geneva: World Health Organization. Available online at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42419/9243545426.pdf> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- World Health Organization. (2023). Disability. World Health Organization, 7 March. Available online at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health> (Accessed September 8, 2026).
- Zavala, L. (2005). Cine clásico, moderno y posmoderno. *Razón Palabra* 46 (Agosto–Septiembre). Available online at: <https://biblioteca.revistarazonypalabra.org/2005/46%20-%20MIRADAS%20DESDE%20EL%20MARGEN.%20EL%20CINE%20Y%20SUS%20DISCURSOS/Cine%20Cl%C3%A1sico%20Moderno%20y%20Posmoderno.html> (Accessed September 8, 2026).