LESSON 2.3m – Disability in the Arts

Learning Objectives:

Unit 2: Disability Community Identity

A. Exploring the historic and changing attitudes related to the Disability Community
B. Exploring the role of media in how society perceives people with disabilities
C. Exploring the influence of an emerging Disability Culture
D. Exploring previously unknown Disability Community connections throughout history

Materials:

- “Freaks” movie – see information below
- TV and DVD player

Time:

Two class sessions (see information below about movie’s run time)

Setting:

Small and large group

Directions:

Lesson Preparation

Obtain a copy of “Freaks” and reserve AV equipment.

Advice to Teachers:

This movie has not been rated and may not be appropriate for all middle school class settings. Instructors are advised to view this film prior to implementing this lesson. Take the interests and maturity level of the class into consideration when determining whether or not to implement this lesson.
Lesson Implementation

Part 1 –

Facilitate the group identifying a list of movies with disabled characters. Make a list of the movie names along with the type of disability represented and whether students think the character with a disability was portrayed in a positive or negative manner. After completing the list, facilitate a group discussion in response to one or more of the following questions:

- Are there noticeable patterns in terms of disability stereotypes? For example, blind people are portrayed as wise and having “special insights,” people with appearance differences (e.g., scars) or mental health disabilities are villains, or people with mobility impairments are angry?
- Are there noticeable differences in how the disabled characters are portrayed depending on when the movie was made? Are more current movies improving their portrayal of people with disabilities? Are there more examples of people with disabilities in newer films?
- What differences do students notice about the characters’ roles? What are the differences when a character is the focus of the movie versus a secondary character? Do students notice “extras” in the film who are people with disabilities?
- Are there noticeable differences in the number of characters with disabilities or the positive versus negative portrayal of people with disabilities in various types of films (e.g., children’s movies, horror films, documentary films, etc.)?

Part 2 –

Watch one of the movies listed below in class. Facilitate a discussion (small group or large group) after the movie to respond to the questions below.

“Freaks”
- Film Information – 62 minutes, directed by Tod Browning (1932). [Note: This DVD is available from Amazon.com and is frequently available at most large video rental stores.]
- Summary – This 1932 film is directed by Tod Browning who directed Bela Lugosi in the original “Dracula.” The film’s setting is a traveling circus and is a horror story about betrayal and retribution. Many of the characters were played by famous sideshow attraction performers from the time. The film was considered to be so disturbing that it was banned for 30 years in Great Britain.

- Follow-up Discussion Questions –
Why do students think this film was considered to be so disturbing that it was banned? Discuss whether students think it is the story line, the use of actors with disabilities, or other issues.

How does the film reflect the attitudes about people with disabilities at the time in history when it was made? Help students make connections to what they may know about Hitler’s efforts to exterminate people with disabilities, the eugenics movement in the United States, or the institutionalization of people with disabilities. How does the movie reflect a fear of people with disabilities?

What do students think about the history of “freak shows?” How did freak shows reflect society’s attitudes about people with disabilities?

Lesson Wrap-up / Follow-up

Assign homework as needed depending on the lesson implementation schedule.
Notes: