

# Cinema as a resource for learning about people with disabilities: Twenty-five films from the last decade

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Received 3 March 2010; accepted 12 April 2010

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## Summary

There is little doubt about the power of cinema to convey information in order to trigger emotions and to stimulate empathy with the various characters and their situations. Accordingly, the use of films with disabled characters as protagonists can be proposed to favour “visibility”, normalization, and a closer view of the reality and circumstances of people with disabilities. Here, twenty-five films from the last decade, whose main characters have intellectual disability, physical disability, motor disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment or disorders within the spectrum of autism have been selected to approach the issue. The most relevant results of the analysis carried out show that problems related to physical limitations, autism, and intellectual disability are those most widely addressed; that the main characters with disability are to a large extent young adult males; that a broad variety of topics are presented (personal, interpersonal and sexual-affective, family related, medical...), aspects related to family being those that are most relevant, and that there is an evident presence of actors with disabilities. Likewise, it should be noted that the image of people with disabilities in these films is much closer to reality and more positive than it used to be in the filmography of previous decades.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Disability, Intellectual disability, Motor disability, Autism.

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## Introduction

Cinema, apart from its own unquestionable cinematographic values, has a series of features warranting it as an extremely useful educational tool for approaching the reality of people with disabilities. First, it is a powerful means to access information of very a diverse nature. It can be useful, and indeed is used, as an educational resource to investigate and disseminate information about current topics and issues. Moreover, it triggers emotions and encourages spectators to accept or reject the personalities of the characters portrayed. While watching a film, the viewer laughs, is surprised, gets angry, is saddened, cheers up or becomes excited. Likewise, it is easy for spectators to “put themselves into

the shoes” of certain characters that appear in the film and to feel identified with them; this makes it possible for them to see other points of view and to experience in themselves the thoughts and feelings of others. Finally, it should be recalled that watching films is appealing because the cinema is a leisurely, motivating and voluntarily used resource, as is the case with all activities aimed at leisure and fun. For all the above reasons, we should bear in mind that the cinema is one of the most effective methods for the promotion and modification of beliefs, attitudes and values. This has led to a growing use of cinema, in its different forms, as a tool for cross-curricular teaching and to instil attitudes and values within different educational contexts<sup>1,2,3</sup>. In short, one could say that the cinema is a means through which con-

cepts can be formed, different issues and topics can be instructed, emotions can be stimulated, opinions can be formed, social values can be promoted, and attitudes can be developed or modified.

In light of the above, the use of films showing people with disabilities can be proposed with three major aims: a) as a teaching resource; specifically, in the initial training stages of the different professionals involved in the different types of disability (teachers, doctors, psychologists, educators, social workers, instructors, therapists...); b) as a tool for working with the different groups involved with disability such as families, educators, non-university teaching staff, students..., and c) as a means for spreading information and raising awareness among the general population and public not directly linked to the topic of disability such as through campaigns supporting awareness in associations, at community centres, through the "International Day of People with a Disability"... or through other activities. The goal in the area of education is that the conceptualization, attention and treatment of people with disabilities should aim at approaches of "normalization" (i.e. acceptance) and inclusion, and we suggest that cinema could be a powerful resource to achieve these goals with university students, families, professionals and researchers working such individuals.

The aim of this paper is to encourage the use of cinema to facilitate the "visibility", acceptance, and a realistic view of the circumstances of people with disabilities. Thus, we perform an analysis and offer summarized descriptions of the main films addressing disability premiered during the last decade. It is worth mentioning at this juncture that this article is the follow-up of an earlier one entitled *People with Disabilities in Films*<sup>4</sup>.

### Films addressing disability premiered during the last decade

#### Criteria for the selection or rejection of films

From the wide supply of films available, those fulfilling a series of criteria were selected: films made in the last ten years (2000 to 2009), in which the protagonist or co-protagonist has a relevant disability that is either the film's central topic or an important aspect of it. Regarding this, cognitive, physical, motor, visual and hearing disabilities and disorders within the spectrum of autism were taken into account. The aim has been to make the films accessible and available in Spain. A final but relevant requirement is that the films should have an educational component and should be able to teach something through their approach to interesting issues, their ability to encourage thought, and their ability to raise people's awareness of the circumstances of the va-

rious groups of people with disabilities.

Films reflecting psychopathologies have been excluded, as is the case of *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) by Ron Howard, whose main character has schizophrenia (Figure 1) or *The Devils/Les diables* (2002) by Cristophe Ruggia, where Chloé, one of the young protagonists, has different psychopathological disorders. Also excluded are films dealing with illnesses such as *The 4<sup>th</sup> Floor/ Planta Cuarta* (2003) by Antonio Mercero; those where the character with a disability plays a secondary role, or where disability is tangential such as *Stones/ Piedras* (2001) by Ramón Salazar with the character of Anita, is a young girl with multiple disabilities (cerebral palsy and intellectual limitations), *The Secret Life of Words / La vida secreta de las palabras* (2005) by Isabel Coixet, *Life in Colour/ Vida y Color* (2005) by Santiago Taberner, and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2006) by Neil Jordan; and also those in which the disability lacks credibility and is really silly, such as *Nobody is Perfect/ Va a ser que nadie es perfecto* (2006) by Joaquín Oristrell.

#### Films chosen

The twenty-five titles listed in table 1 were selected; they are shown in alphabetical order on the basis of

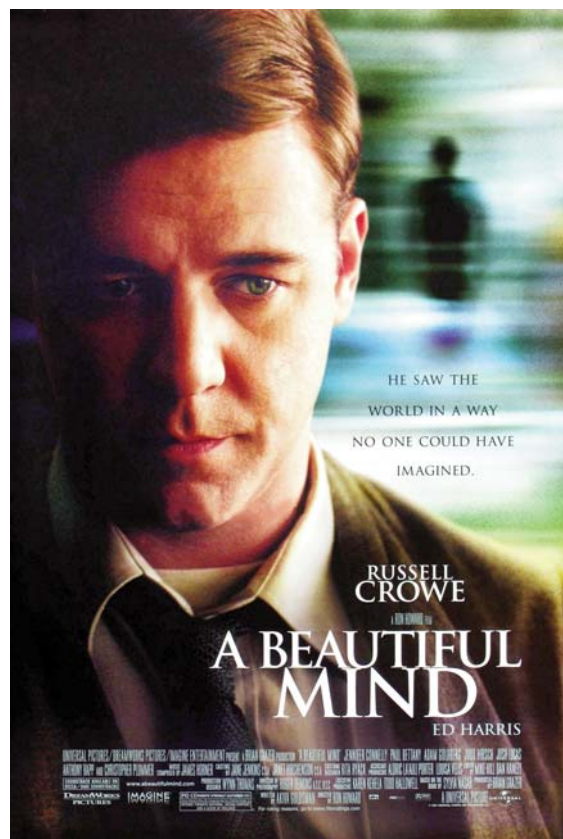


Figure 1: The protagonist of *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) by Ron Howard has schizophrenia (American poster).

Table 1. Films from 2000 to 2009 whose main characters has disability.

Title	Year	Country of origin	Director	Genre	DIn	DFi	DVi	DAu	TEA
<i>Blindness</i>	2008	Brazil-Japan-Canada	Fernando Meirelles	Drama/ Thriller			X		
<i>Adam</i>	2009	USA	Max Mayer	Drama/ Romance					X
<i>Dancer in the Dark</i>	2000	Denmark-Sweden	Lars Von Trier	Musical			X		
<i>Rory O'Shea Was Here/ Inside I'm Dancing</i>	2004	France-Ireland	Damien O'Donnell	Comedy/ Drama		X			
<i>Ben X</i>	2007	Germany	Nic Balthazar	Drama					X
<i>Two-legged Horse/ Asbe du-pa</i>	2008	Iran	Samira Makhmalbaf	Drama		X			
<i>The One-handed Trick/ El truco del manco</i>	2009	Spain	Santiago A. Zannou	Drama		X			
<i>Elling</i>	2001	Norway	Petter Naess	Comedy/ Drama					X
<i>The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*</i>	2007	France	Julian Schnabel	Drama		X			
<i>The Keys to the House/ Le chiavi di casa</i>	2004	Italy	Gianni Amelio	Drama	X	X			
<i>León and Olvido/ León y Olvido</i>	2004	Spain	Xavier Bermúdez	Drama	X				
<i>The Sea Inside/ Mar adentro</i>	2004	Spain	Alejandro Amenabar	Drama real		X			
<i>Radio</i>	2003	USA	Mike Tollin	Drama			X		
<i>Dear Frankie</i>	2005	UK	Shona Auerbach	Drama				X	
<i>Mozart and the Whale</i>	2005	USA	Petter Naess	Drama/ Romance					X
<i>Uneasy Riders/ Nacional 7</i>	2000	France	Jean-Pierre Sinapi	Comedy		X			
<i>No me pidas que te bese porque te besaré</i>	2008	Spain	Albert Espinosa	Comedy	X	X			
<i>Oasis</i>	2002	South Korea	Lee Chang-dong	Drama/ Romance	X	X			
<i>Sin ti</i>	2006	Spain	Raimon Masllorens	Drama			X		
<i>Snow Cake</i>	2006	UK	Marc Evans	Drama					X
<i>Midwinter Night's Dream/ San zimske noci</i>	2004	Serbia-Montenegro	Goran Paskaljevic	Drama					X
<i>Miracle Run</i>	2004	USA	Gregg Champion	Drama					X
<i>The Station Agent</i>	2003	USA	Tom McCarthy	Drama		X			
<i>I am Sam</i>	2001	USA	Jessie Nelson	Drama	X				
<i>Me Too/ Yo también</i>	2009	Spain	Antonio Naharro y Álvaro Pastor	Drama/ Romance	X				

DIn = intellectual disability; DFi = physical/motor disability; DVi = visual impairment; DAu = hearing impairment; TEA = disorders of the spectrum of autism  
 \* *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly/ Le scaphandre et le papillon.*

their Spanish title, together with their year of release, country or origin, director, genre and the type of disability they deal with.

A brief synopsis of each of these films, based on several sources, online databases included<sup>5-13</sup>, and on the authors' opinions, is offered below.

**Blindness (2008) by Fernando Meirelles.** An epidemic of blindness takes over the country. The first victims of this accident are locked up in a hospital with no explanation or help. Among them there is a woman who keeps the fact that she remains sighted secret in order to remain with her blind husband. The film is an adaptation of José Saramago's novel *Blindness*.

**Adam (2009) by Max Mayer.** Adam is a young man who is keen on astronomy and who has Asperger's syndrome (Figure 2). Adam's life changes when he meets his new neighbour, Beth, a beautiful, cosmopolitan woman who "drags" him into the outside world. The implausible and enigmatic relationship between them reveals the degree to which two

people from different realities can push themselves in the quest for an extraordinary relationship.

**Dancer in the dark (2000) by Lars vonTrier.** Selma is an immigrant who moves to the USA with her son Gene. She has a hereditary degenerative illness that is progressively leading her to blindness. This is why she saves up money to pay for surgery that might save her son from an equal fate. Her escape route from her illness is the passion she feels for Hollywood musicals.

**Inside I'm dancing (2004) by Damien O'Donnell.** This is the story of two young people confined to wheelchairs owing to their motor disabilities who confront their circumstances in very different ways. Michael has cerebral palsy and has lived in a hospital for people with disabilities for a long time, while Rory is a person with Duchenne muscular dystrophy; he can only move his right hand but he rebels against what institutionalization in a hospital means. Both move to an apartment where they attempt to lead an independent life, although with support.

**Ben X (2007) by Nic Balthazar.** Ben's intelligence is above that of his classmates (photo 3), but his shyness and his exaggeratedly withdrawn charac-

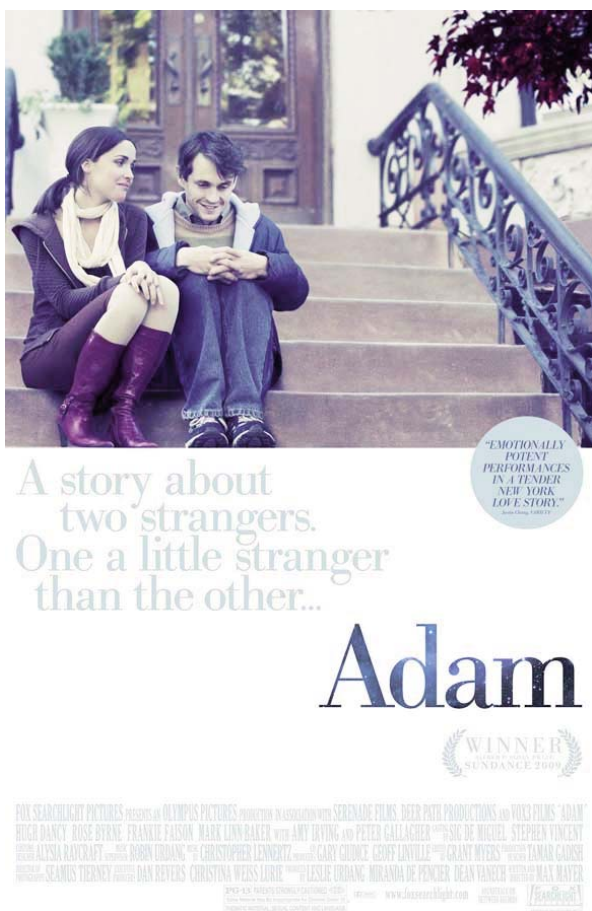


Figure 2: Adam has Asperger's syndrome (American poster).



Figure 3: Ben's intelligence is above the rest of his classmates' (American poster).

ter (on the borders of autism) makes his life at school hard and complicated. Ben feels calm and self-confident when he is at his computer playing his online games, where he is the real king.

**Two-Legged Horse/ Asbe du-pa (2008) by Samira Makhmalbaf.** A man from the city arrives at a very poor village and offers a country boy work. However, before being awarded the job, the boy will have to compete with other boys to see who is able to carry a child whose legs were blown off by a land mine. The country boy wins. For a dollar a day he carries his "burden" to school and they race with the donkeys in the streets. He bathes the child, plays with him and takes care of him, but the disabled child wants his father to buy him a real horse; he does not want another boy.

**The One-handed Trick/ El truco del manco (2008) by Santiago A. Zannou.** Enrique Heredia, El Cuajo, is a go-getter with half his body affected by cerebral palsy (Figure 4), which prevents him from walking normally. With the help of his friend Adolfo, a young boy of mixed race who lives in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city with an

alcoholic father and health problems, he wants to set up a recording studio where they can make a living out of their talent and passion for Hip Hop.

**Elling (2001) by Petter Naess.** After two years at a mental hospital, Elling is ready to get back to his daily life. The social network has found him and his roommate, Kjell, an apartment where they must look after themselves. With great willpower both of them will have to struggle with difficulties. When Kjell Bjarne meets a woman, the strangest situations arise and the couple is forced to do as best they can.

**The Diving Bell and the Butterfly/ Le scaphandre et le papillon (2007) by Julian Schnabel.** Jean is the chief editor of a French magazine. After spending several days in a coma induced by blood clot in his brain, he has what is known as "locked-in syndrome", which leaves him completely paralyzed, unable to move, eat, speak or breathe without support. Jean has to adapt to this new state and he develops a new view of the world through his imagination and memory. The film is based on the homonymous autobiography of Pierre Baulby, who has this syndrome as the result of an accident.

**The Keys to the House/ Le chiavi di casa (2004) by Gianni Amelio.** This film focuses on the meeting of a father with his son Paolo, a fifteen year-old boy who has cerebral palsy and intellectual limitations as a consequence of a difficult birth, which resulted in his mother's death. Gianni, his father, abandoned him as soon as he learned what his problem was, but has now agreed to take him to Berlin for surgery to improve his health. Both of them begin a journey, first towards Germany and then to Norway, in search of a platonic love the boy has met on the Internet. This quest will become another spiritual journey of mutual understanding and acceptance.

**León and Olvido/ León y Olvido (2004) by Xavier Bermúdez.** Olvido and León are brother and sister. They are both orphans and about twenty-one years old. León has Down syndrome (Figure 5). Their relationship is stormy because Olvido wants León to be responsible and autonomous, whereas León's aim is to have as little to do as possible and to be looked after by his sister. This leads to some very tense and extreme situations<sup>5</sup>.

**The Sea Inside/ Mar adentro (2004) by Alejandro Amenábar.** This film is based on the true story of Ramón, a professional sailor who becomes tetraplegic as a result of an accident. After being



Figure 4: Enrique Heredia, El Cuajo, (right) is a go-getter with half his body affected by cerebral palsy (Spanish poster).



Figure 5: León is a young with Down syndrome (Spanish poster).

confined to a bed for around 30 years he decides that he wishes to die in a dignified way. His world is reduced to his room, although he is accompanied by his lawyer Julia, who has cerebral arteriopathy and Rosa, a neighbour who tries to show him how interesting life can be. Ramón's intense personality has a huge impact on the principles of both women.

**Radio (2003) by Mike Tollin.** James Robert Kennedy, nicknamed "Radio" because of his famous collection of radios and his love of music, is a young man who has intellectual disability. He pushes his trolley up and down the streets, unnoticed by others. Then, the coach of the high school football team becomes aware of him and tries to help him and integrate him into the team, the school, and life in general. The coach, Jones, gradually wins Radio's confidence and shows him a whole new world. He encourages him to help in training sessions and matches and to remain seated during lessons at school, despite initial differences with Principal Daniels.

**Dear Frankie (2004) by Shona Auerbach.** This is the story of a nine-year old boy called Frankie, whose hearing is impaired, and of his mother Lizzie, who constantly flit from one home to another, changing their address. Since she does

not want to tell her son the truth, Lizzie has made up a story to satisfy little Frankie's curiosity. From time to time she sends Frankie a letter from his supposed father, who Frankie believes is on board a ship travelling across far away lands.

**Mozart and the Whale (2005) by Petter Naess.** Donald forms a group of people who share similar disabilities so that they can help each other. One day a new member joins the group, Isabelle, an outgoing girl with whom Donald falls in love. The fact that they both have Asperger's syndrome certainly does not help to make life easy for them. The title of the film refers to the fancy dresses they wear on Halloween's eve: Donald dresses up as a whale and Isabella as Mozart (Figure 6).

**Uneasy Riders/ Nationale 7 (2000) by Jean Pierre Sinapi.** Near Toulon and National Highway 7 towards the South of France there is a hospital for people with disabilities. Julie, an inexperienced nurse, works there and is entrusted the care of René, who has a muscular illness and who is unbearably ill-tempered. René confesses to Julie that he wants to make love to a woman before it is too late. Julie begins to look for a candidate



Figure 6: Donald and Isabelle have Asperger's syndrome (American poster).

among the prostitutes who work at the highway's parking lot. Finally, René consummates the act and suddenly changes into a delightful person. Astonished, the other inmates try to work out the reason for his transformation. When they discover it, it proves to be humiliating for those who want it to be kept secret, and a reason for satisfaction for the rest of them.

**No me pidas que te bese, porque te besaré** (Translation: **Don't ask me to kiss you, because I will kiss you**) (2008) by **Albert Espinosa**. There are five days to go before Albert gets married to his girlfriend, Helena, but with so few days left, Albert is not sure of whether he really loves her. The days go by and, to avoid having to talk to her, he takes up guitar lessons with a group of kids who has intellectual disability and who will end up telling him a trick to know whether he loves the person he is with or not.

**Oasis/ Hangul** (2002) by **Lee Chan-Dong**. A love story between two people with disability, a man with intellectual limitations who is a habitual offender, fresh out of prison for a crime he did not commit, and his wife, who has athetoid cerebral palsy with quadriplegia and who is confined to her home. The people around them cannot understand this love relationship.

**Sin ti** (Translation: **Without you**) (2006) by **Raimon Masllorens**. Lucía is a person with a bizarre fall in the bath at home that leads her to become blind. This throws her into a deep depression because she feels useless, clumsy, isolated and misunderstood. At first, immersed in her own world, she rejects all the help she is offered. Nevertheless, she gradually begins to let her family help her and she learns how to live and grow as a person, a mother and a wife.

**Snow Cake** (2006) by **Marc Evans**. Following a fatal accident, Alex decides to go to meet Linda, the mother of the young girl who died in that accident. Linda is autistic, which will obviously condition her relationship with Alex. However, her illness does not prevent them from building a curious friendship.

**Midwinter Night's Dream/ San zimske noci** (2004) by **Goran Paskaljevic**. Serbia, winter 2004. Lazar returns home after an absence of ten years. He wants to start afresh in a country that also seems to be moving towards a better future. His apartment is illegally occupied by Jasna, who looks after her daughter Jovana, an autistic

twelve-year-old girl (Figure 7). Jasna also wants to turn over a new leaf, away from a difficult past with a husband who was never able to come to terms with their daughter's autism and eventually abandoned them. Little by little, a very special bond is set up among these three people.

**Miracle run** (2004) by **Gregg Champion**. A woman who has been abandoned by her husband lives devoted to the care of her autistic children. When they become teenagers, they manage to enter the educational system like any other student thanks to the help of a teacher who is specialised in problems related to autism. However, integration among their classmates is not an easy task for them, although with time they become admired for their many talents.

**The station agent** (2003) by **Tom McCarthy**. Fin is 1.35m tall and wants to go through life unnoticed. Because of this he chooses to live in isolation, enjoying his only passion, trains, and begins to live in an abandoned station. However, gradually and hardly aware of it, he becomes involved in the lives of his reduced number of neighbours.



Figure 7: Jovana is an twelve-year-old autistic girl (Spanish poster).

**I am Sam (2001) by Jessie Nelson.** A young woman abandons her daughter on the same day the child is born, leaving her with her father, Sam, who has an intellectual disability. Sam starts to go through serious difficulties when, from the age of 6, Lucy's mental capacity begins to exceed his. The state questions Sam's ability to educate his daughter, and he is brought to a trial in which the outcome could be the loss of her custody.

**Me Too / Yo también (2009) by Antonio Naharro and Álvaro Pastor.** Daniel, a young man from Seville, is the first European with Down's syndrome to obtain a university degree (Figure 8). He begins his career in the civil service, where he meets Laura, a workmate. A friendship that will soon attract the attention of his family and workmates grows between them.

**Aspects analyzed and results obtained**

From the twenty-five films selected, an analysis of the following aspects was carried out: direction and nationality, genre, type of disability reflected and gender

and age of the people with disabilities, the topics raised, people with disabilities as actors, the feelings that are generated in the viewer and, lastly, the image that is conveyed of disability. As may be seen, the first categories are descriptive and, in a way, objective, while the latter categories are more subjective and related to the impact the film has on each of its viewers. It should be noted that the assessment and analyses carried out are limited strictly to the content of the films and to the approach to disability in them, not to their production, direction, or cinematographic quality.

**1. Nationality.**

There are 6 Spanish films, 6 from the USA, and a considerable number of European ones. Those from other countries such as Korea or Iran are a minority. Spanish production accounts for 24% with six titles: *The One-handed Trick / El truco del manco*, *León and Olvido / León y Olvido*, *The Sea Inside / Mar Adentro*, *No me pidas que te bese porque te besaré*, *Sin ti* and *Me Too / Yo También*.

**2. Genre**

Most of the films are dramas (80%), telling moving stories. Among these the most outstanding ones are the so called "realistic dramas" because their plots are based on real events, such as *The Diving bell and the Butterfly*, *The Sea Inside*, *Radio, Mozart and the Whale*, *Uneasy Riders* (Figure 9) and *Miracle Run*. There are also "romantic dramas" in which love stories conform the main core, such as *Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, *Oasis*, and *Me Too*. Some of the titles are comedies or dramatic comedies (*Inside I'm Dancing*, *Uneasy Riders*) and only one of them, *Dancer in the Dark*, is a musical. There are also only a few examples of thrillers (*Blindness*) and films with fictional aspects (*Ben X*).

**3. Type of disability presented and features of the character with disability**

The analyses of the type of disability (Table 1) show that those most frequently dealt with are physical and motor disabilities, disorders of the spectrum of autism, and intellectual disability. Sensory disabilities (visual and hearing impairment) are hardly present. These results are interesting because traditionally "blind and deaf people" used to be seen quite frequently in films. Likewise, the significant increase in the number of films focused on Asperger's syndrome and highly functional autism (*Adam*, *Ben X*, *Mozart and the Whale*, *Snow Cake* and *Miracle Run*) should be mentioned, which may be a reflection of the work of family and professional groups fighting for social awareness about this problem.



**Figure 8:** Daniel is the first European with Down's syndrome to obtain a university degree (Spanish poster).





Figure 9: *Uneasy Riders/ Nationale 7* (2000) by Jean Pierre Sinapi is an example of a realistic drama about disability (French poster).



Figure 10: In *The Keys to the House/ Le chiavi di casa* (2004) by Gianni Amelio the protagonist with disability is a young boy (Italian poster).

The gender and age of the protagonists with disabilities is analyzed in table 2. It is interesting that in the vast majority of the cases they are male, mainly young men or adults. There are cases in which the main characters are children or teenagers [*Ben X*, *Two-legged Horse*, *The Keys to the House* (Figure 10), *Dear Frankie* and *Miracle Run*], and the protagonist is a young girl in only one of the films: this is Jovana, the twelve-year-old autistic girl in *Midwinter Night's Dream*. It must be pointed out that no children's films with characters with disabilities were released along the years analyzed.

#### 4. Plot and topics addressed

As mentioned above, the main topic of these films is disability, but within this broad framework the situations that are dealt with are many and varied., Some of the topics raised are listed below as examples.

a) Doctors: there are admissions to hospital and surgery in *The Keys to the House*, and problems related to unexpected disability in *Dancer in the Dark* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (Figure 11).

b) School and education: there is inclusive and integrated school activity, either at ordinary schools or in specific special education centres, in *León and Olvido*,

*Radio, Dear Frankie* and *Miracle Run*. The harassment and bullying of children with disabilities by their peers is seen in *Ben X* and *Radio*.

c) Personal matters: problems related to the individuals' own acceptance of their disabilities. These problems which are especially prevalent when they arise unexpectedly and must be faced full on, such as, in *Blindness*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, *The Sea Inside* and *Sin ti*. *Ben X* and *The Station Agent* convey loneliness, lack of acceptance and rejection by others. The struggle for improvement, the confrontation of difficulties and "resilience" are palpable in *Inside I'm Dancing*, *The One-handed Trick*, *The Station Agent*, and *Me Too*.

d) Family: *Inside I'm Dancing*, *The Keys to the House*, *León and Olvido*, *Dear Frankie* (Figure12), *Midwinter Night's Dream*, *Miracle Run* and *I am Sam* are very much focused on family-related aspects. In these we see specific aspects such as brother-sister relationships (*León and Olvido*), the father's acceptance of a problem (*The Keys to the House*), the father's abandonment of a child with a disability (*Inside I'm Dancing*, *The Keys to the House* and *Midwinter Night's Dream*), the predominant role of mothers in the care of children with disabilities

**Table 2.** Gender and age of the protagonists with disabilities of the analyzed films.

Title	Gender		Age		
	Male	Female	Children & Teenagers	Young	Adults
<i>Blindness</i>	x				x
<i>Adam</i>	x			x	
<i>Dancer in the Dark</i>		x			x
<i>Rory O'Shea Was Here/ Inside I'm Dancing</i>	x			x	
<i>Ben X</i>	x		x		
<i>Two-legged Horse/ Asbe du-pa</i>	x		x		
<i>The One-handed Trick/ El truco del manco</i>	x			x	
<i>Elling</i>	x				x
<i>The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*</i>	x			x	
<i>The Keys to the House/ Le chiavi di casa</i>	x		x		
<i>León and Olvido/ León y Olvido</i>	x			x	
<i>The Sea Inside/ Mar adentro</i>	x				x
<i>Radio</i>	x			x	
<i>Dear Frankie</i>	x		x		
<i>Mozart and the Whale</i>	x			x	
<i>Uneasy Riders/ Nacional 7</i>	x				x
<i>No me pidas que te bese porque te besaré</i>	x	x		x	
<i>Oasis</i>	x	x			x
<i>Sin ti</i>		x			x
<i>Snow Cake</i>		x			x
<i>Midwinter Night's Dream/ San zimske noci</i>		x	x		
<i>Miracle Run</i>	x		x		
<i>The Station Agent</i>	x				x
<i>I am Sam</i>	x				x
<i>Me Too/ Yo, también</i>	x			x	

\* *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly/ Le scaphandre et le papillon*

(*The Keys to the House*, *Dear Frankie* and *Miracle Run*), the self-denial of mothers who fight for their children to overcome their disabilities (*Dancer in the Dark*), the struggle of fathers (*I am Sam*), the father's relationship with his disabled offspring, the biological father's flight for a period of time (*The Keys to the House*), the presence of a "hired" father (*Dear Frankie*) or of a "new" one (*Midwinter Night's Dream*), abuse within the family unit related to gender-based violence or maltreatment of a child with a disability (*Dear Frankie*), and problems related to daily life in these situations (*Miracle Run*). Certain films reflect the feelings of sadness, shame, jealousy or rage that the child's disability triggers in parents and other relatives (*The Keys to the House* or *León and Olvido*), or the problems involved in taking care of a boy with intellectual disability when the parents are dead (*León and Olvido*).

e) Interpersonal and sexual-affective relationships: friendship is a clear element in *The One-handed Trick*, *Elling* (Figure 13) or *Radio*. Interpersonal relationships and social support are seen in *Inside I'm Dancing* and *The Station Agent*. One issue topic that has clearly made its way into current film making is that of the sexuality, love, and love relationships of people with disabilities. These touch on sex education in people with intellectual limitations (*León and Olvido* and *Me Too*), incest (*León and Olvido*), sexual needs and the reaction from and in institutions (*Inside I'm Dancing*; *Uneasy Riders*), relationships among people with disabilities (*Uneasy Riders*, *Mozart and the Whale*, *Oasis*), relationships with a person with a disability (*Me Too*, which deals with Down's syndrome), and people with disabilities as parents (*I am Sam*).

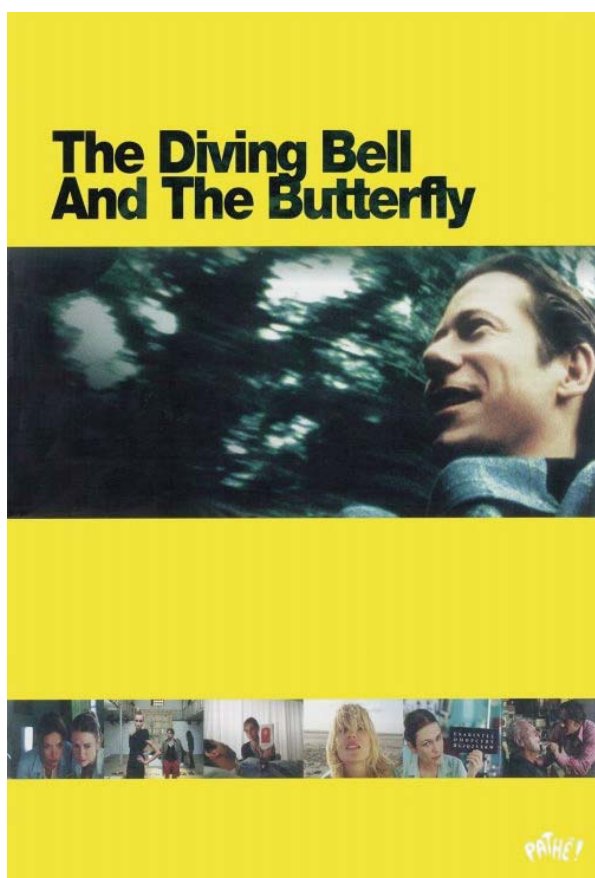


Figure 11: In *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007) by Julian Schnabel a medical question is raised (American poster).

d) Institutional, such as dependence as opposed to independence, and the attention paid to adults with disabilities in hospitals and centres (*Inside I'm Dancing*), or the process undergone by adults with disabilities when they leave these places (*Inside I'm Dancing and Elling*).

e) Job-related issues, which are evidently shown in films where the protagonists are adults (*The One-handed Trick* and *Me Too*), together with the problems certain people might have to face regarding this (*Mozart and the Whale*).

f) In addition, other current social topics are also dealt with, such as euthanasia (*The Sea Inside*), the consequences of armed conflicts (*Midwinter Night's Dream*), social problems, unemployment, alienation, alcoholism, and drug addiction (*The One-handed Trick*) or the clear difference in the situation of people with disabilities in Third World countries (*Two-legged Horse*) (Figure 14).

## 5. People with disabilities as actors

Disability has traditionally been portrayed by actors who in themselves are not disabled, since the film making industry tends to use celebrities in order to

attract viewers. Some emblematic examples are that of Dustin Hoffman playing Raymond, an autistic, in *Rain Man* (1988) by Barry Levinson; Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump* (1994) by Robert Zemeckis, Sigourney Weaver playing an autistic mother in *Snow Cake* (2006) by Marc Evans, or singer Björk in *Dancer in the Dark*. In these films in which actors feign disability, the credibility of the character is an element to consider: in certain films such as those mentioned it is unquestionable, whereas in others it can become exaggerated, which is the case in *No me pidas que te bese porque te besaré*. However, in recent years there has been a tendency towards the inclusion of actors with disabilities, which can be seen in the brilliant Spanish examples of Pablo Pineda (Down's syndrome) in *Me Too*, Guillem Jiménez (Down's syndrome) in *León and Olvido* and Juan Manuel Heredia, "Langui" (cerebral palsy) in *The One-handed Trick*. Outside Spain, actors such as Andrea Rossi playing the role of Paolo in *The Keys to the House*, or of Meter Dinklage playing the role of Finbar in *The Station Agent* should be noted (Figure 15).

6. Emotions triggered in the viewer by the character with a disability and by the film

As mentioned before, most of the films analyzed

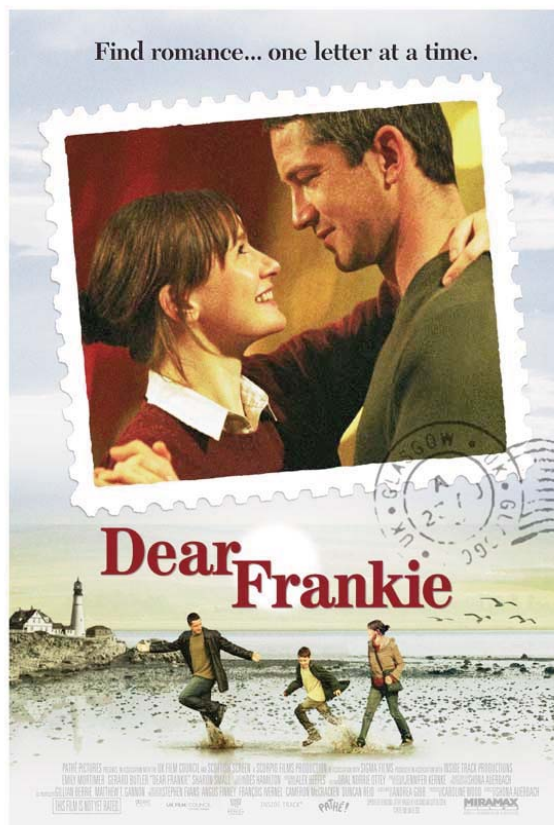


Figure 12: The family-related aspects of disability are dealt with in *Dear Frankie* (2004) by Shona Auerbach (American poster).



Figure 13: Friendship is a clear element in *Elling* (2001) by Petter Naess (Norwegian poster).

are dramas that show the person with a disability in a moving way, which triggers strong emotions in the viewer, both positive (affection, protection, a will to help, closeness...) and negative or inadequate (sadness, pity, compassion, fear, ignorance...). These feelings lead people to think, feel and act in certain ways when dealing with people with disabilities. Positive emotions make approach, acceptance, naturality and spontaneity possible, whereas negative ones lead to rejection, over-protection, mistreatment, alienation, exclusion, distancing, scorn, or at the very least, indifference and morbid curiosity.

The list presented includes films with happy endings, although these might seem artificial and hardly realistic [*Radio* (Figure 16)], some of them with a touch of merriment and cheerfulness (*Inside I'm Dancing*), and others that are sad and harsh (*Two-legged Horse*), bitter (*Ben X*), uncomfortable (reduction of visual field in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*), or potentially disturbing (*León and Olvido*) for the viewer. However, there are also films that trigger a wide range of feelings and encourage reflection and the taking of positions regarding the topics addressed in the plot (*Me Too*).

7. The image of people with disabilities that is conveyed.

The importance of the analysis of the representation of people with disabilities in the films selected is worth highlighting to see whether the conception of these people corresponds to a traditional negative model that insists on dependence and negative stereotypes, or whether it is framed within a positive and realistic model that provides an active image and shows the reality of their daily lives, with their limitations, but also with their possibilities and strengths.

Fortunately, in recent years the cinematographic image of these people has gradually become more positive and consistent with reality and is approached in a more appropriate way. Realistic information is provided, non-discriminatory language is used, knowledge regarding solutions is provided, and drama as a resource is not as melodramatic and pitiful as in former decades. Examples of this can be found in *Me Too*, *The One-handed Trick* or *León and Olvido*. Through this accurate realism, the person with a disability is presented with his/her limitations, but also with abilities, possibilities and strengths. For instance, Dany, the protagonist in *Me Too* who has Down syndrome, has finished his university studies, leads a life of complete integration and has to



Figure 14: The situation of people with disabilities in Third World countries is addressed in *Two-Legged Horse* (2008) by Samira Makhmalbaf (French poster).

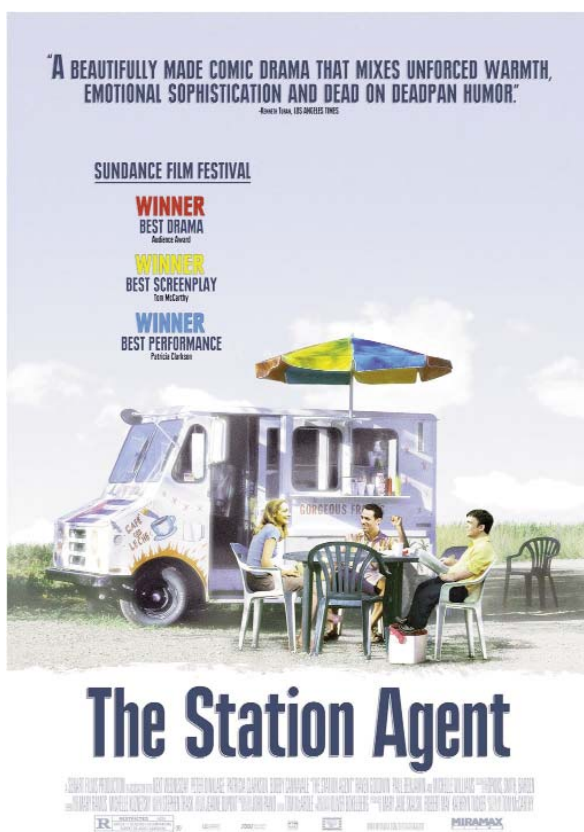


Figure 15: In some films, the character with a disability is played by people who really do have it such as in *The Station Agent* (2003) by Tom McCarthy (American poster).

deal with a job. Enrique Heredia, the protagonist in *The One-handed Trick*, is a person with from serious motor deficiencies (spasticity, hypertonicity, etc.) that limit and make certain activities difficult for him, for example, getting into the bath to shower or descending stairs, but he also has a series of strengths, such as his determination, optimism, passion for what he does, persistence and desire for improvement, which are admirable. The strange behaviour of the protagonists in *Mozart and the Whale* (echolalia, hyperacusis, specific interests confined to numbers, social difficulties, avoidance of eye contact...) are counterbalanced by their will to help others who are under similar circumstances and their will to lead a normalized life. We can surely be proud of the fact that certain controversial topics such as sexuality (*León and Olvido*, *Me Too*) or active euthanasia (*The Sea Inside*) are being tackled by cinema. This can be explained in terms of the change in the conception of disability. People with disabilities are now rising towards social relevance, attempting to reach levels of social normalization and awareness, full integration, inclusion, active participation in all spheres (educational, social, work-related...), self-determination, a better quality of life, and equal opportunities.

### Final considerations

To conclude, it must be pointed out that if these films are used for educational purposes and as educational resources, as has been suggested, they should be framed within a cinema-forum created as a process comprising the following: preliminary activities (introductory information, review of newspaper articles, documentary dossier...), viewing of the film (with the possibility of completing a simple questionnaire or a list of unfinished sentences), follow-up activities (discussion, debate, seminar...) and complementary activities (search for additional information and consolidation, review of certain interesting film sequences, etc.). We should not forget that films portray a reality that responds to the vision that the director and scriptwriters have of the topic and that this vision might be biased, altered or even mistaken, such that the information appearing in the films must be carefully completed, elaborated on and explained, because films are not scientific documents. If these precautions are taken and the activity is planned meticulously, it will certainly contribute towards a more realistic view of people with disabilities, which will undoubtedly result in more positive attitudes towards this group of people.



Figure 16: *Radio* (2003) by Mike Tollin is a film with a happy ending (American poster).

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Translation by the team of the Languages Service of the University of Salamanca.

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