

Firstname Lastname

Dr. Williams

English 102

February 28, 2018

Pop Culture Analysis: *Radio*

Disability is common in modern films, but the representation can be diverse. The 2003 film, *Radio*, is based off a true story of a disabled man in a small South Carolina town. Mike Tollin got inspiration for the movie after reading the article, “Someone to Lean On,” by Gary Smith. The main character is James Robert “Radio” Kennedy, who was never diagnosed with any disorder, but clearly had some type of cognitive disorder. Like many movies in pop culture, *Radio* sticks to the feel-good stereotype of most movies based on people with disabilities. Although the real Radio was never diagnosed with any disorder, I believe an actor with true disabilities could have played his role.

The actor that played “Radio” was the well-known Cuba Gooding Jr. Much of the movie was either exaggerated or altered from the true story. Gary Smith, a highly regarded American journalist, wrote much about the life and stories of James Kennedy in his article, “Someone to Lean On.” His article inspired Director Mike Tollin to take this story even further. *Radio* is one of those stereotypical heart-warming movies that non-disabled people soak up.

Radio has a few disability stereotypes that are defined by the British Film Institute. The film presents Radio as an outcast to the rest of the town or the local football team. Although this may have been true to some degree, the movie really made a focus on it. Much of the outcast-like characteristics came with the interactions with the football team. Eventually, as stated by Sheila

Hilton, the former principal of T.L. Hanna High School, Radio was loved and cherished by the students and town.

The story stereotypically portrays Radio as unable to participate in everyday life; another stereotype defined by the BFI. Before meeting Coach Jones, Radio would meander around town and tinker with his radios. After meeting the coach, he began to help the football team at practices. People in the town did not like Radio helping and this led back to him not being able to participate in daily tasks like any person could.

Radio was never diagnosed with a disorder, but he did show some signs of Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The National Institute of Mental health states in their article on Autistic Spectrum Disorder that, “People with ASD often have these characteristics: Ongoing social problems that include difficulty communicating and interacting with others, repetitive behaviors as well as limited interests or activities, symptoms that typically are recognized in the first two years of life, and symptoms that hurt the individual’s ability to function socially, at school or work, or other areas of life.” James Kennedy had difficulty interacting with strangers or even people he knew that would inhibit his social development. The NIMH also brings to attention that, “Some people are mildly impaired by their symptoms, while others are severely disabled.” In this case, Radio would be considered mildly impaired, as he does develop social skills, but his lack in mental development still shows.

Annie, a blog author, wrote a blog article on the film *Radio* and how disability was portrayed through the movie. In her blog, Annie emphasizes, “*Radio* sends a fairly cliché message regarding disability. The film plays on the idea that people with mental disabilities are unable to help themselves; they need others to reach out to them and encourage them to become functioning members of society. This stereotype has become to commonly accepted; those with

intellectual disabilities are not helpless, they are more often than not very independent.” This comes back to the stereotype that people with disabilities cannot perform everyday tasks.

The British Film Institute compiled a list of ways to cut out disability in film from the Invisible Children Conference of 1995. One way would be to stop creating one-dimensional characterizations. Radio is definitely a one-dimensional character, defined only by his disability and the side effects. While the movie is named after his fascination with radios, there isn't much more about his personality compared to the portrayal of his lack of cognitions. This also ties in with another way to cut out stereotypes as stated, “Avoid presenting physical and mental characteristics as determining personality.” The most important way to cut stereotypical portrayals out of films is, “cast us, train us and write us into your scripts, programmes and publications.”

Cuba Gooding Jr. was very successful at playing the role of Radio. Nonetheless, the disabilities that James Robert “Radio” Kennedy had were not severe. There were ways that the film could have steered clear of the stereotypical stigma, but popular culture has an underlying demand for these heart warming stories played by recognizable actors. If Hollywood were to open their reigns to disabled actors, movies would not only be more realistic but also be much more wholesome. Someone with more mild traits like Radio could train and learn to act and play roles resembling his. The more disabled actors that thrive in the business could cause greater amounts of disabled people to feel that they can act too. Hypothetically this could eventually lead to an equal representation of disability in the film industry and the production of less stereotypical movies. *Radio* is a prime example of a movie that could have benefitted from a disabled actor to portray less of the stereotypes and more of the realistic attributes.

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