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Disability Shows Character: How *Skyfall* Supports the Idea That Disabilities Are Signs of
Character Flaws

The culture we live in often makes villains of who we perceive as different. One way this is done is by pieces of art depicting common harmful myths about disabled people. One such myth is the idea that disabilities are signs of an internal flaw. I am examining this myth because I remember drawing evil characters as a child and often I would give them a disability in order to make them more scary or evil seeming. The fact that children are influenced by this myth shows just how pervasive it is in popular culture. In the paper I will examine how the 2012 James Bond movie *Skyfall* perpetuates this myth in the portrayal of the antagonist Raul Silva. Silva is the driving force of the plot in the movie, he kills many British secret agents and steals an important document from MI6. After being captured, Silva is revealed to have perpetrated his horrible acts because he is angry from having gotten a disability rather than death. His disability is shown to be the cause of many of his worst character traits and actions, this is a trope common in movies and *Skyfall* sustains this myth which reinforces and promotes biases against people with disabilities.

Skyfall opens with the villain, Raul Silva, blowing up the headquarters of MI6. After some investigating, Silva is tracked down to a remote island and captures Bond. Bond has a tracking device on his person and help comes, and with it, Bond captures Silva. Silva is brought in for interrogation where he reveals his backstory. Silva explains that he was an ex MI6 agent who MI6 Director M turned over to the Chinese in order to free hostages. To punctuate how mad he is at M, Silva takes out his dentures, revealing that his face has been damaged by cyanide. This is where the disability myths come in, Silva's motivation is heavily tied to his disability, and the movie does a lot to frame the disability as a sign of Silva's internal flaw.

Skyfall reveals Silva's disability in a way that visually reinforces the stereotype that disability is a sign of an internal flaw. When Silva removes his dentures, revealing his disability, the camera pans to the side of his face that is disabled, then there is a cut to Director M's face where she is staring at Silva with a look of horror on her face. As Rosemary Garland Thompson writes in "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography", "Staring at disability choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle. A more intense form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing, and other forms of casual or uninterested looking, staring registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by making it as aberrant" (3). By shooting the scene in the way it was shot, the movie is forcing the viewer to stare at Silva. The viewer cannot choose to look at the man as a whole, but is made to fixate on his disability, forcing the viewer to engage in prejudice they might otherwise have avoided. The movie also takes care to show the authority figure Director M staring at Silva, giving the viewer the idea that important people would look at Silva in the way the movie is shooting him.

The audio during Silva's revelation also serves to associate Silva's disability with his evil deeds. Shortly before Silva takes out his dentures, the music changes from a soft version of the Bond theme, to a dark piece in minor key. This makes the viewer feel more uneasy and negative, so when Silva's disability is revealed, his disability will be associated with that same uneasiness and negativity. Silva's voice also changes from a typical pitch to a deeper, more robotic sounding tone when his disability is visible. By making Silva's voice sound scarier and less human, as Sami Schlak would say about any piece that dehumanizes the disabled villain, "the disabled body becomes something to fear, for it not only represents evil as already established, but as deviance, the unexplainable and the unknown." (2). The movie is perpetuating biases with these creative

choices and as Rhonda Black wrote, “By reinforcing such stereotypes in the media, society's prejudices are preserved, resulting in fear of people with disabilities and consequently their systematic intentional exclusion from society (67). These myths are further by the backstory of the villain.

The backstory of Silva reinforces the myth that disabilities are signs of internal flaws. Silva claims he is bent on revenge because Director M gave him up to China in a hostage exchange. After being tortured by the Chinese Silva attempted to kill himself with a cyanid pill, but the pill did not work as intended leaving Silva’s face damaged by the cyanide and Silva bent on revenge. This is similar to the motivations for Mr. Hyde, of which Sami Schlak wrote:

As a result, it is not clear if Hyde is disabled because he is evil or if he is evil because he is disabled. The two are not necessarily perceived to be the same, but are so intensely linked in the back of our minds that it becomes hard to not make the assumption of their coexistence. Given this societal connection between evil and disability, it is important to now explore disability adds another layer of fear and aversion toward Mr. Hyde that is not present when viewing him as simply evil.

Silva’s motivations are similarly linked with his disability, leaving the viewer to question if Silva would have done the same horrific acts if he was non-disabled. Furthermore, it is clear that the creators of *Skyfall* intended for Silva’s disability to “add another layer of fear and aversion” to Silva, as at this point in the movie Silva was already established as capable of killing multiple MI6 agents, hacking into British intelligence, and running a criminal enterprise.

Another part of Silva’s backstory that continues the myth that disability is a sign of character is Director M’s defense of giving up Silva to the Chinese, that he wasn’t following orders. A common trope throughout movies is to have a bad decision someone makes be the cause of

their disability. This leads to prejudice as some people assume that disabilities are always a sign that someone did something to “earn” their disability. As Black wrote, “by giving disabilities to villainous characters, three common prejudices are reinforced: (a) disability is a punishment for evil; (b) people with disabilities are embittered by their “fate,” and (c) people with disabilities resent the nondisabled and would, if possible, destroy them.” (68). By having an authority figure claim that Silva deserved to be given up as a hostage, the movie is reinforcing the idea that Silva deserved to have his disability, and that his acquisition of a disability was some sort of karma justice.

The movie is also reinforcing the other tropes Black mentions, Silva is “mad at the world” for his disability, which is why he is willing to kill those who weren’t involved with his accident. He is so “set on revenge” that at the end of the movie he kills himself while fulfilling his goal of killing the MI6 Director. This is evidence for Schlak’s claim that “physical disability has come to signify deviance in our culture” (1). This is not just anecdotally true, “Research into the relationship between physical attractiveness and crime in the various media found that physical ugliness and physical differences are often associated with media depictions of violence and crime” (Dahl 1). When a negative trope is widespread it tends to become an accepted prejudice.

While many movies commit these tropes, it is important to understand them and point them out, so that we can do less of these tropes, and also learn how they may have already biased our own ways of thinking. When *Skyfall* focuses on Silva’s disability while using all aspects of filmmaking to seem it seem scarier, they are making it more likely someone will be scared by the presence of a disabled person. This can seem relatively harmless but the worst manifestations of this prejudice lead to police using excessive force against a disabled person, while the most mi-

nor can cause someone to avoid a disabled person, contributing to the way our society treats disabled people as second-class citizens. When Silva's backstory and his own dialogue suggest that Silva would be better off dead than disabled, it mirrors the thinking that people had that led to the popularity of eugenics. Children are taught that you can't judge a book by its cover but many aspects of our culture, like *Skyfall*, do the exact opposite.

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