

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

(Im)Possible Lives and Love: Disability and Crip Temporality in Swedish Cinema

Josefine Wälivaara and Karin Ljuslinder

Umeå University, SE

Corresponding author: Josefine Wälivaara (josefine.walivaara@umu.se)

As previous research has shown, people with disabilities often have restricted access to adulthood and its corresponding life events (including sexuality, partnership and parenthood), both in society and in popular cultural representations. This article analyzes five contemporary Swedish fiction films with protagonists with disabilities in order to consider how and in what ways they depict romantic relationships, sexuality, and reproduction as manifestations of adulthood in normative time and life course. The aim is to analyze if ableist norms related to time, adulthood, and sexuality is confirmed or challenged in these films. Four of the five films confirmed the ableist norm and used normalizing strategies to assimilate the disability position into normative life course and timeline. One of the films challenged the ableist implications of the normative timeline thus providing the possibility of crip time. Given media representations' powerful dissemination of cultural values it is of great importance to scrutinize its underlying cultural values.

Keywords: crip temporality; ableism; adulthood; Swedish cinema; love; sexuality

Cultural understandings of disability are intrinsically connected to the notion of normalcy. Normalcy is a historical and sociocultural construction that, in part, arose with industrialization and the science of statistics where the average and the normal distribution became an imperative and was applied to ideal moral, intellectual, and bodily qualities (Davies 1997: 3). These ideals are infused with ableist implications. Ableism is a power structure that positions able-bodiedness/able-mindedness as superior to disability. This power structure is upheld through processes of normalization and division between that which is considered normal and that which is considered deviant in a society (Campbell 2009). Ableist normativity also permeates the way we have come to structure time and normative life course. Normative life course is based on a normative perception of time, chronological sequence, and certain bodies and minds, with certain sexual preferences. It implies a linear development from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood (Kafer 2013) manifested through life events such as getting an education and a job, finding a partner, getting married, and having children. These life events are also structured in time to occur in a specific normative order. Many scholars have made visible that not everyone adhere to this linear life course thus pinpointing the ableist and heteronormative structuring of time (Kafer 2013; Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2010). This way of life has been naturalized as the natural and desirable order of human development and life course. It has become a compulsory way of living as it permeates almost every aspect of our lives and structures every social institution in society, from a person's own self-image, the structuring of schools, jobs, and political decisions, to society's overall resource allocation (Ljuslinder 2002). The taken-for-granted logic behind this expected life course from childhood, adolescence, adulthood, productivity, parenthood, retirement, and death for a white, cis-gendered, nondisabled person, is one of teleological progress (Browne 2014: 7). Those who experience these life events in another order (or not at all), with a non-normative partner or otherwise do not follow the normative lifeline are considered deviant, for example many people with disabilities and LGBTQ persons.

Disability is even seen as a disruption of temporal existence (Kafer 2013: 48). Ellen Samuels (2017) asserts, 'Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages'. In particular, the transition into normative adulthood is often put into question as people with disability frequently is conceptualized as 'unfinished adults' (Kafer 2013). Previous research has also shown that people with disabilities seldom are considered sexual objects/subjects, a notion that often is perpetuated through popular culture representations (McRuer & Mollow 2012, Longmore 1985, Schalk 2016). In our study of contemporary Swedish cinema (1995–2018) featuring main characters with disabilities we connect this de-sexualization to normative time and in particular the life-stage of adulthood as infused by ableist normativity. Many of the studied films from this time period, like their international counterparts, perpetuate this notion of people with disabilities as nonsexual and thus restrict the access to normative adulthood. However, of the studied films we found five exceptions in which sexuality and romantic relationships are prominent parts of the film's plot.

In this article we analyze those five films in order to consider how and in what ways they depict romantic relationships, sexuality, and reproduction as manifestations of adulthood in normative time and life course. We discuss and theorize if the films perpetuate notions of normative time, based on ableist normativity and heteronormativity, or challenge normative time through providing the possibility of crip time. Thus, the article is primarily focused on how and in what ways these films negotiate ableist normativity in relation to normative time. The study of Swedish cinema can provide insights into how prevalent discourses and norms of disability are constructed in Swedish society.

We study mainstream fiction films because popular culture representations are such a large part of our everyday lives that we venture to say that media representations, in general, are society's most far-reaching (re)producer of cultural values, and in this case, of notions of disability. Popular culture can therefore be said to be a key to how contemporary society understands disability. Studies have shown that representations have an impact on audiences' attitudes and normative assumptions (Bonds-Raacke et al. 2007; Brown 2002; Ellis 2015; Gomillion & Giuliano 2011; Kama 2004). Disability scholar Ria Cheyne (2012: 117) argues, '[t]he narratives circulating in popular culture play a significant role in shaping wider understandings of disability'. But popular culture do not only reflect cultural discourses regarding people with disabilities but also influence those discourses. Cheyne (2013: 38) argues that the inclusion of characters with disabilities in romance novels, for example, can challenge stereotypes, and that seeing characters with disabilities as romantic agents can make readers 'reflect critically upon how they conceptualize disability and the values they attach to it'. In fiction cinema similar challenges can be made that compel the audience to critically reflect upon normative assumptions regarding relationships, sexuality, and disability, and what possibilities a life with a disability might entail. Thus, popular culture must be subjected to critical scrutiny; and investigating media representations is a way of making visible normative cultural understandings of people with disabilities.

Though media representations of disability is internationally a well-researched area (Longmore 1985; Norden 1994; Haller 2010; Ellis & Kent 2011, Ellis 2015), there has been little previous research conducted on media representations of disability, temporality, and love/sexual relationships. Moreover, only two studies exist that focus on Swedish cinema and disability (Ljuslinder 2014; Flodin 2014).

Method and material

The material consists of featured length mainstream Swedish fiction films with main characters or protagonists with disabilities from 1995–2018. The time frame is chosen to represent contemporary Swedish fiction films. In total 13 Swedish films were examined, and as far as we know, those are all films with those criteria during that time period.¹ Five of these 13 films did not deal with transition into adulthood expressed through sexuality, partnership and reproduction in relation to their characters with disabilities.² The remaining eight films in our material include both romantic and sexual relationships, however, only five of the films use this theme as a prominent plotline. So, from these 13 films we have selected five films for further analysis: *Aerobics – A Love Story* (2015), *Ego* (2013), *Älskar, älskar inte [Against the Odds]* (1995), *Miffo [Freak]* (2003), *Utanför din dörr [Outside your door]* (2002). The characters in these films are portrayed as disabled persons being in their 20s–30s, the time that normative life course positions as the prime time for relationships, sexuality and reproduction, all of them are portrayed as heterosexual. We analyze, through the theoretical framework, representations of partner relationships, sexuality, and reproduction in the films as manifestations of adulthood in normative time and life course.

Theoretical Perspectives

The normative structuring of time, based on ableist normativity, presupposes non-disabled bodies and minds. Studies in ableism is a way of understanding the role of disability in society by, instead of focusing on disability, considering ableist normativity as a structuring power order that values able-bodiedness/mindedness over disability (Campbell 2012). Moreover, ableism normalizes this power order through the very notion of normality and a 'constitutional divide' (Campbell 2012: 216) between the normal and the aberrant, making what is considered normal appear as a natural given way of conceiving the world. Campbell (2009: 5) refers to this hegemonic, or rather compulsory, able-bodiedness/able-

¹ *Älskar, älskar inte [Against the Odds]* (Mikael Hylin, 1995); *Livet är en schlager [Once in a Lifetime]* (Susanne Bier, 2000); *Utanför din dörr [Outside your door]* (Eric Donell and Martin Söder, 2002); *Miffo [Freak]* (Daniel Lind Lagerlöf, 2003); *The Millennium Trilogy (Män som hatar kvinnor [The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo]* (Niels Arden Oplev, 2008); *Flickan som lekte med elden [The Girl Who Played with Fire]* (Daniel Alfredson, 2009); *Luftlottet som sprängdes [The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest]* (Daniel Alfredson, 2009)); *I rymden finns inga känslor [Simple Simon]* (Andreas Öhman, 2010); *Hur många lingon finns det i världen [The Importance of Tying Your Own Shoes]* (Lena Koppel, 2011); *Hur många kramar finns det i världen [How many hugs are there in the world]* (Lena Koppel, 2013); *Ego* (Lisa James Larsson, 2013); *Aerobics – A Love Story* (Anders Rune, 2015); *Jätten [The Giant]* (Johannes Nyholm, 2016). For the purpose of this article we have used English titles of the films as far as they are available, but translated those which do not have an international title (*Outside your door*, *Freak*, and *How many hugs exist in the world*).

² *Jätten [The Giant]* (2016), *Livet är en Schlager [Once in a Lifetime]* (2000), *Hur många lingon finns det i världen [The Importance of Tying Your Own Shoes]* (2011), *Hur många kramar finns det i världen [How many hugs are there in the world]* (2013), and *I rymden finns inga känslor [Simple Simon]* (2010). Two of those deal briefly with romantic relationships (*Hur många lingon finns det i världen*, *Hur många kramar finns det i världen*), however those relationships are strictly platonic and peripheral to the story.

mindness that affects all of us, as cultural ideas and norms that project the perfect 'species-typical' human being. This logic situates disability as not only negative, but as being less human. However, instead of only considering this position outside of normativity as negative it can also be seen as a possibility of disrupting normativity and making visible the ableist norm.

Through the concept *crip time* in disability/*crip studies* the very notion of normative time and how people with disabilities often are situated as other in terms of temporality has been questioned. While there are several ways of defining *crip time* (Baril 2016), for the purpose of this paper we consider *crip time* as that which facilitates other temporalities that might appear in contrast to normative time. We agree with Kafer when she explains:

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of "how long things take" are based on very particular minds and bodies. [...] Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, *crip time* bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds. (Kafer 2013: 27)

We acknowledge the fact that, on an individual level, some persons with disabilities wishes to be included, remain, or be reinstated in a position inside normativity and some strive to instead position themselves outside of normativity. Our intent in this article is to study and criticize the norm, not these individual choices.

One example of how people with disabilities are rendered outside of normative time and life course and positioned as deviant is when the accessibility of the status of adulthood is rendered unattainable for certain people with disabilities (Kafer 2013; Samuels 2017; Baril 2016). For example, by using a temporality framework, Kafer (2013) argues that certain people with disabilities are continuously seen as unfinished adults no matter how old they get. According to the dominant life course model of childhood development, children are considered unfinished adults because they have not gone through the stages of development to reach adulthood. For people with disabilities, this developmental model of childhood means that many grown up disabled people are also considered unfinished adults because they have not undergone the normative life course stages. Furthermore, according to this logic, if adulthood is understood in terms of a certain development connected to things such as autonomy and independence, then adulthood is unattainable for certain people with disabilities, especially those with so called developmental disabilities (Kafer 2013: 54). While this notion of the unfinished adult might be more prominent for people with cognitive disabilities, people with all types of disabilities, including physical, are affected by this discourse. The need for care, and the perceived lack of independence for people with physical disabilities, also signals childhood. Likewise, there is a widespread ableist norm that someone with a physical disability also by default is lacking in so-called normative intellectual functions.

In a normative understanding of life course, a person is expected to transition into adulthood within a certain timeframe. Having partner relationships, sexuality, and the option of reproduction is intrinsically connected to this transition into adolescence and later adulthood. For example, parenthood is seen as a natural step towards adult life (Engwall 2014: 333). But to what extent certain bodies are subjected to expectations of following this normative life path, and encouraged to do so, is highly dependent on functionality. Certain life events associated with adulthood such as forming romantic relationships, being seen as sexual subjects, and reproducing is, for example, seldom presented as viable options for people with disabilities. For instance, disability and sex, as suggested by McRuer and Mollow (2012), are terms which in society are often considered antithetical, and people with disabilities are seldom seen as either subjects or objects of desire (McRuer & Mollow 2012: 1). They call this cultural phenomenon a 'pervasive cultural de-erotization of people with disabilities' (McRuer & Mollow 2012: 4). Paul Longmore (1985: 141) argued that, in a society which emphasizes sexual attractiveness to an almost obsessive extent, people with disabilities are often seen as asexual or sexually deviant, a stereotype commonly perpetuated in cinema. Sami Schalk suggests that in the US:

people with disabilities are often represented as nonsexual, having either no desire or no capacity for sexual interactions. This stereotype is supported by both the lack of mainstream representation and by the historical denial and punishment of the sexualities of people with disabilities. [...] (Schalk 2016: 1241)

Likewise, Sweden also has a history of punishment of the sexualities of people with disabilities through the practice of forced sterilization of people with disabilities. While the practice has ended, the discourse of parenthood, in particular for people with intellectual disabilities, is still often regarded as problematic (Areschoug 2005). For the remainder of the article the representations of these very issues of adulthood, sexuality, reproduction, and partnership in Swedish cinema is studied.

Analysis – (Im)possible Lives and Love

In what follows, we analyze those films that depict adulthood or transition into adulthood through the common events of this life phase, romantic and/or sexual relationships. None of the films depict characters that have children, and only in *Älskar, älskar inte* is there a discussion about reproduction. Since the issue of reproduction is a theme which is not present in any significant extent in any of the films it will not be further analyzed. We merely note that reproduction

is not represented as a possible future for characters with disabilities in any of these films. All of the films adhere to a normative life course that follows a normative and ableist timeline. The films portray the main characters' goals as being included in this timeline. However, we argue that, of these five films, only one film challenges the ableist implications of this normative life course. The other four films instead normalize the disability position and assimilates it into the norm without questioning the norm itself. In these four films the characters with disabilities are assimilated in the normative life course through two different normalization strategies used within the narrative; the first strategy normalizes the disability position by portraying characters that return to a previously held position as normates (Garland-Thompson 1997) in such a way that it appears like the only way to happiness, love, and a good life is through aspiring to the normate position (*Ego* and *Älskar, älskar inte*). The second strategy uses constitutional divides to differentiate between disability positions, one that is portrayed as normal and the other which is portrayed as a deviant counterpart (*Miffo* and *Utanför din dörr*). While these films, in contrast to much mainstream film, do depict stories about people with disabilities as romantic and sexual subjects they do not challenge the ableist implications of the normative life course or timeline. By using these normalizing strategies, the films instead reinforce the normative life course as compulsory and natural, and makes it seem like the only way for people with disabilities to gain access to this normative life is through assimilation to the norm in order to appear as less deviant. In one of the films (*Aerobics – A Love Story*) however, even if the normative life course and timeline is not challenged, as the goal of the main character is to gain access to this very life, the film offers a critique of this normative ableist life course as it depicts the struggle for a person with a disability to be granted access to adulthood according to the normative timeline. The film, unlike the other four, does not assimilate the disabled position into the norm but instead challenges the ableist implications of normative life course and stretches the norm to incorporate disability.

Disruptions of the normative life path: Normalization through return to previous position as normate

Two of the films normalizes the disabled position by focusing their plots on events that tell the story of someone who, prior to becoming disabled, inhabited a normate position, and doing so through depicting and perpetuating ableist notions of disability as inferior to able-bodiedness. Both *Ego* (2013) and *Älskar, älskar inte* (1995) are stories about able-bodied male protagonists in their 20s – 30s who become disabled through accidents, similar to international films such as *Intouchables* (2011) and *Me Before You* (2016). In these films, the protagonists' able-bodied life course is disrupted by accidents leaving them disabled. Prior to these accidents, both protagonists are depicted as following normative timelines. Sebastian (Martin Wallström) in *Ego* is portrayed as an attractive upper-class young man, attending clubs and engaging with beautiful women. Patrik (Thomas Hanzon) in *Älskar, älskar inte*, who is a few years older than Sebastian, lives a pleasant life with a loving girlfriend with whom he plans marriage and having children. These normative life paths are then disrupted when the two men become disabled. Due to this, both of them give up their previous lifestyles, and end their future plans, including romantic relationships and careers. Discourses of disability and asexuality come into play through these stories, as the protagonists assume that they, due to their disability, have become asexual, or non-sexual objects. They transition from normative time to crip time in the sense that they see themselves as wasted time, as unproductive, and without futures (Baril 2016; Kafer 2013). The films portray how the prospect of a future for these characters that includes love, sex, and parenthood becomes unthinkable. The stories show the struggle of the characters to navigate crip time, such as things taking longer than before. But eventually the audience witness how they learn to live with and accept their new functionality and they are then reinstated into the normative life course discourse and thus returned into their previous normative life paths. Through the course of the films, the characters learn that disability does not mean no future, and both characters end up in successful romantic and sexual relationships with able-bodied/minded partners and thus, according to traditional romantic narratives, a happy ending concludes the stories.

We argue that it is central to these films that the characters are portrayed as being part of adulthood prior to becoming disabled. Because the characters already had transitioned into adulthood prior to becoming disabled, including becoming sexual agents and forming romantic relationships, their status as adults is not put into question in the films. Instead it provides an opportunity for the films to show a narrative of transformation from able-bodiedness to disability. The characters previous positions as normates is one thing that makes possible the normalization of these acquired disability subject positions, even though this position, according to normative assumptions, is a position of deviance. The normate, according to Garland-Thomson (2017), is a cultural image and a potential position inhabited by people that embody and conform to culturally valued traits of ability, sexuality, class, race, and gender. The normate 'is the constructed identity of those who, by the way of the bodily configurations and social capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them' (Garland-Thomson 1997: 8). As these characters have already inhabited this position, they have retained some of the power and authority it granted them, which provides them the possibility of, at least partly, stepping back into a similar position after acquiring a disability.

In these two films the possibility of returning to a normative life course becomes a question of personal acceptance and willpower. While this could be used in the plot as a way to underline a characters agency, in these films the characters are mostly portrayed as passive and without agency as soon as they become disabled. Within the scope of the narratives the characters are given little choice, it is suggested in the films that if they had not adapted, they would have lived miserable lives, or chosen to end their lives (as in, for example, *Me Before You*). These two films follow the pattern of what Longmore (1985) calls dramas of adjustment, films that focus on able-bodied characters acquiring a

disability and then learning to adjust their lives and live with that disability. In these types of stories, disability does not self-evidently prevent a person from living a normal life, but these stories assert that the problems the characters are facing are individual, a problem of self-understanding and acceptance, not a societal issue (Longmore 1985). In *Ego* and *Älskar, älskar inte*, the characters' changing attitudes and acceptance reinstate them back into a normative life path. The films reproduce the idea that the possibility of leading a good life with a disability is chosen by the individuals, Patrik and Sebastian themselves, rather than restricted by societal barriers and attitudes or other environmental conditions.

Moreover, in these two films, we argue that disability is used in the narratives primarily as a metaphor, or narrative prosthesis, in Mitchell and Snyder's words (2000) meaning the use of a character with a disability to tell a story that has nothing, or very little, to do with disabilities. The disability is instead a metaphor for something else, often a life-crisis, a tragedy, or a grief. In *Älskar, älskar inte* disability is a metaphor for loss of masculinity. It is stated in the film that 'His entire masculinity has been destroyed' when he, an air force pilot, becomes paralyzed from the waist down in a diving accident. The perceived loss of masculinity due to becoming disabled becomes directly associated with a displacement outside heteronormativity and a normative life course, in which the protagonist was clearly positioned at the beginning of the film. In *Ego*, Sebastian's blindness is used as a metaphor for him being blind to human values (Ljuslinder 2014). Blindness, in particular, is commonly used in stories as a metaphor (Richardson 2010: 177; Barasch 2001: 28–33). Sebastian is initially portrayed as a shallow, womanizing character only focusing on looks. The accident that makes him blind becomes a metaphorical blindness, and through the film he learns how to see things differently and reprioritize what values are important in his life. His blindness makes him develop into a less egotistical person, as indicated by the title of the film. So, while these two films depict characters with disabilities as sexual and romantic agents with full access to the normative timeline, the use of disability as narrative prosthesis, together with the normalization strategy, do not challenge the norm itself as ableist. As the characters' disabilities are used in the narratives in this manner the films and their depiction of disability perpetuate ableist norms.

Normalization through constitutional divides

In two of the films assimilation of the disabled position into what is considered normal is made through a comparison with another disability that is positioned outside the normative, a so called constitutional divide. While these films depict possible access to adulthood and normative time for the characters with disabilities, they simultaneously reinforce the norm as ableist. *Miffo* (2003) and *Utanför din dörr* (2002) portray characters who, in contrast to *Ego* and *Älskar, älskar inte*, appear to have lived with their disabilities throughout their lives. However, even though they have no normative position to return to, as in the two previous films, they still form successful romantic and sexual relationships with able-bodied/minded partners. The two films differ in the regard that the character Carola (Livia Millhagen) in *Miffo* is depicted as already being in a position of a normative adulthood; she is presented as a sexually experienced woman. The story of André (Eric Donell) in *Utanför din dörr*, on the other hand, is focused on this transition into adulthood through his introduction into romantic and sexual experiences. At the beginning of the film, he is positioned as being outside romantic and adult social situations. André has not fully transitioned into adulthood, which is portrayed in the film through his friendship with a young boy who mirrors him in their common loss of parents. It is after meeting Sanna (Lina Englund), and forming a romantic relationship, that he enters into adulthood, and his relationship with the child becomes more of a father/son type of relationship.

We argue that these two films normalize disability by assimilating it in what is considered normal, through constitutional divides. These divides can play a role in perpetuating ableism, as they create a division between what is considered normal (able-bodied/minded), and what is considered aberrant (disabled) (Campbell 2012: 216). However, in the case of these films, the constitutional divide is not used primarily to contrast disability and able-bodiedness, but to contrast between specific types of disabilities. It thus assimilates one type of disability into the normative at the expense of another. In *Utanför din dörr*, André, who is unaware of the fact that he has Tourette's syndrome, insists that there is something wrong with his mind, that he is crazy. However, he meets Sanna who, unlike him, understands and eventually explains to him that he is not crazy but only has Tourette's syndrome, and that she loves him for who he is. The film thus creates a constitutional divide between what becomes normalized (Tourette syndrome), and what does not (crazy, in the dominant cultural understanding of mental illness as deviant, weird, and potentially dangerous).

Similar normalizing strategies through a constitutional divide are at work in *Miffo*. In the film, Carola's physical disability position is portrayed in comparison to intellectual disabilities. This comparison is a recurrent and dominant theme in the film as suggested by the title *Miffo*, a derogatory expression meaning freak or idiot, which points to an ableist understanding of disability in which someone with a physical disability is also assumed to be lacking in intellectual functions. One example in the film is a scene where Carola pretends to have an intellectual disability when shoplifting, as she assumes the clerk has seen her physical impairment and thus presumes that she is intellectually disabled as well. The film perpetuates a constitutional divide between physical disabilities (which here become normalized), and intellectual disabilities (here positioned as aberrant), only positioning the latter as the deviant.

These films present the possibility of the characters being assimilated in normative life and heteronormativity because their deviation from normalcy is put in contrast to something that is presented as more aberrant. The characters with disabilities meet able-bodied characters to have relationships with, characters who manage to understand that their disability does not mean they are deviant, allowing them to be sexual subjects. What is implied in *Utanför din dörr* is that as long as André is not crazy (i.e. mentally ill, deviant and dangerous), he can be positioned as a romantic/sexual

subject. Likewise, in *Miffo*, it is implied that having a relationship with someone with a physical disability is possible, but having a relationship with someone with a cognitive disability is deviant. In these ways both of the films perpetuate the ableist norm by restricting and conditioning the access to the normative life and timeline to certain types of bodies and minds.

Towards a critique of inaccessible adulthood

In *Aerobics – A Love Story*, the issues of sexuality, intellectual disabilities, and adulthood are brought into debate, giving voice to a perspective that has been culturally unexplored, and thus challenging our ways of thinking about disability, sexuality, and adulthood. Who is able to give consent to sexual activities? What is the relationship between intellect, emotion, and desire? What types of bodies/minds are allowed to feel sexually aroused? The film does not reject the normative life course and its related timeline, but challenges the ableist implications of the normative life course. The protagonist Maria (Marina Nyström), is a young woman with an intellectual disability who lives with her sister, dreams of love and the physical sensations of sex. Her primary goal in the story is to gain access to this normative life course. However, through the depicted difficulties and conflicts Maria meets related to her desire to be included in the normative life course, the film offers a critique of the inaccessibility of the normative life course for people with disabilities.

Unlike the other four films discussed in this article, *Aerobics – A Love Story* frames the story about Maria in a way that depicts disability not as a metaphor or a narrative prosthesis, but as the focal point of the story. It thus offers depiction of a more complex character, with a storyline focusing specifically on portraying disability. The film does not lay the responsibility of change and equality primarily on the character with a disability, but depicts the negotiation between individual and society as that which is needed to bring forth change and more equality for people with disabilities. The film depicts the challenges faced for people with disabilities to be a part of this negotiation on equal terms. Moreover the film does not use constitutional divides to normalize Maria's disability at the expense of another type of disability. Instead it challenges the ableist implications of the normative life course and timeline.

The first scenes of the film establish one possible life path for Maria, in these scenes it is established that she has little power over her own destiny due to her disability. In these scenes, Maria and her sister, Helen (Madeleine Martin), visit a group home in order to evaluate whether such a living arrangement would be beneficial for Maria. The gloomy outlook in the group home, and of its employees and inhabitants, forces Helen to decide that Maria should continue living with her in her apartment. This decision over her fate, which Maria herself apparently has no say in, provides another possible life path for Maria – one with more freedom and possibilities. However, there is a constraint in that freedom and that is Helen who believes that Maria is unable to make decisions about her own body and life path. Maria tries to contact men through online dating sites, goes on dates, and attempts to follow a complete stranger home despite her sister's desperate warnings and interventions. Eventually, Maria meets Janne (Victor von Schirach), a failed television producer who is burnt out and depressed, and they initiate a secret relationship. They create a home together in his apartment, which becomes a space where Maria's disability does not dictate her possibilities in life, unlike the other two possible homes for Maria (the group home and her sister's apartment). The disability position of Maria is thus included into a normative life path, including love, sex, and the possibility of marriage. However, the film makes it clear that this position in the normative life path that Maria inhabits as a woman with disability is both fragile and conditioned on the acceptance of the able-bodied/minded society.

As their relationship evolves, even to the point where Janne proposes to Maria, she creates a new possible life path for herself, one that has been unthinkable to Helen, and by extension by the societal discourse. Helen's character is used, in part, as a sounding board for normative discourse. Helen, is doing her best to divest Maria from the right to her own adult life, including love and sex, not in the least through forceful interventions such as tying her down in order to stop her from returning to Janne. Helen plays the part of someone who does not understand or accept that a person with an intellectual disability can be capable of, and desirous of, feeling of sexual pleasure. Kafer argues in regard to intellectual disabilities that an 'inability to describe such interactions [feelings of sexual pleasure] or even to understand them intellectually does not necessarily translate into an inability to feel them' (Kafer 2013: 65). The film thereby problematizes the normative notions of adulthood, sexuality, and disability.

The narrative underlines the fact that Maria's disability does not make her asexual or incapable of wanting to be included in the normative life-path, instead she is given agency in the film. She is portrayed as having agency to control her own desire, as well as a desire to experience love and sex. We witness her masturbating, and her curiosity over her sister's sexual relationship with her boyfriend. When she finally meets Janne, she is portrayed as totally in control of the situation. She becomes the agent in her own (sex) life: It is she who comes to his apartment, it is she who initiates sex. The scene in which they first have sex is controlled by her gaze, and she is active while he remains passive. In this way, the film positions Maria as both a subject and object of desire. Eventually, Helen comes to understand that Maria is capable of making these decisions, and that Janne has no hidden agenda but in fact loves her. This provides a happy ending to the film, whereby Maria and Janne's relationship becomes accepted, and we can assume will continue.

In contrast to the other four films analyzed in this article, *Aerobics – A Love Story* does not merely assimilate the disabled character into the norm, it instead challenges the ableist implications of the normative life course and timeline and extends the norm to include disability. In this film it is not the character with a disability that has to change to be

assimilated into the normative, but the normative view that has to change to include people with disabilities. Like Kafer (2013) suggested in terms of crip time, the film suggests a possibility to bend normative time (and the normative life course) to meet disabled bodies and minds.

Concluding discussion

To summarize, four of the five films use normalizing strategies to assimilate the disability position into normative life course and timelines. Thus, while they depict characters with disabilities as romantic and sexual agents these positions are conditioned on an assimilation into normativity. In this way the films do not challenge the normative timeline and its ableist implications. *Aerobics – A Love Story*, offers a challenge of the inaccessibility of this normative life for people with disabilities. This is the only film in the material that challenges the normative timeline and life course as ableist and extends the norm to suggest the possibility of crip time.

As previous research has shown, people with disabilities often have restricted access to adulthood and its corresponding life events (including sexuality, partnership and parenthood), both in society and in popular cultural representations. By analyzing how and in what ways five Swedish films that depict romantic relationships and sexuality as prominent themes for its main characters with disabilities we have hoped to gain insights into how prevalent discourses and norms of disability are constructed in Swedish society. Four of the five films suggest that it is the individual who needs to change and bend towards normative society, rather than normative society changing and making room for its citizens regardless of functionality. In the films, the responsibility of Swedish society towards creating accessibility and equal rights for people with disabilities is presented as a finished and accomplished project, and what remains in order to achieve equality and equal rights is for the individual to change and bend towards normative society. However, this view of Sweden's welfare system and social equality disregards the actual struggles for equal rights, and the uneven allocation of resources for people with and without disabilities. These films thus create a quite unified image of Sweden as a progressive society with very little discrimination against people with disabilities. Only *Aerobics – A Love Story* presents a more nuanced image of the Swedish society and the welfare state. In this narrative, it is not the character that has to change and adapt but the surrounding environment.

As a result of this study we can discern a tendency in the films to confirm and reproduce a normative life course and timeline that is built on ableism and not on the equal value of all human beings regardless of functionality. The cultural implications of this result is that there is reason to believe that this tendency corresponds to societal discourses of disability in Sweden because media representations are, in part, built on cultural values. The importance of the media for developing knowledge is well known and acknowledged, especially regarding those phenomena that we cannot experience firsthand where media many times is the only source of knowledge. We are thus often dependent on media images to understand our society, our history and our future. However, the influence of media representations is not causal and straightforward from sender to receiver, but a complex relationship both reflecting and constructing the image of the outside world. Therefore, in order for political goals of welfare and equality to be achieved, it is of utmost importance that media representations are constantly scrutinized.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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