

MURDERBALL (2005)

Directed by Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro

CONTEXT: Ways of speaking about disabled people

There have been many **ways of speaking about people with disabilities** over time. These ways of speaking **reflect underlying values and attitudes**, many of which disempower and serve to 'other' those who are disabled. In times gone by, the disabled were labelled as 'crippled', 'defective', 'invalids', 'deformed', 'spastic' and 'handicapped'. They were often locked away, seen as an embarrassment, or regarded as 'freaks' (see [The Elephant Man](#)). This way of speaking and thinking reflected a very narrow view of what was 'normal' and regarded those who didn't 'match up' to this narrow definition as being of less value to society.

Over time, this way of speaking and thinking has shifted (especially since the International Year of the Disabled in 1981); however, it is important to remember:

In some parts of the world these attitudes persisted for a lot longer, and in some places they still persist. For example, after the fall of communism in the 1990s, the world saw horrific images of abused children living in deplorable conditions in state-run Romanian orphanages. These images and stories led to an international uproar and an outpouring of humanitarian aid to the country. A report released by Mental Disability Rights International detailed the horrible abuse of handicapped children in Romanian institutions. Over an 18-month period, the organization found 46 disabled children and teenagers aged 7 to 17 years inside a hidden ward at a psychiatric hospital for adults. Many of them had cerebral palsy and had been abandoned by parents, some of whom had been told their children were "biological garbage." When Eric Rosenthal, the organization's executive director, visited an institution in the midsize city of Braila, he captured the misery on camera -- a 17-year-old girl who looked like she was 5 years old and weighed only 22 pounds; children wrapped in full-body restraints with sheets tied to beds and cribs; and children so malnourished that their skin peeled off their bodies.

NOTE: this way of thinking is referenced in [Murderball](#) when we eventually hear Joe Soares' story about growing up in Portugal. Apart from going some way to explaining Joe's world view, it also becomes part of 'The American Dream' narrative (see below).

ATTITUDES AND VALUES - Even today we can still use terms that are offensive to people with disabilities, or speak of them in ways which perpetuate power imbalances.

- We often see them as fragile, dependent, as needing care, help and protection, as being incapable of making decisions about their own lives and so on.
- We also fail to note any differences between those with different disabilities, assuming that they are all exactly the same.
- Sometimes our response is to see them as 'inspirational' (often in a condescending way), as objects of pity, as 'special' and as 'different'.
- We might feel that we have to be kinder and/or less honest. Humour seems out of place.
- We are also still sometimes embarrassed and confronted by people with disabilities, particularly if we have to consider sexuality or intimate relationships.

This constructs disabled people as 'different' and/or as victims.

These past and current attitudes are referenced in Murderball.

- One of the health professionals reminds Keith that he is still fragile.
- Scott Hogsett bemoans being referred to as 'special' and both Andy Cohen and Scott tell stories about people saying how 'wonderful' it is to see them out and about. These comments are usually lampooned (ridiculed) by the men, which would make an audience more conscious of having thought similar things themselves.
- Mark Zupan also discusses the idea that people tend to lump all disabled people together without acknowledging differences between them.

We can look at Murderball as a text which seeks to construct a new way of speaking and thinking about people with disabilities. It can be read as challenging existing ways of thinking and as attempting to shift the balance of power.

How does the documentary do this?

- The film is **not told in chronological order**. It is carefully **structured** so that we first meet the main **characters** at a point in their stories where they are **represented** as being successful, independent, confident etc. They are already playing wheelchair rugby at the highest level and are about to be selected to represent their country at the Olympics. Through **selection of detail**, we do not see any of them (except Keith) immediately after their accidents.
- Through **omission**, we do not a lot their carers or hear a great deal from their families. We meet Zupan's mother and father, but their comments (**selection of detail**) emphasise his mental and physical toughness and resilience, plus we don't see them with Mark. This omission of families helps to **construct** the men as independent.
- The film opens with Mark Zupan. He is an important **focaliser** throughout the film. Although we are made aware of how difficult/ frustrating it is performing simple acts (getting dressed), Zupan is constantly **represented** as alone (independent) and looks determined. Our attention (**selection of detail**) is also drawn to his strength, tattoos, muscles etc, plus there is a focus placed on his machine.
- The **character** of Keith has an important **function**. He serves to let us know how difficult it must have been for each of them in the early days; however, the **structure** is again important here. We don't meet Keith until the others have been established as successful and independent athletes. This means that instead of feeling pity for them, we are **positioned** to admire how far they have come. In fact, in some ways, it may be difficult to think of them as having ever been like Keith.
- The segment when Bobby Lugano is speaking of his dream is more emotional; however, once again we hear this later in the **narrative structure**. Plus, with Bobby the **focus** still tends to be on his capabilities, not his disability. There are **close ups** of him typing, preparing meals, driving etc.

THE SPORTS NARRATIVE

As Murderball is a SPORT NARRATIVE, there is movement (through competition/ games) towards the **climax** (the final game of the Olympics) and the **back story** of each character is filled in as it moves forward. This means the emphasis is not on the past but on the present and future. The **focus** is not 'will they walk?' but 'will they win?' This means the **emphasis** is on the sport, not the disability. Plus, we are so caught up in the games that we 'forget' their disabilities during these and we also become involved in the 'march' towards the Olympics/ final games.

Intertextually, the sport narrative very familiar to audiences >> we recognise this story (**genre**) and this familiarity is used to **construct** these men as 'normal'.

The '**sport narrative**' structure is also important because it is a traditionally **masculine narrative** (like war, action adventure and exploration narratives) and so serves to reinforce their masculinity.

All of this serves to construct the men as independent, forward-looking and successful, rather than as helpless, fragile and as deserving pity.

THE RESOLUTION

As part of the structure, the **resolution** is also very important. The film does not end with the Olympic final (and with the disappointment of losing).

- Instead, we see the team mentoring and training Iraqi war veterans >> 'giving back' to society >> **positioned** to think of disabled men as positive influences, productive, generous and valuable.
- We then come back to the main characters – recognition that we are interested in these men as individuals and in their lives (not as objects of pity).

NOTE: REPETITION, OPPOSITIONS and JUXTAPOSITIONING – the SEQUENCING of shots is important.

CHARACTERS

Through the **narrative** we are told that there are hundreds of men playing wheelchair rugby, but the squad comprises only a dozen or so men. Out of these, our **focus** is on four: Mark Zupan, Andy Cohen, Scott Hogsett and Bobby Lugano. All of them (except for Bobby) are in wheelchairs because of **risk taking behaviour**. Yet, none of them is **represented** as look 'feeble' or needy, rather they are **represented** as generally outspoken, confident and quite overtly masculine/attractive. This makes the 'pity response' more difficult on a number of levels.

- **Zupan** is probably the most important character in terms of challenging attitudes about disabled men. He is **characterised** as a 'hard' man: aggressive, strong, determined, competitive, independent, swears a lot. Note what he says and how he says it, what he looks like, what others say about him etc. He is described as scary and intimidating. Even his friends and parents describe him as a 'tough' guy. **NOTE:** the image presented of Zupan off court does soften later as we see him with his girlfriend and with children; however, this is not the initial impression we have of him.

NOTE: There are **no gay or more effeminate quad rugby players** focused on (**selection of detail**). The men we do see are often drinking alcohol after games, carousing, indulging in horse play, playing cards, swearing, chatting up women, and talking about women and sex. They work hard and play hard – a more traditional (recognisable) of masculinity.

- The character of **Robert** (Joe's son) is the only one who is **represented** at 'nerdy' and not a 'jock' and he is gently mocked (at least initially). He dusts his father's trophies, drops his steak, is spoken of disparagingly by some of his peers etc. Each time I have watched this film, he is the one people laugh at (rather than with). In some ways we feel sorry for him, although he is not disabled, so can **the text be read** as suggesting that it is worse to be nerdy than to be disabled?
- **Joe Soares** – until halfway through, Joe fulfils the role of the 'villain' (an **archetype**) and the **antagonist** in the sport narrative. It is interesting that the 'villain' is a disabled man. It is also difficult to feel 'pity' for Joe at this stage in the narrative – he is very aggressive, swears at officials, is called a traitor etc.

NOTE: Apart from his role as the 'rival' who may prevent the 'heroes' achieving their goal, Joe's character adds interest and engagement because he provides two other narrative strands: the **redemption/ transformation narrative** and **The American Dream**. We like characters who change in stories (**intertextuality and context**) and the character of Joe provides this. He is **constructed** as having a life changing/ personality changing experience. **NOTE:** Watching the DVD extras reveals how constructed the character of Joe is in this film.

- **Chris Igoe** – interestingly it is Igoe who audiences often feel the most sorry for (**positioning**) and he isn't disabled. He is the one who doesn't attend the reunion and even Zupan's parents feel sorry for him. He **represented** as consumed by guilt, despite declaring it was an accident. The scene where he re-visits the scene of the accident is very revealing and poignant. His character provides another **narrative strand** which engages us: will Zupan and Igoe be reconciled? We are positioned to think that this reconciliation is more crucial for Igoe than for Zupan>> **dispels some of the myths** about feeling sorry for disabled.

NOTE: Some other 'myths' are dispelled through careful **selection of detail**. For example, on a few occasions the characters mention that their lives are better because of being in a wheelchair and playing rugby. This argues against us feeling pity for them. We are also **positioned** to think that being disabled hasn't changed them significantly – they are still taking risks, playing hard etc. In fact, two of Zupan's friends say that the wheelchair cannot be blamed for Zupan's grumpiness – he has always been the same. We see them as skilful, as highly skilled sportsmen through repeated **motifs/ footage** of playing sport...and as winning. They are also **associated** with the **conventionally masculine ideas** of camaraderie when shown as part of, not just a team, but an Olympic level team. They are not alone or isolated (which challenging some other images).

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SELECTION OF DETAIL

Much of the detail included serves to **emphasise the masculinity and sporting prowess** of the four protagonists. This means we see them primarily as men who play sport rather than as disabled men or disabled athletes. This challenges the existing ways of speaking and thinking. It may be read as **empowering** these men and **redefining their identity** as disabled men. They want to be seen first and foremost as athletes and the emphasis on masculinity is important for this.

NOTE: On the DVD extras they say what they were most worried about is being represented as 'pathetic'.

It is also possible to read this representation as **reinforcing a particular version of masculinity – a traditional version**. This means that whilst it challenges traditional ways of thinking about disability, it does so by reinforcing a particular version of masculinity (sport playing, competitive, heterosexual, mentally and physically strong, alpha male etc). For the most part, we do not see them crying, struggling with their disability, angry or upset (except when losing a game). This film could also be read as excluding disabled men who are struggling with their disability, who aren't as resilient, or who are less like 'alpha males' etc. Some people have felt that this striving to represent themselves as alpha males not only excludes some men but also reveals their own insecurities. (See below for a discussion of the more poignant/ tender/ gentle moments)

What function could the **segments dealing with sex** serve? First of all, they present us with a side of being disabled we may find uncomfortable discussing/ thinking about >> challenging for audiences. Secondly, it makes us see disabled men as being fundamentally the same as all men – as having sexual needs (still men). Thirdly, their talk of (heterosexual) sex constructs them as potent, virile, sexual beings >> 'real men', not 'half men'. This is an important part of their identity as young men – they are seen as men, not as disabled men.

NOTE: all except Andy end up with a girlfriend (obviously a 'happy ending' and a validation of their normality). As mentioned before, no homosexual players are featured.

NOTE: this sometimes means that their **attitudes towards women** can be read as sexist/ exploitative. Hoggsett speaks of using his disability to 'play' women – using women's compassion to his advantage. We aren't positioned to condemn them for this; in fact, it seems humorous until the text is read for gender.

The role played by **carers** is not focused on a great deal. In the film, these people are usually women (even in the hospital the carers are female). This is a conventional way of representing women (girlfriends, mothers, carers/ nurturers). Their experiences might be read as being downplayed and their perspective marginalised. Their concerns and worries are trivialised and sometimes mocked. Keith's mother is the one who asks whether they wear protective clothing and doesn't seem to understand Keith's frustration and anger when he first comes home. According to one of the articles/ reviews of the film, this is where quads in the audience laughed. I think that this may be seen as rather unfair given what she has gone through as a parent. It is no wonder that she is anxious. It is one of the health professionals (female) who mentions Keith's fragility and who doesn't want him to hit Zupan's standard wheelchair with the 'murderball' variety. Mark Zupan's girlfriend speaks of the need women have to nurture men in wheelchairs – this presents it as a need of the women, rather than as something needed by the disabled men themselves.

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Humour – people might think this is a serious, worthy and sad topic. They might feel uncomfortable laughing; however, this documentary represents these men as enjoying life, having a keen sense of humour and as able to laugh at themselves. This is done through the inclusion of incidents like Bobby getting in the box in the hotel room. This challenges common ways of thinking and responding.

Repetition: the story of the main characters' accidents is re-told a number of times.

Tender, poignant, sad moments: there are some parts included which draw our attention to the more gentle, reflective, softer side of the men and their stories.

The section on Bobby is perhaps one of the most important, especially the **animated dream sequence**. The **music** here is also more emotional. Another **significant image** is when Keith is coming home for the first time and holds his hand out of the window – **slow motion** – symbolic gesture. The interactions between Zupan and the school children serve to 'soften' the image. We also see Bobby interacting with children >> idea of 'giving back'. The Chris Igoe/ Mark Zupan storyline adds a more poignant element.

FILM LANGUAGE

As well as any filmic codes mentioned previously...

There are **close ups of the machines**, especially the battered wheels, and nuts and bolts. These may be seen as symbols of the men themselves: both are tough and battle-scarred (we also see their scars in close up at times). The emotional scars are not focused on as much.

Close ups of machines – also reinforces traditional notions of men and machines/ technology. There are **references to 'gladiators' and Mad Max**. These men are constructed as warriors.

Close ups of Zupan's tattoos and muscles – he is often shown shirtless. He is intimidating. [He is also articulate and intelligent. Later he is shown with some school children – not scary at all. In the DVD extras we are told that he is an engineer. None of this is emphasised initially.]

Footage of games:

Many aspects are quite conventional for sports films.

Fast paced editing and lots of **camera movement** >> fast and furious – hardly passive, static and lacking mobility (challenging traditional way of thinking) – adrenaline charged, energy and movement. These men are moving!

A lot of focus on crashes – thrill and spills

Loud, aggressive heavy metal **music** (ex-diegetic) >> masculine

There is also **footage of crowd reactions** during the games – **close ups** of faces, **panning** of crowd, Mexican waves. This helps to build up excitement plus it represents disabled sport as entertaining and valuable – worth watching.

Music (ex-diegetic) builds to a crescendo during pivotal moments.

Sometimes there is **silence and slow motion** as clock counts down >> crowd erupts.

Amplified sounds during games (reminded me of Remember the Titans).

Low angle shots to empower players – especially when teams first introduced.

Tracking shots and **zooms** – to emphasise movement

High angle – looking down on the game so we can see the passage of play from the perspective of those in the stands

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We often see the men seated – their height difference is not emphasised. This means our sight line is at **eye level** >> men not disempowered by camera angles etc. One of the only times when they are shown next to others who are standing is at Zupan's reunion.

Settings: it could be argued that there are two main settings – the hospital and the sporting arena/ stadiums/ courts. It is the journey from one to the other that shows the journey these men go on. The hospital shows the disabled men as needing care and help (weak, vulnerable and broken). The people around them are worried and in control of the men's lives. In this environment the men aren't powerful at all. In the stadium/ gym/ court, however, the men are empowered – warriors, fast moving, skilful and in control. They are being watched and applauded for their feats – they are centre stage.

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SOME OTHER POINTS:

It is important to remember that like all texts, this documentary is a construction. It was filmed over two years and yet the final film is 85 minutes long. This means that choices have been made >> **selection of detail** (which characters to follow, which interviews and games footage to include, etc) plus it has to be ordered/ **structured** in a way to best achieve its purpose.

We are positioned to think that this **version of reality** is the 'truth'. This is done by including interviews, footage and photos of actual events, filming in a 'fly on the wall' style at times (cinema verite), showing excerpts from other documentaries, repeating the same views/ similar statements by a number of different people, including some 'experts' (coaches, sports commentators), using graphics etc. Although this documentary provides information about the sport of wheelchair rugby, there is no voice over, no presence of an interviewer, and few 'experts' beyond the men themselves.

One of the articles comments that there is not a great deal of reliance on the 'mainstays' of documentary genre ('talking heads', experts); however, this can be seen as making it more (rather than less) convincing – seems less 'constructed' – as the main players are seen as telling their stories with little 'intervention'. However, you must always remember that this is a representation, a version of reality.

It is constructed as a narrative, with a number of different strands/ sub plots. The sport narrative (journey to the Olympics) is the overarching story, with the personal stories of each of the men included. Focusing on fewer players allows us to **engage emotionally** with their individual stories.

As well as reading this film as a sport narrative – journey to the Olympics – it can also be read in terms of other archetypes:

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The **story of Joe Soares** provides us with a narrative which intersects with the journey to the Olympics story. This is '**The American Dream**'. At the beginning Joe is constructed as a traitor to his country. He is labelled Benedict Arnold and is accused of betrayal and a lack of patriotism. This makes him the villain as what could be worse than turning on your own country because you weren't chosen to be part of the team. No matter how much Joe protests he is doing it because he needs to earn a living, this isn't compelling as even his own (Canadian) team says similar things.

After Joe's heart attack, a more sympathetic view of Joe is constructed (see redemption story below). We find out more about Joe's childhood in Portugal. He is pictured next to the US flag and uses the words 'I am living the American Dream'. This helps to rehabilitate Joe in the eyes of an American audience. He is evidence that America rewards hard work and determination – anyone can succeed in America. This represents America positively in terms of how it treats disabled people. It also means subsequent games become less about 'Joe versus the USA'.

REDEMPTION – TRANSFORMATION/ JOURNEY

We like characters who change, especially when they have an epiphany – a moment of realisation and a life changing experience. Joe is represented as having been transformed. This is a 'feel good' story. We see this change and hear of it as well. Before his heart attack, Joe is constructed as being too hard on his son and as not valuing Robert's achievements because they aren't in the sporting arena. He is also constructed as obsessive to the point of putting his team before his wife and family (see the anniversary dinner and Joe's toast). After the heart attack, we hear Joe telling his son he loves him, we see Joe rushing back from a game to see Robert receive an award, we hear Joe boasting proudly (in a good way) of his son's achievements to neighbours, and we are also told that Joe's trophy wall now includes Robert's trophies. Joe's sisters also support the 'transformation' story.

This construction of Joe as a 'villain' is necessary for a number of reasons: to engage and entertain us a story needs heroes and villains for conflict, tension and drama. A sport narrative needs rivalry. A redemption narrative needs transformation. That this is a construction becomes more evident after watching the DVD extras. These reveal Joe as a much kinder man than we have been shown and as mortified by some aspects of his representation in the film.

HEALING and FORGIVENESS - Chris Igoe and Mark Zupan – the trajectory of this relationship provides another narrative to engage the audience. Will they or won't they be reconciled? This is heart warming and adds another strand to the overarching narrative >> **THIS IS NOT JUST ABOUT SPORT; IT'S ABOUT HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS** (as are all good sport narratives). There is guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation.

KEITH'S STORY - this is a **parallel narrative** and serves to make us aware of just how far these men have come. Keith is just beginning his journey.

All of these stories engage us. They involve characters, conflict, relationships, settings, suspense and resolution. We learn about wheelchair rugby and disabilities through stories which entertain us and which are aesthetically pleasing/ satisfying.

These stories also broaden the appeal and thematic concerns of the film: living with a disability, patriotism, loyalty, friendship, loss, fathers and sons, guilt and forgiveness, healing and hope, stereotypes, masculinity etc.

FOR REFLECTION:

After watching the documentary and reading this summary, what do you think the contentions (arguments/ propositions) of this documentary?

What does this text position us to value?