Introduction: The case of Percy Jackson

In 2010, 21st Century Fox released *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*: an action-adventure film aimed at young adults, based on the first of a series of five books by the American author, Rick Riordan. To date, the book series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, has sold over 20 million copies worldwide (Mead 2014), and the film has grossed over $200 million (Box Office Mojo 2010). A sequel to the film, *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters*, was released in 2013, also exceeding $200 million in global receipts (Box Office Mojo 2013). A number of spin-off productions have been created, including a second five-book series, *The Heroes of Olympus*.

The series' plot, inspired by the *Harry Potter* series of novels/films, sees the eponymous Percy, a struggling student from a troubled home in New York, discover that he actually possesses superhuman parentage: his full name is Perseus, and he is the son of the Greek god of the sea, Poseidon. Called by Poseidon and the other gods to undertake a series of quests, the books and films detail Percy's various adventures, alongside several fellow teenage demigods, which culminate with him successfully defending Olympus against a host of invading titans. Percy is offered immortality as reward, but refuses, so that he might stay with his friends on Earth.

In its writing, the series is perhaps unremarkable, and it has encountered little critical attention (cf. Morey and Nelson 2015). It does, however, provide a useful point of entry for examining the representation of dyslexia in popular culture. Originally, the tales were told by Riordan to his son, who has dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as bedtime stories. To let his son know, in Riordan's words, "that being different wasn't a bad thing", Riordan gave Percy dyslexia and ADHD (Riordan 2005). Both are central to Percy's character and reformulated by Riordan into gifts, contrary to common perceptions of dyslexia and ADHD, especially from educational perspectives, as learning difficulties (Rose 2009).

While such educational perspectives have limitations, they are useful in summarising the difficulties experienced by those with dyslexia – leaving aside, for the moment, the question of how best to conceptualise the cause of such difficulties (see below).[1] The definition of the Rose Report (2009, 10), on dyslexia and literacy difficulties, remains the most influential and commonly-cited definition of dyslexia in the UK:

[1] The paper uses 'dyslexic' as adjective, but not noun. This reflects usage by research participants interviewed for the UK Dyslexia Archive (see below).

> Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.

In terms of economic success, the *Percy Jackson* series, across both mediums, is the most notable recent iteration of popular culture to feature a character with dyslexia, and is returned to as a point of reference throughout this paper. But it is not the only such representation. Here, the depiction of dyslexia in Western popular culture broadly is considered, as part of an increasing interest from disability studies with the portrayal of cognitive, as well as physical impairment (Renwick 2016). In this way, the paper builds on recent accounts that have considered the representation of learning difficulties, most commonly autism and Asperger syndrome (e.g. Murray 2006, 2008).

To date, the representation of dyslexia has yet to be considered from a scholarly perspective. This is despite it affecting up to 10% of the population (Snowling 2000), and recent years seeing a marked increase in references to dyslexia in Western popular culture (see below). The example of film and television is emblematic. According to Quotes Database (QuoDB), an online script repository, there were just six references to ‘dyslexia’ in feature films and television series prior to the 1990s. Since 1990, there have been 100, with the annual number of productions referencing dyslexia increasing, on trend, over time. This aligns with greater governmental and societal recognition of dyslexia, with the 1990s conventionally referenced as a watershed period in the US and UK for official recognition (Kirby 2018).

In addition to providing the first account of dyslexia in popular culture, this paper seeks to contribute to disability studies’ ongoing theorisation of popular culture as a key mode of communicating knowledge and understanding of disability (Cheyne 2016). In particular, while reiterating that disability is often underrepresented in popular fora (Ellis 2015a) and/or represented in reductive ways (Allan 2013), the paper seeks to show that representations, illustrated by those of dyslexia, can exist beyond the ethically positive/negative binary (Wilde 2014). In keeping with other, recent analyses in the field, it suggests that while disability studies’ role in critiquing certain portrayals is crucial, conceptual space might also be left for alternative perspectives on representation, and for the ambivalence of the same (Ellis 2015a).

In structure, the paper begins by considering work on the popular culture of disability to date, especially learning difficulties. In then proceeds through three analytical sections, considering the three dominant tropes of dyslexia in popular culture: 1) as a gift, which enables as well as disables the individual; 2) as a functional limitation, often requiring the intervention of an external party – usually a person without dyslexia who is nevertheless depicted as an expert on the topic – to identify and ameliorate its difficulties; and 3) as a joke, usually referenced less as a key plot device, than as an opportunity to elicit humour.

Through these analytical frames, the paper seeks to show that, in the case of dyslexia, popular representations of disability often engage with broader discourses and understandings of disability in complex, sometimes paradoxical ways. Many of these are arguably problematic, but exist nevertheless beyond straightforward conceptions of ethically 'positive' or 'negative'. The paper finishes with a set of conclusions, summarising how dyslexia has been represented in popular culture, and considering future directions for work on/theorisations of the popular culture of learning difficulties.

Disability, dyslexia and popular culture

In 1985, Paul Longmore penned his seminal essay, 'Screening Stereotypes', highlighting the prevalence of disabled characters in Western popular culture, but the narrow range of roles in which they typically appeared. Since then, work on the representational politics of disability has expanded, including accounts of books (e.g. Beckett et al. 2010; Markotić 2016), television (e.g. Cumberbatch and Negrine 1992), film (e.g. Safran 1998; Chivers 2010, 2011; Mogk 2013; Richardson 2016) and the internet (Ellis and Kent 2011; Ellis and Kent 2017), amongst other media (Haller 2010). Much of this research has been led by disability studies, seeking to correct an initial neglect of cultural imagery in disability's production (Ellis 2015a). Such accounts have generally focussed on Anglophone examples, but important work has also been undertaken in international contexts (e.g. Devlieger, 1998; Saito and Ishiyama 2005; Phillips 2012; Atilola and Olayiwola 2013; O'Dell 2015).

Principally, representational accounts have focused on physical (e.g. Gauci and Callus 2015; Boyd 2016), rather than learning disabilities (Renwick 2016), again reflecting disability studies' early foci (Shakespeare 1994; Osteen 2008). In addition to such disciplinary preference, cognitive impairment has been inherently less-visible on-screen than other forms (Murray 2006). Hafferty

and Foster (1994) have differentiated, in the context of representation, between disability-in-action and disability-in-dialogue. In the case of non-physical impairments, their portrayal may be suggested by a character's actions, but only 'confirmed' when either they or another character discursively describes the impairment in question. Because of this, cognitive impairment has attracted less attention in visual media than might otherwise be expected; part of a broader societal disenfranchisement of such disabilities (Collinson and Penketh 2010).

However, work on the representation of cognitive impairment is increasing, appearing in such diverse fields as communication, cultural studies, media studies and psychology, as well as disability studies (Renwick 2016). In recent years, autism, in particular, has been subject to several analyses (Murray 2006, 2008; Conn and Bhugra 2012; Nordahl-Hansen et al. 2018). These have examined the *Rain Man* phenomenon – the point at which representations of autism dramatically proliferated in Western media (Conn and Bhugra 2012) – as well as that film's role in fostering a public impression of autism as synonymous with savantism (Murray 2006). Such representational accounts sit alongside an increasing interest in autism from the humanities/social sciences more broadly, including a series of recent histories, both popular and academic (Nadesan 2005; Feinstein 2010; Waltz 2013; Silberman 2015; Evans 2017).

In this paper, QuoDB, a repository of scripts linked to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) – the world's largest database of film and television content – has been used to identify references to dyslexia in television and film. Through this, the paper highlights the tropes of dyslexia as gift, functional limitation and joke. Traditionally, accounts from the perspective of disability studies have considered what they deem to be negative portrayals of disability, and critiqued these (Mitchell and Snyder 2001). More recently, literature on positive depictions has expanded (e.g. Whittington-Walsh 2002; Schwartz et al. 2010; Rice et al. 2015; O'Dell 2015; Boyd 2016). Through the tropes considered here, however, the paper seeks to show how considerations of popular culture in disability might move beyond this positive/negative ethical binary, reflecting the complexity of dyslexia as a lived phenomenon.

Dyslexia is well-suited to such an approach. Several qualitative studies have traced the plurality of ways in which people with dyslexia produce their dyslexic identities, negotiating the knowledges, practices and representations that construe dyslexia in society. Thompson et al. (2015), for example, have identified three dyslexic identities in research with tertiary students: learning-disabled, differently-abled and societally-disabled. Through these, "some contributors constructed themselves as differently-enabled and celebrated dyslexia-related activities, others

sensed themselves as having a disabled identity imposed upon them" (Thompson et al. 2015). Similarly, Cameron and Billington (2015, 1237), in their work on the construction of dyslexia by the same demographic, have found that students with dyslexia "find ways of managing the way they take on identities as people with certain kinds of abilities and disabilities."

As these examples show, conceptualising the cause of dyslexia is important in the formation of dyslexic identities. As a learning difficulty associated with a cultural product (language), dyslexia is particularly amenable to social constructionist models (Campbell 2011, 2013) – indeed, dyslexia, as either disability or impairment, would not exist without society. At the same time, dyslexic identities do not map neatly onto the Social Model of Disability (SMD), which sees disability as the product of society, rather than the individual (Shakespeare 2013). The notion of dyslexia as a biologically-based difficulty, for example, has been crucial to campaigns for political recognition, frequently led by those with dyslexia themselves (Kirby 2018). Those with dyslexia have often campaigned for, rather than against the dyslexia label – a label shown to be useful in the everyday lives of people with dyslexia (Macdonald 2009a, 2009b, 2012). Thus, representations of dyslexia exceed both the positive/negative ethical binary, and the mapping of this binary onto the SMD's distinction between progressive (social)/regressive (medical) understandings of disability.

To better capture dyslexia's complexity, this paper seeks to situate the representation of dyslexia on-screen within broader understandings of dyslexia, including those of the dyslexia community. For example, the trope of dyslexia as a gift/beneficial way of thinking, as exemplified by *Percy Jackson*, is a discourse that has a particular history, most often traced to the work of Norman Geschwind (1982), Ron Davis (1994), and most recently Malcom Gladwell (2013). Within the dyslexia community, this notion has been used as a tool of empowerment by some, but resisted by others who suggest that it occludes the societally-imposed difficulties faced by people with dyslexia and/or query its diagnostic veracity. Similarly, notions of dyslexia as a limitation or joke have been referenced not only by those critical of dyslexia's existence, but also by people with dyslexia and those who have campaigned for dyslexic rights (see below). What differs between the two groups is not the employment of the tropes themselves, but their interpretation, framing and mobilisation.

With reference to the representation of dyslexia, this makes it key to think in more nuanced ways about how such representation functions: to better understand what Cresswell (2012, 100) has called "how representation *works* in and with the world". To do this, and to ensure the inclusion

of the dyslexic voice, this paper draws from a collection of oral histories at the UK Dyslexia Archive, based at the University of Oxford. There, a series interviews have been conducted with people from across the dyslexia community, considering their everyday experience of dyslexia and their views on the discursive construction of dyslexia as a disability.[2] In particular, the paper considers the opinions of interviewees with dyslexia on the three tropes considered here. Using these, it seeks to offer a nuanced account of the ways in which dyslexia has been represented in popular culture.

'The learning-disabled hero': The ambiguities of dyslexia as gift

In 2005, Rick Riordan authored a short article to accompany the release of his first novel to feature Percy Jackson, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. Entitled 'The Learning-Disabled Hero', he described his inspiration for giving the character dyslexia and ADHD. After a difficult parents' evening, "listening to the teacher catalogue my child's deficiencies [*sic*] in class," "I took my son to the psychologist. His teacher had recommended testing. Well… not just testing, a full 'psycho-educational battery'" (Riordan 2005). After the tests identified dyslexia and ADHD, Riordan (2005) decided that he would create a character to reframe such learning difficulties as strengths: "I thought about Haley's struggle with ADHD and dyslexia. I imagined the faces of all the students I'd taught who had these same conditions. I felt the need to honor them, to let them know that being different wasn't a bad thing. Intelligence wasn't always measurable with a piece of paper and a number two pencil."

Given this, dyslexia is referenced in almost every book of the initial *Percy Jackson* series and its spin-off, *The Heroes of Olympus* (Riordan 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). It is first mentioned in chapter one of book one, in an interaction with Percy's favourite teacher, revealing the difficulties Percy is facing in school: "Mr Brunner expected me to be as good as everybody else, despite the fact I have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder and I had never made above a C- in my life… I just couldn't learn all those names and facts, much less spell them correctly" (Riordan 2005, 7). Four pages later, Percy's ADHD is described: "I have moments like that a lot, when my brain falls asleep or something, and the next thing I know I've missed something as if a puzzle piece fell out of the universe and left me staring at the blank space behind it. The school counsellor told me this this was part of the ADHD, my brain

[2] All interviews were conducted by the author between 2016 and 2018. Pseudonyms have been used.

misinterpreting things" (Riordan 2005, 11). Percy, then, is an outsider within the educational system – a sentiment frequently expressed by pupils with dyslexia (Cameron 2016).

Later, as Percy begins to interact more with the world of Greek mythology, transposed to contemporary America, both Percy's dyslexia and ADHD are recast as gifts. In an interaction with a fellow student, Annabeth, at his new school for demigods, Percy is told that dyslexia and ADHD are marks of his godly lineage, and his difficulties in conventional education to be expected: "The letters float off the page when you read, right?" Annabeth says. "That's because your mind is hardwired for Ancient Greek. And the ADHD – you're impulsive, can't sit still in the classroom. That's your battlefield reflexes." (In the film, this explanation is visualised by letters floating across a blackboard.) As for Percy's attention problems, "that's because you see too much, Percy, not too little. Your senses are better than a regular mortal's. Of course the teachers want you medicated. Most of them are monsters. They don't want you seeing them for what they are" (Riordan 2005, 87-88). Dyslexia as gift is referenced briefly elsewhere in popular culture (e.g. *Mean Creek* [2004]), but *Percy Jackson* is the most concerted engagement.

The notion of dyslexia as a beneficial way of thinking has a particular history in the West. The first suggestion that dyslexia might be associated with specific talents/abilities is conventionally traced to the neurologist, Norman Geschwind (1982). Following his work, such arguments have been furthered in the popular sphere by Ron Davis in *The Gift of Dyslexia* (1994), and Malcolm Gladwell in *David and Goliath* (2013), who posits its association with lateral thinking. For those with dyslexia, engagement with the trope exists along a spectrum. For some, dyslexia and creativity align to such an extent that to be non-dyslexic is deemed disabling (Gardner 2013). For others, dyslexic thinking is seen to convey advantages, but an awareness is retained of how dyslexia can often disable, not least because society requires certain levels of literacy and because support from educational authorities and others often varies in quality and accessibility (Dale and Taylor 2001).

In interviews conducted for the UK Dyslexia Archive, focusing on the trope of giftedness, similar sentiments are expressed. Typically, these acknowledge the difficulties faced in certain areas associated with literacy, but also the potential benefits of having dyslexia. For Josephine, an actress in her 80s, "you [the person with dyslexia] are born with other gifts, you may see things in a different way"; for Stephanie, a student in her early 20s, "it [dyslexia] has benefited me in so many different ways, it's helped me to be a creative person"; for Nicola, a dyslexia rights campaigner in her 50s, "having a brain that [is] different [has] its disadvantages, but it also

potentially [has] advantages". With respect to the *Percy Jackson* series, in particular, there is evidence that dyslexic viewers have found its association of dyslexia and giftedness empowering (Williams 2010; Commander Ben 2012).

In locating the cause of this giftedness, the *Percy Jackson* series is ambivalent: Percy's dyslexia is rooted in both medical and social models of disability. In the quotes above, Percy's dyslexia and ADHD are diagnosed/interpreted for him by an educational/psychological authority figure – his teacher and school counsellor, respectively – leading him to state that "my brain falls asleep" and that "my brain [is] misinterpreting things". The role of such authority figures in placing responsibility for disability on the person with the impairment has been highlighted previously (Donoghue 2003). Upon Percy discovering that such conditions might also be gifts, similar models are still stressed by Annabeth: 'your mind is hardwired for Ancient Greek', 'you're impulsive', and so forth. Rooting disability in the individual is an approach taken throughout the series, for characters with a variety of disabilities, including teachers (Mr Brunner), classmates (Grover), demigods (Hephaestus' children) and the gods themselves (Hephaestus).[3]

With reference to Percy's giftedness, too, there are clearly echoes of what have been called 'supercrip models' of disability, which "turn disability into problems faced by individual people, locate those problems in our bodies, and define those bodies as wrong" (Clare, 359-360). Specifically, as Clare (2001, 360) continues, the supercrip model "frames disability as a challenge to be overcome and disabled people as superheroes just for living our daily lives". In *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, Percy's dyslexia is an aspect of his everyday life, recast as something that makes him (literally) superhuman. Prior to Percy being recognised as a demigod, the limitations of dyslexia belong to him; after being recognised, the gifts of dyslexia are his, too.

At the same time, and conversely, the series draws attention to the social factors that structure disability. As mentioned, Percy's dyslexia manifests differently in different languages: Ancient Greek is not as disabling as English. While Riordan's reference to dyslexia as a predisposition to Ancient Greek is obviously fiction, it draws attention to the fact that dyslexia does pose various challenges in diverse languages (Landerl, Wimmer and Frith 1997). Moreover, commenting on a shop sign at one point, Percy states: "The neon sign above the gate was impossible for me to read, because if there's anything worse for my dyslexia than regular English, it's red cursive neon

[3] In the original Greek myths, Hephaestus' walking is permanently impaired after he is thrown off Mount Olympus as a baby by his mother, Hera.

English" (Riordan 2005, 171). Similar scenes occur elsewhere in the series and its sequel (e.g. Riordan 2005, 24, 242; 2007, 204; 2008, 3; 2012, 183). While Percy uses the possessive in discussing dyslexia, it is built-design (typography), rather than an inherent limitation of Percy's, that disables.[4]

Thus, in the *Percy Jackson* series the representation of dyslexia as gift is complex – reflecting broader social understandings of dyslexia, albeit often in simplified form. In recasting dyslexia as a beneficial mode of thinking, the series draws from an established discourse which suggests that dyslexia is associated with creativity and giftedness – a discourse pioneered by a small number of writers, and appropriated by people with dyslexia. For some, this discourse has been empowering; for others, it fails to capture the full experience of dyslexia and occludes its societally-imposed difficulties; for still others, it is demonstrably false. Similarly, the underlying reason for dyslexia being enabling/disabling is divided, in the series, between individual and social models of disability. At times, Percy Jackson's dyslexia is rooted in his body, construed as both impaired and the cause of his disablement. Elsewhere, however, the social factors that disable Percy are highlighted, including language, typescript and other societal norms.

'The teachers know how to help': Dyslexia, limitation and remediation

Percy Jackson is one of the few iterations of popular culture to engage with the trope of dyslexia as gift. However, in stressing dyslexia as a check on 'normal' functioning during its early scenes, when Percy resides in New York and attends conventional schools, it also references a more common understanding: dyslexia as functional limitation. More specifically, this is a limitation often overcome, in popular representations, only by the intervention of an external individual: a saviour, often well-educated, who seeks to remediate the difficulties faced by the dyslexic character. As the series states at one point: "The teachers know how to help" (Riordan 2008, 4). In the case of *Percy Jackson*, the saviour is his teacher, Mr Brunner, who identifies Percy's difficulties and, as cited above, expects Percy "to be as good as everybody else, despite the fact I [Percy] have dyslexia" (Riordan 2005, 7).

In the film, *In Her Shoes* (2005), a romantic drama, the dyslexic lead character, Maggie, lives a life of reliance on others, principally male romantic partners and her sister. Narratively, this is at

[4] Typography has been identified as a factor that can disable/enable people with dyslexia, depending on design (see Hillier 2008).

least partly because of her unrecognised reading difficulties, seen to have precluded her from a successful career. Later, she is identified as having dyslexia during voluntary work for an assisted living programme, where she forms an emotional attachment to a visually-impaired professor. Asking her to read for him, Maggie is reticent: “I’m kind of a slow reader.” “Perfect,” replies the professor: “I’m a slow listener.” When she struggles, he asks her why: “What is it, dyslexia?” He then puts her at ease: “Just take your time, Maggie. Listen to the words as you’re about to say them. Nine times out of 10, you’ll hear a mistake coming and you’ll correct it before you make it.” Through further remedial lessons with the professor, Maggie’s literacy skills improve and her relationship with her sister is repaired.

The role of a single, often previously unknown saviour in identifying and seeking to ameliorate a lead character’s dyslexia is seen elsewhere in popular culture, marking some of the earliest engagements with dyslexia. These include a well-educated taxi driver in *The Princess and the Cabbie* (1981); a teacher in *Backwards: The Riddle of Dyslexia* (1984); a social worker in *Love, Mary* (1985). More recently, the trope has been seen in *Pearl Harbor* (2001), wherein a nurse helps a dyslexic pilot pass his military entrance exams, and a lifelong friend assists him whenever reading is required in his everyday life; *A Mind of Her Own* (2006), wherein the lead, discouraged by most in her social network from going to medical school, is nevertheless persuaded by her best friend to attend; and *bAd* (2007), wherein an American fifth-grade student is dismissed by his teacher as lazy, but, after the intervention of his mother, they are able to overcome his reading difficulties together.

Returning to Clare’s (2001, 360) typology, there are echoes here of the ‘charity model’, which “declares disability to be a tragedy, a misfortune, that must be tempered or erased by generous giving.” The notion that a non-disabled saviour is required to ameliorate the difficulties experienced by the disabled person is common in popular culture (Beaumont 2016). At the same time, many of the aforementioned examples depict more reciprocal relationships than this model might suppose: Percy is assisted with his dyslexia by Mr Brunner, and later Percy saves Mr Brunner’s life; Maggie is assisted by her professor, whom she also assists by reading to him; the two friends in *Pearl Harbor*, one of whom has dyslexia, have a mutually-supportive relationship throughout the film. As such, these depictions go beyond the repayment of a ‘debt’ incurred by accepting support. While the focus is on dyslexia, each shows disability to be a complex phenomenon, experienced by people in different ways at different times, often within broader relationships of mutual support.

As a result, the employment of an individual model of disability again goes alongside, in many of these instances, an awareness of the social dimensions of dyslexia. The *Percy Jackson* series, as mentioned, describes some of the ways in which societal structures disable people with dyslexia. *In Her Shoes* shows the difficulties experienced by people who have failed to receive adequate support from conventional education, with a skill that conventional education, and society more broadly, deems paramount. In *The Princess and the Cabbie*, the opening shot pans across a diverse rendering of society – an Afro-Caribbean man, a white 'hippie', a middle-aged woman – all of whom are shown reading magazines/newspapers, highlighting the centrality of literacy to successful functioning in society, but also its arbitrariness: there could be, and indeed are, alternative modes of communication, as the film goes on to show.

The role of a particular individual in identifying dyslexia, communicating its challenges and providing support, is often part of the life experiences of people with dyslexia. The moment of recognition is frequently considered formative and readily recalled.[5] In interviews for the UK Dyslexia Archive, Nicola, a dyslexia rights campaigner, recalls being diagnosed with dyslexia by a psychologist specialising in dyslexia, who later inspired Nicola to see the potential strengths of dyslexic thinking. For John, an aid worker in his late 30s, a "very, very supportive" teacher helped him to understand dyslexia: "I remember it being a relief, in one way or the other, because it explained to me why [literacy-related tasks were challenging]." For others, particular friends or family members, often dyslexic themselves, provided knowledge and support. Such assistance was required given often sceptical and unhelpful teachers, and/or other educational authority figures.

Being labelled, though, is a fraught process, even where it is designed to foster acceptance and recognition. Percy Jackson captures this succinctly: "Being dyslexic is one mark of a demigod, but sometimes I really hate it." (Riordan 2009, 48). His quote reflects the ambivalence expressed toward the label by those with dyslexia. For Nicola, "at the point of diagnosis, there is a phase of emotions that you go through: the anger, there is the acceptance, and then there is the moving forward." For Helen, an events planner in her late 20s, being diagnosed as a student in the 1990s was "a mixture of relief and I was a bit upset". For John, who was also diagnosed in the 1990s, recognition led to specialist schooling: "I remember a lot of excitement, [but] I must have been anxious." For Josephine, an actress, there was a slight psychological benefit in better

[5] The preferred terminology for the point at which dyslexia is recognised varies between individuals. Dale and Taylor (2010) suggest that, for some people with dyslexia, 'diagnosis' is deemed overly-medical; in interviews conducted here, the term 'diagnosis' was used by interviewees.

understanding the difficulties she faced, “but of course it [dyslexia] was just a word I could use”. In other words, the moment of diagnosis is ambiguous: a point in which both difficulties are explained (at least through one [medical] model of understanding) and support becomes more forthcoming, but also an external label of disability is enshrined, beyond the control of the individual affected.

The notion of dyslexia as a functional limit is, perhaps, the most common trope in everyday understandings of dyslexia, where it is widely-referred to as a learning difficulty, as per hegemonic psychological and educational perspectives (see Introduction). In popular culture, this trope is also common, rendered narratively through early challenges faced by a character, whose difficulties are then most frequently ameliorated not by themselves alone, but by the intervention and assistance of a non-dyslexic character. Again, such a trope arguably exceeds the positive/negative binary: given widespread societal and official ignorance of dyslexia, certain individuals (parents, teachers, campaigners) have often been crucial in acquiring dyslexia support. In part, this trope aligns with the ‘charity model’ of disability, framing dyslexia as a misfortune that must be tempered; but in part, the iterations of popular culture discussed in this section show assistance with dyslexia to be one aspect of often reciprocal relationships of support between individuals.

‘Can you make jokes about dyslexics now?’ Dyslexia and humour

Dyslexia as joke is the most common trope in references to dyslexia on the QuoDB database (representing over one quarter of returns), outside of generic statements about dyslexia that fulfil no especial plot device, such as background discussion. In the only meta-reference to dyslexia as joke, a contributor to the British television series, *Have I Got News For You* (2013), asks the fellow panellists: “Can you make jokes about dyslexics now? Is that ok? I don’t know what the rules are anymore.” The array of jokes about dyslexia in popular culture would suggest that, at least as far as the content of jokes goes, there are few rules.

To provide a framework for the categorisation of jokes, this section employs humour theory. Within this, three perspectives remain pre-eminent: “the superiority approach (where humour is deemed to stem from some kind of dominance of others), the incongruity approach (where humour is created by the shock of the contrast), and relief theories (where humour is used to address unconsciously repressed thoughts, leading to the release of laughter in the form of excess

energy)" (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 51). Each of these perspectives is reflected by jokes about dyslexia in popular culture.

In the *Percy Jackson* series, humour about dyslexia is used to signify the superiority of certain characters, in an often self-reflective manner. Thus, in the second book, *Sea of Monsters*, Percy contends that, "As smart as she was, Annabeth was dyslexic, too. We could've been there all night while she tried to spell Cyclops" (Riordan, 2006, 103). Here, the 'we' might normally be considered the non-dyslexic majority, but in this case is reoriented by the fact that Percy is dyslexic himself. Superiority approaches are seen elsewhere in popular culture, including the television series: *Call Me Fitz* (2011), wherein dyslexia is laughed-off as a minor learning difficulty; *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006), wherein an older character states, in reference to dyslexia, 'In my day, you were just stupid'; and *The Simpsons* (2007), wherein dyslexia is mockingly described as a character's 'secret shame'. In these three examples, dyslexia is subordinated through the normative ableist logics of a non-dyslexic character.

Incongruity approaches are also common. Through these, dyslexia is listed next to other disabilities with highly different characteristics: as such, the reference to dyslexia comes as a surprise. In the film *American Psycho* (2000), for example, the misidentification of dyslexia as a virus is used for comedic effect: "By having sex with someone who's infected, then you can catch anything: Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, haemophilia, leukemia, diabetes, dyslexia." "I'm not sure, but I don't think dyslexia is a virus", another character replies. "But who knows? They don't know that." Again, an ableist philosophy of the superiority of certain bodies is present. Elsewhere, the characteristics of dyslexia are altered, again to offer a surprising juxtaposition between dyslexia and something commonly known to be unrelated. In *Scrubs* (2003), a character describes 'stress-induced' dyslexia; in *The Mindy Project* (2014), dyslexia is exacerbated by drinking – the humour being derived from the audience's knowledge that these emotions/actions do not actually affect dyslexia. In *Common Law* (2012), the opposite technique is used. When one character asks: "Is dyslexia hereditary?" Another replies, deadpan: "It's a neurobiological condition that's genetic in origin, yes."

Elsewhere, dyslexia is used as an analogy in jokes, so that a character might explain a particular, unrelated difficulty, with which they have been made to feel self-conscious. In other words, dyslexia serves as a mode for them to interpret disability for non-disabled characters, and to relieve themselves of the burden of this character's ignorance. Thus, in *The Pest* (1997), a character makes reference to their "stuttering dyslexia"; in *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*

(2001), their “dyslexia, only with objects”; in *Felicity* (2002), their “dance dyslexia”; in *Bones* (2009), their “chronological dyslexia”; and in *In the Thick of It* (2012), their “directional dyslexia”. Less frequently, humour is used by a protagonist with dyslexia to explain their difficulties to a character who is unaware of them. Thus, in the television series, *In Living Color* (1991), a character explains their literacy difficulties by stating that, “It’s the tongue of my native land, Dyslexia.”

In seeking to move beyond the positive/negative ethical binary in conceptualising representations of disability, humour would seem one of the more problematic areas. As Wilde (2014) has contended, the positive/negative ethical binary may still be appropriate in approaching particular examples of antagonistic humour (she cites the examples of Bernard Manning and Jim Davidson – two UK-based comedians, famous for jokes directed toward disabled groups, alongside others). In research with dyslexic students, Dale and Taylor (2001) have found that stereotypes perpetuated by comedians, in particular, remain a widespread concern. In part, this may stem from the inherent antagonism of the genre: jokes frequently function by placing one person/group/identity in a subordinate position relative to another. In recent years, debates about the limits to jokes regarding minority groups have been enacted through ‘no-platforming’ policies and related approaches.

A key part of these debates is who has the power to joke, who has the power to laugh, and who has the power to respond. In the interviews of the UK Dyslexia Archive, this is made clear. Nicola, for example, recalls that during the 1980s, when there was little recognition of dyslexia and scepticism from some within the psychology profession, dyslexia was sometimes included in professional psychology presentations as a joke: “It [dyslexia] was a cartoon. The room laughed out loud at the idea [of dyslexia], and they were encouraged to laugh out loud at the idea.” Later, during the early 2000s, when dyslexia was more widely recognised in education, John recalls university professors joking about his entitlement to a laptop: “it was all light-hearted, but half of me [was uncomfortable]”.

Elsewhere, joking can be a method through which people with dyslexia formulate dyslexic identities. Thus, for Helen: “I really, really like reading, even though I always joke that I can’t read!” For Tim Miles, a dyslexia researcher and campaigner for dyslexic rights, “I have noticed over the years that those families where the dyslexia was causing least stress were often those who, in the most sympathetic way, were able to laugh at some of the things which went wrong” – without attributing blame to themselves (Miles and Miles 1999, 164). At a broader scale, Lockyer

(2015) has highlighted the ways that comedy about disability can be used to renegotiate hegemonic understandings of disability, especially when the perspective of those with the disability in question is reflected (and see Wilde 2018).

In the *Percy Jackson* series, humour is used to foster in-group solidarity, with Percy mocking Annabeth for her dyslexia – 'We could've been there all night while she tried to spell Cyclops" – but from the perspective of another, sympathetic dyslexic character. In *Common Law* (2012), the deadpan response to the question of whether dyslexia runs in families – "It's a neurological condition that's genetic in origin, yes" – elicits humour at the expense of dyslexia, but also references a biological understanding of the condition that, as mentioned, has been key to campaigns for societal recognition, led by individuals with dyslexia themselves. In this way, references to 'dance dyslexia' (*Felicity*, 2002), 'chronological dyslexia' (*Bones*, 2009), 'directional dyslexia' (*In the Thick of It*, 2012), too, might be situated not only with problematic stereotypes, but also the achievements of a dyslexia lobby that has made dyslexia widely-recognised across society.

Like the other tropes considered in this paper, therefore, dyslexia as joke cannot straightforwardly be reduced to a positive/negative ethical framework. Rather, dyslexia humour is complex – understood and mobilised in different ways at different times. As this and preceding sections have sought to show, definitive judgements of a representation's moral worth are often reductive – whether depictions are progressive or regressive is, at least in part, a subjective judgement (see Conclusion). In this way, as Wilde (2014, 42) has written, "Remaining within the terms of the negative/positive debate seems to disable us [disabled people] further… The avoidance of some stereotypes… will limit disabled people's' roles and viewing opportunities further. Disabled characters should float freely between stereotypes and multiple roles, interwoven on all narrative roles, just as non-disabled people do. Our place within media narratives should be everywhere".

Conclusion: Beyond the positive/negative ethical binary

This paper has traced three key tropes through which dyslexia has been represented in popular culture, principally television and film: as gift, limitation and joke. In the first, through the *Percy Jackson* series especially, dyslexia is associated with heroism: a potential sign, in fact, of divinity. While exaggerated and arguably exemplifying the 'supercrip model' of disability, the trope also engages with discourses of giftedness and talent that have a particular resonance in dyslexia's social history. For some with dyslexia, such discourses have been empowering; for others, they

occlude the ways in which dyslexia is structured through societal requirements for literacy, and the difficulties, rather than benefits, that these can impose on individual lives. For still others, of course, both perspectives are likely true, or neither.

In the second trope, dyslexia is considered a functional limitation, and often one to be ameliorated through the intervention of a non-dyslexic character, who nevertheless has extensive knowledge of dyslexia. Again, while some representations root such limitation in the body of the individual, others highlight how dyslexia is necessarily mediated through societal structures and conventions, most obviously society's general requirement for literacy (as above), but also the enabling/disabling potential of typography and built-design, amongst other factors. Some representations, including the *Percy Jackson* series, portray disability through both models. In this way, they echo Macdonald's (2009a, 273) conceptualisation of dyslexia as "both a social construct and a medical condition".

In the third trope, dyslexia is construed as joke. Through three paradigms of humour theory – superiority, incongruity and relief – dyslexia is rendered a subject for laughter. The inherent antagonism of this genre would seem to lend itself to the positive/negative framework critiqued here. While careful to retain the ability of theorists to critique representations, though, this section also seeks to open-up possibilities for other readings of such humour. As with the preceding tropes, dyslexia humour cannot be understood solely through the relationship of author and representation. Rather, it can be contextualised, too, with dyslexia's broader history, including the successful campaign for dyslexia's societal recognition that has made much dyslexia humour possible, and the place of certain forms of humour in constituting dyslexic identities.

To return to the paper's initial objectives, it has sought to: first, add to the emerging corpus of work within disability studies on the representation of cognitive difference; and second, consider the continuing efficacy of the morally positive/negative binary that has marked much of the work on disability and popular culture. The example of dyslexia shows that representations often exceed this binary, engaging with the history and cultures of disability in intricate ways; and reflecting, to varying degrees, the spectrum of dyslexic experience and dyslexia's social history. The sophistication of such engagement varies – both between representations of different disabilities, and within representations of particular disabilities – but is almost always present.

Here, to capture this complexity, the paper has sought to contextualise representation "in and with the world" (Cresswell 2012, 100). To do this, the popular culture of dyslexia has been emplaced

within broader discourses and understandings of the condition. In particular, it has sought to acknowledge the dyslexic voice, using a collection of interviews in the UK Dyslexia Archive, based at the University of Oxford. Repositories housing the views and beliefs of people with disabilities are too few, but there are indications that they are increasing in number (White 2012). More than ever, this makes it possible to supplement author-centric analyses, and to better engage with how disabled communities interpret particular tropes of disability, as proffered in popular culture and elsewhere.

Through such approaches, accounts of the representation of disability might better capture their inconsistencies, idiosyncrasies and slippages. Whether depictions are progressive or regressive is, at least in part, a subjective judgement. (The representation of disability in one particular film, for example, *The Elephant Man*, has been considered both progressive and regressive – by two authors writing in the same journal, from ostensibly the same epistemological perspective [Darke 1994; Boyd 2016]. Both make a convincing case – what is less clear, though, is how, in forming such definitive judgements on representations, theoretical models of the popular culture of disability might be moved forward.) The ability to critique representations deemed problematic must be retained, but without some concession to the fact that representations may exceed conceptual limits, the danger, as Wilde (2014) has stated, is that representational analysis of disability will remain in a conceptual impasse.

Following this, the limits of this paper might be stated. While the three tropes discussed here summarise how dyslexia has been rendered across the broad range of principally Western popular culture, there will be representations that are not fully captured by this necessarily typological approach. (In *Jonny Mnemonic* [1995], for example, perhaps the only science-fiction film to discuss dyslexia, reference is made to a technological cure: a trope common across science-fiction, but not depictions of dyslexia [Allan 2013]). As Mitchell and Snyder (2001) have noted, all critical work serves to channel iterations of popular culture into a limited set of representational possibilities. Categorical accounts of popular culture should be recalled as just that: categorisations. The experiences of people with disabilities exceed their representation in popular culture, and, while we might be able to refine our theoretical tools, they exceed accounts of such representation, too.

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