

Do You See What I See?

Netflix's *Bird Box* has been a fan favorite for its thrilling and unique plot; however, it still does not escape careful analysis by society's critical eye. *Bird Box* involves the depiction of a human experience that often captures the curiosity of many but also easily goes unseen: blindness. In the movie, an apocalyptic creature is roaming the world, and if you see it with your own eyes, it will cause you to go blind and commit suicide. For this reason, many characters in the film lose their sight either voluntarily and temporarily or permanently.

The film has been critiqued because most, if not all, of the actors depicting blindness and visual impairment are not actually visually impaired in real life. Films and shows with blind characters are often criticized because of the misrepresentation of what it's like to live life in the real world as a blind person. There are many common misconceptions about blindness. Many people who are blind or visually impaired still have the ability to watch TV, interpret body language, drive, or perform other tasks that fully sighted people may not expect or understand. Blindness is not "all or nothing"--different blind people have different visual capabilities. It is important to keep in mind that the term 'legally blind' is not necessarily the most appropriate means of differentiating sight experiences. Worries about inaccurate portrayal can be mitigated by working with accessibility consultants during production. However, some people argue that even if additional measures are taken on a set, casting an able-bodied character with a disability inevitably perpetuates the existing exclusion of visually impaired actors in the film and TV industries. There are similar concerns about the portrayal of racial and gender minorities by actors that do not have those identities. For example, *Ghost in the Shell* was criticized for casting Scarlett Johansson (a white woman) instead of an Asian actress and *The Danish Girl* was criticized for casting Eddie Redmayne (a cisgender man) instead of a trans woman.

Also arising from the popularity of *Bird Box* was the 'Bird Box Challenge', where fans would attempt to do basic everyday activities with a blindfold on. This led to some dangerous situations, but even seemingly benign versions can have negative outcomes--disability activists have criticized this type of role-play because it treats disability like a game and inaccurately portrays the experience of being disabled. A sighted individual can never truly understand the experience of living life without sight, therefore, this experience can become easily misrepresented, and the potential to deliver an effective example of the diverse range of visual impairment experiences (to a majority-sighted audience) can be limited.

Others would say that the very purpose of acting is to employ the ability to portray someone other than oneself. The general awareness of a certain identity that a film or show generates, particularly if that piece of work becomes extremely popular, might be an important gateway to diving into deeper issues that can be explored outside of the entertainment industry. Even some visually impaired viewers describe *Bird Box* as an entertaining experience that they enjoyed. Many controversial decisions in screen-acting that are identified by some as damaging and demeaning to the disability community (such as consistently being portrayed as helpless, supernatural, or inspirational) are interpreted by others as an important means of generating empathy for a commonly overshadowed life challenge.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is the representation of identity in film and TV morally important? How should such representation be accomplished?
2. Who has the right to portray whom in a movie or TV show? Are there differences between cases concerning disability, race, gender, etc., on this score?
3. In what ways does our own entertainment and pleasure conflict with the ways that we understand our own identities?

