

For Film Critics

“Critics are, themselves, creators of art. It’s an art that’s usually funneled through the medium of **journalism**, but **criticism** is still fundamentally an art form. **Criticism** is about expanding a work of art, making it part of a cultural **conversation and discourse**. It gives it air. It opens it up for the reader to have an experience with it. This is why criticism needs to be diverse. Critics try to read a film through the **lens of their own unique experience**, and that gives life to the work of art. Even when we all sit in the same movie theater, we all watch a different work of art. **Adding those perspectives to the chorus can only enrich and expand the movie.**”¹⁹

Alissa Wilkinson, Writer



Image Description: Nicole Newnham and Jim LeBrecht are in front of a purple press wall. The hand of a white person holds a microphone out in front of Jim.

Film criticism is a crucial contributor to representation and **equity in society**, and a skilled writer will inform themselves about **authentic** portrayals of disability, recognise misconceptions and tropes, and take steps to **avoid ableist language and interpretations** of films (tools for this included below).

If authentic films are made by authentic voices but on release only reviewed by writers with no insight into that authenticity, then they are immediately disadvantaged in the **crucial independent cinema pipeline** that leads directly from enthusiastic festival reviews to sales and distribution deals to awards to 'success'. The nuance and artistry of narratives that avoid the **pervasive misrepresentations** of disability that have dominated culture for decades (e.g. **'inspiration porn', 'disability as tragedy'**) can be invisible to critics if the **lens** they are viewing through is an ableist one.

If critics themselves have an unconscious bias against disability, harmful stereotypes will not only be reinforced but promoted. It is essential that writers **assess their own lens**, experiences and beliefs that may lead them to unconsciously **devalue** disabled lives. It is necessary for critics to keep in mind that, even in the case that a film is made by a disabled person, about disability, ableism can be so **pervasive and internalised** that disabled-led films also need to be held accountable for perpetuating stereotypes in storytelling. Critics must devote the **same attention** to ableism as they do other forms of discrimination in cinema and TV, and invest time in exploring **intersectionality** and the multiple forms of discrimination enacted upon D/deaf or disabled people who also occupy other marginalised identities. A crucial tool for any of us to understand our ableism (including, for disabled people, our internalised ableism) is understanding the **social model of disability**. In addition, we all benefit from reading the work of **disabled film critics** (some identified below), actively identifying tropes and stereotypes in media (See Glossary), and reflecting upon whether a film values disabled bodies as equal to non-disabled bodies.

To help **broaden the lens**, useful resources for writers include:

The [American Psychological Association's Style Guide](#) to inform journalists writing about disability.

The [Journalist's Toolbox: Writing about people with disabilities](#)

The [Journalist's Resource: 4 key tips for reporting on and writing about people with disabilities](#)

“I think for some reason, there’s still a kind of **nervousness among critics to think about **disability**. For some reason, they don’t have the **language**, or they feel they don’t have the language. And it’s something that they still treat with a hands-off sort of ‘put that over there’ attitude that doesn’t really lend itself to actual **conversation and discussion**. And this relates to how they actually see movies with disabled characters and think about them. This might explain why you still see terms like ‘**wheelchair bound**’ or ‘crazy’ or things like this still creeping into people’s language.”**

Film critic Angelo Muredda, interviewed by writer and activist Alice Wong ²⁰

“I think that’s because a lot of the things that I see as tropes and that other [disabled] people see as tropes haven’t really been identified. **Most people know what racism in movies looks like. They know what misogyny in movies looks like. They can disagree with those assessments, but they know it when they see it. **Most people don’t know ableism in movies.**”**

Film critic Kristen Lopez, interviewed by writer and activist Alice Wong ²¹

We commend the Sundance Film Festival for its [Press Inclusion Initiative](#). Described as an “effort to cultivate a **more representative press corps** at the Sundance Film Festivals by providing top-tier **access** to freelance critics from underrepresented communities,” it has been supported by Critical Minded, Netflix, Open Society Foundations, and Rotten Tomatoes, and places “an emphasis on people of colour, women, and people with disabilities.” In addition to providing support in navigating accreditation, attendance and reporting, Sundance is providing grants to defray travel and lodging costs.

At 2020’s festival, the initiative supported 51 critics’ access to the event: “61% women, 84% people of colour (including 51% women of colour), and 49% LGBTQ+ people. 25% of successful candidates are people with a disability.” ²²

We also applaud the [London Film Festival Critics Mentorship Programme](#) and encourage it to include disability in its intersectional work going forward. We encourage other festivals and exhibitors to be similarly **proactive** in **supporting** and **developing** D/deaf and disabled professional critics and to interrogate the **lens of ableism** that is often applied by non-disabled writers when writing about D/deaf and disabled stories and characters. We also urge press outlets to **hire** D/deaf and disabled critics to write about **all films, not just those with a D/deafness or disability connection.**

“If shame around disability—what we reveal when we refuse to look, to witness, to surrender the **illusion of sameness, or to accept that **disability justice** is not a matter of **individual overcoming**—is in fact the enemy of the story, then recognising our own role as critics in perpetuating that shame can only help us tell better ones. I hope we can eventually move beyond these patterns in order to afford stories about disability, and those by disabled creators, the kind of **critical weight** and **complexity** they **deserve.**”**

Laura Dorwart, Writer