

Crippling the Screen: Reframing Temporality in Media Narratives Through the Lens of Crip Time

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Abstract: This study explores disability theory of time—an important concept emerging from the field of disability research—and advocates for disrupting the normative framework to reconstruct the cognition of time—and to reconstruct the form of contemporary film and television narratives. Traditional film and television narratives often follow linear temporal logic, emphasizing the achievement of goals and the resolution of contradictions. This model tends to exclude the disabled experience that cannot be accommodated. By analyzing five film and television works (“Camp for the Disabled,” “Special,” “Peanut Butter Falcon,” “Casual,” and “Diddy”), this article reveals how discontinuous timelines, open endings, and flexible narrative rhythms challenge established paradigms. Combining text analysis and a mixed-method audience survey (with 152 valid samples), the study focuses on the interactive relationship between image aesthetic strategies and audience feedback. The data show that there are significant differences between disabled and non-disabled audiences in terms of scene resonance, emotional immersion, and narrative satisfaction. The research revealed that time spent with people with disabilities is not only a tool for artistic expression but also a key avenue for reconstructing the creative paradigm. By emphasizing interpersonal relationships, uncertainty, and real-life experiences, it offers new possibilities for breaking the inertia of traditional narratives. This research result expands the cross-disciplinary dimension of media studies and disability theory, advocating for the establishment of a more inclusive temporal narrative system in creative practice.

Keywords: crip time, disability studies, narrative temporality, media aesthetics, audience reception

1. Introduction

The construction of narrative time conceals value judgments—it defines what kind of life is worth recording, what kind of story is worth telling, and what kind of journey is worth presenting. The film and television industry has long followed the linear law of time and prefers narrative models full of ups and downs, with clear objectives and perfect endings. This creative tradition, rooted in the three-act structure of the play, resonates with modern society's thinking of instrumentalizing and improving the efficiency of time, but it pushes the non-standard experience of time to the brink. For patients with chronic illnesses, people with energy fluctuations, or those with neurodiversity, time can be a fragmented, repetitive cycle rather than a straight line that flows smoothly. But on screen, this irregular time disappears or is simplified into a stereotypical model of inspirational rehabilitation.

This article introduces the notion of "disabled time" for critique. This concept originates from the spontaneous survival wisdom of the disabled group. It rejects punctual, efficient, and predictable discipline, and recognizes that rhythmic desaturation, shot interruption, and flexible adjustment are respectable survival strategies. Although academic circles have paid attention to its philosophical and social values, its aesthetic potential as a narrative method in film and television has not been fully exploited [1]. By analyzing the narrative structure and thematic expression of specific film and television cases, combined with audience feedback surveys, the research concluded that disability time not only creates new narrative rhythms but also breaks the cognitive framework of sound centrism, thus paving the way for inclusive narratives. When the camera begins to present a flexible experience of time, the audience's emotional resonance and cognitive limitations also change accordingly.

2. Literature review

2.1. Temporal hegemony in classical narrative structures

Standard film and television narrative is derived from the three-act play structure, and its genes are engraved with the code of Aristotle's theory of drama—events must be connected and characters must transform according to a clear timeline. This standard structure places particular emphasis on the escalation of conflicts and the resolution of crises, which coincides with the dominant value that "time must be used efficiently." The Hollywood industrial system is particularly typical. It compresses time into a strict timetable, and character development must follow the precise rhythm, leaving no room for the slightest deviation. Under such a narrative rule, disabled characters are always portrayed as stumbling blocks that hinder the main plot, either trapped in a static state or represented as problems difficult to overcome. Their experience of time was characterized as abnormal, eliminated through medical miracles, or excluded from the narrative altogether [2]. This type of time control has consolidated dominant society's obsession with efficiency, leaving no room for expression for survival states that require a slow pace, adaptability, or coexistence with chronic illness. When all stories follow a standardized rhythm, not only does it eliminate the possibility of narrative innovation, but it also reinforces capital's logic that "time is a resource," rendering unconventional rhythms of life neither visible nor unimaginable on screen [3].

2.2. Disability and the politics of time

The field of disability research continually deconstructs dominant society's imagination of temporal linearity and universality. Scholars and practitioners emphasize that the lives of people with disabilities always unfold within a different temporal logic—the monitoring cycle, energetic fluctuations, daily care routines, and the uncertainties caused by chronic illnesses all alter their perception of time. The concept of "disability time" has thus developed, rejecting the discipline of punctuality and predictability, and recognizing that stagnation, regression, and dynamic adjustment are all reasonable states of existence. This vision of time places flexibility, support networks, and slowness at the center, values often devalued in societies based on sonic centrism. When time is redefined as a relational and contextualized existence, it not only shakes up the hegemonic position of the physical experience of sound but also opens up new possibilities for artistic creation. However, current film and television research pays insufficient attention to the narrative potential of disabled time [4]. Most existing work focuses on the surface analysis of character images or visual symbols, rarely touching on the temporal texture of story structure. This theoretical gap calls for an interdisciplinary dialogue between media aesthetics and disability justice—when the language of the camera begins to reconstruct the flow, density, and direction of time, it could open up a new narrative dimension that embraces body politics [5].

2.3. Media representations of non-normative temporalities

Some independent films and experimental images have begun to break through the time frame of traditional narratives, but related research has yet to be systematically reviewed. While some segments of series like "Camp for the Disabled," "The Sound of Metal," and the TV series "Special," while attempting to present unconventional experiences of time, are often dismissed as inspiring by critics—people pay more attention to how the characters overcome obstacles than to reconstructing the perception of time itself. These works capture the fragmentation, stagnation, and circulation of time in a valuable way, forming an intertextuality with the life experiences of many people with disabilities. However, creators are often constrained by the market and use standard plots like returning to work and finding love to bridge the time gap. Slow-paced or non-linear narratives often become mere decorations for commercial considerations and must ultimately return to the traditional story model [6]. More importantly, the academic community has yet to establish a rigorous analytical framework for identifying the innovative and compromised nature of these temporal experiments. Without specific tools to assess the narrative of disabled time, even if the creator has good intentions, the work may still fall into the existing narrative rut, instead consolidating the hegemony of time that should have been dismantled.

3. Methodology

3.1. Selection of case studies

This study selects five image samples as objects of analysis, covering different types of disabled protagonists and narratives of times of rupture. The sample selection adopts a targeted strategy, taking into account the diversity of work forms, production contexts, and levels of diffusion. The selected works include: Netflix series "Special" (2019-2021), a semi-autobiographical comedy about a patient with cerebral palsy exploring an independent life; the documentary "Camp for the Disabled" (2020), takes the summer camp for young people with disabilities in the 1970s as a starting point to trace the history of the affirmative action movement [7]. The drama film "Peanut Butter Falcon" (2019) focuses on the awakening journey of a young person with Down syndrome. The second episode of the third season of the anthology series "Casual" (2019) attempts a fragmented temporal narrative [8]. The short film "Diggle" (2017) presents the silent world of people with autism through a poetic structure. The selection criteria include narrative innovation, evaluation by the disabled community, subtitle accessibility, and industry reputation. Each work is examined based on three dimensions: the degree to which it breaks the linear narrative structure, the innovative nature of the conflict resolution model, and alternatives to the suspense-creating mechanism.

3.2. Content analysis criteria

The research team established a framework for image time analysis, integrating the fundamental dimensions of narrative theory and disability time theory. The analysis indicators include: the duration of scenes without dialogue/action (as an observation point for slow pacing), the speed of plot progression (divided into fast, medium, and slow levels based on the frequency of transitions), and the existence of medical timelines (such as rehabilitation progress, treatment duration, and other goal-oriented narratives). At the same time, the characters' reaction patterns (acceptance/anxiety/confusion/resistance) to time dislocation were recorded, as well as the functional positioning of nonlinear narrative techniques such as flashbacks and circular paragraphs. Using the complete scene as the minimum unit of analysis, time nodes were precisely marked using video editing software. All data were imported into NVivo for coding and classification, with a focus on tracking temporal motif recurrence patterns [9]. For the final portion of the story (the last 15% of the

total duration), the focus was on observing the ending choices—whether to return to the social clock (recovery/normalization) or remain in an open state. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, two researchers independently coded 20% of the material, and the reliability coefficient reached 0.89 [10].

3.3. Audience reception survey

To explore audience acceptance of unconventional time narratives, the research team conducted an online questionnaire survey with 152 respondents (41% of whom had disabilities). Recruitment was conducted through multiple channels, such as disability advocacy organizations and academic communities, to ensure sample diversity. Participants were required to watch two experimental clips: a collective protest scene from "Disability Camp" and a dialogue-free daily record clip from "Special," and then complete a mixed-language questionnaire [11]. The quantitative section used a seven-point Likert scale to measure dimensions such as rhythmic perception and emotional immersion. Open-ended questions collected intuitive feelings about the experience of time. Core themes such as "the feeling of dislocation from time" and "the authenticity of empathy" emerged in the feedback text. Some participants with disabilities notably mentioned "seeing the mirror image of their own life rhythm." The study synchronously records data on pause/replay behaviors as a baseline indicator of cognitive engagement [12]. Data analysis was performed using SPSS to process mean values and cross-comparisons, and NVivo was used to facilitate subject grouping, thus establishing a model of association between image time strategies and audience responses.

4. Analysis and results

4.1. Temporal disruption and viewer perception

Video sequences that adopt the narrative of disability time (manifested by long periods of silence, repetitive daily life, or fragmented narratives) trigger cognitive differentiation among the audience group. The data show that 80% of disabled viewers find these scenes real and tangible, while only 36% of non-disabled viewers share the same perception. Nearly half of the latter admitted that the pacing was uncomfortable and they eagerly awaited a clear ending to the story. This cognitive gap reveals the profound influence of life experience on the interpretation of images—people with disabilities are more likely to identify the time code on screen [13]. Table 1 clearly presents the gap in evaluation between the two groups of audiences. Interestingly, respondents dedicated to art or education (whether they have a disability or not) showed greater acceptance of unconventional narratives, suggesting that experience with artwork can mitigate rigid perceptions of time stereotypes.

Table 1: Viewer perception

Viewer Group	Found Scenes Relatable (%)	Desired Narrative Closure (%)
Disabled	82	15
Non-Disabled	36	47

4.2. Resistance to normative narrative arcs

Of the five research samples, the special collections "Disabled Camp" and "Uninhibited" displayed the most distinct rebellious stances. These two works reject the standard formula for ending a story and instead adopt a blank treatment, keeping the characters in a state of continuous adaptation. The questionnaire data shows that 76% of listeners can recognize this narrative deviation, but only 39% consider it intentional on the part of the creator, and the remaining 61% believe it is a manifestation of "the story not being finished" or "logical confusion." [14] The distribution of comments in Table 2 confirms the general public's obsession with the degree of closure in the story—they expect a clear

arc of growth, and the narrative of the disabled period aims precisely to loosen this expectation. This creative direction essentially invites the audience to experience a different ethic of time: not to pursue dramatic turning points and ultimate answers, but to cherish the continued presence of relational growth.

Table 2: Narrative arc interpretation

Viewer Group	Recognized Arc (%)	Non-Normative	Appreciated Choice (%)	Artistic	Viewed as Incomplete (%)
All Respondents	76		39		61

4.3. Narrative empathy and emotional resonance

Video sequences depicting daily care procedures, adaptation to barrier-free environments, or psychological fluctuations trigger emotional tremors among the audience. Audiences with disabilities frequently used descriptive words such as “true,” “quenching thirst,” and “being seen” in the open-ended questionnaire. Non-disabled audiences gave polarized reactions: some complained about the “slow” pace, while others felt that these segments “broke down cognitive barriers.” This cognitive gap reveals that the narrative of disabled time serves a dual purpose: it is not only an artistic technique but also a calibrator of social cognition. The data confirm this effect: the empathy index of audiences exposed to the narrative of disabled time increased by an average of 23%. The comparative data in Table 3 demonstrate the differences in emotional transmission across time periods. These results suggest that when the camera begins to faithfully record unconventional rhythms of life, the audience's emotional coordinate system may change accordingly.

Table 3: Empathy scores

Scene Type	Average Empathy Score (out of 10)
Crip Time	8.2
Conventional	6.5

5. Conclusion

Research has confirmed that disability time has a dual innovative value: it is not only an analytical tool, but also a creative lens. From independent documentaries to streaming television series, flexible narratives within cases have undermined the narrative hegemony that prioritizes efficiency and linear development, and have instead embraced loops, blank spaces, and fragmentation. Not only do these choices reflect the reality of the disabled community's survival, but they also relax stereotypical audience expectations of the story's format.

Audience feedback data tears open a cognitive fissure: disabled audiences find emotional anchors in the mirror narrative, while the non-disabled group experiences a struggle between confusion and empathy. This cognitive tension precisely confirms that the disability time narrative is not only a formal innovation, but also a social practice that breaks cognitive inertia.

This research gives new impetus to the intersection of media studies and disability theory. In the future, the possibility of intertextual interaction between disabled time and queer time, postcolonial time, and other diverse temporal concepts can be explored, or verification can be carried out at practical levels such as screenwriting and editing logic. When the film and television industry is obsessed with the spectacle of speed, disabled time offers not a formula for solving problems, but a pause button: it allows us to see these life narratives that flow at different paces but are equally rich.

Contribution

Xun Zhang and Zhihan Ren contributed equally to this paper.

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