

**Walking through Illness and Disability: A Hallian Approach of Representation,
Production, and Reception of Alzheimer's in *Still Alice***

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Abstract

Representation of illness and disability in cinema is a highly debated and complex topic. Nuanced and respectful portrayal of illness in films can create awareness, empathy, and support for those affected contributing to broader conversations and discourses about illness and disability in society. Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture is an important theoretical framework that enables analyzing how representations in popular cultures like films, media, TV shows and literature shape and reflect societal understandings of issues like illness and disability. Hall's theory comprises of five interconnected components such as, representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation in analyzing cultural artifacts like films and decoding their complex meanings. This research paper aims to analyze Richard Glatzer's movie *Still Alice* – a poignant film that explores the life of Dr. Alice Howland, a renowned linguistics professor diagnosed with early – onset Alzheimer's disease - using Hall's Circuit of Culture. The paper also highlights how a film's representation, production and reception can contribute to the destigmatization of a progressive and degenerative disease like Alzheimer's and the disability connected to it and foster empathy within the society.

Keywords: Illness, disability, Alzheimer's, films, representation, etc.

Introduction

Representation of illness and disability in cinema is a complex and contested terrain. Films, as cultural texts, wield the power to influence public perceptions, creating awareness and fostering empathy while also shaping societal discourses surrounding illness and disability. They serve as both mirrors and shapers of culture, reflecting existing beliefs and contributing to the redefinition of social norms. In this context, the portrayal of illness and disability in films becomes a critical site for understanding how societal attitudes are constructed, negotiated, and transformed. Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture provides a comprehensive framework to analyze cultural artifacts like films. This model emphasizes five interconnected moments—representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation—that together shape the cultural meaning of a text. By focusing on these dimensions, the Circuit of Culture allows for a nuanced examination of how cultural meanings are created, contested, and disseminated.

This paper applies Hall's model to Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland's *Still Alice* (2014), a poignant film that tells the story of Alice Howland, a linguistics professor diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. The film stands out not only for its sensitive portrayal of Alzheimer's but also for its exploration of the associated cognitive and emotional challenges faced by individuals and their families. Through an analysis of the film's representation, production, and reception, this study seeks to unpack the cultural significance of *Still Alice*. It explores how the film portrays Alzheimer's disease and disability, the creative and commercial choices behind its production, and the ways in which audiences have received and interpreted the film. In doing so, the paper argues that *Still Alice* contributes to the destigmatization of progressive illnesses by fostering empathy and challenging reductive stereotypes. The study also

underscores the importance of critically examining such representations in a media landscape where depictions of illness and disability often risk being either overly sentimentalized or dehumanized. By offering a layered narrative that humanizes Alzheimer's patients and portrays the complexities of their lived experiences, *Still Alice* stands as a significant cultural artifact that invites audiences to reflect on the realities of progressive illnesses and the broader societal attitudes toward disability.

Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture

Stuart Hall's Circuit of Culture offers a dynamic and interconnected framework for understanding how cultural meanings are created, circulated, and negotiated within society. This model comprises five interrelated components—representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation—each of which plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural significance of an artifact. By examining the relationships between these components, the Circuit of Culture provides a holistic approach to decoding how cultural texts, such as films, function as sites of meaning-making within broader social and cultural contexts.

Representation lies at the core of Hall's framework, addressing the ways in which meanings are constructed through language, symbols, and imagery. It is through representation that ideas, values, and ideologies are communicated, often reflecting and reinforcing power structures within society. In the context of illness and disability, representation becomes particularly critical, as it shapes how these experiences are understood, normalized, or stigmatized. Films, as visual and narrative mediums, play a significant role in representing illness and disability, influencing societal perceptions and attitudes through the stories they tell and the images they portray. Identity, another key dimension, focuses on the cultural meanings assigned

to individuals or groups and how these meanings influence self-perception and societal recognition. In films, the portrayal of characters with illnesses or disabilities contributes to shaping collective understandings of identity, often reflecting or challenging dominant cultural narratives. For instance, characters with Alzheimer's disease, such as Alice Howland in *Still Alice*, may embody broader societal fears, hopes, and misconceptions about aging, cognitive decline, and disability, prompting viewers to rethink their own assumptions.

Production examines the processes, motivations, and power dynamics behind the creation of cultural artifacts. This dimension delves into the economic, creative, and social factors that influence how a film is conceived, scripted, directed, and marketed. In the case of *Still Alice*, the personal connection of one of its directors, Richard Glatzer, to a progressive illness Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) underscores how production choices are often informed by lived experiences, lending authenticity and depth to the portrayal of illness. Additionally, production choices, such as casting Julianne Moore in the lead role, the film's visual style, and its narrative structure, shape the way Alzheimer's disease is depicted and understood by audiences.

Consumption, or reception, explores how audiences engage with and interpret cultural texts. Viewer interpretations are influenced by personal experiences, cultural contexts, and existing societal discourses. The reception of *Still Alice*—from critical acclaim to audience empathy—reveals the ways in which the film resonated with diverse viewers, sparking conversations about the realities of Alzheimer's disease, the challenges faced by caregivers, and the need for greater awareness and support for those living with such conditions.

Finally, regulation addresses the role of norms, policies, and societal expectations in shaping cultural production and consumption. This dimension considers how cultural texts are

framed within broader regulatory frameworks, including industry standards, censorship, and societal values. In the case of films depicting illness and disability, regulation might include ethical considerations about representation, the avoidance of harmful stereotypes, and the adherence to cultural sensitivities. For example, *Still Alice* avoids sensationalizing Alzheimer's, opting instead for a respectful and realistic portrayal that aligns with evolving societal attitudes toward progressive illnesses. By considering these five interconnected components, Hall's Circuit of Culture provides a robust lens through which to analyze the representation of illness and disability in films. It allows us to move beyond surface-level interpretations and critically engage with the cultural, social, and ideological implications of cinematic portrayals. In the case of *Still Alice*, this framework illuminates the film's role in mediating societal understandings of Alzheimer's disease, highlighting its contribution to empathy-building and the broader destigmatization of progressive illnesses.

Representation: Portrayals of Alzheimer's

In *Still Alice*, the representation of Alzheimer's disease is both poignant and nuanced. The protagonist, Dr. Alice Howland, is a renowned linguistics professor whose diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's disrupts her personal and professional life. The film's depiction of her cognitive decline is rooted in authenticity, avoiding sensationalism. For example, the scene where Alice forgets her way home while jogging highlights her vulnerability while preserving her dignity. Another moving scene occurs when Alice struggles to deliver a lecture, losing her train of thought mid-sentence. These moments encapsulate the gradual loss of identity central to Alzheimer's, illustrating what Hall describes as "the way meaning is given to the things depicted" (Hall 15). The film's representation of family dynamics, particularly between Alice and her daughter Lydia, adds another layer of complexity. Lydia's decision to prioritize care

giving over her acting career reflects the profound ways illness reshapes relationships. As Zeilig observes, “Artistic depictions of dementia are most powerful when they delve into its relational aspects” (260). The evolving bond between Alice and Lydia exemplifies the emotional labour and resilience that care giving demands.

Production: Crafting a Respectful Narrative

The production of *Still Alice* was deeply informed by the personal experiences of its directors, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland. Glatzer himself was battling ALS during the film’s making, which brought a unique sensitivity to the storytelling. As Westmoreland noted in an interview, “Our goal was to create a film that was authentic and respectful, a tribute to those living with Alzheimer’s” (Smith 78). This intent is reflected in the meticulous research undertaken to portray the disease accurately, including consultations with neurologists and individuals living with Alzheimer’s. Hall’s concept of production emphasizes the interplay between cultural and economic factors in shaping a text. Despite its modest budget, *Still Alice* garnered critical acclaim, demonstrating that films addressing serious issues can resonate widely. Julianne Moore’s Academy Award-winning performance as Alice further underscores the film’s impact, with critics praising her for capturing the “exquisite complexity of living with Alzheimer’s” (Jones 102). Moore’s nuanced portrayal captures Alice’s simultaneous fear, determination, and vulnerability, particularly in scenes such as when she confesses her diagnosis to her husband or when she bravely acknowledges her cognitive decline in front of an audience. The decision to focus on early-onset Alzheimer’s also distinguishes the film. As McGowan observes, “The rarity of early-onset cases adds urgency to the narrative, compelling audiences to confront the unpredictability and cruelty of the disease” (116). By highlighting Alice’s struggle

to maintain her career and identity, the filmmakers emphasize the profound disruptions caused by Alzheimer's.

Reception: Bridging Empathy and Advocacy

The reception of *Still Alice* highlights its role in raising awareness about Alzheimer's disease. Audience reviews and critical responses frequently commend the film for its emotional depth and educational value. As Hall asserts, "Consumption is where meaning is made" (Hall 28). Viewers bring their own experiences and perspectives to the film, shaping its cultural significance. For many, *Still Alice* served as an entry point into understanding Alzheimer's and advocating for greater support for those affected.

One particularly impactful moment in the film is Alice's speech at an Alzheimer's conference. Her words, "I am not suffering. I am struggling," challenge the audience to reconsider the language and stigma often associated with the disease. Scholars like Zeilig have noted that "mainstream media often perpetuate stigmatized views of dementia, portraying individuals as burdens" (Zeilig 258). However, *Still Alice* disrupts this narrative by emphasizing Alice's personhood and agency. The film's emphasis on family dynamics also invites viewers to empathize with caregivers, illustrating the shared burden of progressive illnesses. Such representations can challenge societal prejudices, fostering a more inclusive understanding of disability. In addition to its narrative, *Still Alice* introduced a new shade to cinematic portrayals of illness. As McGowan argues, "The film stands out not only for its focus on Alzheimer's but also for its refusal to reduce the protagonist to her illness, instead showing the richness of her relationships and the ongoing complexity of her life" (114). By portraying Alice's continued

engagement with her family and her profession, the film counters reductive portrayals of illness as a complete erasure of identity.

The film's reception sparked discussions about healthcare policies and the need for greater research funding for Alzheimer's. Advocacy groups such as the Alzheimer's Association reported increased public interest in the disease following the film's release. Critics like Michael Jones argue that the film "bridges the gap between individual experiences of illness and broader societal discourses, encouraging viewers to advocate for systemic change" (104). *Still Alice* also inspired a surge in literature and cinema exploring similar themes, paving the way for more empathetic and refined representations of illness and disability. Furthermore, the film's influence extended beyond its narrative, impacting broader cultural conversations about caregiving, autonomy, and the societal structures surrounding illness. For instance, Lydia's decision to adapt her aspirations in response to her mother's needs underscores the evolving roles of caregivers and the sacrifices they make, prompting viewers to consider the emotional toll of caregiving within families. Such moments highlight how the film not only portrays illness but also delves into its ethical and relational dimensions, enriching its narrative depth.

Conclusion

Still Alice exemplifies how films can serve as powerful tools for representation, education, and empathy. By employing Hall's Circuit of Culture, this paper has analyzed the film's nuanced portrayal of Alzheimer's, its production context, and its reception. Through its respectful and authentic depiction of illness, *Still Alice* contributes to the destigmatization of Alzheimer's and fosters a deeper societal understanding of cognitive disabilities. By showcasing moments of vulnerability, resilience, and relational complexity, the film moves beyond

stereotypes to present a holistic and humanized view of living with Alzheimer's. As cinema continues to shape public discourses, films like *Still Alice* remind us of the potential for art to inspire compassion and social change.

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