

What You See on Screen Shapes How the World Sees You



A resource for people impacted by a burn injury and those with facial differences that discusses stigma and media stereotypes

A burn injury can alter far more than appearance — it can impact pain, mobility, identity, healing, relationships, and daily life. **If you have a facial disfigurement or difference, you may know what it feels like to be stared at, avoided, or treated disrespectfully.** You are not alone. It didn't start with the people around you — it started in movie theaters and on television screens. The way media portrays people with facial differences shapes how others see you, long before they ever meet you.

THE PATTERN YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED

Since the beginning of filmmaking, Hollywood has relied on a scarred face to signal danger, evil, or otherness.¹ A recent analysis of four decades of top-grossing U.S. films found that characters with facial differences were disproportionately portrayed as villains, and their marks tended to be larger and prominently displayed.²

When villains on screen consistently look like you, audiences learn—often unconsciously—to associate facial disfigurement with fear or threat.

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

Media portrayals reinforce stereotypes and have substantial consequences for people with facial disfigurement.¹ When people repeatedly see facial disfigurement linked to evil or menace, they may unconsciously treat real people as if they pose a threat.³

This isn't about being too sensitive. Stereotypes can become learned associations that shape how people interpret others.⁴ Media representation is a public health issue, and it affects your daily life, your mental health, and your sense of belonging in the world.⁵

YOU ARE NOT THE PROBLEM — THE NARRATIVE IS

The discomfort others may show is not a reflection of your worth. It is, in large part, a learned response, absorbed from a culture that has perpetuated the same distorted story for generations. When someone stares or avoids you, they are often reacting to a script written by Hollywood—not to who you are. You deserve respect, choice, connection, and representation that reflects your full life—not a stereotype.

HOW C.A.R.D.D. IS HELPING

C.A.R.D.D.—the Coalition for Authentic Representation of Disfigurement and Difference—was founded to address this problem directly. We:

- Advocate for authentic, humanizing portrayals of people with disfigurement
- Track and document patterns of misrepresentation in U.S. film and television
- Educate healthcare professionals, media creators, and the public
- Support survivors in understanding and naming their experiences

Our work is grounded in research, lived experience, and a deep belief that every person—regardless of appearance—deserves to be seen as fully human.

References & Resources

About C.A.R.D.D.

C.A.R.D.D., the Coalition for Authentic Representation of Disfigurement and Difference, is dedicated to ending the invisibility and misrepresentation of disfigurement in all forms of storytelling. We unite professionals from media, art, literature, healthcare, education, and advocacy to create meaningful change through education, advocacy, and policy development.

Connect With Us

- Facebook Group: @carddcoalition
- Google Group: cardd-coalition@googlegroups.com
- Email: realrephollywood@gmail.com

References

¹ Hartung, F., Jamrozik, A., Rosen, M. E., Aguirre, G. K., Sarwer, D. B., & Chatterjee, A. (2019). Behavioural and neural responses to facial disfigurement. *Scientific Reports*, 9, Article 8021. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-44408-8>

² Wagner, C. S., Paruzel-Czachura, M., Workman, C. I., Kumar, S. L., Salinero, L. K., Barrero, C. E., Pontell, M. E., Taylor, J. A., & Chatterjee, A. (2025). Exploring film as popular art promoting scarred villain trope. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 44(2). <https://neuroaesthetics.med.upenn.edu/assets/user-content/documents/publications/wagner-et-al-2025-exploring-film-as-popular-art-promoting-scarred-villain-trope.pdf>

³ Ryan, S., Oaten, M., Stevenson, R. J., & Case, T. I. (2012). Facial disfigurement is treated like an infectious disease. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 33(6), 639-646. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2012.04.001>

⁴ Delplanque, J., Heleven, E., & Overwalle, F. V. (2019). Neural representations of groups and stereotypes using MRI repetition suppression. *Scientific Reports* 9, Article 3190. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-39859-y>

⁵ Harris, R. (2004). Media representation of people with mental health problems. *Nursing Times* 100(34), 33-35. <http://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15386919/>

"You are not the character the culture wrote for you. You are the one who gets to tell your story."

Be a part of the change. Join our Facebook group by scanning the QR code or by visiting www.facebook.com/groups/carddcoalition →

