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The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography

The history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous while politically and socially erased. The earliest record of disabled people is of their exhibition as prodigies, monsters, omens from the gods, and indexes of the natural or divine world. From the New Testament to the miracles at Lourdes, the lame, the halt, and the blind provide the spectacle for the story of bodily rehabilitation as spiritual redemption that is so essential to Christianity. From antiquity through modernity, the bodies of disabled people considered to be freaks and monsters have been displayed by the likes of medieval kings and P. T. Barnum for entertainment and profit in courts, street fairs, dime museums, and sideshows.¹ Moreover, medicine has from its beginnings exhibited the disabled body as what Michel Foucault calls the "case," in medical theaters and other clinical settings, in order to pathologize the exceptional and to normalize the ordinary (*Birth of the Clinic* 29). Disabled people have variously been objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter, or fascination—but they have always been stared at.

Staring at disability choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle. A more intense form of looking than glancing, glimpsing, scanning, surveying, gazing, and other forms of casual or uninterested looking, staring registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant. By intensely

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telescoping looking toward the physical signifier for disability, staring creates an awkward partnership that estranges and discomforts both viewer and viewed. Starers gawk with abandon at the prosthetic hook, the empty sleeve, the scarred flesh, the unfocused eye, the twitching limb, but seldom does looking broaden to envelop the whole body of the person with a disability. Even supposedly invisible disabilities always threaten to disclose some stigma, however subtle, that disrupts the social order by its presence and attenuates the bond between equal members of the human community. Because staring at disability is considered illicit looking, the disabled body is at once the to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at, further dramatizing the staring encounter by making viewers furtive and the viewed defensive. Staring thus creates disability as a state of absolute difference rather than simply one more variation in human form. At the same time, staring constitutes disability identity by manifesting the power relations between the subject positions of disabled and able-bodied.

The rapid flourishing of photography after 1839 provided a new way to stare at disability. In our ocularcentric era, images mediate our desires and the ways we imagine ourselves.² Among the myriad, often conflicting, and never indifferent images modernity offers us, the picture of ourselves as disabled is an image fraught with a tangle of anxiety, distance, and identification. As a culture, we are at once obsessed with and intensely conflicted about the disabled body. We fear, deify, disavow, avoid, abstract, revere, conceal, and reconstruct disability—perhaps because it is one of the most universal, fundamental of human experiences. After all, we will all become disabled if we live long enough. Nonetheless, in representing disability in modernity, we have made the familiar seem strange, the human seem inhuman, the pervasive seem exceptional. By the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, public displays of disabled people became inappropriate in the same way that public executions and torture came to be considered offensive. Disabled people were sequestered from public view in institutions and the private sphere as middle-class decorum pronounced it impolite to stare. Photography, however, has enabled the social ritual of staring at disability to persist in an alternate form.

Photographs seem to be transparent windows onto reality that ensnare truth. But like all representations, photographs organize our perceptions, shaping the objects as they depict them by using conventions

of presentation that invoke cultural ideas and expectations. Photographs evoke the familiar only to make it seem strange, eliciting a response Alan Trachtenberg describes as “astonishment mingling with recognition” (*Reading 4*). Because disability has such potent cultural resonances, our capitalist democracy has enlisted its imagery to manipulate viewers for a wide range of purposes. Popular photography catapults disability into the public sphere as a highly mediated image shorn from interactions with actual people with disabilities. Photography’s immediacy, claim to truth, and wide circulation calcifies the interpretations of disability embedded in the images, at once shaping and registering the public perception of disability.

Photography authorizes staring. Photos are made to be looked at. With the actual disabled body absent, photography stylizes staring, exaggerating and fixing the conventions of display and eliminating the possibility for interaction or spontaneity between viewer and viewed. Photos absolve viewers of responsibility to the objects of their stares at the same time that they permit a more intense form of staring than an actual social interchange might support. Disability photography thus offers the spectator the pleasure of unaccountable, uninhibited, insistent looking. This license to stare becomes a powerful rhetorical device that can be mobilized to manipulate viewers. By exploring some of the purposes to which popular photography’s “dialectic of strange and familiar” has been put, I aim here to suggest how modern America imagines disability and disabled people (Trachtenberg, *Reading 4*).³

To look at the way we look at disability, I elaborate a taxonomy of four primary visual rhetorics of disability. They are the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic. This template of visual rhetorics complicates the often restrictive notion of images as being either positive or negative, as communicating either the truth of disability or perpetuating some oppressive stereotype. Thus, I analyze more than evaluate. These visualizations of disabled people act as powerful rhetorical figures that elicit responses or persuade viewers to think or act in certain ways. The wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic converge and inflect one another in individual pictures as well as across all genres of disability photography. These visual rhetorics seldom occur discretely; rather, the photographs blend together in individual photographs. They wax and wane, shift and combine over time as they respond to the purposes for which the photographs are produced. Moreover, these rhetorics constitute part of the context into which all representations of disabled people enter. Not only do these representational modes configure public

perception of disability, but all images of disabled people either inadvertently or deliberately summon these visual rhetorics and their accompanying cultural narratives. None of these rhetorical modes operates in the service of actual disabled people, however. Indeed, almost all of them appropriate the disabled body for the purposes of constructing, instructing, or assuring some aspect of a putatively nondisabled viewer.

The first visual rhetoric is the wondrous. The oldest mode of representing disability, the wondrous continues to find a place in modernity’s framing of disability. This genre capitalizes on physical differences in order to elicit amazement and admiration. The antecedents of the wondrous disabled figures are the monsters of antiquity, who inspired awe, foretold the future, or bore divine signs, and freaks, who were the celebrities in nineteenth-century dime museums and sideshows (Garland-Thomson, “From Wonder”). The rhetoric of the wondrous springs from a premodern interpretation of disability as either augury or marks of distinction, whether representing good or evil. Oedipus, Teiresias, monsters, giants—even Shakespeare’s Richard III—were imposing if ominous disabled figures.

A nineteenth-century example is Charles Tripp, the famous Armless Wonder (fig. 1), pictured eating with his toes in a *carte de visite*, one of the exceedingly popular photographic portraits commonly sold to augment and promote live appearances. This carefully choreographed portrait includes samples of his calligraphic skills, paper figures he’s cut out, as well as the pen and scissors he used to accomplish such remarkable tasks. The silver tea set in the picture refers to other photos of him drinking from a cup with his toes. The composition is a visual résumé documenting Tripp’s supposedly amazing accomplishments. The spectacle tries to elicit awe from the viewers, whose sense of their own clumsy toes makes Tripp’s feet feat seem wondrous.

Photography introduced into the rhetoric of wonder the illusion of fusing the ordinary with the extraordinary. This picture invites a relation of identification and differentiation between Tripp and his viewer, making him seem simultaneously strange and familiar. Viewers see a typical man engaged in the quotidian acts of writing, eating, or drinking tea, but—to those with arms—he does this in a most extraordinary manner. Only the single detail of eating with feet rather than hands marks this scene as distinctive. Disability operates visually by juxtaposing the singular (therefore strange) mark of impairment in a surrounding context of the expected



Figure 1

Surrounded here by the products of his agile feet, the famous nineteenth-century freak show entertainer, Charles Tripp, one of the many “armless wonders,” is presented as amazing and yet ordinary. Courtesy of the Robert Bogdan Collection, Syracuse, NY

(therefore familiar). By telescoping the viewer’s eye to the mark of impairment, the picture instructs viewers to stare and coaches them to understand impairment as the exception rather than the rule. Orchestrated and provoked by the photo, staring creates a particular relation between the viewer and the viewed that gives meaning to impairment.

Modernity secularized wonder into the stereotype of the supercrip, who amazes and inspires the viewer by performing feats that the nondis-



Figure 2

This photograph for adventure vacations invokes wonder by inviting the viewer to look up in admiration and awe at the person who can scale rocks while using a wheelchair. Courtesy of Wilderness Inquiry

abled viewer cannot imagine doing. Contemporary wonder rhetoric emphasizes admiration rather than amazement, in part because bourgeois respectability now deems it inappropriate to delight in staring at disabled people. One example is a recent ad for adventure tours that features a rock climber using a wheelchair (fig. 2). Here the photographic composition literally positions the viewer as looking up in awe at the climber dangling in her wheelchair. By making the disabled figure exceptional rather than ordinary, the wondrous can estrange viewer from viewed and attenuate the correspondence that equality requires.

Sentimentality has inflected the wonder model, producing the convention of the courageous overcomer, contemporary America’s favorite figure of disability. Even though armless calligraphers are no longer an acceptable form of middle-class entertainment, photos of disabled people who have adapted tasks to fit their bodies still ask their viewers to feel a sense of wonder. An advertisement for Habitat for Humanity, for example, pictures a disabled volunteer worker building a house (fig. 3). Like Tripp, this man is portrayed as entirely ordinary except for the detail of the fingerless hands holding the hammer, which occupies the center of



Figure 3

This photograph of a volunteer worker for Habitat for Humanity, an organization that builds homes for the needy, utilizes the narrative of overcoming to elicit admiration for working despite having a disability. Courtesy of *Habitat World*

interest, at once inviting and authorizing the stare. As is typical in disability photography, the text instructs the viewer how to respond to the picture, with a headline that says, "Extraordinary Volunteer, Unstoppable Spirit." The picture thus combines the narrative of admiration for overcoming disability with the narrative of empowerment characteristic of a post-disability rights movement consciousness. By making disabled subjects masters of ordinary activities such as climbing rocks,

drinking tea, or using hammers, these photos create a visual context that elicits adulation for their accomplishing what the normalized viewer takes to be a superhuman feat.

The second visual rhetoric is the sentimental. Whereas the wondrous elevates and enlarges, the sentimental diminishes. The sentimental produces the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor and invoking pity, inspiration, and frequent contributions. The sentimental disabled figure developed as a part of the larger nineteenth-century bourgeois culture of fine feelings.⁴ The pathetic, the impotent, and the suffering confirmed the Victorian bourgeoisie by arousing their finest sentiments. As the increasingly empowered middle class imagined itself capable of capitalizing the world, it began to see itself as responsible for the world as well, a stewardship that launched humanitarian and reform movements to which today's telethons are heir. This discourse of middle-class noblesse oblige operates on a model of paternalism, often trafficking in children and alluding to the cute, the plucky, the long-suffering, and the courageous.

The rhetoric of sentiment found an effective home in the photographic conventions of the poster child of mid-twentieth-century charity campaigns. The 1946 March of Dimes poster child (fig. 4) echoes the spunky cuteness of freak figures such as General Tom Thumb. But where Tom Thumb delighted with his miniature adulthood, this poster child breaks hearts as he is propped vulnerably up in a corner of his crib in the before-and-after format. In order to catalyze the adult, to whom the photo addresses itself, this March of Dimes poster presents disability to the middle-class spectator as a problem to solve, an obstacle to eliminate, a challenge to meet. In such appeals, impairment becomes the stigma of suffering, transforming disability into a project that morally enables a nondisabled rescuer. The viewer's dimes, the poster suggests, will literally catapult the unhappy little fellow trapped in braces in his crib into a smiling and spirited tyke, striding with determination and gratitude toward the viewer. Sentimentality makes of disabled people occasions for the viewers' own narratives of progress, improvement, or heroic deliverance and contains disability's threat in the sympathetic, helpless child for whom the viewer is empowered to act. Whereas earlier sentimental literature accentuates suffering to mobilize readers for humanitarian, reform, or religious ends, the poster boy's suffering is only the background to his restoration to normalcy that results from "your



Figure 4

The March of Dimes 1946 poster boy appeals to the rhetoric of sentiment, which often employs pathetic, courageous, or cute children to elicit the viewers' sympathy and money. Courtesy of March of Dimes

dimes." The optimism of cure thus replaces the intensity of sympathy, testifying to an increasing faith in clinical treatment and scientific progress as modernity increasingly medicalizes and rationalizes the body.

The rhetoric of sentiment has migrated from charity to retail in late capitalism's scramble to capture markets. For example, the cover of a 1998 Benetton public relations brochure (fig. 5) distributed in stores employs a chic sentimentality in documenting a school for developmentally disabled children Benetton supports and outfits. This cover girl



Figure 5

Sentimental cuteness and high fashion come together in this public relations brochure's presentation of a developmentally disabled child in a school supported and outfitted by Benetton clothing stores. Concept: O. Toscani. Courtesy of United Colors of Benetton

with both Down syndrome⁵ and a stylish Benetton hat fuses sentimental cuteness with high fashion to produce the conviction in the viewer-shopper that Benetton is humanitarian rather than solely commercial. In anticipation of its patron's skepticism, the brochure instructs its viewers that Benetton launched this campaign as social commentary, although people are apt to see it as "cynical advertising." Benetton devotes a whole introductory page to assuring its customers that this brochure is about "the gift of love" (United Colors 3). So while commercial fashion marketing demands a certain sophistication and sleekness that precludes the gushy sentiment of the 1940s poster child, Benetton still assures its viewers of their tolerance and allows them to fantasize rescuing this child from the stigma of being disabled by dressing her smartly and supporting her school.

The third visual rhetoric is the exotic. The rhetoric of sentiment domesticates the disability figure, making it familiar and comforting. In contrast, the visual rhetoric of the exotic presents disabled figures as alien, distant, often sensationalized, eroticized, or entertaining in their difference. The exotic reproduces an ethnographic model of viewing characterized by curiosity or uninvolved objectification and informed by

the proliferation of popular ethnographic photography that accompanied the era of Western imperialism. For example, nineteenth-century freak photography often transformed disabled people into “wild men” or other exotic “savages,” whose impairments were translated into marks of alien ethnicity (Garland-Thomson, “From Wonder” 5). The exotic demedicalizes, fascinates, and seduces with exaggeration, creating a sensationalized, embellished alien.

The introduction of disabled models has exploded the contemporary fashion world in the last several years, returning the rhetoric of the exotic into disability photography. Where the sentimental makes the disabled figure small and vulnerable in order to be rescued by a benevolent agent, the exotic makes the disabled figure large, strange, and unlike the viewer. Ever straining for novelty and capitalizing on titillation, the fashion arm of the advertising world was sure to discover the power of disabled figures to provoke responses from viewers. Advertising has learned that disability sells in two ways. One is by making consumers feel good about buying from a company that is charitable toward the supposedly disadvantaged, which is the Benetton brochure’s pitch. The other is to capture the disability market, which is 54 million people and growing fast as the baby boomers age and as their spending power is estimated to reach the trillion-dollar mark in 2000 (J. Williams 29).

The exotic serves this commercial aim by upsetting the earnest, asexual, vulnerable, courageous image of disability that charity rhetoric has so firmly implanted. One image advertising wheelchairs presents a tattooed biker figure brandishing a hockey stick (fig. 6). The image alludes at once to the strong men and tattoo kings of the sideshows and then inflects it with a hyperphallic sexuality, completely rewriting the cultural script of the emasculated invalid and the male who becomes feminized by disability. As is typical with much popular disability photography, the text instructs the viewer on how to read this photo. The exaggeration characteristic of exoticization here marshals ironic hyperbole to mount a brazen, sensational parody, provocatively challenging the viewer by lewdly commanding, “Lick this!” Such representations preclude even a trace of the sentimental or the wondrous, insisting instead on the empowerment of the transgressive, even at the expense of distancing the spectator from the spectacle.

Another venue for disability as the exotic is emerging in the high-fashion market, which is always desperate to keep its edge. These advertisements and magazine features present disabled models in a dual

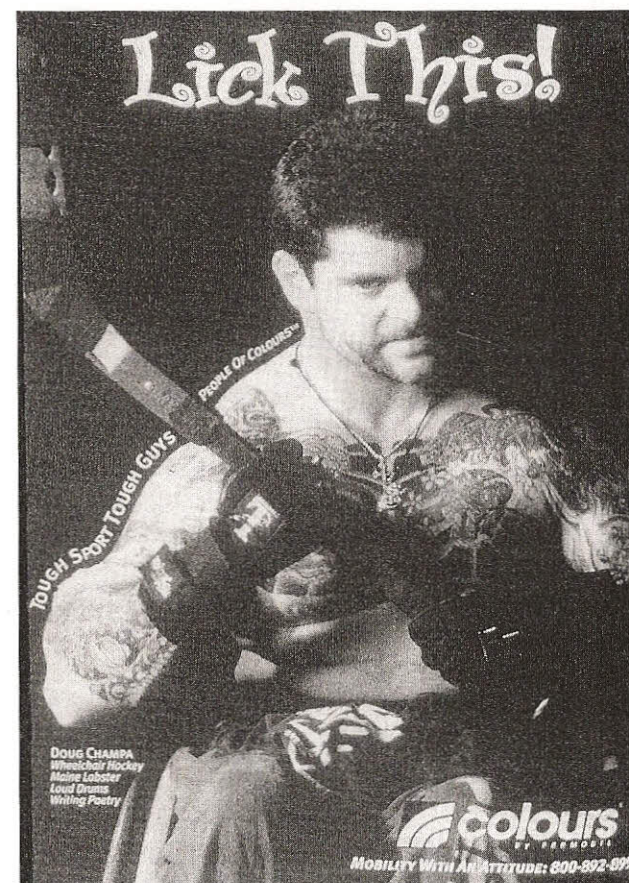


Figure 6

The rhetoric of the exotic in this ad for wheelchairs “with an attitude” employs the tattooed biker-jock figure to create a transgressive, hypermasculine image for the wheelchair user. Courtesy of Colours Wheelchairs

attempt to capture a market and to novelize high fashion by introducing bodies that at once depart from and conform to the exhausted image of the high-fashion body. Alexander McQueen, known in England as the bad boy of fashion design, recently collaborated with other designers and the fashion photographer Nick Knight for a shoot called “Accessible,” featuring eight disabled models. Knight’s shots fold the models’ impairments into a context of exoticism that extends to the entire frame, as in



Figure 7

The high-fashion layout of the model, sports star, and double amputee Aimee Mullins emphasizes rather than conceals her prosthetic legs, exploiting the exotic mode to make disability seem chic. Courtesy of *We Magazine*. Photograph by Nick Knight.

the shot of Aimee Mullins, the double-amputee celebrity cover girl, rendered as a kind of high-tech bionic mannequin (fig. 7). No attempt is made to disguise her cosmetic prosthetic legs—so she can pass for nondisabled; rather, the entire photo thematically echoes her prostheses and renders the whole image chic. As a gorgeous amputee, Mullins becomes an embodied contradiction. Her prosthetic legs parody, indeed proudly mock, the very idea of the perfect body that has been the mark of fashion until now, even while the rest of her body conforms precisely

to fashion's impossible standards. Rather than conceal, normalize, or erase disability, these photos use the hyperbole and stigma traditionally associated with disability to quench postmodernity's perpetual search for the new and arresting image. These transgressive juxtapositions of disability and high fashion, such as the macho chair user and the athletic but legless Mullins, produce a fresh, attention-grabbing brand of exotic radical chic that redefines disabled identity for the disabled consumer.

The fourth visual rhetoric is the realistic. Where the exotic mode cultivates estrangement, realism minimizes distance and difference by establishing a relation of contiguity between viewer and viewed. The wondrous, sentimental, and exotic modes of representation tend to exaggerate the difference of disability to confer exceptionality on the object in the picture. The rhetoric of the realistic, however, trades in verisimilitude, regularizing the disabled figure in order to avoid differentiation and arouse identification, often normalizing and sometimes minimizing the visual mark of disability. Realism domesticates disability. Realist disability photography is the rhetoric of equality, most often turned utilitarian. The use of realism can be commercial or journalistic, and it can also urge the viewer to political or social action.⁶

Realism emerged as a property of portraiture, documentary, and medical photography of the nineteenth century. Documentary photography such as that made famous by Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis aimed photographic realism at the progressive obsession with social reform.⁷ Documentary and journalistic photographs differ from charity and commercial photographs in that they do not solicit the exchange of money so directly but rather aim to democratically disseminate information intended to shape the viewers' actions and opinions. Hine and Riis recorded the fabric of the American underclass, exposing the supposed truth of the conditions in which it struggled. Hine photographed wounded workers whose disabilities robbed them of the male privilege and duty of work (fig. 8), and he featured children whose disabilities he felt stole their childhood. The caption below an amputee worker reads, "When a man's hand is mutilated, he keeps it out of sight" (Stange 60). The implied message is that the social mandate to hide disability precludes entry into the workplace. Hine enlists disability in documentary photos ultimately to tell a cautionary tale: disability is a scourge that can and should be avoided in a world that works right. In spite of the political support and social acceptance the picture confers, the photo-

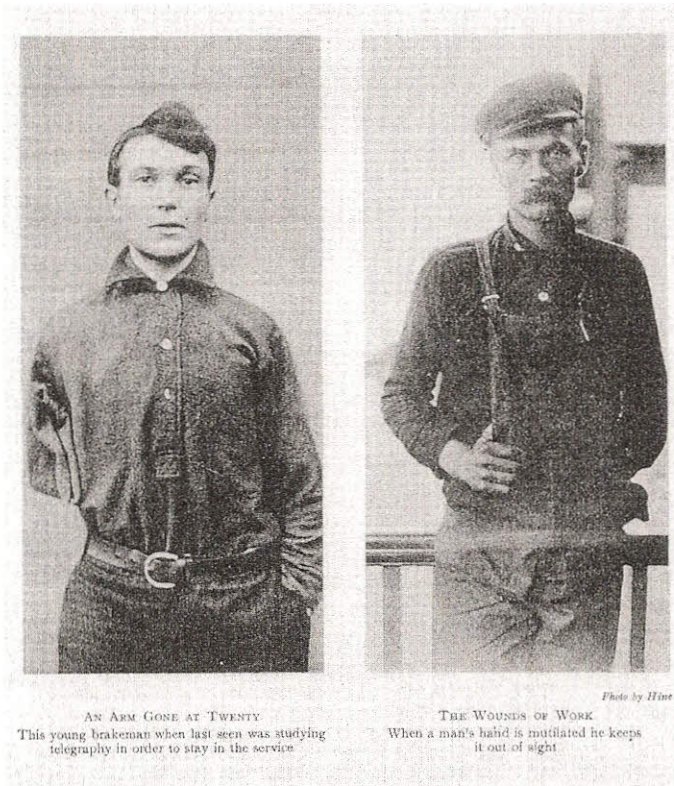


Figure 8

Lewis Hine documented wounded workers in 1907-08 by using the rhetoric of realism as a form of social protest against excluding disabled men from the privileges of labor.

graph nevertheless marks this worker as a person the viewer does not want to be.

A more sensationalized use of realism recently provoked controversy and roused political protests over what constitutes unacceptable looking at women's breasts. The Breast Cancer Fund, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization dedicated to education about and funding of breast cancer research, mounted a public awareness campaign in January 2000 called *Obsessed with Breasts*, featuring three posters showing women boldly displaying mastectomy scars. The posters parodied a Victoria's Secret catalog (fig. 9), a *Cosmopolitan* cover, and a Calvin Klein perfume ad, all of which typically parade women's breasts in soft-porn modes that have become an unremarkable staple of



Figure 9

This controversial 2000 Breast Cancer Fund poster employs the sensationalism often characteristic of realism to protest inadequate breast cancer research and to expose the cultural effacement of mastectomies. Courtesy of the Breast Cancer Fund

commercial magazine advertising. The posters disrupt the visual convention of the female breast as sexualized object for male appropriation and pleasure by replacing the now normative, eroticized breast with the proscribed image of the amputated breast. The powerful visual violation produced by exchanging the spectacle of the eroticized breast, which has been desensationalized by its endless circulation, with the medicalized image of the scarred breast, which has been concealed from public view, was so shocking to viewers that many demanded that the images

be removed. Of course, the censoring and censoring of images that demand a recognition of the reality of breast cancer ignited a vibrant controversy. The images intensify this forbidden version of the disabled breast by ironically juxtaposing it with the commonplace but virulently sexist eroticization of the breast. The posters thus advance a potent feminist challenge not only to sexism in medical research and the treatment for breast cancer but also to the oppressive representational practices that make erotic spectacles of women's breasts an everyday thing while erasing the fact of the amputation that one woman in eight will have. By mocking the tired sensationalism of pornography, these pictures protest against the refusal of contemporary America to literally and figuratively look at breast cancer.

The visual rhetoric of the ordinary has emerged in a climate of integration and diversity created by the disability rights movement and resulting legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). While the post-ADA era is not without resistance and backlash to the integration of people with disabilities, the social environment is filling with disability in the popular press. Disability not only appears in the sensationalist underbelly of the press, where it always has, but also is tucked with various degrees of conspicuousness into the fabric of common visual culture. Department store and catalog advertising, for instance, has adopted the rhetoric of the ordinary both to appeal to disabled people as a market and to suggest an ethic of inclusion. L. L. Bean promotes a wheelchair backpack in its catalog; Walmart and many other stores feature disabled models and mannequins in everything from frumpy jog suits to evening gowns. Toy lines like Barbie and the upscale American Girl have wheelchair-using dolls. Such routinization of disability imagery not only brings disability as a human experience out of the closet, it also enables people with disabilities—especially those who acquire impairments as adults—to imagine themselves as a part of the ordinary world rather than belonging to a special class of untouchables and unviewables. Images of disability as a familiar, even mundane, experience in the lives of seemingly successful, happy, well-adjusted people can reduce the identifying against oneself that is the overwhelming effect of oppressive and discriminatory attitudes toward people with disabilities.

The most radical reimagining of disability offered by the realist mode is, ironically, the least visually vivid of the images discussed here, perhaps because it is the only mode with no commercial purpose. The genre of disability photography I conclude with is the official portrait,



Figure 10

The contrast between this official portrait of Assistant Secretary Judith E. Heumann sitting in her wheelchair and the many photos of FDR that hid the wheelchair he used daily during his presidency marks the difference between a pre- and post-civil rights era. Courtesy of United States Department of Education.

exemplified by the Department of Education's simple photographic portrait of Judith E. Heumann, assistant secretary of education during the Clinton administration (fig. 10). The conventions that govern such pictures strive for the effect of the everyday, inflected with enough dignity and authority to communicate the importance of the position but not enough to separate the official from the constituency. In a democracy, official portraits depict public servants, after all, in no-nonsense black and white, with standard costuming and poses, and flanked unpretentiously by flags. Unlike commercial photographs, these portrayals are neither generalized nor stylized; rather, they are particularized. The photo suggests that here is a real, recognizable person responsible for certain official duties. The radical aspect of this common visual rhetoric is that part of this woman's particularization is the wheelchair that is clearly an aspect of her identity, an integral element of who and what the photograph says she is. The glimpse of her chair is descriptive, as fundamental to her image as the shape of her chin, the cut of her hair, or the tint of her skin. In its ordinariness, the photograph discourages staring without prohibiting it. Indeed, it encourages forms of looking such as glancing, if the viewer is not very interested in the secretary, or perhaps beholding, if the viewer is interested in her. By depicting Secretary Heumann as an ordinary person who has a position of official status

in the society, the portrait encourages both viewers who consider themselves disabled and those who consider themselves nondisabled to identify with her. The photograph suggests neither that her accomplishments are superhuman nor that she has triumphantly overcome anything. She thus becomes more familiar than strange. Most important is the picture's message that a woman with a disability can occupy such a position.

Secretary Heumann's picture sits in bold historical opposition to the many now-controversial official photos of President Franklin D. Roosevelt that hide the wheelchair he used daily.⁸ Authorized by the cultural changes the civil rights movements wrought, Heumann's official portrait exemplifies one of several genres in contemporary photography that familiarize disability rather than defamiliarize it. Indeed, such representations banish the strange and cultivate the ordinary, radically reimagining disability by installing people with disabilities in the realm of human commonality and dismantling the assumption that disability precludes accomplishment.

This taxonomy of four primary visual rhetorics of disability provides a way to see the way we see disability. These pictures choreograph a social dynamic of looking, suggesting that disability is not simply a natural state of bodily inferiority and inadequacy. Rather, it is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. Disability, then, is a system that produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Furthermore, this comparison of bodies legitimates the distribution of resources, status, and power in a biased social and architectural environment. As such, disability has four aspects: first, it is a system for interpreting bodily variations; second, it is a relation between bodies and their environments; third, it is a set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the disabled; fourth, it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self. The category of disability exists as a way to exclude the kinds of bodily forms, functions, impairments, changes, or ambiguities that call into question our cultural fantasy of the body as a neutral, compliant instrument of some transcendent will. Moreover, *disability* is a broad term in which cluster ideological categories as varied as sick, deformed, ugly, old, crazy, maimed, afflicted, abnormal, or debilitated—all of which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards. Thus *disability* functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent—all of which provide cultural

capital to those who can claim such status, who can reside within these subject positions. Thus, the various interactions between bodies and world make disability from the raw material of human variation and precariousness.

All visualizations of disability are mediations that shape the world in which people who have or do not have disabilities inhabit and negotiate together. The point is that all representations have social and political consequences. Understanding how images create or dispel disability as a system of exclusions and prejudices is a move toward the process of dismantling the institutional, attitudinal, legislative, economic, and architectural barriers that keep people with disabilities from full participation in society.

NOTES

1. For a historical account of the display of disabled people as monsters and freaks, see Altick; Bogdan; Dennett; Garland-Thomson, "From Wonder"; and D. Wilson.
2. For an account of the ocularcentric in Western culture, see Barthes; Crary; Debord; and Jay.
3. I am not including medical or artistic photography here, although both genres inform the visual construction of disability. I am limiting this analysis to popular photography, which I take to be the primary register and shaper of public consciousness. For an analysis of images of insanity, see Gilman.
4. For a discussion of the development of middle-class feeling as a form of distinguishing respectability, see Halttunen; for a discussion of how sentimentality uses disabled figures, see Garland-Thomson, "Crippled Little Girls."
5. The term "Down syndrome" is now preferred over "Down's syndrome" by more politicized parents and guardians looking to mark some distance from the English physician John Langdon Down, who first described the syndrome's characteristic features (i.e., they are challenging his "ownership" of Down syndrome). See, for example, Richards.
6. To use the term *realistic* does not suggest that this visual rhetoric is more truthful, accurate, or real than the other modes discussed here. Realism's function is to create the illusion of reality, not to reproduce or capture reality's elusive and complex substance. Although more subtle perhaps, the rhetoric of realism is just as constructed and convention-bound as the rhetorics of the wondrous, sentimental, or exotic.
7. For further discussion of Hine, see Rosenblum, Rosenblum, and Trachtenberg.
8. For a discussion of Franklin Roosevelt's disability, see H. Gallagher.