Grace Caterine

Ableist Restrictions in Capitalism: An Exploration of Inspiration Porn – Main Points Transcript

“And these images, there are lots of them out there, they are what we call inspiration porn….those images objectify disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people. They are there so that you can look at them and think that things aren't so bad for you” Stella Young, TEDxSydney, 3:11 – 4:30. In October 2018, I took a trip to Barcelona with a re-acquainted high school friend while studying abroad in Ireland. We were **just two young women,** lost like typical tourists, but nevertheless enjoying ourselves among the beautiful architecture and balmy weather. We decided to pass through a park to get to our bus stop**. I now regret that decision.** Suddenly, a young Spanish boy jumped in our way, asking repeatedly **“Cuantos anos? Cuantos anos?”** No words passed between myself and my friend, **but we both knew he was referring to my Achondroplasia, a form of dwarfism.**  My friend attempted to distance us, repeatedly yelling “Stop!” and shoving him away. **The boy’s teenage family member appeared and suddenly I was his photography object in that moment.** Never before had I been in the position of an unwanted object so actively. For a moment, I became a deer in the headlights. Then, instinctually, I knew what to do**. I turned away my face and gave him the middle finger. Presumably, he captured my picture in this position.** Eventually, we crossed the street and the family disappeared into the crowd. Much like the permanency of the picture the teenager took, however, the memory remains fixated in my mind and I cannot help but ask - **Why was my instinctual reaction to poise defiantly and belligerently? What then was I trying to prevent from happening?**

I was resisting against becoming what Stella Young calls “objects of inspiration” (1:36). By making an obscene gesture and turning away my face, it would become harder for those who viewed the picture to gain benefit from it. Either way, the experience would be traumatic for me, but **through my poise, I altered how others would perceive that experience.** With inspiration porn, then, “it is important to examine the nondisabled position and its privilege and power. It is not the neutral, universal position from which disabled people deviate, rather, it is a category of people whose power and cultural capital keep them at the center” (Linton, 32). How then does inspiration porn keep non-disabled people “at the center,” granting them more privilege and power? What negative effects then carry onto people with disabilities, such as myself? Through the objectification, infantilization, and medicalization of disability in the following inspiration porn images, society attempts to fit people with disabilities within the restrictions of capitalistic individualism. In reality, because the images do not grant subjectivity to those with disabilities, non-disabled people use them as a superficial show of sympathy for disabled people while still ignoring the social constructs that enable their disabilities.

In this image, the girl’s “disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute” (Garland-Thomson, 12). For this image, the single attribute is perseverance DESPITE her disability. The viewer does not see the girl’s daily life activities outside of this event, implying that the girl must constantly be perseverant throughout her life. Moreover, her perseverance is despite her disability because the activity avoids using her disability during the process. The sock on her arm highlights that this disability exists, making clear that her “trying” is in opposition to her disability. Her body “becomes an analyzed body…one's own subjectivity and autobiography become denigrated to sub-texts” (Eisenhauer, 18). The girl is an object of inspiration: She does not participate in a mutual gaze, which subordinates her to the audience. The girl is not the “you” in the picture, in that she participates is not quitting. The “you” then becomes the viewer themselves. The girl then becomes one of the many “awe-inspiring figures placed up on pedestals” in inspiration porn (Norden, 81). The viewers know nothing about her life or disability, other than that it should inspire them to try actions instead of quitting.

Capitalism “requires “fit” and productive bodies” (“Disability,” 86) Both additional images focus on a productive physicality. “To try” then means “to be physically productive.” In the original poem “Before You,” two lines – “Before you speak, listen” and “Before you write, think” – assume the reader is abled bodied and neurotypical. This “averageness” then connects to capitalism: two additional lines – “Before you spend, earn*”*  and “Before you invest, investigate” – follow a capitalist economic structure of spending and investment. The girl with a mobility related disability then “calls into question such concepts as will, ability, progress, responsibility, and free agency, notions around which people in a liberal society organize their identities” (Garland-Thomson, 47). Her amputations become “a loss to be compensated for, rather than difference to be accommodated” (49). The “What’s Your Excuse?” mirrors the competition within a capitalistic sytem – whoever can participate the most fully in capitalism wins. Capitalism then creates the “cultural construction of disability as property” (Eisenhauer, 11). It can be owned, but also sold by its owner, who earns capital through selling. Disability is then separate from identity and is something the owner can choose whether or not to possess.

Again, the non-disabled “you” is centered, and the child avoids eye contact with the camera. The child also participates in a productive physical activity, but the photo does not actively show him using his wheelchair. Term of “invalid” for disability Invalid “does not confine the weakness to the specific bodily functions; it is more encompassing” (Linton, 28-29). Disability, or weakness in this interpretation, is then “best understood as a marker of identity” (12) – the child can either let this “weakness” encompass him or become part of society through defying it. Considering the child is in the wheelchair, “excuse” creates “boundaries between animal and machine, organic and mechanical, me and not-me” when these boundaries do not need to exist in a complex identity (Garland-Thomson, 14).

The picture still centers the non-disabled perspective, but introduces the voice of “me,” or the disabled perspective. She establishes mutual gaze with the viewer, which equalizes them in status. Moreover, it separates the disabled person from involvemenin inspiration porn through “your inspiration porn.” The woman’s disability does not “become subject to rehabilitation (if possible) or elimination (if necessary)” (“Disability,” 86). She nstead uses the autobiographical form, which “eliminates the dynamics of sympathy and the potential for objectification that often emerge” (Garland-Thomson, 126). The photo takes an aggressive stance against inspiration porn, rather than becoming the victim of it. Still, Aimee Mullins is “attractive, cute, and perfect in every way (in other words, lived up to the mass-media representation of the typical person) except for their disability” (“Charity,” 45). To establish that mutual gaze, Mullins must gain authority through her race, attractiveness, and celebrity status. She still compensates for her disability through these other capitalistically accepted means. She is an adult, however, and has full control over her own agency. **Why then does so much inspiration porn use children at the center of their images?**

The video intersperses footage of adults receiving cochlear implants with children and babies. Yet the description emphasizes the youthfulness of the receives, as it refers to them as “(little) people” collectively. This depiction fits into the general stereotype of people with disabilities as “more dependent, childlike, passive, sensitive, and miserable and are less competent than people who do not have disabilities” (Linton, 25). For example, the adults are often shown crying, much like the babies before and after them.Having the cochlear implant then represents the first step into “adult life” or non-disabled life. This equalizing of adulthood with non-disability is more “projections of the adults than on the unadulterated feelings of the child” (21). The additional descriptor of “beautiful phenomenon” focuses on the superficial viewing experience, rather than the experience of getting the implant itselfThe children are then projections of the adults themselves – they are “almost exclusively middle class, well groomed, white, and attractively attired,” which connects to an audience who may have access to this video. The children doing well brings hope that anyone can succeed in a capitalistic society (“Charity,” 45).

“Where capitalism posits a market economy…benevolence posits a moral economy of contractual obligations based on the pledge of human sympathy” (Garland-Thomson, 89). The phrase “even in her condition” in the left images conveys that asking a disabled person to perform is unusually kind. Similarly, the phrase “real friends” implies that most other friends do judge the young man for his Down Syndrome. The young woman then becomes special through her “real” kindness. The “contractual obligation” portrays the person with disabilities as “dependent upon her supporter” (89) and supports “do-gooder mentality” that maintains institutional standards (Linton, 14), “rather than restructuring the social environment” (Garland-Thomson, 51). In the left image, the young man looks down at the young woman as he holds her hand. This position mimics that of parent and child. In the right image, the young woman has a hand placed on top of her date’s shoulder, which again suggests subservience. Both pictures also occur at prom, an institutionalized high school experience. The disabled individuals can only then engage in the social environment through permission to conform from a non-disabled person. Those with disability are then “the consequence of a comparative relationship in which those who control the social discourse and the means of representation recruit the seeming truth of the body to claim the center for themselves and banish others to the margins” (62). “Like and share = respect” represents that the young man gains respect as the photo becomes more viral. As the young woman is “banished to the margins,” she does not gain anything. Through making a sign, there is an expected viewership. Not only does the sign declare that the two are real friends, but that the man has Down Syndrome. The “seeming truth” of the young man’s body then connects to the young woman’s friendship, which questions how much of the friendship depends on viralness. **What then happens with disabled representation when the person with disabilities has supposed free will?**

These images correspond to the stereotypical presentation of people with disabilities as “physically flawed individuals who only need the right attitude to succeed” (Norden, 80).

This rhetoric implies that disability is a choice. Moreover, it narrows the wide spectrum of disability into this one choice. The phrase avoids pronoun use altogether; therefore, it still functions as inspiration porn for the non-disabled viewer while also delegitimizing the perspective of the disabled viewer. These images fit into the overcoming trope, as they value “personal triumph over a personal condition” (Linton, 18). Both of the previous images depict running or racing, where one can win by “surpassing” their physical condition. In the two pictures, the children actively engage with their disabilities, but “attitude” infers that their good attitudes “overshadow” their disabilities. Additionally, all children depicted are smiling. By “overcoming” their disabilities, they become happier. This rhetoric creates “no need for civil rights legislation or affirmative action” for people with disabilities (19). The responsibility lies in them to change their thinking, which will essentially “cure” them from their disability.

The girl’s modeling skills surprised the babysitter because of her “cult of normalcy” expectations. Cult of Normalcy”: “a set of rituals that police a normal way of being in society” (“Disability,” 86). The girl cannot, therefore, be quirky and beautiful at the same time, due to cult of normalcy standards of beauty. She instead has to overcome her quirks through transforming them into “magic.” The babysitter is therefore not proud of the girl’s identity, but proud that she can appear as “normal.” Both the “overcoming” trope and “cult of normalcy” act as components of the medical model: The medical model treats disability “as an individual’s physical and psychological problem to be overcome” (Norden, 80). This idea becomes especially problematic for the girl on the spectrum, or the girl with down syndrome, or for children who cannot afford prosthetic legs, because they can never “overcome” their disability. These ideas lower self-confidence and hinder “self-determination and subjectivity of people with disabilities” (“Disability,” 98) The model also “acts with capitalist institutions, and helps identify any persistent obstacles that get in the way of participation in the free market” (86). It encourages those without “good attitudes” or “normal ways of being” to not participate in society.

By the end of this presentation, it may scare viewers to consider the power of objectification, infantilization, and medicalization with the disabled identity. Each of these projections functions as a tool of capitalism, which often defines the makeup of United States society. To assume that these capitalist ideas are unavoidable is to perpetuate conformity, however. It is to assume that I must pose nicely for others’ non-consensual pictures, that non-disabled people must post on the disabled perspective, that inspiration porn must become viral. We ignore another essential component of the American identity, individualism, through these actions. To avoid objectivity, we must grant and re-claim subjectivity. It is possible for the disabled person to wield the camera. Non-disabled people must give us the necessary resources and support to do so first, however.

Works Cited

Bruijn, RWL de. Cochlear Implants: People Hearing for the First Time! YouTube, YouTube, 1

June 2012

“Charity: The Poster Child and Others.” Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen and Other

Photographic Rhetoric, by Robert Bogdan et al., Syracuse University Press, Syracuse,

New York, 2012, pp. 42–56

Dailymail.com, Erica Tempesta For. “Down Syndrome Teen and Friend's Inspiring Prom Picture

Hits Back against Disability Discrimination.” Daily Mail Online, Associated Newspapers, 8 Apr. 2015

“DISABILITY, SOCIETY, AND THEOLOGY: The Benefits and Limitations of the Social

Model of Disability.” Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L'Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship, by Jason Reimer Greig, Georgetown University Press, 2015, pp. 82–113

Eisenhauer, Jennifer. “Just Looking and Staring Back: Challenging Ableism through Disability

Performance Art.” Studies in Art Education, vol. 49, no. 1, 2007, pp. 7–22

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American

Culture and Literature. Columbia University Press, 2017.

“I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much.” Performance by Stella Young, YouTube,

YouTube, 9 June 2014

Linton, Simi. Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity. New York University Press, 2010

Norden, Martin F. “‘I’M LUCKY – I HAD RICH PARENTS’: DISABILITY AND CLASS IN

THE POSTWAR BIOPIC GENRE.” Cold War Film Genres, edited by Homer B. Pettey,

Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018, pp. 79–98

Ward, William Arthur. “Inspirational Words of Wisdom.” 92 Vacation Quotes, Inspirational

Words, 2019