

Published in *British Journal of Visual Impairment* January 2014.

**An Advertising Aesthetic:
Real Beauty and Visual Impairment**

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Abstract: This paper considers critical responses to disability in twentieth-century Anglo-American advertisements from which a problematic advertising aesthetic emerges. The aesthetic is used to test the progressiveness of a recent trilogy of Dove advertisements that represents visual impairment. The conclusion is that, while there has been much progress, the ableist advertising aesthetic of decades ago remains an issue in the twenty-first century. More specifically, the Dove advertisements are found to be underpinned by ocularcentrism, despite their apparent appreciation of visual impairment.

Introduction

So emotively has disability been represented in literature, film, music, art, and casual conversation that it has now become irresistible to many advertisers. Though relatively few, there have been enough critical studies of disability in twentieth-century advertising for an aesthetic to be drawn. This ableist aesthetic is summed up in the present paper in relation to distortion; alterity; disclosure; segregation; and exclusion. The aesthetic is then used as a model of representational regression against which a recent trilogy of Dove advertisements is measured. The advertisements all feature women who have visual impairments and refer to visual impairment explicitly. The trilogy is deemed progressive in relation to alterity and segregation, complex in relation to disclosure, but regressive in relation to distortion and exclusion. The trouble is that the apparent appreciation of visual impairment is underpinned by an ableist and more specifically ocularcentric advertising aesthetic.

A Recent History

Foundational to this paper, if not to the very discipline of disability studies, are a couple of works on stigma from more than half a century ago. The one, the better known book, was a fairly general study of stigma (Goffman, 1963), while the other focused on disability in particular (Hunt, 1966). The latter made the salient point that disabled people were tired of being represented as pitiable objects whose purpose was to elicit funding, as well as being wonderfully courageous examples to the world, and criticised the stereotyped portrayals of popular culture (Hunt, 1966). This sentiment resonated nearly three decades later when advertising was found to contribute to discrimination in two ways: first, people who had impairments were excluded and in some instances deliberately ignored; and second, a distorted view of disability was presented in order to raise money, as in charity campaigns (Barnes, 1991). The issue of stigma loomed large in advertising because, either way, via exclusion or misrepresentation, for people who had impairments that was the effect.

The pitiable misrepresentation of disability was particularly prominent in early charity advertisements. A hallmark of the aesthetic of these advertisements was a stark, usually black and white image of someone who was disabled, with a focus on her or his impairment, the key purpose being to evoke fear and sympathy in the viewer (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Hevey, 1992). Unfortunately, until the late twentieth century, the representation of disability in advertising was generally restricted to such fundraising campaigns (Brolley & Anderson, 1986), or at best found in medical and rehabilitation product catalogues, disability magazines, and disability organization posters and brochures (Thomas, 2001). Representations of disability were seldom included in so-called mainstream advertisements.

A more progressive and inclusive approach to disability and advertising became apparent in the late twentieth century. Favourable images started to appear in the eighties (Longmore, 1987) and, while 'routine pictures of disabled people in advertising' remained 'hard to find' (Davis, 1995, p. 150), a number of advertisements in the early nineties included characters who used wheelchairs and were shown as 'normal people doing things that normal people do' (Nelson, 1996, p. 125). By the end of the century there was a growing list of advertisers who featured disability in their campaigns. This list included Crest, Citibank, Citicorp, Coke, Fuji, IBM, Kmart, Levi's, McDonald's, Nissan, Pacific Telesis, and Target (Bainbridge, 1997; Fost, 1998; Haller & Ralph, 2001; Longmore, 1987; Panol & McBride, 2001; Shapiro, 1993; Williams, 1999). Thus, by the nineties, if not the eighties, the application of disability in advertising was no longer the sole domain of charity campaigns.

The reason for this progress was not simply a less prejudicial, more informed use of images and ideas. The disabled consumer was said to be coming of age, as companies in the United States and the United Kingdom recognised the profitability of including disability in their advertisements (Haller & Ralph, 2001). This recognition was greatly aided by legislation in the form of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Moreover, although many businesses started to use disabled models in advertising due to capitalistic motivation (i.e., an awareness not only that there were potential customers who had impairments, but also that diversity enhanced audience reception to the products in question), the crass commercialism produced some good disability images (Haller & Ralph, 2001). Albeit due to a desire for profits, companies learned to move away from the use of pity narratives and toward advertisements that were sensitive and accurate, that represented disability as 'another slice of life' (Haller & Ralph, 2001), progress that was bound to reduce stigmatisation.

For all this progress, the portrayal of disability in advertising was far from representative, even in purely quantitative terms. Advertising images that utilised people who had impairments were 'few and far between in mainstream media publications' (Thomas, 2001). Indeed, although the United States was faster than the United Kingdom to reflect disability in commercial advertising (Haller & Ralph, 2001; Scott-Parker, 1989), a two-year quantitative analysis conducted in 1998-1999 found that people who had visible impairments were portrayed 'far less frequently in the commercials than their 6.5% of the population as reported by the Census Bureau (1994)' (Ganahl & Arbuckle, 2001). In relation to Britain, advertisements on American television were more prevalent and less restricted (Haller & Ralph, 2001) but nonetheless harshly underrepresented people who had impairments.

Another representational problem related to questions about if, when, and what impairments were shown. The trouble was that impairments in general were avoided; they were conveniently overlooked or else portrayed so as not to intrude on the viewer's aesthetic consciousness (Barnes, 1991; Thomas, 2001). Indeed, if and when impairments were visible, they tended to be restricted to a few (if not a couple), for there was an 'almost total focus' on wheelchair use and deafness (Haller & Ralph, 2001). In other words, in relation to the normative, aesthetic consciousness, some impairments were considered more intrusive than others and avoided accordingly.

Although the disabled consumer was said to be coming of age, the problem of avoidance extended beyond the advertisements in many ways, even when the medium was relatively easy to make accessible, as in the case of the internet. For example, at the end of the twentieth century, according to one study, three out of four banner advertisements in online

newspapers failed to provide accessible content by using an informative alternative to image tags (Thompson & Wassmuth, 2001). This state of affairs was worsened by a general lack of concern, a form of critical avoidance (Bolt, 2012), for disability in advertising was an important topic seldom discussed (Panol & McBride, 2001). Indeed, although the scope of mass media advertising campaigns was broad by definition, concern within the academy about this level of misrepresentation was slight (judging by the low number of published papers on the topic).

Advertising Now

As we might expect (thanks to disability activism, disability rights, disability advocacy, disability studies, and disability theory), advertising in our own century tends to reflect far more awareness of disability. For example, a qualitative analysis of a selection of Anglo-American advertisements since 1999 finds improvements in the images of disability, including the theme of empowerment, as used by Cingular, and the themes of disability pride and inclusion, as used by Doritos, Marks & Spencer, and HSBC (Haller & Ralph, 2006). Such advertisements illustrate a departure from the pitiful, sentimental aesthetic used by charities, representations no longer considered appropriate in societies that are trying to restructure themselves so that those of us who have impairments can compete equally in all facets of life (Haller & Ralph, 2006). Indeed, even charity campaigns now often differ greatly from their problematic predecessors; the use of an ableist aesthetic defined by medical tragedy in order to prompt pity is far less evident. In fact, Scope and Mencap, among others, explicitly attack disability discrimination in their advertising, and both promote research and

campaigns about social exclusion (Shakespeare, 2006). In advertising that utilises disability, then, pity is now far less prominent.

But in some of its content, advertising that utilises disability certainly remains problematic.

Though departing from the more overt pity narratives, several advertisements adopt antiquated themes that continue to stigmatise those of us who have impairments: among others, Nuveen, HealthExtras, and Bank of America advertisements convey underlying messages that those of us who have impairments are broken, in need of repair; awash in tragedy; or supercrips, put on pedestals for living our lives (Haller & Ralph, 2006).

Reminiscent of what was carelessly circulated nearly half a century ago, when people who had impairments grew tired of being represented as pitiable or wonderfully courageous (Hunt, 1966), these and other such advertisements follow a binary system in which those of us who have impairments are represented in extreme terms: overtly negative or ostensibly positive.

From all this we can gather that there is an ableist advertising aesthetic that still resonates in campaigns that employ disability. The nature of this aesthetic can be summarised in relation to five points:

- 1 . *distortion* – usually based on pity, fear, or wonder, a distorted view of people who have impairments is presented;
- 2 . *alterity* – routine, slice of life representations of people who have impairments are not used (instead, Otherness is constructed);
- 3 . *disclosure* – impairments are conveniently overlooked or represented so as not to disrupt the normative aesthetic (alternatively, impairment is such a focus that it becomes reductive and the person effectively becomes displaced);

- 4 . *segregation* – advertisements that feature disability or people who have impairments are not used in mainstream campaigns;
- 5 . *exclusion* – advertisements that feature disability or people who have impairments are carelessly rendered inaccessible.

If only to start the discussion, this problematic profile is a useful instrument in the analysis of recent advertisements, such as those in the Dove trilogy. The key is that regurgitation of the ableist aesthetic demonstrates regression, while departure often reveals progress.

Campaign for Real Beauty

Launched a decade ago, the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty has its genesis in concerns that portrayals of women and girls in popular culture are helping to perpetuate an idea of beauty that is neither authentic nor attainable (Etcoff et al, 2004). The need for authenticity informs not only the selection of women for the advertisements but also the scenarios that are used, as noted by one of the team that developed the campaign in the first instance: '[W]e made a lovely spot with a blind girl to advertise physical deodorant and we could have got her a script and encouraged her to script it, but she is who she is and she talks authentically. And actually, it is manifestly the truth' (Fielding et al, 2008). The significance of the editing process emerges later in the present paper, but the point to note here is that although the manifest focus of the campaign is the real beauty of real women, it is criticised in many feminist readings (Dye, 2009; Froehlich, 2009; Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Scott & Cloud, 2008). The fundamental problem is that Dove markets itself as an esteem-building brand based on enhancing women's *natural* beauty, yet what it sells are beauty products; it is not, therefore, a shining beacon of social change, but a product of corporate aims, implicit in the

social problems it seeks to transform (Dye, 2009). In brief, the campaign for real beauty is part of the very social aesthetic by which women become stereotyped and stigmatised.

This paper focuses on three Dove advertisements that feature women who have visual impairments. The first advertisement, already mentioned, is for deodorant; the second is for the movement for self-esteem; and the third is for hair colour radiance shampoo/conditioner. Aired between 2007 and 2012, all three advertisements depart from the ableist aesthetic insofar as they *do* contain slice of life representations and *are* used in a mainstream campaign, facts that should be acknowledged from the outset. However, in relation to distortion and exclusion the advertisements are far from progressive and even the disclosure of impairment warrants some discussion.

The deodorant advertisement shows a woman who is alone but getting ready to go out with her friends. She tells us that she loves this chance to relax and pamper herself, that she finds the whole experience therapeutic. However, she explains, her deodorant and hair spray must be kept apart to avoid confusion between the two, thereby suggesting that, for her, the purely visible labels are not accessible. This hint toward visual impairment is sustained when we are told that the woman chooses her clothes by how they feel, that she has to be especially careful about using deodorant that leaves marks, and that she puts sellotape on the end of her eyeliner so as not to confuse it with lip liner. The woman's impairment ultimately becomes explicit, though, for she asserts that she does most things by touch since losing her sight. Thus, the initial concealment is not simply about protecting the normative aesthetic: it adds punch to the revelation that the woman so preoccupied by looks does not perceive by visual means.

The full power of this punch is captured in the critical term *aesthetic blindness* (Bolt, 2013), which designates the epistemological myth of blindness to aesthetic qualities, whereby visual impairment becomes synonymous with ignorance, and aesthetic qualities are perceived by purely visual means. A consequence of this myth is that aesthetic qualities perceived by other than visual means find expression, indeed legitimation, via visual terms – and, by extension, even the emotions become so framed, as illustrated in the Dove Trilogy.

Aesthetic blindness is implicit in the advertisement for hair colour radiance shampoo/conditioner, which focuses on one woman, like the deodorant advertisement, but represents slices, rather than a single slice of life. The woman is shown sitting on a sofa, in the shower, on the beach, in a car, in a boat, in a field, and so on. Again, the ableist aesthetic is not disrupted initially, for there are no signifiers of visual impairment until the woman finally says, ‘Being blind I can’t physically see the colour of my hair.’ Thus, aesthetic blindness is implicit because, as in the deodorant advertisement, visual impairment is concealed for effect, specifically to bolster the revelation that the woman who has so much to say about beauty does not perceive by visual means.

The movement for self-esteem advertisement is similar insofar as it begins with a woman on her own but, unlike the others, she is not preoccupied with beauty or how she looks. Rather than getting ready for a night out, for example, she is preparing for a game of cricket. The advertisement is also different because instead of concealing her visual impairment in order to reveal it as the narrative unfolds, this woman opens with an explicit reference to when she began to lose her sight. Indeed, where concealment is employed creatively in the other advertisements, in this case there may be a charge of reductionism in the emphasis on visual impairment, a danger of ‘reducing the complex person to a single attribute’ (Garland-

Thomson, 1997, p. 12). Where the trilogy unifies, however, is in ocularcentrism. Although the woman in the movement for self-esteem advertisement reassures us that she has found her passion in the sport she plays twice a week, the vast majority of her direct (but obviously edited) speech refers or alludes to vision – and, by extension, visual impairment.

If the Dove trilogy is complex in terms of disclosure, it is profoundly problematic in relation to distorted representation. Most explicitly, the woman in the Movement for Self-esteem advertisement asserts that when she began to lose her sight ‘it all seemed so dark,’ thereby illustrating an ocularcentric rendering of visual impairment that invokes the fear of darkness in order to elicit pity. Far more than pity and fear, however, it is wonder that distorts the Dove trilogy’s representation of people who have visual impairments. For example, in the deodorant advertisement the woman says, ‘I don’t know why I use a mirror, I can’t see myself,’ an expression of perplexity that is likely to elicit wonder in the viewer, as the visual domain becomes appropriated by someone who perceives by other means. The use of the mirror resonates with aesthetic blindness, as though beauty must be assessed visually, a suggestion confirmed when the woman finally turns to the camera and asks, ‘Do I look fit?’ The importance of the visual assessment of her beauty thereby becomes explicit and the implied audience finds a sense of narrative closure, a release from tensions around any suggested departure from ocularcentric aesthetics.

The advertisement for the Movement for Self-esteem is similarly fixated on vision and employs what is sometimes called an overcoming narrative (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). The woman in the advertisement employs ocularcentric language in order to overcome her visual impairment. ‘I found my passion,’ she asserts, ‘I found the light.’ At this point viewers see a sunlit scene that reveals the woman’s passion to be cricket.

The visual references continue as she says, 'I started to see things clearly' and 'I don't let my sight get in the way.' This contrary reference to 'sight' denotes visual impairment, which illustrates the point that 'if the actions of disabled individuals are cited as the source of overcoming, then it is only to the extent that they successfully distance themselves from the stigma of their own biologies' (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 208). The woman's self-esteem depends on her distancing herself from the stigma of her visual impairment. Paradoxically, this narrative about overcoming visual impairment works by rendering the woman's predicament in visual terms. Although the ocularcentric aesthetic ostensibly allows expression of achievement, it necessarily leaves people who have visual impairments wanting.

The use of an overcoming narrative is less explicit in the advertisement for hair colour radiance shampoo/conditioner, but the evocation of wonder is nonetheless strong and emanates from the concept of synaesthesia. In a radio programme about this advertisement, the creative director Sarah Bamford explains that the idea comes from a briefing with Dove and a colour psychologist about a test on someone who is blindfolded and yet can feel if colours are cool or warm (*In Touch*, 2012). Indeed, Kate Crofts, the woman in the advertisement, asserts in the same programme that she is 'acutely aware of the synaesthesia phenomenon of enjoying and experiencing one sense through another' (*In Touch*, 2012). In the advertisement she tells us that colour is sounds, smells, and textures: yellow is sunshine on her face, lemon in her drink; and blue is cool water, air, and sky. She also refers to the pertinence of different colours to different moods, although this point is problematically illustrated via an invocation of stereotypes, whereby blondes are 'bubbly and fun and girly' and red hair reveals passion. The supposed significance of colour becomes more dramatic when we are told that even normal things become vivid: 'It's like the feeling of the sun on my

skin or the wind in my hair'; 'I feel like laughing and dancing'; and 'I feel beautiful. It makes me happy and I want it to stay that way because I want to feel like that every day.' The perception of colour becomes paramount, as though sight is the supreme sense by which the other senses are led. The woman perceives by other than visual means but her very emotions are translated into visual terms.

Adding the proverbial insult to injury, the Dove trilogy is patently problematic in relation to access. Despite late twentieth-century legislation, the accessibility of advertising remains an issue for those of us who have visual impairments in the twenty-first century. Google AdSense, for example, has been found inaccessible because it uses the iframe tag and JavaScript, and as such prevents many screen-readers from being functional in reading the content (Thomson, 2006). The Dove trilogy is comparably inaccessible because there are no audible indications of the products being advertised: in the first advertisement, the product becomes apparent in the form of an image of Dove Invisible, a deodorant that, according to the writing on the screen, keeps the user's 'black dress black'; in the second advertisement, the text reads, 'Dove movement for self-esteem' and 'How do you see the world?'; and in the third advertisement, the text reads 'Keep the feeling of freshly coloured hair' and 'Dove Colour Radiance'. In the absence of an audible representation of these product names and slogans, the advertisements are essentially inaccessible for those of us who do not perceive by visual means, a scenario that is surely worsened by the fact that the advertisers employ people who have visual impairments and use visual impairment as a theme. After all, the implication is that the advertisers accept the aesthetic blindness implicit in their work and imagine that those of us who have visual impairments necessarily have no interest in a beauty campaign.

Conclusion

This paper considers a number of studies from which an ableist advertising aesthetic emerges. The aesthetic captures half a century of problems with disability in advertising. Whatever the advertisers' intentions, the result has tended to be the stigmatisation of people who have impairments. In the case of the recent Dove trilogy, the advertisements are found quite progressive in relation to alterity and segregation, given that they present slices of life and appear in a mainstream campaign. The results of the analysis are less positive in relation to disclosure, owing to the cardinal plot function of visual impairment (whether it be stated at the outset or withheld for dramatic effect). However, the advertisements are regressive in relation to distortion and exclusion, for though not designed to elicit pity or fear, they evoke wonder that is grounded in ocularcentrism and worsened by blatant inaccessibility. The depiction of the pleasure of people who have visual impairments is manifestly positive, of course, but becomes negative when persistently (if not exclusively) expressed in visual terms. If beauty is superficial, as is often said, it becomes even more so when stripped of all but visible content. It has been argued elsewhere that, irrespective of the manifest intention, the campaign for real beauty is part of the social aesthetic by which women become stereotyped and stigmatised. Along similar lines, in the present paper, close analysis of the Dove trilogy reveals it to be part of the ableist social aesthetic by which those of us who have visual impairments are stereotyped and stigmatised.

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