

**Introduction**  
**Changing Images of Disability:**  
**Looking Anew at Disability Images in the Mainstream**  
*Petra Kuppers*  
*Manchester Metropolitan University*  
*United Kingdom*

This issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* addresses an area of inquiry that has been part of the disability movements for a long time: disability representation in the media. How does 'the mainstream' imagine disabled people? How are they addressed; how are they constructed? How do and how can disabled people relate to these images, and take up the tools of representation themselves? How is the category of 'disability' intertwined with cultural self-representation? Over the past decades, disability scholars have become adept in exposing the disabling effects of images of impairments, the structuring effects of stereotypes and the centrality and policing of the 'body' and its differences for the development of cultural narratives.

At the same time, the media have developed more and more complex and varied forms of narrative, imagery, and audience addresses. Market fragmentation and consumer culture mark contemporary images of disability, as disabled people in Western cultures come to be seen as consumers and addressees. This issue finds entry points into these complex contemporary images and their cultural positions.

As Mairian Corker reminds us in her paper, visuality is a privileged site for social interaction, and a technique which makes meaning, not a neutral practice. Visual images are produced within discursive spaces which define what becomes legible and understandable to actors in a social environment. They are produced within an apparatus that defines the relations of consumption and production. They are created in specific institutions such as the advertising industry, the fashion industry and Hollywood. Their meanings are negotiated in interaction between different bodies and subjects - issues of spectatorship, audience address and contingent frameworks for consumption, such as genres and conventions, shape the creation of meaning.

The papers collected here stress different aspects of this production of meaning. Mairian Corker explores the necessity to be awake to the performativity of images: in her discussion of a recent British Government advertising campaign, she provides a careful reading of how the theatre of image consumption, with its different actors, can undermine the concept of 'positive images.' Disability campaigners need to understand the consequences of the regimes of visuality if new representational strategies are to be found.

Christopher Smit shares with us the concern and ideas that shaped a recent conference on film and disability. Smit sees the need for disability scholars to go beyond an analysis of cinema narratives in terms of 'positive' and 'negative' representations. He calls controversially for a 'non-political, aesthetic analysis' which focuses on film as art, and complements the emphasis on cultural studies approaches to cinema. Maybe we need to think about a politics of aesthetics on different terms, as executed within the pages of this issue.

Disabled people have often served as metaphors for the modern and postmodern condition - Patrick McDonagh inserts an interesting note of difference into these discussions by pointing out how medical categories of impairment themselves are shaped by the cultural environment. He discusses autism as a diagnostic category which articulates core concerns about identity, and autism's use as metaphor in contemporary US film-making.

Another analysis which pays close attention to the mechanics of genericity and historic references within film practice is executed in Carrie Sandahl's reading of the US film *There's Something About Mary*. The film is highly controversial in its representation of disabled characters, but still affords pleasure to viewers, even those who are aware of its manipulation of familiar stereotypes. Sandahl's analysis aims to address that contradiction by seeing the work of these stereotypes within the specific practice of comedy film making.

Petra Kuppers explores the conditions within which fashion imagery can produce discourses of male beauty. In an analysis of a fashion photograph of disabled British rock artist and actor Mat Fraser, Kuppers creates an echo between the 19th century dandy and contemporary concerns with performativity in identity politics.

Scholarly activity on the meanings of images is part of the circulation and production of culture, and feeds back into the industries. This link between the different production sites is often ignored.

With these articles, *DSQ* produces a snap-shot of contemporary work on the relationship between image production and identity politics. Core issues that emerge out of the papers address the necessity to re-define representational politics, and to place the production and consumption of images and identities into wider discursive and institutional analyses. At a time when many identity scholars look hard at traditional understandings of politics and constructions of self, it will be fascinating to see how we within the disability studies community answer to the challenges of our global culture and find ways of making a difference.