

**Performing Femininity:
Frames, Agency and Disability Politics**
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Aimee Mullins is a fashion model who wears artificial lower legs. She has found her way into high fashion shootings, and graces international magazine covers. This paper investigates readings of her disabled public persona, in order to excavate and articulate the problems faced by artists and other image-makers engaged in representational politics.

The disabled research community (as well as other identity-orientated interest groups) embraces different approaches to images and self-representation. Broadly, these (non-exclusive) approaches can be simplified and grouped under the headings of the movement and the humanities perspective. The movement approach stresses individual agency in the creation of imagery, and the dialogic character of an image as an intervention into existing regimes of representation. A humanities approach views representation within a historic and discursive framework. Here, the artist is not necessarily seen as a free agent, able to articulate her own identity, but any image is seen as bound within its specific discursive frame, unable to escape those structures that make social meaning possible. The problem that emerges from these views of representation are similar to the dilemma identified within Foucauldian-influenced identity politics: agency and passivity are intertwined, any active intervention is bound by structural constraints which define the meaning of individuality, agency, and social effect. Meanings emerge in negotiation, guided by different agendas, frames, dialogues, effects, and positionalities.

The public images of Aimee Mullins provide a rich textual field which can highlight the bridges, continuities, and discontinuities between the different approaches to images. The meanings of gender, disability, show business, and different media addresses merge to create a complex pattern whose social effects are hard to measure, but interesting to chart.

The image of Aimee Mullins I want to discuss was presented in (a UK daily) *The Guardian*, August 29th 1998, and also in the September issue of the magazine *Dazed and Confused*. It was part of a fashion shoot executed by Alexander McQueen in which a range of disabled people appeared as models. The shoot gained a high profile in the UK and the furor created reverberated in the US, for instance in Rosemarie Garland Thomson's discussion of disabled fashion models at the 1999 Society for Disability Studies conference in Washington, D.C.

The large colour photo presents Mullins sitting on the floor, her head in her hand in a defeated or melancholic position. She appears squeezed into the frame, contained by the photo's borders. The colours of the image are brown and beige, earthy, taking up the blond of Mullins' wild hair and echoed in the make-up. Mullins is wearing various stiff items of clothing, all of which extend out of the photo frame. The clothes are referenced in the accompanying text in accordance with the generic conventions of fashion photography. They comprise: a calico-coloured skirt skeleton reminiscent of whalebone crinoline underskirts ("crinolin [sic] frame, for hire from Angels and Bermans") and a textured close-fitting top ("suede T-Shirt by Alexander McQueen") to which shoulder ornaments are attached that look like wooden filigree Japanese or Spanish fans ("wooden fan jacket, by Givenchy Haute Couture"). She is also wearing artificial mannequin lower legs (not referenced as "model's own" in the picture blurb, but extensively discussed in the press). The legs look old and stained and, while one foot with coloured toenails is visible in the frame, the other reaches out to frame-left.

The image immediately reminds me of Romantic dolls and artificial ladies on the borderline of life and death - Hoffmann's Olympia or Von Eichendorff's marble Venus. In illustrations to E. Th. A. Hoffmann's late-romantic short story "The Sandman," the mechanical Ersatz woman Olympia is often wearing just such a crinoline as she turns her mechanical waltzes and

bewitches Nathanael's eyes. She enchants Nathanael - as a doll, she is the perfect screen for the projection of his own narcissistic desires which imbue her with tenuous life. In Joseph von Eichendorff's short story "The Marble Image," a marble Venus in a beautiful, mysterious garden similarly becomes a crystallisation point for male desire. As she is brought to life through their wishes, her identity is made up out of a thousand images glimpsed or dreamt of by the male hero, Florio. Olimpia's and the marble Venus' status - half-way between agency and passivity - marks them as the focal points of romantic narratives, but disrobes them of their mystery as living women. Once the spell is broken, and the male heroes emerge from their delusions, Olimpia becomes an assemblage of limbs and mechanisms, and Venus nothing but cold marble. How much is Mullins' presentation as an image of femininity created out of the wishes and dreams of our culture, and how much is she performing that image, active in the donning of the veils of imagery?

In the Mullins image I see a beautiful doll now discarded and stuffed awkwardly into a loft or the corner of an empty house. *The Guardian* underlines the relationship between the artificial legs and the doll:

[Mullins] is very proud of her pretty legs. She will later be photographed in them, styled, with her full co-operation, to look like a Victorian doll: a decidedly dilapidated Victorian doll - for this picture, Mullins put the glue on her legs herself. (p. 15)

It is interesting to note that the legs have become a fashion item - Mullins is seen "in" them, rather than "wearing them." This interpretation is also supported by Mullins herself, who campaigns for more desirable prostheses to become available in the US. It is also the narrative angle of other media, such as the London *Daily Telegraph*, which ran a long story on Mullins and Heather Mills, another young, vibrant, beautiful amputee, and their quest to find the perfect prosthesis.

In the Mullins photo, the drained colour scheme, bedraggled hair, the exotic connotations of the fans, and the historic allusions of the skirt all create this image of a doll, as do the visible seams between Mullins' real and her artificial legs, which look like the joints of Barbie dolls with bendable knees. Even her real flesh looks stiff: her gaze is fixed, staring down-wards, and both her hands, one underneath her head, one on her knee, are open with fixed, spread fingers. In her stiffness, dirt, and melancholia, the image can be read as the death pallor of femininity, this construction of female identity which underlies much romantic gender imagery. Lethargy, consumption, beauty most beautiful in its moment of non-selfpresence: Mullins' pose echoes the dead and near-dead ladies depicted and analysed in Bram Dijkstra's art-historic study *Idols of Perversity* under the headings of "The Cult of Invalidism," "The Collapsing Woman," or "The Nymph with the Broken Back." Dijkstra charts how conflicting fantasies of female masochism, ultimate submission into death, as well as ambivalent feelings about a threateningly active female sexuality, merged into artistic representations of women at the turn of the last century which favoured the woman on the borderline of death and life.

But Mullins' image is a photograph, indexing a real woman, not a painting of an allegory, a fantasy, or a myth. Elisabeth Bronfen discussed how the representation of the real-life dying woman simultaneously references reality and consigns femininity to the quotable canon. The literal and the figural merge uneasily in the constellation of woman and death. This instability and fascinating unease is, in my opinion, also referenced in the Mullins' shoot. Edgar Allan Poe wrote that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world," a quotation which not only sums up femininity in the romantic sublime, but also foreshadows high fashion's fascination with death and danger.

Helmut Newton was the fashion photographer who started a craze for depicting thin, pale fashion models in scenarios that echo crime scenes: post-rape, post-mortem shoots of meager flesh. Given this history, Alexander McQueen's choice of subject, the disabled woman, presented amongst the paraphernalia of the doll, is neither revolutionary nor new. We could easily close this discussion by delegating the image into the canon of disabling and misogynistic imagery. But I find

that this movement is not quite so easy for me: this is a real woman amongst the doll works. The media discourse surrounding the image stresses Mullins' agency. Her widely publicised choice to be a fashion model (rather than being picked by a famous designer) and her work around fashion and prosthesis become intertextualised with her success in the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta, her feats in sprinting and long jump. It seems important to *The Guardian's* writer Susannah Frankel that Mullins is in control of how her disability is represented: "Mullins put the glue on her legs herself." Can we just dismiss personal agency as "false consciousness" or as media-attempts at political correctness?

Bronfen quotes Elaine Scarry in order to discuss the relationship between knowledge and representation of death, but I want to use the same quote to talk about the struggle of a represented, framed, canonised identity:

[t]he instability of the verbal (and visual) sign is that a representation can work in two ways; it can coax real pain into visibility or push it into further invisibility (p.3).

The instability of the photo lies for me in the tension between the heritage of imagery referenced in its mise-en-scene, and the awkwardness of the living body wedged into this uncomfortable position. As a feminist, for me, the wooden fans and crinoline do not only reference the literary and art historical canon, but also the phenomenology of body discipline, of docile bodies. My own body rebels at the thought of the discomfort experienced by my fore-mothers, and my reading is driven onwards by the political desire to find images to live by.

Mullins' pose is in tension. Her straight fingers pointing outwards do not only remind me of the doll, but also allow me a glimpse into the corporeal, kinesthetic quality of her position, show me traces of the moment when she was sitting for the photographer. The traces of her life and the specifics of her experience are not wholly erased by the discourses that frame her: she exceeds the frame, just as her stiff paraphernalia escape the photographer's lens. The pain of representation is literally played out across her body as the price for feminine beauty becomes apparent to me.

Bronfen discusses the destabilizing effects of the literal and the figural in the paintings made by Ferdinand Hodler of Valentine God-Darel, dying of cancer, or of the images of Elizabeth Siddall, wife and muse to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In her study, she finds interesting scenarios of complicity and agency in the relationships evidenced on the canvas and in the historic frame: no one interpretation holds, the perversely tenacious complexities of real life intrude on male fantasies.

Similarly, disability identity politics can become complicated in the web of historic references, contemporaneous agencies, media intertextuality and my, the analyst's, desire to see life rather than death. In order to enlarge our vocabulary of aesthetic practices and political choices, we need to bridge the insights and strategies of discursive analysis with the complexities of artistic and subjective agency, both for producers and consumers of the images which surround us.

References

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