Disability in Fashion Photography and the Architectures of the Visible

Chiara Tessariol*

Università di Bologna (IT)

Abstract

This article examines the visual representation of disability within contemporary fashion photography, questioning whether the increased presence of non-normative bodies signals a meaningful shift in aesthetic regimes or merely reframes existing exclusions in more palatable terms. Fashion imagery is approached here not as a neutral site of visual celebration, but as a cultural apparatus that regulates access to visibility and symbolic value. Through the analysis of editorial practices and selected photographic case studies, the article interrogates the ways in which disabled bodies are stylized, legitimated or marginalized. The argument advanced is that visibility alone does not guarantee transformation because inclusion often operates through subtle strategies of containment, where difference is rendered acceptable only when aligned with dominant visual expectations. As such, the politics of representation must be understood not simply in terms of who is seen, but under what conditions and with what effects.

Keywords: Fashion Photography; Aesthetics of Inclusion; Disability Representation; Body Politics; Magazine Discourse.

* ✉ chiara.tessariol@unibo.it

Introduction

In a particularly charged set of editorial campaigns, ranging from Jillian Mercado's appearance in *Teen Vogue* (2018) to Aaron Rose Philip's 2019 debut in *Paper Magazine* and Sinéad Burke's inclusion on the cover of *British Vogue* (2023), the fashion industry has made visible an array of bodies once systematically excluded from its visual lexicon. These are not incidental appearances. Photographs of models with Down syndrome, mobility aids, visible prosthetics or non-normative bodily traits break into the glossy of fashion media, confronting viewers with forms of embodiment long deemed incompatible with the idealized codes of glamour. Their emergence is often celebrated as an emblem of progress and as a proof that the industry is opening up to diversity, and yet, a closer look reveals that these images are never just about bodies: they are about power. Stylized, highly curated and often channeled through a precise aesthetic grammar, these representations invite critical attention not simply for *who* they show, but *how* and *why* they are shown.

This article examines the photographic framing of disability in contemporary fashion media as a site where visibility and regulation are intricately intertwined, drawing on critical perspectives that explore the cultural construction of legitimacy, eventually questioning whether the presence of non-conforming figures in fashion media truly disrupts dominant ideal or whether it reinforces them in new aesthetic forms. What is at stake in this inquiry is the symbolic positioning of disabled embodiment within the visual regimes of fashion, approached as a field where meaning, desire and social value are constructed; and the analysis begins from the view that fashion photography can open up spaces for political and relational expression, unless neutralized by stylistic conventions.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a critical visual and discursive approach, grounded in reading of editorial campaigns and theoretical discourse. While it does not claim to offer a comprehensive overview of the field, it aims to foreground the aesthetic logics through which disability is made visible (or remains obscured) within fashion media.

Visual Genealogies and Cultural Mediations of Disability in Fashion

World War II marks a turning point in the social approach to disability, especially in the United States, where the massive return of amputee soldiers and wounded civilians requires a radical rethinking of individual autonomy; a sort of redefinition that regards not only access to public spaces, but also the possibility of self-determination through the act of dressing. The need to regain bodily agency translates, therefore, into a progressive focus on clothing as a vehicle for social reintegration.[1] It is in this climate that the then still embryonic idea of accessible fashion for disabled bodies takes shape, destined to re-emerge with renewed force in later eras. But the legitimization of disability as an "aesthetic subject" also draws from a deeper visual genealogy, rooted in the 1940s, when growing interest in emotional communication and the "material experience" of costumes in cinema brought the body to the narrative forefront,[2] anticipating the ambivalent role that fashion magazines would later play as powerful creators of imagery.

Nevertheless, fashion and lifestyle magazines, which are the main vehicles for constructing standards of beauty and ideas of what is desirable have, as we shall see, often struggled to embrace forms of inclusivity, especially in the immediate post-war period, due to a number of social and cultural factors, but let's take a small step back. During the interwar period, Italy witnessed a marked proliferation of periodicals targeted specifically at women. These publications featured a diverse range of content — from domestic advice columns and entertainment news to serialized fiction, fashion updates and articles on popular

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1. Kate Annett-Hitchcock, *The Intersection of Fashion and Disability. A Historical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024), 84–88.

2. Bethan Bide, "Costume Design and Emotional Communication in 1940s British Cinema," in *Fashion and Feeling. The Affective Politics of Dress*, eds. Roberto Filipello and Ilya Parkins (Cham: Palgrave, 2023), 63–66.

culture — effectively bridging the public and private spheres and reinforcing a connection between women and the emerging culture of consumption. This phenomenon intensified significantly in the postwar era. In facts, in the years immediately following World War II, while the presence of wounded veterans and amputees highlighted the urgent social need for adaptive and inclusive fashion, women's magazines pursued an opposite strategy: they sought to construct a "comfort zone" of absolute beauty and perfection, where difference from the normative body was deliberately excluded. Fashion and costume journals promoted a dreamy, idealized dimension designed to shield readers from the traumas of the recent past, reassuring them with images of harmony, glamour and stability. Within this framework, female figures were often portrayed in domestic interiors, represented as graceful and secure in the management of their own household spaces. Such images reaffirmed traditional gender roles while simultaneously suppressing the visibility of non-conforming corporealities.

In the postwar period, moreover, Italian women's magazines truly flourished, becoming, as Passerini observed, "a gigantic enterprise with tens of millions of readers".[3] By the early 1960s, total circulation had reached nearly 7 million copies; with fashion journals such as *Eva*, *La Donna*, *Novella*, *Gioia!*, etc., and with *Grazia*, published by Mondadori, that led the market with 350,000 copies, closely followed by *Annabella*, published by Rizzoli, with 300,000.[4] This extraordinary reach meant that such magazines played a central role in the daily lives of Italian women. *Annabella*, originally launched in 1933 under the name *Lei*, stands out as a key vehicle in promoting and normalizing an emerging international model of femininity. Addressed primarily to a bourgeois female audience, *Annabella* functioned as a form of "education in modernity".[5] Through its editorial content and advertising, it actively promoted ideals of youthfulness, charm, elegance, and sexual allure — qualities frequently exemplified by Hollywood actresses or the stylized figure of Mrs. Consumer, the archetypal modern American housewife.

Advertising, in fact, has historically built its communication around ideals of physical integrity, athletic prowess and conforming beauty, emphasizing individual productivity and success as key values.[6] Thus, the portrayal of disability has been severely limited and often filtered through stereotypical images, which have reduced its complexity.[7] This exclusion reflects a strategic intent: to associate products with models of power and social desirability, favoring only bodies perceived as "presentable" and relegating divergent corporeality to the margins of advertising communication.[8] During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, fashion photography largely reinforced dominant ideals of beauty and bodily integrity, mirroring the consumerist optimism of postwar culture and leaving little space for alternative corporealities. This period of consolidation, however, provides the necessary background against which the experimental ruptures of the 1980s and 1990s would later gain their critical significance. During the 1980s and 1990s, infact, a decisive intermediate phase emerged that reshaped the visual languages of fashion photography: independent magazines such as *The Face*, *i-D* and *Dazed & Confused* became laboratories of experimentation where subcultural styles were integrated into the fashion imaginary. Such publications privileged a raw aesthetics, also presenting street-culture references, that valorized an immediacy of representation that disrupted those previous ideals of polished beauty.[9] In such way, these magazines provided a crucial platform of "dialogic" nature of fashion photography, one that negotiates between

3.   Luisa Passerini, *Europe in Love, Love in Europe: Imagination and Politics Between the War* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 1994), 337.

4.   Gioacchino Forte, *I persuasori rosa sociologia curiosa del rotocalco femminile in Italia* (Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1966), 114.

5.   Adam Arvidsson, *Marketing Modernity Italian Advertising from Fascism to Postmodernity* (London, New York: Routledge), 2003.

6.   Zenaida Panol and Michael McBride, "Disability Images in Print Advertising: Exploring Attitudinal Impact Issues," *Disability Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 21, no. 2 (2001).

7.   Jack A. Nelson, "The Invisible Cultural Group: Images of Disability," in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, ed. Paul Martin Lester (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 120–25.

8.   Divya Parashar and Narayan Devanathan, "Still Not in Vogue: The Portrayal of Disability in Magazine Advertising," *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling,* Vol. 37, no. 1 (2006), 13–20.

9.   Paul Jobling, *Fashion Spreads: Word and Image in Fashion Photography Since 1980* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 45–47.

commercial imperatives and cultural critique.[10] Importantly, the inclusion of non-normative corpore-alities within these editorial projects anticipated later developments in mainstream fashion publishing, where the normalization of diversity would be framed as innovation rather than rupture.

In this new logic with political connotations, the fashion press acts both as a place for aesthetic circulation and as a discursive arena in which issues of cultural legitimacy are negotiated.[11] The visibility of unconventional models in these decades prepared the terrain for the inclusive strategies adopted by global magazines in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the most incisive shift occurs in the new millennium, when disability's depiction becomes part of the broader dynamics of aesthetic comprehensiveness, conveyed primarily by social media. As Pompa notes "on the one hand, these platforms are witnessing a paradoxical recrudescence of old, highly 'exclusive' beauty standards; on the other hand, the normalization of the inclusion of divergent bodies from those usually presented in the dominant visual narratives is gaining ground".[12] In this ambivalence lies the subversive potentiality of social networks, which previously strictly belonged to fashion magazines, of either perpetuating stereotypes or destabilizing them. With such regard, Kate Carroll's reflection proves particularly relevant: through the expression "the 'public face' of Disability", she identifies iconic figures such as Aimee Mullins as embodying a new form of visibility, capable of introducing aesthetic codes that depart from traditional ones.[13]

Alongside this emerging digital phenomenology, institutional and curatorial practices have begun to consolidate and promote this evolving sensibility, such as the exhibition *Design and Disability*, inaugurated at the Victoria and Albert Museum in June 2025. The exhibition also features a section dedicated to inclusive magazine covers, including the landmark *Reframing Fashion* issue of *British Vogue*.[14] This openness also extends to the productive dimension of the fashion system: new agencies and platforms, such as ReVolt Models, Zebedee Management or VisABLE People, are springing up to promote disabled models, helping to deconstruct the dominant aesthetic imaginary.[15] In March 2021, moreover, on International Women's Day, the organization Easterseals promoted a photo campaign focused on marginalized groups' representation in the fashion industry, in collaboration with stylist Stephanie Thomas, founder of the Cur8able platform and photographer Brad Swonetz.[16] The initiative involved the reworking of famous magazine covers depicting black female icons, including Naomi Sims, Jennifer Lopez, Selena Quintanilla and Lena Horne, reinterpreted by models with disabilities. The campaign, which found distribution through official Easterseals and Cur8able channels, intervenes on the level of established iconography by reinterpreting recognizable covers and outlining a resemantization strategy that redefines access to the visible.[17]

In recent years, these changes have sparked renewed academic interest, particularly in the social sciences.[18] Sociological research has highlighted how audiences often respond positively to images and

10.   Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 14–15.

11.   Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2020), 59–65.

12.   Chiara Pompa, "The Beauty of Inclusivity: 'Visual Activism' from Social Media to Fashion Magazines," *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (2021), 314.

13.   Kate Carroll, "Fashion, Design and Disability," in *Fashion Design for Living*, ed. by Alison Gwilt (London: Routledge, 2015), 165.

14.   Victoria and Albert Museum, "Design and Disability Exhibition Guide," accessed July 3, 2025, https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/design-and-disability-exhibition-guide.

15.   To further explore see the link to the agencies: ReVolt Models: https://www.revoltmodels.com/; Zebedee Management: https://www.zbdtalent.com/; VisABLE People: https://visablepeople.com/.

16.   "Disability Fashion Advocate Recreates Celebrity Magazine Covers Using Models with Disabilities," *PR Newswire*, March 17, 2021, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/disability-fashion-advocate-recreates-celebrity-magazine-covers-using-models-with-disabilities-301241959.html.

17.   To further read see: Allison Norlian, "How a Hollywood Stylist Is Helping the Fashion Industry See People with Disabilities as Desirable Fashion Customers," *Forbes*, March 16, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/allisonnorlian/2021/03/16/how-a-hollywood-stylist-is-helping-the-fashion-industry-see-people-with-disabilities-as-desirable-fashion-customers/?utm; and "Home," *Cur8able*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://www.cur8able.com/.

18.   Kateryna Pilyarchuk, "In/Exclusion in Fashion Discourse: Are We in or Out?" *Discourse & Society,* Vol. 35, no. 5 (2024),

stories that portray disability in terms of strength and agency. Indeed, these figurations do more than foster recognition, they help reshape the visual and cultural codes through which society understands and frames difference.[19]

This renewed attention within the social sciences to visual representations of identity intersects meaningfully with critical approaches in photography studies, where fashion imagery has long been scrutinized as a site of cultural production and symbolic power. Fashion photography has shaped the collective imagination by presenting subjects in idealized and creating stylized visual worlds that reflect the industry's aspirational logic.[20] As Muzzarelli observes, photographic images do not merely preserve the memory of well-known figures; they also bear the significant responsibility of "literally creating the myth, nourishing it, giving it structure, identity and meaning, whether the figure truly exists or is fictional".[21] As she has systematically discuss,[22] the photographic medium within fashion does not simply illustrate but actively *produces* myth, transforming subjects into icons endowed with cultural permanence. This mechanism of "mythicization" marks the passage from the elaboration of an imaginary, which is often aspirational and collective, to the construction of true style icons, whose visibility stabilizes new aesthetic codes. In this sense, when fashion magazines feature bodies that deviate from dominant canons, the question arises as to whether these images initiate a comparable myth-making process or whether such representations remain confined to the margins of fashion stardom.

Fashion magazines, while presenting themselves as mere vehicles of information, have gradually played a pedagogical function, guiding readers in defining their own image and constructing the self.[23] However, in the contemporary visual context, saturated and hypermediatized often aimed at the celebration of kitsch,[24] an attempt at discontinuity is observed. New images emerge to introduce subjects hitherto excluded from the field of the representable. In this regard, as Ruggerone notes:

> Fashion images are not perceived (nor do they genuinely aim to present themselves) as a world "other" than everyday life, but rather as a prefiguration of goals and desires that are within reach and entirely attainable. Therefore, the bodily structures, especially female ones, that are presented cannot be considered "ideals" in the aesthetic sense of the term, but rather social models offered for public imitation. (Author's translation)[25]

If fashion images present body models as attainable goals, then their function shifts from being merely aspirational to one that is fundamentally normative. Therefore, the emergence of the disabled body in fashion photography, that disrupts this logic, becomes evident, to affirm authentically another mode of existance.[26] Its presence transforms fashion into a space of representation, where the value of the body resides in its singularity and takes on ethical value, as it creates a necessary discontinuity that dissolves the univocity of the traditional editorial gaze. Such bodies generate a perceptual discontinuity by introducing alternative forms that disrupt the established balance of the visual imaginary. As Rodan

606–24.

19. Jordan Foster and David Pettinicchio, "A Model Who Looks like Me: Communicating and Consuming Representations of Disability," *Journal of Consumer Culture,* Vol. 22, no. 3 (2022): 579–97.

20. Claudio Marra, *Nelle ombre di un sogno: Storia e idee della fotografia di moda* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2004), 3–42.

21. Federica Muzzarelli, *L'immagine del desiderio: Fotografia di moda tra arte e comunicazione*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2006, 92. Author's translation.

22. For further discussion, see Federica Muzzarelli, *Moderne icone di moda la costruzione fotografica del mito*. Torino: Einaudi, 2013.

23. Joanne Finkelstein, *Fashion: An Introduction*. New York: NYU Press, 1998, 46.

24. Susan Sontag, *On Photography.* New York: Anchor Books, 1990, 34.

25. Original text: "Le immagini di moda non sono percepite (né per altro intendono veramente proporsi) come un mondo «altro» rispetto alla vita quotidiana, ma al contrario come prefigurazione di obiettivi e desideri a portata di mano e assolutamente realizzabili. Ma allora le strutture corporee specialmente femminili, che vengono proposte non possono esser considerate degli «ideali» nel senso estetico del termine, ma piuttosto dei modelli sociali che si propongono all'imitazione del pubblico." Lucia Ruggerone, "Il corpo simulato: Immagini femminili nella fotografia di moda: Il mercato delle esperienze", *Studi di sociologia*, Vol. 42, no. 3 (2004): 302.

26. Lucia Ruggerone, 277–305.

notes, "What the categories of disability, obesity and ageing represent is a lack of control of the body. As such, these representations become discomforting to many individuals who prefer to believe they are in total control of their bodies and, by extension, themselves".[27] Over time, certain editorial projects have attempted to address this iconographic void. As early as 1993, *The New York Times Magazine* featured an image of Matuschka following a mastectomy, accompanied by the caption "You can't look away anymore":[28] a portrait that departed from the rhetoric of pity to assert a vision of the body as resilient. A decade later, the magazine's cover showcased disability rights activist Harriet McBryde Johnson, portrayed with pride and determination;[29] visual interventions that contributed to shifting the cultural positioning of disability "from the private medical realm into the public arena of consumer culture",[30] and that began to integrate disabled bodies without resorting to rhetorical devices. An "ability-integrated" visual mode is established with the new millenium, in which subjects with disabilities are presented as competent individuals who are fully included in the various spheres of social life, beyond any compassionate or functionally instrumental representation for charitable purposes.[31] In September 1998, Alexander McQueen, serving as guest editor of *Dazed & Confused*, selected Aimee Mullins as the magazine's cover model. Mullins, photographed by Nick Knight in sculptural poses wearing artistically designed prosthetic legs, embodied a striking fusion of *avant-garde* aesthetics and a critique of "body fascism". The editorial intervention was widely acknowledged for its visual and political impact; however, it also generated debate within critical circles, because some interpretations have viewed the imagery as oscillating between subversive intent and techno-fetishism.[32] Twenty years later, *Teen Vogue* (2018), under the editorship of Elaine Welteroth, dedicates its first digital cover to three models with disabilities: Jillian Mercado, Chelsea Werner and Mama Cax, in a shoot photographed by Camila Falquez that privileges authorship and places them in a feminist discourse.[33] Months later, for the Pride Month celebration, in June 2019, *Paper Magazine* features Aaron Rose Philip, a black, transgender woman with cerebral palsy, on its cover, photographed by Myles Loftin and accompanied by an interview with Naomi Campbell.[34] The moments of visibility, thus, seem to intensify until, in May 2023, the most exciting case of representation occurs: *British Vogue*, under the editorship of Edward Enninful and with the support of Sinéad Burke (activist and founder of the accessibility agency *Tilting the Lens*), publishes five covers for the special edition *Reframing Fashion*, portraying Ellie Goldstein, Aaron Rose Philip, Sinéad Burke, Selma Blair and Justina Miles, photographed by Adama Jalloh in a series of powerful shots. A genuine collaboration with the disability community, integrating ramps, silent rooms, adapted

27. Debbie Rodan, et al., "Introduction: Renegotiating Disability, Obesity and Ageing," *Disability, Obesity and Ageing: Popular Media Identifications*, 1st ed., Routledge (2014), 1–18.

28. "Beauty Out of Damage," *The New York Times Magazine*, cover Matushka, August 15, 1993.

29. "Should I Have Been Killed at Birth? The Case for My Life," *The New York Times Magazine*, cover Harriet McBryde Johnson, February 16, 2003.

30. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability and Representation," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 120, no. 2 (2005): 522–27.

31. Divya Parashar and Narayan Devanathan, "Still Not in Vogue: The Portrayal of Disability in Magazine Advertising," 13–20 https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/still-not-vogue-portrayal-disability-magazine/docview/216481566/se-2.

32. See "Read From Alexander McQueen's Guest-Edited *Dazed* Issue (1998)," *Dazed Digital*, January 16, 2020, https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/47909/1/read-from-alexander-mcqueens-guest-edited-dazed-issue-1998-aimee-mullins; Ted Stansfield, "The Magnificent Impact of Alexander McQueen's SS99 Collection," *AnOther Magazine*, October 12, 2016, https://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/9225/the-magnificent-impact-of-alexander-mcqueen-ss99; "Interview: Aimee Mullins," *SHOWstudio*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://www.showstudio.com/projects/unseen_mcqueen/interview_aimee_mullins; Sian Cain, "Meet the Model Agency Fighting 'Body Fascism'," *The Guardian*, August 10, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/aug/10/meet-the-model-agency-fighting-body-fascism.

33. Keah Brown, "What It's Like to Be a Disabled Model in the Fashion Industry," *Teen Vogue*, September 5, 2018, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/cover-story-representation-fashion-industry-jillian-mercado-mama-cax-chelsea-warner.

34. For the interview to Aaron Philip by Naomi Cambell see Naomi Campbell, interview with Aaron Philip, *Paper Magazine*, June 24, 2019, https://www.papermag.com/aaron-philip-naomi-campbell-pride#rebelltitem26; to see more images see *Paper Magazine*, "Paper Magazine Pride 2019 Digital Cover," *Models.com*, June 24, 2019, https://models.com/work/paper-magazine-paper-magazine-pride-2019-digital-cover/1153072; for knowing more about first steps for black trans women representation see Emily Bashforth, "8 Black Trans Women You Should Follow If You're Celebrating Pride Month," *LGBTQ Nation*, June 21, 2021, https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2021/06/8-black-trans-women-follow-youre-celebrating-pride-month.

makeup and accessible clothing, and also introducing audio-described and braille versions, thanks in part to the participation of the *Royal National Institute of Blind People*. According to Enninful, the aim was to embed inclusion as an ongoing editorial practice rather than treating it as a one-off gesture — an approach framed as both long overdue and necessary; and Burke similarly emphasized that access and inclusivity must be understood as shared, collective responsibilities rather than individual initiatives.[35] These publishing experiences are in the groove of a redefinition of the representable, but the question remains: is this a structural transformation or an ephemeral phenomenon? Numerous content analyses have highlighted the persistent under-representation of minority groups in the media, raising the question of why disability should be treated differently and tends to remain marginalized.[36] Indeed, as Melchior observes, "disability is not a front-page issue",[37] underscoring its persistent status as a cultural undercurrent that reflects the marginalization of divergent bodies within mainstream fashion discourse. Furthermore, recent years have witnessed a partial regression in inclusivity, marked by the resurgence of hyper-normative body ideals dominating both runway presentations and editorial content. The fragility of the inclusive framework is evidenced by the article "Inclusivity on the Runways: Has Fashion Ever Truly Embraced Body Positivity, or Was It Merely a Trend?"[38] published in September 2024.

Aesthetic Inclusion or Symbolic Strategy?

In his study *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (1990), Bourdieu introduces the notion of the "field of the photographable" as a set of subjects, objects and situations perceived as legitimately representable in a given social context. The photographable, then, is not a neutral datum: it is defined by internalized social norms, aesthetic conventions and symbolic hierarchies; photography, therefore, confirms and reproduces what a given society recognizes as worthy of visibility.[39] This theoretical framework becomes particularly evident when applied to editorial projects such as *Teen Vogue*'s 2018 digital cover or *Paper Magazine*'s Pride issue of 2019. In these editorials, disabled and queer bodies appear as part of a broader negotiation of style and power. The images lean on polished, highly curated aesthetics that make difference look familiar, even comfortable, within mainstream fashion codes. Thus, what seemed like a breakthrough ends up reinscribing disabled embodiment into well-worn conventions of desirability; eventually, this mechanism reveals a paradox: the very act of granting visibility can operate as a form of containment, where inclusion becomes possible only once it can fit into the "field of the photographable". Indeed, as noted by Rancière, the visible and the sayable are not natural data, but the result of a precise "distribution of the sensible", a system that defines who is entitled to be seen, heard and represented.[40] Applied to fashion photography, such perspectives reveal an exclusionary visuality that has consolidated an aesthetic-political order in which only young, thin, able-bodied, white, cisgender, heterosexual bodies are found in the field of the photographable. Only the irruption of dissent, such as the emergence of the disabled body in the glamorous space, can break this hierarchy.[41] As it has been said previously, bodies that have historically been excluded from mainstream visual culture are increasingly being incorporated into the fashion image, however, this inclusion often occurs only when such bodies

35. Jess Cartner-Morley, " 'I Have an Invisible Disability Myself': Edward Enninful and Sinéad on Their Fashion Revolution," *The Guardian*, April 25, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2023/apr/25/i-have-an-invisible-disability-myself-edward-enninful-and-sinead-burke-on-their-fashion-revolution.

36. Olan Farnall, "Invisible No More: Advertising and People with Disabilities," in *Handbook of Communication and People with Disabilities: Research and Application*, ed. O. Dawn and T. L. Thompson (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000), 307–18.

37. Claudio Melchior, "The Map of Disability: Exploring the Media Representation of Disability and Disabled People," *Salute e Società*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (2023): 170.

38. Veronica Cristino, "*Inclusività alle sfilate: alla moda è mai interessata veramente la body positivity, o è stato solo un trend?*", Vogue Italia, September 24, 2024, https://www.vogue.it/article/body-positivity-moda-sfilate-modelle-inclusivita.

39. Pierre Bourdieu, "Occasions for the Practice and Occasional Practice," in *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 31–37.

40. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 57–93.

41. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 71–73.

are made compatible with prevailing aesthetic norms, even within their "alternative" appearance logic. The previously cited special issue of *British Vogue*, *Reframing Fashion*, represents an emblematic example of this dynamic; as a matter of facts, critics noted that its impact was tied to the symbolic authority of Vogue as an institution, highlighting how legitimacy strickly depends on editorial and curatorial power, rather than on the mere presence of disabled models.[42] Moreover, this form of representation is frequently mediated through medical or celebratory narratives, which may reinforce rather than dismantle structural marginality. The criteria that determine what is deemed visually representable reflect socially constructed symbolic boundaries. As Bourdieu reminds us, to challenge these boundaries is to intervene in the broader process of cultural legitimation.[43] In this regard, Annett-Hitchcock highlighted the strategic role of icons and role models in the process of renegotiating tastes and styles, emphasizing the ability of fashion photography to act as an aesthetic, ethical and political vector.[44] However, this dynamic is ambivalent: the inclusion of marginalised bodies can degenerate into forms of tokenism, where symbolic presence replaces a real commitment to equity, and this tension was already visible in Alexander McQueen's guest-edited issue of *Dazed & Confused* (1998), where Aimee Mullins's presence oscillated between avant-garde empowerment and techno-fetishism. An ambiguity that once again demonstrates how editorial contexts may simultaneously open and constrain possibilities for re-imagining disabled embodiment. The media celebration of figures such as Madeline Stuart or Aaron Rose Philip fits into a logic of cultural capitalization, similar to that which transformed Chiara Ferragni into an object of devotion through visual devices inspired by religious iconograph; one could therefore put forward the hypothesis that while the machinery of fashion celebrity easily transforms models (or, influencers) without disabilities into global icons, disabled models are often framed as exceptions, celebrated for their difference but rarely granted the sustained visibility that produces long-term star power. Thus, another perspective to consider emerges: the often ephemeral nature of these campaigns or illustrations. The appearance of disabled models often takes the form of a spectacular event — a *special* issue, a Pride cover, an anniversary campaign. An event-based logic that produces what could be called ephemeral icons that are celebrated intensely just for a moment, but later rapidly displaced by the next cycle of fashion novelty, as a sort of fleeting recognition. As noted by Piancazzo, the "spectacularisation of the self" and the affective investment generated by micro-celebrity reproduce forms of emotional engagement that also shape the reception of inclusive fashion icons.[45] But disability, to assume a transformative role, must be represented outside the rhetoric of marginality or exceptionality: it must be inscribed as an ordinary component of the human condition.[46] The case of Madeline Stuart, a model with Down syndrome, exemplifies the critical potential of fashion photography in reconfiguring disabled imagery. Stuart constructs a visual narrative that integrates embodied difference as an element of identity, using the transformative logic of "before-and-after", centered on weight loss, which allows her to legitimize herself within dominant aesthetic codes. This process is embedded in an affective economy that, as

42. Sinéad Burke, " 'Nothing Is More Fashionable Than Inclusivity': Sinéad Burke Introduces British Vogue's May 2023 Cover Stars," *British Vogue*, April 20, 2023, https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/vogue-disability-portfolio-2023; and Jess Cartner-Morley, " 'I Have an Invisible Disability Myself': Edward Enninful and Sinéad Burke on Their Fashion Revolution," *The Guardian*, April 25, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2023/apr/25/i-have-an-invisible-disability-myself-edward-enninful-and-sinead-burke-on-their-fashion-revolution.

43. Pierre Bourdieu, "Occasions for the Practice and Occasional Practice," 31–37.

44. Kate Annett-Hitchcock, *The Intersection of Fashion and Disability: A Historical Analysis*, 206. The book also discusses the example of Frida Kahlo (see pp. 113–17), who made extensive use of photography to express her point of view and assert her personality through the styling and display of her body; and eventually providing an historical perspective on the relationship between fashion and disability and highlighting how certain figures have used dress and visual media as tools of self-representation.

45. Flavia Piancazzo, "Celebrities Dressed like a Goddess: Admiration, Cultural Appropriation and Disrespect," *Film, Fashion & Consumption*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (2023): 231–46. Moreover, as has been noted, the phenomenon of micro-celebrities complicates the processes of icon construction: their visibility is intense but often fragmented and ephemeral, circulating within niche digital communities, rather than consolidating into durable symbolic figures. In this regard, Muzzarelli's reflections on the photographic production of myth (Muzzarelli, Federica. *Moderne icone di moda la costruzione fotografica del mito*. Torino: Einaudi, 2013) provide again a useful reflection on how the fashion system has historically transformed certain bodies into stable "icons of style".

46. Antonello Mura and Antioco Luigi Zurru, *Identità, soggettività e disabilità processi di emancipazione individuale e sociale* (Milano: Angeli, 2013), 89–92.

analyzed by Ahmed, redistributes emotions around the disabled body, conveying agentivity.[47]

In the domain of fashion photography, the indical nature of the medium — understood, in Barthes' perspective, as a "faithful reproduction of the real"[48] — takes on a strategic function in the process of redefining aesthetic canons. The apparent neutrality of the photographic device is converted into an instrument of political recognition, a function that is integrated into the concept of *habitus*, that is, the set of internalized dispositions that orient the perception of the visible and establish the boundaries of the representable. In fashion photography, *habitus* functions as an unconscious structure that acts as an aesthetic filter, shaping which bodies are perceived as "naturally" photographable.[49] This is why the appearance of a disabled model can generate perceptual dissonance, her presence challenges the visual *habitus* shared by those who produce and consume the images. As Bourdieu writes, what is photographed responds to an implicit obligation rather than a truly free choice:

> Although the field of the photographable may broaden, photographic practice does not become any more free, since one may only photograph what one must photograph, and since there are photographs which one must 'take' just as there are sites and monuments which one must 'do'.[50]

This "duty to photograph" is nothing more than *habitus* in action: it structures vision even before the lens is pointed, making some images natural and others unthinkable. Disability appears as a perturbing element, as the perception of such bodies as a threat fits into a rhetoric of control, similar to that activated against immigrants in the political-discursive.[51] To this end, the metaphor of the "container"[52] is particularly effective, which, drawing on it in the field of cultural studies, designates fashion as a closed space, regulated by ideological and material boundaries, within which only certain subjects (such as established designers, normed models, etc.) can move with ease, while nonconforming subjects (such as disabled, racialized, nonbinary models) are confined to parallel collections or occasional campaigns. Hence, one can speak of the risk of *virtue signaling*, i.e., inclusion as a marketing strategy rather than as a real renegotiation of legitimacy criteria.[53] The central issue, then, plays out on the terrain of symbolic capital since not all images enjoy the same degree of legitimacy; indeed, photography acquires artistic value only when it is recognized by figures who hold symbolic power, such as critics, curators, art institutions and hegemonic media. In other words, it is not the mere presence of the image that gives it legitimacy, but its placement within an authorized system of recognition.[54] That is to say, the presence of divergent bodies is not enough. For such presence to be culturally effective, it must be supported by devices that inscribe it within the domain of the representable and the legitimate. Authentic inclusion, thus, requires not only representation but also positioning within the circuits of legitimate visibility.[55] Also in the Foucault's perspective photography is a power device that disciplines bodies and the portrayal of the divergent body can be configured, in this sense, as a *limit-experience*, that is, an exposure that exceeds the dominant aesthetic and identity norms, destabilizing the order of the visible. When these bodies are depicted not as exceptions but as desiring subjects, a critical gap is produced that re-

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47. Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø and Camilla Bruun Eriksen, "Madeline Stuart as Disability Advocate and Brand: Exploring the Affective Economies of Social Media," in *Disability, Media, and Representations: Other Bodies,* eds. Jacob Johanssen and Diana Garrisi (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 55–73.

48. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

49. Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, 5.

50. Pierre Bourdieu, "Occasions for the Practice and Occasional Practice," 37.

51. Federica Ferrari, "Metaphor at Work in the Analysis of Political Discourse: Investigating a 'Preventive War' Persuasion Strategy," *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 18, no. 5 (2007): 616–18.

52. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 29–30.

53. Kateryna Pilyarchuk, "In/Exclusion in Fashion Discourse: Are We in or Out?", 606–24.

54. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Definition of Photography," in *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 95–98.

55. Kateryna Pilyarchuk, "In/Exclusion in Fashion Discourse: Are We in or Out?", 606–24.

defines the categories of beauty, but also of desire.[56] The disabled body is frequently confined to an asexual status or, on the contrary, fetishized into marginal and caricatured forms instead of representing it in its erotic, aesthetic or relational subjectivity. However, in order for this representation not to be reabsorbed by the dominant logics of recognizability, it must retain its disturbing charge, as happens in *limit-experiences*, creating an experience that escapes assimilation. Erotic photography, even in inclusive contexts, participates in devices for regulating the gaze and the body. Post-human aesthetics, while deconstructing traditional categories, risks reinscribing difference within new norms.[57] The inclusion of disabled or queer bodies can open up significant spaces, but only if accompanied by critical reflection on the normative function of images. In particular, disabled sexuality remains largely excluded from the regime of the desirable, and often represented according to heteronomous or aestheticizing logics. Moreover, the visibility granted tends to privilege disabilities that are immediately recognizable and compatible with dominant aesthetic standards, reinforcing hierarchies of representability; as has been observed "linking disability with visible illness and referring to disability as beneficiary status, have contributed to discrimination against disabled people".[58] Fashion, in this context, does not merely reflect desire: it produces and governs it. Ultimately, for inclusive fashion to truly constitute a space for cultural transformation, it is necessary to interrogate not only who is represented, but how and according to what logics of visibility and desirability these bodies are staged.

Conclusion

The inclusion of disabled, queer, fat or otherwise non-conforming bodies within the highly codified realm of fashion photography signals a significant shift in the contemporary visual economy. These images puncture long-standing regimes of invisibility, introducing subjects who had historically been denied access to the spaces of aesthetic legitimacy, and yet, as this study has shown, inclusion is never innocent. Within the disciplinary matrix of fashion media, the visibility of difference does not in itself constitute a rupture; on the contrary, the incorporation of marginalised bodies often occurs through modalities of aesthetic domestication — where difference is, in a certain way, made to conform to dominant standards of beauty, desirability, and recognisability. Drawing on the theories of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Rancière, we see that visibility is not a simple matter of presence versus absence, but a complex negotiation of visibility, value, appearance, and power. Fashion photography, far from being a neutral or liberatory platform, continues to function as a filtering apparatus; selecting which forms of disabled embodiment are rendered legitimate, which are aestheticised, and which remain unseeable. The disabled body, thus, emerges not simply as an object of representation, but as a contested site through which the very boundaries of aesthetic citizenship are drawn and redrawn. If visibility alone cannot guarantee political efficacy, then the challenge lies in reconfiguring the terms under which such visibility operates. It requires a shift from inclusion as tokenistic gesture to inclusion as transformative practice; one that engages critically with the politics of the image, destabilises normative frames of desire, and expands the epistemic terrain of fashion itself. In this sense, the presence of disabled subjects in fashion photography should not merely be read as a sign of progress, but as a terrain of struggle: a space where power is negotiated and identity is performed.

If, as Barthes has argued, the photograph functions as an indexical trace of the real, and if, following Butler, identity itself is not a pre-discursive essence but the effect of performative acts — "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results"[59] — then the presence of disabled bodies in fashion imagery

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56. Stefano Marino, "Overcoming 'the Penetration Model': Rethinking Sexuality with Foucault, Shusterman, and Contemporary Feminism," *Foucault Studies,* Vol. 36, no. 1 (2024): 170–200.

57. Federica Muzzarelli and Claudio Marra, *Immaginari proibiti. La fotografia e la provocazione dell'erotismo tween* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2018), 92–112.

58. Zhraa A. Alhaboby, Hala Evans, James Barnes and Emma Short, "Disability and Cyber-Victimization," in *The Image of Disability: Essays on Media Representations*, eds. J. L. Schatz and Amber E. George (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 169.

59. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.

cannot be read as mere reflection: it is also production. Representation, in this light, becomes a constitutive act. To photograph the disabled body is to make it intelligible within the cultural field; or better, to authorise its very possibility of existence, partecipating in the symbolic labour of shaping what counts as desirable and legitimate.

While empirical research has extensively investigated disability within the sphere of political recognition, less attention has been paid to how non-normative embodiment.[60] In the symbolic realm of fashion, visibility becomes a mode of political agency, one that not only resists exclusion but redefines the criteria of recognisability itself. Ultimately, if fashion as a cultural apparatus holds the power to naturalise ideals, then it also contains the potential to denaturalise them. The task ahead is to activate that potential, and not simply through the mere multiplication of bodies on the page, but by confronting and transforming the symbolic structures that determine whose bodies matter and on what terms.

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Chiara Tessariol – Università di Bologna (IT)
✉ chiara.tessariol@unibo.it
She is a PhD student in "Arts, History, Society" (XXXIX cycle) at the Department of Arts, University of Bologna, where she conducts research with gender and feminist perspective and collaborates on the PRIN 2020 (Research Projects of National Interest) *Italian Feminist Photography*. At the same university, she is a fellow at the Research Centre "FAF – Photography Art Feminism", a junior fellow at the International Research Centre "CFC – Culture Fashion Communication".