The Embodiment of Disability. How Ableist Expectations Render Visual Practices

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ABSTRACT

How can the self-portraiture by people with disabilities render visible ableist expectations? The paper investigates the visual practices of people with disabilities on social media. A philosophical-anthropological approach to selfies is deployed to understand the self-representations of people with disabilities. The conditions of 'showing oneself' are researched as the relation of the body, the others, and the normative environment. A visual analysis of social media posts gives insights into how people with disabilities distance themselves from stigmatizing experiences and embody themselves in social relationships. Despite risking stigmatization, the images potentially transform the viewer's gaze on disabled bodies and visualize disability experiences.

1. Introduction

Austrian Television broadcasts a show called "Licht ins Dunkel" (i.e., bring light into the dark) every year in December. The popular show gathers celebrities to meet people with disabilities, who struggle in their everyday lives because of social disadvantages. This reproduces pictures of people with disabilities being depended on help. The images of mainly children and their families in need of help create feelings of pity in the viewers, who, like the non-disabled celebrity persons, are asked to donate money to make the lives of people with disabilities better, to ease their so called fate. Disability activists and scholars have criticized

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this charity event, but it still gains high viewer ratings.[1] Recognizing the progress in human rights discourses on self-determination and self-representation of people with disabilities in Europe, there seems to be little effect on the mainstream visual culture of representing people with disabilities.[2] In daily life, disability is still linked to stigmatization, exclusion, and ableist assumptions of a pitiful life. Finally, this has become a concern in social and educational sciences since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has spread the global norm of inclusion. The concept does not only cover principles to reduce barriers and discrimination; it also fosters self-determination and self-representation.

One of the main interests of disability activists is to counter stigmatization and to transform cultural attributions of disability by drawing attention to ableist expectations (Linton 2005; Poore 2009; Schönwiese 2007). The dismantling of disabling attributions can take place through the participation of people with disabilities in public affairs or education to diversity and the opportunity to speak for themselves (Grandia 2014). Participation on social media platforms plays a more and more critical role in connecting, exchanging, and bringing forward the interests of people, especially those with disabilities and chronic illnesses today (Cocq & Ljuslinder 2020). Visual representations are significant because the exchange of images has increased enormously. In social media communities, individuals and their bodies take center stage; users are invited to display their lives and selves (Hedegaard Heiselberg & Raun, 2024; Satija 2022). People exchange digital visuals to show themselves and their lifeworlds and comment on their experiences. The digital world thus offers possibilities of embodiment (Mirzoeff 2013) because pictorial media offers the chance to externalize experiences and bodily expression visually (Barthes 2020).

[1] For example, the non-governmental organization "andererseits" produced a film about the successful fundraising charity show, informing about the non-compliance of Austrian Television with the equalization tax, undermining the employment of people with disabilities (see: https://www.andererseits.org/das-spendenproblem/).

[2] In 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) created a new legal basis for human and fundamental social rights worldwide. In Article 8, the UNCRPD refers to the continuous struggle for recognition of people with disabilities and awareness-raising for freedom and dignity for all human beings.

This article investigates the visual practices of people with disabilities on social media to understand how the disability experience is made visible and relates to others.

To research images of people with disabilities on social media, we discuss disability as a relational phenomenon that occurs when bodies or the behavior of persons differ from social expectations (Garland-Thomson 2010; Schönwiese 2007; Siebers 2010). Following an understanding of a person as a natural, cultural, and moral human being (Lindemann 2021), we conceptualize visual self-images as interacting with the viewers, creating imaginations of the depicted selves (Wulf 2014, 11). The analysis of visual practices on social media investigates how images make ableist experiences visible. When people present themselves on social media, they create images as selfies and self-portraiture. These visuals offer insights into the cultural and social possibilities of 'showing self.' The images refer to the lifeworld of the portrayed and respond to expectations; they create imaginations of the embodiment of disability. From a philosophical-anthropological perspective, images detach representations as imaginations from their pure depictive power because the image relates to the self, others, and visual discourses.

The analysis aims to describe transformative ideas on disability through disabled people's social media performance and the possible viewers' gazes. By doing this, we close a significant research gap and ask how people with disabilities visually embody themselves as equal subjects in social media with a desire to foster the emergence of more inclusive images. The questions we pose – in short – are: how people with disabilities present themselves in social media, what significance their experiences have in these presentations, and how these experiences are indeed shaped by the very visuals that serve to represent them.

First, the state of research on visuals of disability in social and educational sciences will be reviewed. Second, an anthropological approach to bodies shown in self-images will be developed, focusing on different ways of visual presentations of people with disabilities struggling with social stigmatization. By analyzing social media posts, the subject's positioning and the embodiment of disability will be analyzed in the third part of the article. We conclude that self-images of people with disabilities perform a social experience and react to ableist expectations in at least three dimensions: they position themselves in a shared lifeworld, encounter the ableist gaze, and guide the viewer's view.

2. People with disabilities in media and visual culture

How people with disabilities are represented in visual media has a long history and has been the subject of research in social science and educational science. Until the 20th century, people with disabilities were portrayed as objects of medical deviation or as grotesque in so-called freak shows (Bogdan 1990; Stammberger 2011). Cultural narratives of disability refer to traditional images of loss or burden (Garland-Thomson 2010; Mürner 2003). Many popular images of disability perpetuate these ideas and present people with disabilities as different from non-disabled persons and dependent on help (Pernegger 2023, 94). The production of images must be seen as a powerful process for popular imagination of the abilities and disabilities that come with disabilities (Barnes 1992) because public visuals shape how individuals and groups are seen as part of society (Traue, Blanc & Cambre 2019).

Disability studies have critically examined how people with disabilities are portrayed (Hevey 1992). For example, Colin Barnes (1992) uses various categories to classify and understand the respective visual representations. He identifies multiple negative images and differentiates visuals of disabled persons, represented as

> pitiable, pathetic, sinister, evil, sexually abnormal, as a burden or super cripple, an object of ridicule or violence, as sinister and evil, as atmosphere or curio, as their own worst and only enemy, as incapable of participating fully in community life (Barnes 1992, without pages).

He further argues that people with disabilities must be involved in media production as a corrective and an opportunity to participate in the representations. Images tell stories, and as such, they frame social ideas and co-construct disability narratives. Garland-Thomson (2010) shows that how people with disabilities are seen and understood is linked to the images that circulate about them and that images must, therefore, be understood as "visual narratives" (2010, 23). She names four visual narratives:

> Pictures tell their stories not with words but through visual elements and conventions. The stories that public pictures tell shape the way we understand one another. The images that surround us both reflect received perceptions and mould new ways of thinking about one another. [...] The most prevalent pictures of people with disabilities have come to us through the genres of freakshow photography, charity campaigns or medical photography. These images portray disability narrowly as sensational, sentimental or pathological. Ways of seeing

> disability have expanded, however, as people with dis-abilities have entered into the newly accessible public realm (Garland-Thomson 2010, 23).

These visual narratives on disability refer to conventional "viewing habits" (Krause 2017) of a mainstream audience, where the viewer interprets typical signifiers. Garland-Thomson points out that these visual narratives on disability should not be understood separately from one another but that they break down the content of the images into focalizations through which the images can be arranged. How people perceive images depends on social conventions. An image discriminates when persons with disabilities are shown as objects rather than subjects of the image. However, the relevant modes of representation and the gazes associated with them (Garland-Thomson 2009; Schönwiese 2007) create disability when the images are received. Visual representations are read as 'images of disability' when they are congruent with social expectations towards people with disabilities (Siebers 2010).

In addition, the use of language accompanying the visual is important. Because text frames most of public visual presentations, it guides the interpretation of images. Derogatory language can change the viewers' perception (Poore 2009); it is also incompatible with the principles of modern societies that guarantee equality for all citizens and the principles of inclusion and participation under the UNCRPD.[3] Media coverage of people with disabilities seems to have largely failed to achieve this goal. Recent research on representations of people with disabilities has focused on media representations. An Austrian study on modes of representation in mass media shows that it makes a difference to the visual and textual content of a reportage, whether people with disabilities talk about themselves or whether they are talked about (Pernegger 2015). Life shown on mass media only applies to a limited extent of people and is not particularly representative. Furthermore, the relationship between the external view and the view of the people themselves on the realities of disabled people's lives must be problematized, as both perspectives often differ widely (Krause & Seebo 2022; Siebers 2010).

[3] The UNCRPD calls for a form of representation that realistically portrays people with disabilities in their diversity and makes them the subject of the media representation in Article 8. This awareness-raising aims to represent disabled people in everyday and realistic portrayals and to create sensitivity for inclusion by removing obstacles and barriers (UN 2023).

The recent follow-up study on the representation of people with disabilities in Austrian mass media (Pernegger 2023) shows that disability is predominantly addressed in contradictory ways when it comes to disabled sports and charity campaigns. People with disabilities are portrayed in extraordinary, unusual situations, but often as needy and dependent on the help of others. The study shows increased media coverage of people with disabilities in Austria. Still, the reports are predominantly themed around the Paralympics and the context of fundraising campaigns such as "Licht ins Dunkel." There are differences in representations according to gender, as more men are portrayed. However, this content does not correspond to the reality of people with disabilities and their everyday lives, leisure activities, and working lives (Pernegger 2023, 30–31). Although an overall increase in the number of representations can be observed, only a small range of life realities is shown by mass media (Pernegger 2023, 45).

At the same time, it can be assumed that the range of representations will grow because digital culture opens a variety of media formats in which people visually present themselves. Social media are particularly relevant when it comes to generating attention for topics chosen by people; the widespread use of selfies (Cambre & Lavrence 2023) makes them relevant for visually representing people with disabilities and circulating images of their everyday lives. To contribute 'images of disability,' social media are the platform for realizing this easily. Social media's barriers to showing oneself and sharing visuals are lower than those in mass media: people relate to communities and the public.

Few studies focus on the representation of people with disabilities in social media. A combination of discourse analysis and visual analysis was used in a language-based study on bloggers in self-help communities by Cocq and Ljuslinder (2020). They dissect when and how disability as a topic is addressed by social media users (Cocq & Ljuslinder 2020, 75). The analyses conclude how people typically see themselves: "either as having a disease or as being prevented or hindered from participating in society as a result of social structures" (Cocq & Ljuslinder 2020, 76). The authors refer to the first group as part of the medical discourse and the second as part of the social discourse on disability. Nevertheless, all bloggers first introduced themselves with facts other than their disability (Cocq & Ljuslinder 2020, 76). This de-thematization can, in turn, also be interpreted as a prerequisite for participation in online communities. The authors identify four narratives of the embodiment of disability: dealing with shame and guilt; social circumstances causing the disability; 'I am like others, I

am normal', and 'I have a diagnosis, I am not my diagnosis' (Cocq & Ljuslinder 2020, 78–80).

In this perspective, dominant discourses about disability convey the image of people with disabilities but also shape their self-image. Struck-Peregończyk and Leonowicz-Bukała (2023) conducted a comparable study on the self-portrayals of influencers on Instagram. With a qualitative content analysis of narratives within 100 posts, they demonstrate representations such as the "victim-supercrip" contradict the common representations of people with disabilities in Polish mass media (Struck-Peregończyk & Leonowicz-Bukała 2023, 74). With the increased visibility of people with disabilities on social media and the spaces that have emerged on the internet, an online "disability culture" has appeared (Haage 2020, 289). Studies focusing on self-representations of people with disabilities discuss these representations as a possibility to foster the rise of a more inclusive visual culture. Studies of mass media, in contrast, show how visual narratives reproduce mainstream images of care and dependency or highlight extraordinary bodies and abilities. Tensions of being disabled and extraordinarily abled manifest in the figure of the 'supercrip.' The trope of the supercrip has been framed as problematic because it represents a disabled subject through a heroic lens, indicating "what society demands of the individual" (Bröckling 2020; the authors' translation).

A standard critique of these representations is that they lack everyday experiences. Going yet further than this critique, we will address the visualized and imagined embodiment of disability as the ground of social relations and relations to oneself. Images mediate lifeworld experiences between the depicted and the viewer and guide the viewers' gazes to themselves. To center these bodily effects and visual forms of embodiment as a heuristic potential, we draw from philosophical anthropology approaches to understand human beings as subjects who depend on social relations for being in the world.

3. Theoretical reflections: How to show oneself as a person with disabilities?

The concepts of a culture of digitality (Stalder 2016) and visual culture (Mirzoeff 2013) describe how the visual asserts its dominance in multiple lifeworlds (Schütz 1971 [1932]). Emerging media conditions create multiple possibilities for visualizing self-portraiture: being portrayed by others, being portrayed by oneself, and combinations thereof (Plessner 1982, 153). When people enter social media, they enter a world where the visual is comprehensive. As described

before, the dominant visual discourse on disability is derogatory or pitiful. People with disabilities who share images on social media, like in other everyday life interactions, are at risk of encountering hate and stigma. We assume people are aware of this danger and reflect answers through visual forms. Here, we are especially interested in understanding how self-images allow people with disabilities to visualize their bodies' conditions and experiences. We ask about the viewer's gaze and, further, the viewing habits the images create.

Portraying oneself on social media risks stigmatization for people with disabilities based on socially attributed 'typical characteristics' (Goffman 1986). According to a person's natural, cultural, and moral status (Lindemann 2021), these attributions are strong and cannot be defended when a self-image is shared on social media. However, they can also be diffuse or invisible, meaning they must be made to appear by the user to become the subject of an image.[4] Whereas visual practices and images visibilize, the social meaning of visibility is produced in social interactions of commenting and reacting to the visuals. Therefore, despite dominant visual discourses, how bodies are seen is not predetermined; this gaze results from social relations through negotiation processes. This is why changing the pictures that show people with disabilities is linked to social attributions and leads to inclusive or exclusive effects. By examining how people create images, we can observe the sharing of images and captions as an interaction that perpetuates, counteracts, or sidesteps stigmatization. However, to learn about people's orientations, what they intend, and what goals they may pursue by showing themselves on the internet, we must explain how they relate to themselves as the image′s subject. To grasp visual practices of self-representation, we understand self-portrayals and selfies as a social performance. The analysis of self-images aims to describe the possibilities of showing one's body and reconstructing individual orientations in the social world. These orientations can be needs-based, part of daily routines, of desire and longing, or driven by personal interests, knowledge-based, or strategic actions.

Since images address the viewers, the reception of images is a performative action. The viewers enter a relationship with the images that can be touching. It affects how they relate between distance and closeness, public and intimate imaginations, gaze, and physical contact with each other (Fischer-

[4] Goffman (1986) speaks of "stigma management", when discredited people who cannot hide their stigma and discreditable people, who could hide their stigma, are in mixed-abled interactions and manage social expectations.

Lichte 2004, 62). In the context of mass-media reception, Fischer-Lichte calls the interaction between sender and receiver a "feedback loop." Visible performances not only affect the spectators, but the spectators also affect the perception of the performers (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 18). Because the self is related to others, the gaze directed at oneself is social; others can comprehend if they share the social meaning. This increasingly occurs visually today; we feel empathy or ignorance with or against the image of others as these frequently shared images are part of the other's being in the world (of social media).

For people with disabilities, as for all persons, images offer the possibility of thematizing oneself by actively constructing the gaze of the other. The ubiquitous use of social media makes this an everyday experience: it allows one to tell and show oneself as a natural, cultural and moral being. Visuals mediate this 'showing of oneself'; even more, every self-image is necessarily mediated by a person relating to his or her body. Visual culture (Mirzoeff 2013) offers many possibilities to experience and show one's self-relationship. This imaginative 'showing oneself' can be understood as a form of mediated immediacy:

> To be excentrically positioned means that the living subject has an indirect-direct relationship to every thing [sic!]. A direct relationship is one where there are no connecting links between the members of the relation, an indirect relationship one where there are such links. We will call an indirect-direct relationship that form of connection in which the mediating link is necessary in order to produce or ensure the immediacy of the relation. The notion of indirect directness or mediated immediacy is thus not meaningless, not simply a self-refuting contradiction, but a contradiction that resolves itself without reverting to zero (Plessner 2019, 301).

Here, the relationship of subjects to themselves is understood anthropologically as indirect-direct. The portrayal mediates the direct-indirect relations of the subject's relation to itself. Self-images that constitute the mediated immediacy of the self arise in social contexts and are related to discursive-performative possibilities of showing oneself. In the visual world afforded by social media, self-images are shared and shown frequently; the body image represents the person. We hypothesise that people with disabilities specifically share their mediated immediacy. Many live with (in-)visible technical and social support and thus cannot avoid showing the mediateness of their immediacy. They create visual forms of embodiment that we will analyze in three ways: as a social interaction in the

lifeworld of social media, as a visual expression of a relational experience of stigmatization, and as an image of the subjects' gaze grounded on their body as the "material of their existence" (Plessner 1982).

4. Analysis of visual self-thematizations of young people with disability on social media

Looking at current social media postings of (young) people's self-images, we study how self-representations in social media help to transform ideas and images of disability in three different ways. We are learning to see disabled subjects that show us their relations towards their lived bodies, which informs us about their embodiment. The examples are taken from a qualitative-empirical study on images of people with disabilities shared on social media. More than two hundred social media profiles were reviewed between 2020 and 2024. In digital ethnographic fieldwork (Postill & Pink 2012), a sampling of fifty profiles was observed and followed, of which twenty profiles were sampled for an individual visual analysis. The study is based on grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967). It aims to understand visual discourses on disability, the visual practices and visual life worlds of people with disabilities, and the significance of their self-images for society. Therefore, this approach lends itself to combining theoretical assumptions on embodiment with visual aspects of seeing and being seen. It also provides information that can be specifically examined regarding the subjects' relationships with the world, others, and themselves (Knoblauch, Baur, Traue & Akremi, 2018).

An anthropological reflection on images offers to detach representations as images from their depictive power and to understand them as representations that relate to oneself and others, as well as discursive knowledge on disability. The research approach follows interpretative methods of visuals and texts (Denzin 2005; Honer 1993; Traue, Blanc & Cambre 2019). Interpretative analyses ask about the emergence of meaning in different contexts of social action and the production of social meaning. The visual analysis examines the image impression and content, the form of representation of the image's subjects. The analysis includes the text parts to reconstruct the intention of the person showing themselves. The images' and texts' thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) give insights into the contexts of disability representation in different lifeworlds and its references offered to the viewer.

The selected posts for this article were found by using the hashtag #disability (German: #*Behinderung*). They are taken from three different Instagram accounts. Screenshots of the posts were examined in interpretative group discussions with a group of diverse inclusion researchers. The first example is a post of a young man who introduces viewers on Instagram to @finns_kunterbuntes_leben (post 1). The second post shows a young woman revealing scars (post 2) and is from her account called @behinderung_ist_nicht_schlimm. The third post shows the legs of a young woman who calls herself @zebrajemma (post 3). [5]The analysis of the posts will reveal that disability representation is connected to social possibilities of being seen, different cultural forms of visualization, and narratives and offers attachment to the personal reflections of the self by letting the viewer participate.

4.1 Representing oneself as the subject of the image (post 1)

In the post from the Instagram account @finns_kunterbuntes_leben, a young man introduces himself. He presents his interest in everyday activities, so that he can be perceived as an ordinary person on the autism spectrum by the audience. The post emphasizes in the captioning text that "every autistic person is different and that there are no fixed comparison standards" (figure 1; the authors' translation). At the same time, the post actively deals with discrediting attributes against persons on the autism spectrum by emphasizing his uniqueness. But how is this self-representation visualized in the image?

[5] With this title, the account positions itself in an online community assembling people with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS).

Figure 1: Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CPX9-YGD_V-/ [archived 22.09.2024]

In the picture, we see Finn from the front, sitting on a bench and holding cards up to the camera. He is looking directly at us, the viewers. By looking into the camera, he gives the impression of being looked at directly, thereby addressing the viewer with the help of the image. He is wearing glasses, a blue fleece sweater, and gray jeans. The picture was obviously taken outside, in a forest, because several trees are visible in the background. The background is not blurred, which gives the picture an optical depth and makes the background look spacious. He is in the center of the picture, taking up the most space in proportions and composition due to his central placement.

The text claims to be a "presentation" (German: *Vorstellung*). It is mentioned that the image's subject is 21 years old, from Bavaria (a federal state of Germany), and received an autism diagnosis in 2019. He is now on social media and wants to use his profile to show people what his life looks like and that "every autistic person is different". He further writes about his interests in nature, animals, and music, and that he likes playing, dancing, and magic tricks. In the text, Finn directly turns to the readers, thanks them for their interest in his profile, and introduces the following posts on his account.

The interests and activities mentioned make him a familiar person. Nevertheless, the post arouses interest in getting to know the represented person;

his posts are of surprise, too. Reading the image symbolically, the visual narrative tells us about card playing and tricks. By opening his card box and holding cards up to the viewer, Finn plays with the viewers' gaze: he lets us look into his cards. The image expresses the diversity and uniqueness of the subject that remains invisible in many social interactions with persons on the autism spectrum. The diversity and uniqueness of the subject's image lies in the individual presented not in comparison but in dialogue with others who see the picture. The visualization represents him as the subject of the image. At the level of social interaction, it can be stated that how others view the image also depends on how the subject shows and 'tells' about the self. Stigmatization linked to diagnoses can be reinforced by the subjects or countered through confrontation and self-thematization. One way of dealing with stigmatization can be to show oneself as ordinary but interesting and thereby gain recognition—achieving recognition of difference.

The post deals with the expectations of seeing a young man diagnosed. By looking at the picture, our visual expectation of a young man in his early twenties is irritated, because we can see him playing with children's cards. What we expect when we see an image is determined by cultural and temporal framings. Viewing habits are learned (Krause 2017). Irritations can arise when we see something different in images than what we expect to see. He shows himself as a subject with certain interests besides his autism diagnosis. Finn shows his relationship to the world: how norms are relevant to him in self-expression and how he presents himself within it. We glimpse how he relates to the norms but also knows and reinterprets them by presenting himself with unique character traits. The posting shows everyday life activities. The text introduces the subject; the picture shows a playful, inventive person who is discovering the world. In doing so, the image comments on people's diverse experiences: every person is different. Everyone shares the experience of being interested in the world and others, which is what all people have in common. In this post, as in his account, he talks about stigma management and campaigns for Disability Activism.

4.2 Showing oneself to others: The embodiment of disability (post 2)

The second post shows a young woman's nude back. The picture works with a different atmosphere than the first post. Due to the chosen aesthetics of a lonesome person represented in black and white, the image refers to a romantic vis-

ual narrative of female intimacy. It allows the viewer to glimpse an intimate situation that is visualized by the subject of the image, making a scar on her back visible.

The picture shows light-colored, shoulder-length hair that has fallen loosely on the nude back of the young woman. The image's background reveals a garden, park, or nature. It is out of focus, thus drawing attention to the body and leading the viewer's gaze to the scar on the bottom of her back. The mood of the picture is calm and thoughtful. The woman looks to the side, into the far. We can see her profile, although her face is not fully visible. A shadow can be seen in the middle of her back, running vertically along her spine in the lower part of her back. By following this line and looking at the part of the image, the viewer realizes there is a scar. Although in the picture's composition, this scar is placed at the edge of the picture, the accompanying text makes it the starting point and the focus of the picture, as it carries a symbolic meaning of injury and vulnerability. The image subject embodies these experiences, expressed by the image content and impression: a solitary individual lets us glimpse her body, gets close to us, and touches our view. The captioning text interrupts with visual closeness and embodiment; it appeals to problems caused by stigmatization.

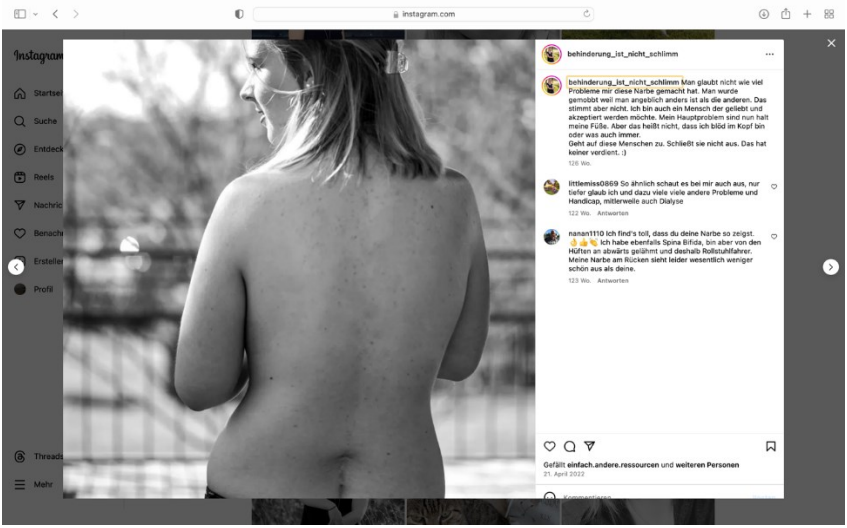

Figure 2: Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CcnMXJaInWh/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link [22.09.2024]

The text explains that the subject recounts her experiences and appeals to people not to take the scar as a call for bullying and exclusion but to accept and love people. The post captions a message or a mission to the viewer:

> "You can't believe how much trouble that scar caused me. I've been bullied because I am supposed to be different from everybody else. [...] Go out to these people. Don't shut them out. Nobody deserves this" (figure 2; the authors' translation).

Through this form of self-representation, the subject rejects discrimination. It generates empathy by inviting others to get in touch with her and physically comprehend her romantic setting in the scene of her body.

The image puts the viewer into a resonant relationship with the image's subject due to it's aesthetics. Her view of herself depends on cultural forms of intimate visuals, and thus, in the view of others, the image leads the viewer to see the subject this way and realize that the represented individual is a recognizable female subject to whom we can relate. Typical gender performance covers and balances disability, as is known from popular media strategies (Becker, Knöppchen & Pfahl 2014). Empathy is generated, whereby the image shows how subjects embody experience and create a recognizable subjectivity that the viewer can follow. The posting of the scars represents gender aspects showing the naked back of a young woman aesthetically (Stammberger 2018, 289). There is something mysterious about the picture that makes us question its meaning. The image aestheticizes the scar. As a result, it symbolizes creativity and imagination when dealing with her body. In other posts on her Instagram account, she uses this picture again to discuss the same aspects, her daily struggles, and medical issues. In most pictures, she shows herself as an ordinary young woman who stands up for disability activism.

4.3 Looking at oneself and guiding the gaze of others (post 3)

The third post is from a user who calls herself @zebrajemma. She shows her legs lying on blankets. She introduces the reader to the complex regional pain syndrome and therapeutic measures in the captioning texts. She tells us about her experiences with chronic pain. In the post, she describes the pain and limitations in daily life she experiences because of the pain. She visualizes this with markings on the picture of her body.

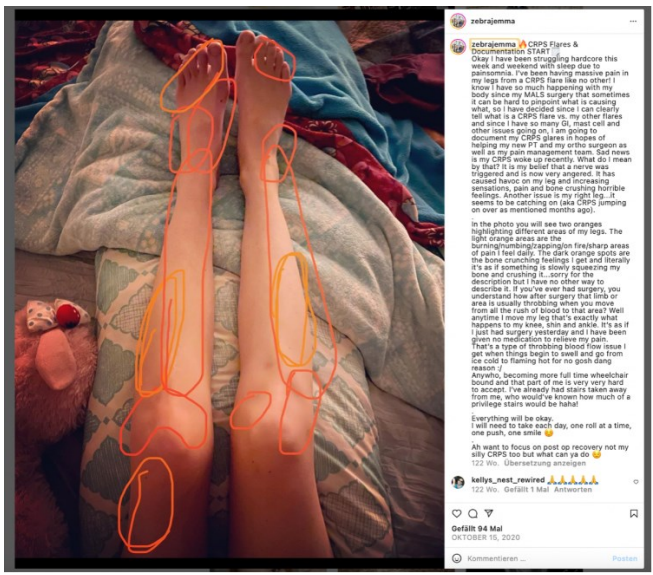

Figure 3: Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CGWo_X5jPxR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link [28.04.2022]

The colored image shows two legs positioned from the perspective of a subject sitting or lying while leaning forward with the arms to take a picture of the lower body. There are blankets around the legs and something that looks like a soft toy. The composition of the picture centers on her legs, which are placed on a large white and blue cushion on a bed or sofa. Hand-drawn lines in light and dark orange overpaint the pictured legs, circling the shins and knees. These circular strokes additionally draw the viewer's attention to the legs. Three elements characterize the impression of the image: the plushy surroundings created by the blankets and the stuffed animal, the bare legs, and the colored circles. The viewers see the legs from the perspective of the image's subject, looking at her legs. The background is also close to the image's main subject due to the sharpness, which corresponds to the natural view and reinforces the impression of a point-of-view shot. Adding hand-drawn elements, the profile's owner visualizes experiences of pain by using a creative technique of 'changing the picture.' She explains the meaning of those areas marked with circles in the captioning text:

> "Two oranges [two shades of the same color] highlight different areas of my legs. The light orange areas are the burning/numbing/zapping/on fire/sharp areas

> of pain I feel daily. The dark orange spots are the bone-crunching feelings I get, and literally, it's as if something is slowly squeezing my bone and crushing it" (figure 3).

The text refers to medical experts and her pain management team on how she deals with pain. By commenting on aids like a wheelchair and the barriers of stairs, she locates her body in a shared lifeworld with others. Zebrajemma is showing herself as a subject by showing what relationship she has to her body and dealing with experts to manage her being in daily chronic pain.

She makes the viewer see and likely feel her physical body. The visibilities enable the viewer to recognize her relationship to her body. The composition and hand-drawn additions lead the viewer to follow the subject's view of her body. Therefore, the image not only visualizes the subject's view and invites the empathic viewer to follow but reveals the lived body relations, communicating the embodiment of pain. Zebrajemma experiences her body and explains how she feels as a disabled person. The reader can relate to the image, identify with the subject, and thus acknowledge her experience of becoming disabled. The post shows how becoming a subject depends on others' recognition; it is realized by empathizing and knowing the subject's lived body experience.

Zebrajemma refers to the attribution that brings one's body relationship into view as a fundamental and constant part of human life. Because subjects have to live with and in their bodies, it is the basis of being in the world but also shapes their relationships with the world. Subjects must accommodate their bodies to the best of their ability to get along with them. They distance themselves from their body and question it; by doing so, they experience themselves as subjects and understand the bodily experiences of chronic pain. The post shows the viewers how to look at ourselves to reflect our body relationships. The picture resonates with the viewer's affects. It refers to self-care and self-determination in that people have to take care of themselves and can take care of themselves.

5. How self-images visualize the body and self as a social relation

The discussed postings of persons with disabilities show different self-portrayals in and through images on social media: 1) Finn's post interrogates disability narratives and turns negative images of persons with disabilities into a social relationship of curiosity for uniqueness and magic; 2) the scarred back of the young woman shows former life events and experiences inscribed in her body as the

materiality of her existence. The image allows us to view and relate to her as a romantic person; 3) Zebrajemma transforms the picture of her legs into an image of her self-relationship. All images depict disability experiences by performing another view of social relations. The examples react to stigmatization and ableist expectations about disability images.

As the state of research shows, there are powerful visual narratives about people with disabilities that challenge the imagination of a full and rich life for persons with disabilities. Whereas the discussed self-representations prove the possibility of creating images in resonance with inclusive representations of people with disabilities, they all refer to mainstream visual discourses and transform them. All three images pursue and demand awareness of self-perception as a disabled person. They use strategies of self-revelation by showing their body with scars or chronic pain and communicating their interests, as in the representation of a multicolored world. They raise awareness for their lives and ableist attributions, while some more openly confront social stigmatization. They counter stigmatization by showing themselves as a person with feelings and desires and as a person who is characterized by attributes other than their disability. The images visualize disabled subjects as selves in their social life and thus open the view on diverse experiences of disability, commenting and negotiating the image′s meaning acquired by the viewers and their viewing habits.

Looking at the self-portraits of people with disabilities from a philosophical anthropological perspective, we assume diverse bodies and social differences are the norm. The analysis shows this in the following aspects:

1. Social and cultural expectations that are linked to ableist attributions are experienced by the self and thus embodied. Relations to the body and the environment are an everyday experience; the image subjects capture their being in the world with their bodies and behave accordingly. The self-relationship shaped by 'Finn's multicolored world' is mediated by magic tricks that catch the viewers' attention. His bodily conditions and abilities to relate to the world and others are linked to medical diagnoses that produce the protagonist as a disabled subject. However, showing one's body is an everyday undertaking regarding one′s relationship to others. Accordingly, people learn to know about their body's performance in social interactions. They intervene in viewers' imagination by giving meaning to their bodies' outside looks and characterizing their selves as the image's subject. For example, Finn talks about his diagnosis but puts his interests at the center of his self-image.

Through this, he narrates autism through his interests and the preferences shared with others.

2. By thematizing visually social interaction and experiences of exclusion, we learn about how the surroundings and other people influence (possible) self-images. Social events and life experiences shape a person's self-relationship. Commenting and showing a scar makes this visible to others. The scar is a specific part of the body, the body through which the person is in the world. By external attributions, this body develops its meaning as, for example, missing body integrity. The aesthetics of the image involve the viewer in an erotic gaze. The image is reminiscent of common artistic ways of depicting the female nude from the back in Western paintings and tells a gendered visual narrative on being an equal subject.

3. Making the body's lived experience of pain visible in the self-relationship makes it clear that the self is embodied as an object in the world. The visualized self sees itself as being entangled about oneself and environmental circumstances due to "eccentric positionality" (Plessner 1982). The image's subject positioning and the shot visualize the need to reflect on oneself. As a worldly subject, she sees herself experiencing pain, drawing from outside expert knowledge to interpret her feelings.

The visual analysis explores self-representation in the context of disability. To be seen as an equal subject, people imagine and visualize all three dimensions of their being: the natural body, the social self, and their cultural interests. Self-images narrate the body; they engage with viewers and give insights into the mediated immediacy of human beings. Deploying Plessner′s theoretical approach to visual self-images highlights that subjects have a body as the material of existence and live by embodiment. Our relationship to the world, others, and ourselves is embodied and grounded on the body as the material of our existence (Plessner 1982). Plessner found universality in human self-relationships but not in the bodies themselves (Plessner 2019). Still, this approach is open to bodily diversity and its effects on the social and cultural human being. Our analyses show that analyzing self-representations of people with disabilities takes the discussion in philosophical anthropology further, and it highlights that an anthropological theory should be developed that is affirmative and able to relate to diverse bodies and self-relationships to learn "what is human".

6. Conclusion

The analysis of self-representations on social media observes how people with disabilities show themselves in images on social media. It aims to expand the analysis of the visual culture that shows people with disabilities as objects or attempts to represent them as the subject of images. A philosophical, anthropological approach opens the perspective on mediated, embodied self-images, performing awareness for disability experiences. By self-representing people with disabilities, the viewers' gaze is guided to the subject's body, lifeworld, and self-relationship. The portrayed persons are the objects and subjects of the portraiture. By sharing their pictures, people with disabilities introduce (new) viewing habits of diverse bodies on social media.

Our paper shows why these self-portrayals are attractive, and why they have become a staple of internet culture: evoking curiosity, promising the mysterious, playing with the intimacy and erotic, taking control of the body and its feeling – they may not make disability itself more attractive, but its signifiers can appear as a resource to present the individual as a person. These resources are scarce in internet culture, and one who can mobilize them commands respect. This embodiment allows the viewers to relate to themselves differently.

The state of research on visual narratives in media shows that the representation of people with disabilities bears the risk of stigmatization. So far, disabled people seldom portray themselves and lack self-representation in media, whereas in social media, selfies and self-portraits of people with disabilities are disseminated and publicly shared but rarely researched. Our analysis of the visual practices of people with disabilities based on a study of individual social media posts shows that the embodiment of self as disabled can be told in a credible way. The visualization of bodies as selves becomes relevant to spatially locating one's being in the world and one's social performativity.

Being present in certain places and being depicted in a credible subject's position creates references to other people and performative contexts. This holds true for all individuals who draw on their bodies and mediate their experience of being in the world with themselves and others by taking pictures of themselves. Selfies capture the views of the body by the subject taking the picture. A difficulty in transmitting images is that images can irritate viewing habits, which is precisely where the productive side of visual practices of self-presentation lies. In the case of self-representation of people with disabilities, this is tricky; it can also fail because of predominant ableist cultural expectations and a

prefigured gaze lacking empathy or curiosity. The studied images generate empathy, but the stigmatization risk remains and must be managed by guiding the viewer's gaze. We observed this in three different modes: by addressing the viewer's lifeworld, interacting as a person in gendered aesthetics, and teaching the viewers how to look at the image and themselves.

We conclude that shaping and transforming viewing habits is possible because sensibilization takes place. Viewers are addressed, they are touched by the images. (More) self-representation of people with disabilities might and will change viewing habits and, therefore, might fulfill the United Nations' expectations that "[s]elf-representation of disability destroys negative stereotypes and myths formed towards disability, conveys the authentic experience of disability, and allows people with disabilities to express their opinion. Through self-representation, disability is reflected as part of the human experience" (UN 2021, without pages). In inclusive contexts, pictures of people with disabilities transmit awareness. Taking pictures can be used as an educational process.

By making their experiences visible, people with disabilities promote understanding and acceptance of their selves as natural, cultural, and moral persons. Taking the discussion in philosophical anthropology further, marginalized aspects of human beings can be used as an entry point for analyzing the visualization of body experiences. The analysis proved that people with disabilities run accounts with a "show value" (Bruhn 2003), accessible to all users. The images don't show visual narratives of pity or supercrip. They do not normalize disability but confront viewers with diverse bodies and shared subjectivity. Disability is the occasion of self-thematization. The visual self-descriptions present a complex critical self-relationship that is affirmative to the body and personal intentions. The visuals reject the labeling and show how people with disabilities rather "badge" themselves (Maskos 2022, 493). This makes the personality of the images' subjects authentic. On social media, authentic social performance is a status attribution ("I am not ordinary"; "I claim belonging and identity"). This allows people with disabilities to appear as a subject of rights (Traue & Pfahl 2022) in public interactions.

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