Troubling images? The re-presentation of disabled womanhood: Britain's Missing Top Model

Introduction

Seven years after the Disability Discrimination Act, the need for representational change in the portrayal of disabled people was recognised in the UK as an important issue throughout the broadcasting industry. It was a central principle in the agendas of the Broadcasting and Creative Industries Disability Network and also in reports commissioned by broadcasters, such as Jane Sancho's report' Disabling Prejudice (2003). Alongside commitments to improving opportunities for disabled employees[1], a number of broadcasters released manifestos on disability which included the improvement of representations of disabled people across the range of television content.

Since then, some disabled people have achieved high visibility on UK television, perhaps most notably in the screening of the 2008 and 2012 Paralympics and on *The Last Leg* (a UK Channel 4 comedy chat show broadcast as part of the 2012 Paralympics). There have also been a number of disabled actors employed in longer term soap opera roles, casting which Ian Macrae (editor of Disability Now) welcomed as a sign of positive change. Nonetheless, other critics, such as Colin Barnes (quoted in Cochrane, 2008) have said that little has changed during the twenty-three years since his report. Barnes highlighted the importance of content and the ways that disabled people are represented stereotypically (often according to impairment). He asks how this makes viewers *feel,* and how these processes might contribute to the cultural mis/recognition of disabled people. The limited amount of recent television research on this topic (Sancho, 2003, and Wilde, 2004) on television audiences suggests dissatisfaction in all of these areas. Sancho's research had very similar findings to those found by Barnes in 1992, emphasising the desire for 'accuracy', 'role models', representations which promote the 'acceptance' of non-disabled viewers for disabled people, 'progressive thinking' and putting disabled people 'at the heart of the creative process' (2003,6). Wilde's

research found an overall dissatisfaction with 'narrative inequalities' and a particular need for personal identifications with characters for disabled women (2009).

Although intersections of gender with impairment and disability are rarely considered (by either broadcasters or the aforementioned writers), recognition of the different ways in which disabled men and women are represented offers a foundation for working towards such aims, especially when one considers the importance of gendered viewing positions to viewing engagements (see Joyrich, 1996, for example). It is unsurprising that disabled women feel they have little to identify with; in 1991 Jenny Morris wrote about the lack of portrayals of disabled women in contemporary British culture, highlighting their marginalisation as peripheral figures, occupying only a narrow range of roles. Similarly, on television in the US four out of five images of wheelchair users (the most common signifier of impairment) were found to be men (Klobas, 1987). These representational inequalities in film and television were also echoed in the work of scholars such as Norden (1994) and Kent (1987) who found a very limited range of highly gendered stereotypes, often naturalised as 'common-sense' portrayals of disabled women. Underlining the role of media in viewer's construction and maintenance of their identities, Wilde's (2004) study of soap opera audiences found that few viewers liked portrayals of disabled women and that disabled women felt particularly marginalised, or even humiliated as viewers.

Since then, reality shows have been one of the most important contributors to representational change for under-represented and marginalised groups on television, especially as reality television was often part – as part of the 'demotic turn' (Turner, 2006) – of pro-diversity programming agendas (Wilde and Williams, 2011). As Turner suggests, reality shows appear to have produced 'ordinary celebrities', even if there is scant evidence of democracy within media representations. Biressi and Nunn (2005) have argued that the reality television genre has made some of the most obvious attempts to include excluded voices in more fluid, dynamic ways, providing a platform for seeing 'ordinary' people and hearing 'ordinary' voices apparent in the United Kingdom from 2000 onwards. On such terms it could also be argued that reality

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television can provide the greatest potential for more 'authentic' or 'accurate' portrayals of disabled womanhood; production choices notwithstanding, the conditions of possibility for disabled women to perform more multidimensional portrayals of themselves would be greater, perhaps providing a valuable corrective to the emphasis placed on disabled women as burden, lacking virtues (e.g. 'caring') traditionally associated with womanhood in portrayals around this time (see Wilde, 2009).

However, despite the clear commitment to diversity and the deliberate policy of inclusive casting on reality TV programmes, disabled people did not appear until around 2005. The first programme in the UK to feature disabled people was *Beyond Boundaries*, a 'special school' variant of adventure-based reality television, where disabled people (including women), in a team led by a former Special Air Service (SAS) member, navigated challenging and dangerous terrain in places such as Nicaragua and the Andes; notably this did not follow the tendency to emphasise the more individualistic, competitive dynamic of elimination-based reality TV shows such as *Big Brother*. However, *Big Brother* (the original franchised programme broadcast by Channel 4) followed the lead set by *Beyond Boundaries* by including disabled people in 2006, introducing disabled people into competition with non-disabled contestants on ostensibly equal terms. Even then, following the long-standing cultural trend to marginalise women, the first disabled people to be included were men, and also reflected typically normative ideals in terms of age and bodily appearance (Wilde and Wiiliams, 2011).

If one accepts that reality TV has some promise for disabled people to occupy core roles within content, the inclusion of disabled people in reality shows can be seen as a major step forwards in television representations of people with impairments, particularly since members of the disabled people's movement and respondents in a number of media studies have expressed a desire for 'normal', 'realistic' or 'accurate' portrayals of disabled people (Cumberbatch and Negrine, 1992; Darke,1995; Ross,1996; Sancho, 2003, 2004a). So, their inclusion in reality shows are much more likely to take viewers closer to the impairment restrictions and social barriers which face these particular disabled people in their daily lives. The

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broadcasting of people's 'real', rather than fictional lives, seems ideally placed for this, especially where realism is foregrounded and veracity is clear (for debates on this see for example, Biressi and Nunn, 2005), especially when contrasted with the traditional construction of fixed stereotypes (Barnes, 1992). Further, the potential to meet the desire for impairment accuracy, to see the portrayal of everyday 'real' forms of existence and daily barriers to inclusion are concerns which is clearly close to the hearts of many disabled people, women in particular (Wilde, 2009). As problematic as these desires for change may be, especially when considering the lack of consensus on what a 'good image' might be (Shakespeare,1999) and the diversity of disabled people's lives and experiences, the need for representational change has consistently been expressed in calls for change.[2]

Despite an appeal to glamour which locates it far from the lives of many disabled women, in 2008 the opportunity to focus specifically on 'real' disabled women was presented in the form of *Britain's Missing Top Model* (henceforth BMTM). This programme came at a time when disabled people had achieved recognition in wider policy agendas and prejudicial attitudes to disabled people were beginning to change; a report undertaken by NatCen (the following year), compared attitudes in 2005 with those in 2008, saying that the public 'were also more likely to think of disabled people as the same as everybody else' (2009, 9). As the first, and only, UK entertainment programme to focus specifically on disabled women, which was marketed in terms of its capacities to deconstruct and reshape images of disabled femininities, BMTM will be considered in terms of its conditions of possibility for re-presenting disabled womanhood. Notably this one-off programme was broadcast only a year before austerity policies began to be introduced by the government which disproportionately affected the lives of disabled people, arguably supported by less progressive changes in media discourses and a decline in public attitudes towards identification, acceptance and inclusion (Aiden and McCarthy, 2014; Briant et al, 2011).

As such it represents programming which occurred towards the end of a period of relative social progress, and some movement in representational change, for disabled people. I will explore strategies of representational change evident in this show by interrogating the ways in which television media re/produces ideas of the 'ordinary' with particular reference to disability and impairment. The show will be analysed as a whole, as a case study of the first TV show which deliberately sought to explore, if not change, representations of disabled women. Data will be drawn from initial marketing, the diegesis of the show, individual episodes, internet-based material and other relevant/intertextual media resources which discuss the competitor's lives. The emphasis will be placed on the performance of disabled and impairment identities of the women, and how these are refracted through the production lens of the show (e.g. events shown) and the judges' opinions of the 'model disabled woman'

Britain's Missing Top Model and possibilities for representational change

BMTM was a British Reality TV show, broadcast for five weeks in 2008 on BBC3. It featured eight disabled women who competed in challenges and photo shoots to win a modelling contract, and a cover photo on the magazine *Marie Claire*. Briefly outlined, this programme was screened in six episodes, in early summer of 2008; each episode showed the models being set a number of tasks which were deemed equivalent to jobs and challenges they would face in their careers as models with the contestants being eliminated by the judges as the show progressed. Their interactions with each other, the judges and other industry professionals were also facets of each episode's narrative of their 'journey' towards success or failure. The women lived together in a penthouse during the duration of their appearance on the show. The premise seemed to be rather equivocal, emphasising the lack of fit of disabled women with beauty industry ideals (and wider cultures) of beauty, whilst hinting that some disabled women could compete for accolades of beauty in much the same way as other potential models. Highlighting both of these aims, the trailer for the show the voiceover asked, 'What are the chances of a disabled person making it in a world obsessed with perfection?' (wn.com). There was some ambiguity about the central focus here; employing a distinctively individualist

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perspective on disability whilst foreshadowing some of the hurdles that were to be set for the women. For example, the voiceover went on to ask 'how will they cope with their disability' and 'the demands of an unforgiving industry.'

In some ways then, a programme such as this could be seen as an ideal vehicle to make radical changes to the depiction of disabled women. Perhaps most importantly, it was the first time that an audience had been presented with disabled women as central protagonists as the main feature of the programme, and the hint that the show might expose disabling processes. However, this would seem to be reliant to some extent on how the competition proceeded and how the women would be evaluated. BMTM can be seen primarily as an audition show, such as *Fame Academy* (2002-3) and *Pop Idol* (2001-3). It followed other non-disabled 'model reality show' predecessors, such as *Britain and Ireland's Next Top Model* (2005-2013) and its forerunner, *America's Next Top Model* (ANTM, 2004-present), in trusting the decision of identifying the winner to television judges, all of whom were associated with the fashion industry – the television audience had no vote and no way of influencing their decision. As such, the intention of the show was spelled out unequivocally – this was to be about the reality of model appearances and the modelling industry judged by experts from within. Further, Brenton and Cohen (2003) show that the audition-types of reality programming borrow production techniques from reality game shows (such as *Big Brother*), most notably perhaps in separating the contestants from the outside world and filming their behind-the scenes interactions, which invariably seem to get more conflictual as the show progresses and competition increases. In both 'front stage' and 'off stage' (Goffman, 1959) aspects of the show, then, the judges and audience were able to see the contestants performing aspects of their 'selves', including a focus on their disagreements, decisions often framed in terms of impairment limitations and moral agency (see below).

As an obvious form of spectacle (Debord, 1983) it was clear that this show was going to be exactly that – a spectacle, a re-presentation of images which was focussed on the appearances of the women, and the

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anticipated desires of the 'virtual stare' (see Garland Thomson on staring and disability, 1997; 2005; 2009), particularly that of the youthful 'model' (presumably non-disabled) reality television viewer (Wilde and Williams, 2011). How this would relate to the lived experiences of the models' (or other women's) lives, and the possibility of deconstructing stereotypes of disabled womanhood was, at the beginning at least, less clear.

From the start then, going a little beyond the initial focus on spectacle (which also characterised its non-disabled 'reality model show' counterparts), the audience were also led towards additional questions about impairment and the ways in which the contestants managed themselves and their impairments, or even conquered their 'differences'. Further, the statement about the 'unforgiving industry' both recognised and naturalised the barriers erected by the industry itself. Although this seems to offer the potential to provide a critique of the modelling/fashion industry, this focus on testing how 'outsiders' can squeeze themselves into awkward, unwelcoming, or even hostile spaces (constructed in terms of a number of unspoken, amorphous normativities which the audience is unaware of until they are breached see below) is apt to *produce* disabling effects which present the disabled women as flawed. In turn, this is likely to perpetuate cultural beliefs about disability, in much the same way that some women were trapped in some of the transgressive narratives produced in ANTM (Hasinoff, 2008). As Hasinoff demonstrates, in relation to ethnicity and skin colour, production processes which foreground a close focus on the moral agency of models in conditions where they are made to experience adversity are likely to obscure structural inequalities and other forms of discrimination or disablement. As a number of scholars have argued, this is often the result of reality TV's preference for pursuing narratives which emphasise overarching individualistic discourses of self-empowerment and self-transformation (Hasinoff, 2008; Skeggs, 2007). However, despite the introduction of these themes, and unlike the other programmes in the modelling reality genre, BMTM kept the promise of the possibility of the challenges to the norms of the modelling industry alive, with the voiceover for the trailer warning us that it may 'tear the world of fashion apart'. Indeed, the trailer also suggested that the

show may 'change people's perceptions of beauty' and BBC3 marketed the programme as part of their 'new collection of programmes challenging our ideas of beauty' (wn.com). Thus, the programme marketed itself as having a double focus and it was a little unclear whether it would offer radical new possibilities for representational change.

Modelling tasks – the importance of impairment

Like most reality game shows, BMTM proceeded on a challenge and elimination basis, its goal to produce a 'proper disabled model' based on industry standards. As such the women were set a series of challenges, and judged on their suitability for a range of modelling tasks (in couture, catwalk, casting and so on). However, these tasks went beyond the presentation of skills appropriate to modelling, being closely modelled and judged on 'appropriate' forms of behaviour (bearing the expectations of potential clients in mind) and their attitudes to working on their own self-development. Cruelly, skills-based tasks were often undertaken in ways where the women were expected to transcend the limits of their impairments and to carry out tasks which non-disabled models might be asked to do. In the majority of these cases there was a disregarding of the limits of their impairments, with some contestants having disabling barriers put in their way for good measure – for example the decision to remove interpreters from the deaf women at particular points. Also, Jenny Johnson, who has partial paralysis and ataxia (with a pronounced and shaky limp) was asked to walk on high heels, causing her both humiliation and injuries. She, and other contestants who were asked to surpass their individual physical limits, did not make it into the top three. Significantly, Sophie Morgan, a wheelchair user was not given a task such as this (which, like Jenny, she could not have done). Other contestants pointed this anomaly out as unfair, but perhaps the reluctance to take the disablement of the women this far was perhaps due to an understanding of the place of wheelchair-users at the top of the cultural hierarchy of impairments (Deal, 2003; Reeve, 2004). Thus perhaps Sophie, as a wheelchair-user who has paralysis from the chest down, was seen as more deserving of reasonable adjustments than those

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construed to have lesser or more ambiguous/less understood impairments. In other words, despite the common occurrence of contestants being humiliated on reality-based modelling programmes (Healy, 2006), often depicted as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966), the degradation of a wheelchair-user is likely to have been seen as too cruel and too dangerous, not least for the programme-makers. Apart from this being a ridiculous idea, it would have ruptured the appearance that this show was a fair and legitimate endeavour, especially as people who use wheelchairs tend to be simultaneously regarded as braver and sadder than, as well as different from, other disabled people and most likely to receive social approval (Deal, 2003).

This also enabled them to mark Sophie out in other terms; providing few possibilities for her to fail and to effect self- transformation, allowing for an easier characterisation of her as 'brave' and as an exceptional role model, in accordance with the cultural/media propensity to push 'inspiration porn' (Young, 2014) as positive imagery. As Young argued, inspiration porn is an injustice to all disabled people, providing impossible goals and reinforcing the division of disabled people into good and bad, according to how their impairment identities are performed (Wilde, 2004a). This moulding into the shape of a 'Survivor Cripple' (Kriegel, 1987) seems to be attributed to those disabled people who are assumed to be in less need of self-transformation (Wilde and Williams, 2011), making them worthy candidates to win[3]. It of some significance that Morgan became one the key figures on this show, even perhaps, the defining image of it, especially when considering that Morris suggested women we most likely to be cast as 'overcoming all odds' where they did get the opportunity to appear (1997, 27).

Whatever the reasons for the disparities in the treatment of the contestants, the production of these women's characters, their impairments and the portrayal of their skills worked, from early on, to mark some women out as deficient and others as 'good role models'. This was primarily shaped in terms of their attitudes to self and others. Like many other reality competitions, this is also likely to have contributed to expectations of who was favourite to win. In this case Morgan was a clear contender, being shown as the most outspoken in

terms of her commitment to changing people's perceptions of disabled people, possibly lending her a greater moral worth as an agent of change for disabled people , especially as she could be seen to have completed her 'journey' of 'self-transformation' from a car crash victim to 'poster girl' for the visibility of disabled people, described in *Disability Now* magazine afterwards as 'the real star of the reality TV show' (Reay, 2008). The position of moral authority she seemed to hold heightened the eventual twist in the final episode, where she was awarded second place, perhaps to re-assert the fashion industry's expertise in judging beauty and restoring naturalised ideas of those who deserve to be insiders and outsiders.

However, from the very start, the show assumed a deficit model of disabled womanhood, with no acknowledgement of 'disability' as a form of social oppression (see Thomas, 1994, for an explanation of how this often occurs to disabled women). This was, perhaps, to be expected given the invitation to judge whether any of the 'girls' have 'got what it takes to break into the industry and make it as a top model' (wn.com). Further, the deficit model went beyond the tasks as much of the show devoted itself to investigating each model's personal agency and performance in personal relationships (see next section). This was constructed in two main areas: differences and conflicts between the contestants, and also (most importantly) in their relationships with industry professionals and judges. Judgements on their performances of disabled womanhood within all these relationships were woven into an overarching discourse on hierarchies of impairment and associated degrees of moral worth, often framed in narratives of deficit, courage and self-development, corresponding to their value as both fashion models and role models, closely resembling the moral economies of class and womanhood Skeggs (2010) found produced in reality shows.

One of the programme's tasks addressed the interactional capacities of the women more directly, by exploring relationships with a male model (and production crew) in a sexualised casting/advertising scenario. The casting/advertisement session with male models first involved the contestants having to demonstrate intimacy with their partners, involving touching, closeness and hugging, before the introduction

of the second part of this task; eating ice-cream in a feminine, seductive fashion. Again, on this occasion Kellie, one of the Deaf contestants was instructed to speak rather than to sign in her own means of communication, British Sign Language (BSL). Her request to use BSL may have worked well in advertising the sensory-based pleasures of ice-cream, but this was not considered, and her resistance to speaking and complaint about the double standards of the competition (including the consideration of Sophie's mobility) resulted in her coming last in this task, due to her recalcitrance. Like many other tasks set for the women, judgement of their virtues seemed to be based mainly on forms of conformity to 'appropriate' behaviour; challenging the instructions given was deemed inappropriate. In this task alone, Sophie took first place despite choking on the ice-cream and Kelly Knox (the final winner) was penalised for her over-sexualised behaviour, despite the titillating themes of the task and the 'warm-up' exercise.

The positioning of hearing impairments as less worthy, and as a sign of unacceptable, if not subversive, difference was a theme which echoed throughout the series. From episode one, questions were asked of the ability of Deaf women to cope with the modelling world, notably to Lilli Risner who had already worked as a presenter on programmes such as *See Hear* (1981-present). This continued in the second episode with Jonathan Phang, the mentor appointed for the women, visiting their shared flat and explaining that he hadn't brought an interpreter as they would not be provided for models in the industry. In this instance he was more of a provocateur than a mentor. In a number of ways his role as mentor can be seen as the equivalent of psychologists in the reality game shows, who tend to be used more as 'production-side consultants', 'mind crew' and interpreters of contestants' behaviour (Branton and Cohen, 2003, 93). This is very different from Elle MacPherson role in *Britain's Next Top Model* (*BNTM*); she spoke of her mentoring role as one characterised by nurturing and guiding the contestants. This marked another difference between the shows; models in *BNTM* spoke of feeling degraded in terms of over-sexualisation, e.g. an unexpected involvement in 'soft porn', whereas the women in *BMTM* were more likely to be degraded (and eliminated) by a denial of their sexual agency (as Knox was in the ice-cream task and Jenny Johnson was later in the programme – see

next section. Otherwise the disabled women in *BMTM* were most likely to face shame which was attributed to their impairments. Indeed, humiliation most often emerged in the highlighting of 'impairment effects' and their inabilities to overcome disabling barriers, as indicated in the catwalk and speaking tasks.

Despite the goals outlined by the trailers for the show, this hierarchy of impairment was continuously shaped and re-emphasised by the production choices of the programme makers in ways which seemed to evidence the women's limited capacities to *integrate* themselves into a world of non-disabled norms, rather than to illustrate their strengths and weaknesses as potential models. This was made clear from the first episode which immediately departed from the usual 'reality model show' format. The very first episode was an 'haute couture' shot task where they were asked to choose an item which represented how they felt about their 'disabilities' (impairments). Three of the women picked mirrors, one which was cracked to symbolise her car accident, and the others to show how they had gained more confidence to look at themselves again, especially in order to transcend the consequent lack of faith which ensued from their unpleasant (and impairment-based) experiences. Other reasons shown for choices included symbols of faith and recovery, and also of resilience. This task worked to immediately differentiate the women, one from another, inextricably introducing the audience to their personalities by way of their impairments. Again, in contrast, *BNTM* adopted a strategy in direct opposition to this, as their first task, by providing the contestants with a uniform, perhaps signalling their commonalities and an equality of starting points; one *BNTM* contestant claimed this 'put us more on an even level with each other' and another stated that this reinforced the need to compete and differentiate oneself on one's own terms, saying 'you really do have to work extra hard to stand out' (*BNTM* on You Tube, 2010).

Conversely *BMTM*'s 'objects of desire' task, worked to define and reinforce impairment hierarchies, whilst perpetuating common tropes of disability. Stereotypes such as the 'Survivor Cripple' (Kriegel, 1987), and 'triumph over tragedy' stereotypes (Barnes, 1992) were particularly evident in the appeal to overcoming

adversity and maintaining faith and a desire for (psychological) recovery. Perhaps the only contestant that was portrayed as shifting slightly away from these stereotypes was Kelly Knox with her choice of a riding crop and the explanation that she wanted to be tough against discrimination from others – she was the eventual winner.

Impairment and real disabled women, social relationships and the judgement of disabled models

As the tasks demonstrate, the visibility of impairments also seemed to be an implicit theme of the show. Alongside the less visible hearing impairments were the impairments of Jessica Kellgren-Hayes – ME (Myalgic Encephalopathy) and HNPP (Hereditary neuropathy with liability to pressure palsy). Portrayed almost as the female equivalent of Alice in Wonderland's dormouse, both of whom can fall asleep unexpectedly at any time, Jessica received criticism from the other contestants for inappropriate sleeping during tasks. They also said that she was 'faking it' (presumably 'being disabled'), and accused her of 'feeling sorry for herself' questioning why she identifies as disabled. She was also shown to exclude herself from social events, explain her need to put her health first. The presentation of her tendency for sleeping was slightly comedic and was only highlighted as a potential problem in a later episode, before her (seemingly) inevitable elimination. However, her impairments did not seem to be sensationalised by the judges. Nevertheless, the production strategies chosen by the show did place her close to the centre of debates on impairment – the audience were made aware of her complaint that she always felt she had to defend herself to receive acknowledgement that she was disabled, particularly in facing barriers to participation, as indicated in her withdrawal from social events. This was juxtaposed sharply with the criticism of some of the other women, especially Sophie Morgan, incidents which were also broadcast. The comments from the other women marked Jessica's status as a disabled woman as uncertain and this was portrayed as causing conflict and division between the women.

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Scholars such as Gere (2005) and Zahn (1973) have explored the experiences of 'invisible impairments', highlighting the common occurrence of social marginalisation, weaker interpersonal relations (Zahn, 1973) and greater social invisibility for those with non-visible impairments. Further Gere (2005, 61) speaks of the 'danger of crediting the visible with too much power' and cites Gabel, who argues that 'disability identity [ ] comes from one's experiences in the world and the meaning given to those experiences by the one having the experiences'. Gere demonstrates that people with less visible impairments are faced with very difficult choices about 'passing' as non-disabled or coming out as disabled. So, although conflicts between contestants are a staple of reality shows, the decision taken to broadcast these particular disagreements can be seen as particularly insidious form of ableist and disablist hegemony (see Wolbring, 2008 for a discussion of these terms), reinforcing the primacy of the visible (Gere, 2005) and common-sense understanding of normalcy. As Titchkosky (2001, 134-5) argued,

> she must actively deny her own stance in, as Irving Zola (1993) has put it, the "world of the normal." It is the very visibility of normalcy that must be silenced, ignored, denied. It is the person's assumed and apparent stance in the ordinary that makes coming out as, and passing into, disability a different matter for people whose differences do not readily appear to others who unquestioningly assume, and thus "see" only, the structures of normalcy.

Seen alongside other mainstream forms of media in the current climate of 'inflicting suffering on those in need' which Ryan (2015) argues is fundamental to our benefits system and the policies which drive it, this division of disabled women into disabled/less disabled, worthy/less worth adds to the weight of some of the most damaging stereotypes of disability and impairment, most notably perhaps, those which portray disabled people as dependent/parasitical, as burdens, as morally questionable, outsiders and as useless. This is especially so given the rise of 'poverty porn' (Meikle,2013) such as *Benefits Street* (2014), the language of 'shirkers and scroungers' in policy and media on welfare (Garthwaite, 2011) and the high numbers of people who now associate disabled people with benefit claims and fraud (Briant et al, 2011). A key finding of Briant et al's study pf newspaper coverage of disability was that those with 'hidden impairments' are 'less

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likely to receive sympathetic treatment' and 'more likely to be presented as 'undeserving'' (4). Given this sharp divide between those with more and less obvious impairments, the performance of differences which links directly to obvious forms of impairment appears to be the hallmark of the 'spectacle' created by the show.

The initial demarcated terrain of the competition as being open to 'disabled' women suggested a level playing field for all the competitors, and an appeal to talent and personality. However, despite this adoption of a more social understanding of disability (as a collective of people facing disablement regardless of impairment), the production strategy did not focus upon (arguably) more objective, meritocratic measures of talent, beauty or skills based on women's strengths. As suggested above, production strategies presented challenges which highlighted the impairment-based differences between the women, rendering tasks easy for some and impossible for others. Like other reality TV programmes, this was done in ways which 'flattened out differences' giving the impression of a level playing field between the women, and giving structural inequalities (especially disablement) the appearance of being individual difficulties, often in performing the right kinds of intimacy with others (Skeggs, 2007,11).

These perceived differences fed into growing resentments and increasing debates between the women, which were heavily focussed on impairment hierarchies. The discussions which were shown in each episode often featured the differentiation of 'real' disabled people from those who were jumping on the bandwagon; this was most notable in the criticisms of deaf women as 'not really disabled' and the polarised images of Sophie (as survivor and representative for disabled people's issues) and Jessica (as 'fake' and potential mendicant). Like many other reality TV shows, divisive challenges and selective editing enabled the producers to focus on the divisions and more excessive behaviours, rather than the sociality within the group. The language of therapeutic discourse (self-development and control), together with the potent messages of lack and abjection that were inscribed on these women's bodies from the start (the trailer and 'objects of desire' task

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for example) lent weight to the trite observations made by the majority of the judges and mentor, e.g. the mentor's comment that the deaf women were a blessing due to their limited capacities for communication. In turn, the portrayal and discussion of such failings encouraged primary judgments to be made of the contestants' worth on the basis of inappropriate behaviour, resulting in their elimination

Reflecting the emblematic status of the wheelchair in images of disability, Sophie Morgan, the only wheelchair user (and who had previously been shown as someone who had the capacity to go 'beyond boundaries' in the programme of the same name[4]), became associated (by herself, the mentor and the judges) as the best and most responsible role model for other disabled women. Further, this 'role model' status has continued to be apparent in media work she has done since this programme, including presenting and journalism work for the Paralympics[5]. The overarching discourse between women on 'real' and 'lesser' disabilities largely assumed that worth was related to extent of wheelchair use, rather than other axes of difficulty, e.g. communication barriers or acquired versus 'disabled from birth' status, with the deaf women or those with less visible impairments often being regarded as imposters. Notably, there were no contestants with visual impairments. The opportunities for including women with visual impairments is likely to have focussed greater attention on the disabling practices of the model/fashion industry, rupturing the macro-narratives of self-management and transformation. Like wheelchair-users, reasonable adjustments may have been needed (e.g. familiarisation with catwalks and guide dogs) and a denial of them may have been seen as cruel and exploitative. This is an important omission as women with impairments have been portrayed (comparatively) frequently in media, especially film, as Norden demonstrated (1994), often as passive figures or as victims. Conversely, Dibaja (2010) shows how modelling can directly challenge such stereotypes and the norms of society and the modelling industry, especially in the ways it been used by blind women in India as a vehicle for fighting social discrimination against them.

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As suggested, the competition proceeded according to a deficit model, with most of the judges and their mentor framing the contestants in terms of blame and fault rather than praise and virtue. This highlighted the difference of some contestants, re-presenting some of them as inadequate or pathological if they could not get past the hurdles put in their way. We were continuously shown how the models were breaching industry rules through their irresponsible behaviour. There was one point in the whole series where this pattern was broken and the focus was turned on disabling processes and practices. Framed as a dramatic conflict between judges Wayne Hemingway and Mark Summers, an argument erupted when Jenny Johnson was eliminated after she had flirted with Summers the night before, suggesting that they might go for a drink in the pub down the road. Summers demonstrated a clear disgust for her behaviour, and she was eliminated the following day, a decision clearly framed in terms of the disavowal of disabled sexuality. He described her as 'overbearing' and predicted that it would be 'hell to work with her', and feared negative responses from potential clients (can be seen on 'The Clash of the Judges – Britain's Missing Top Model- BBC Three clip, 2008)'.

Her comparatively mild abandonment of behaviour designated as appropriate led some of the judges to express concern 'over her personality' and when Summers asked her where she thought she had 'gone wrong' she replied (tearfully) 'I became too sexual'. This denial of Johnson's sexuality was considered legitimate grounds for her elimination, reflecting wider cultural dismissals of women as sexual agents or even as 'abject' (see Arya, 2014, for more explicit examples). Schotland (2009 para. 25) draws on the work of Garland -Thomson (1997, 285) to argue

> "while feminism quite literally decries the sexual objectification of women," disabled women often experience "asexual objectification", the assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled women.

This disciplining of disabled women's sexualities can perhaps be seen as a second key feature of the spectacle being created by this show. However, despite a possible perpetuation of asexual/deviant

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stereotypes of disability, this can also be seen to highlight the double standards of this programme, and arguably of the modelling industry, and providing an excellent example of affect 'breaking through', as Beverley Skeggs (2010, 81) suggests, where reality 'seeps beyond its containment'; Johnson's humiliation and shame in knowing she has been eliminated for her 'sexual behaviour' can be seen to highlight and challenge the stereotype that is being invoked against her. Indeed, this has a mimetic effect in that it resubmits her identity to stereotypical views of disabled women in order to call the view itself into question. Her attempt to speak logically about Summers' view undermines the claim that her actions are illogical, almost acting as a strategic essentialism. That is, it turns the truth of the evaluation back onto the judge who has assessed her, exposing the masculine non-disabled economy valuation of identity and a 'model' form of unity, challenging the exclusion of disabled women as doubly lacking and non-sexual. Indeed such strategies, seemingly accidental in this case, can be seen as contributing to a 'category shift' in representation (Siebers, 2010). Siebers argues:

> Disability breaks the mirror of art as traditionally conceived by putting into question the art object's relation to perfection, but the beauty reflected in the broken mirror grows more beautiful as a result (135)

Notably, Wayne Hemingway also questioned the moral judgements being made on the basis of sexuality, challenging Summers' opposition to the self-positioning of a model as an object or subject of desire (*sic*). Hemingway then discredited the modelling/fashion business as an 'absolutely shit industry' that she was 'best out of', before asking for the cameras to be turned off. Hemingway's (lone) dissent adds to the question of whether this disruption to the overarching macro-narratives of non-disabled normality has posed fundamental challenges to fixed stereotypes of disabled women. It seems doubtful. Portrayed as equally excluded from an uneven playing field and emphasising the inadequacy of (inter)subjectivities, *BMTM* flattened the differences between the women, which worked to naturalise and individualise disability. Simultaneously they erected barriers, highlighting attitudinal differences between contestants, re-presenting

them as inadequate or pathological if they could not get past their individual hurdles or if they transgressed sexual norms.

In episode five the winner was chosen on the basis of beauty and personality, despite doubts about her 'strong' personality; these seemed to be framed in terms of her working-class background, especially in the form of over-sexualised behaviour and drunkenness. In terms of the repertoire of skills deemed necessary (through the setting of tasks) she was a contestant who passed in accordance with most non-disabled imperatives, e.g. strutting, listening, and the capacity to follow instructions. The winner's photo-shoot was in episode six, alongside interviews with the other contestants, juxtaposing 'expert' justice against pity, as Skeggs (2007) suggests of reality TV shows in general. Over-turning the de-sexualising discourses used to judge the women as morally questionable, the sexualised conversation between Phang and the photographer, Rankin, in the winner's photo-shoot, served as a heavy reminder of the ownership of sexual desire and judgement. Phang commented that Knox was 'definitely very strong' and the 'the thing I would like her to do is just to remember that it's not a problem to be vulnerable'; soon after Rankin asks to touch her arm and comments that is it's quite sexy (she doesn't have a forearm). Skeggs shows how important such final revelatory scenes are, and demonstrates how the experts' opinions can 'feed into' narratives such as romantic Cinderella stereotypes (2007, 14), in this case perhaps from 'strong', working class, ugly duckling to expertly judged swan. Conversely, the interviews with other women were able to 'affect pity and the display of failed selves', retaining the other contestants as a 'cultural commodity' (16).

Performances of intimacy and emotion seem integral to the events chosen to be broadcast by this and other reality TV programmes, as Skeggs (2007) suggests. Brunsdon's (2000) and Barker's (1996) studies of soap opera demonstrate how fundamental psycho-emotional dimensions of experience are to cultural representations, particularly through their illustrations of the significant roles that television plays in offering resources and reassurances for the ongoing articulation of 'normal' identities. For instance, it is clear from

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such studies that television can play an important role for many people in negotiating fundamental questions of 'who to be', 'how to act' (Giddens,1991,70) or 'who we can be' and 'what we can do'(Thomas,1999, 45), offering strategic resources on 'how to get there'. It is perhaps these aspects of representation, which highlight the conditions of possibility for disabled women's identities, which can be seen as the most crucial aspects of verisimilitude for portrayals which might be more easily regarded as 'normal', 'realistic' or 'accurate', by those who have called for such (impossible) changes. In these terms, BMTM's discourse on disabled women would do little to offer new subject positions which place disabled women as active agents with personalities independent of their impairments and physical capacities.

Evidence from BMTM adds weight to arguments that the power of such shows to assist their participants and allow the audience to see, or construct, more creative or transgressive forms of identity depend to a large extent on who and how 'legitimate subjects' are framed and judged.

Conclusion

Skeggs speaks of contestants' participation in reality competitions as a kind of 'moral entrepreneurship' where value is 'demonstrated through the right emoting', an 'economy of persons is made visible for judgement' and profit is made by the 'revealing of intimacy by TV companies' (2007, 17). Whilst these features of reality TV hold true for this programme, BMTM has shaped these discourses in ways that reinforce impairment-based identities based on difference positioned as 'spectacle' and maintain de-sexualised portrayals of disabled women, linking moral value to the performance of both.

All the women discussed here have endeavoured to prove their worth in a television genre which placed them at the centre of a sexualised (invariably heteronormative) gaze which simultaneously invokes moral judgements on their sexual behaviour and often built impairment hierarchies which serve to obscure

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common experiences of disablement. Despite the potential that these and other disabled women have had to transgress and contest conventional ideas of femininity and beauty, and to subvert conventional gender dichotomies and essentialist ideals of womanhood, the media images of disabled women discussed have, so far, provided few opportunities to consider the skills and talents of these women on their own terms. They have also shown us even less of their everyday experiences of disablement, although the possible benefit of removing them from everyday life also minimised the idea of disabled women as dependent and deficient in their capacity to care for others. Further this has been presented in in an individualistic manner, which supports ideologies of meritocracy and non-disabled ideas of normalcy. Arguably, the argument between Hemingway and the other judges disrupted the framing of disabled women as a spectacle of extraordinary bodies disciplined by experts, allowing viewers to see something of how spectacle, or 'freak show' images are little more than a 'social relation among people, mediated by images' (Debord, 1983, Thesis 4, 3), possibly allowing us to see alternative ways of doing things, which may indeed hint towards the need for a revolution in cultural representation. Conversely they may have contributed to spurious ideas of representational democracy, hindering the development of representations which might come closer to meeting the desires expressed by audiences (Sancho, 2003; Wilde, 2004).

Overall, in the case of disability, reality television is put to specific use in promoting individualistic notions of non-disabled normality, out-contextualising disabling contexts and production strategies. The operation of sexualised, classed, impairment-based and gendered values and practices and discourses of ambition result in distinct forms of disabling discourse, which are reliant upon a wide range of normative ideas on subjects of value and processes of experimental individualism. These result in discourses of lack and inadequacy whilst working to fetishise some impairments and to disavow social causes of disability, all of which are portrayed in highly gendered terms. Given the dominance of these narratives the conditions of possibility for representing disabled women in reality television are few, especially in this type of reality model show.

The women in *BMTM* demonstrated a clear ambition to succeed in their chosen field. Brief analysis of *BMTM* reveals that the values of non-disabled normality are used to judge and contain disabled women, inviting us to see the person in these terms, as an extraordinary spectacle, overlooking or de-politicising disabling forces, allowing us to overlook individual needs, and experiences. Only those who are seen to conform to this emerging image of a disabled model escape the opprobrium of those who judge them, a status which seems highly contingent on the way they are portrayed to deal with their impairments, the tasks they are set and the ways they are expected to meet them. As Yaeger asserted:

> To define 'all women' as 'one' gives us the centripetal turn within language – an act with dire political conseq
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> oneness is imaginary and exclusionary (1991, 244).

This seems to be the central goal of all those programmes in the reality model genre, but takes a specific and insidious form in BMTM. To define ideal disabled women in these ways denoting a 'one' true model of disabled womanhood is likely to distance these contestants, at least, from non-disabled women and each other. The explicit privileging of one discourse over another, such as a metanarrative 'message' of superior moral agency, is likely to perpetuate messages of 'us and them', discouraging audience attachments to disabled women in general.

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List of Television Programmes

America's Next Top Model (2003- present, United States of America, United Paramount Network/The CW Television Network)

Benefits Street (2014, United Kingdom, Channel 4)

Beyond Boundaries (2005, 2006 and 2008, United Kingdom, BBC 2)

Big Brother (2000-2010, United Kingdom, Channel 4/E4)

Britain's Missing Top Model (2008, United Kingdom, BBC3)

Britain and Ireland's Next Top Model, formerly Britain's Next Top Model (2005-2013, United Kingdom and Ireland, Sky Living)

Brookside (1982-2003, United Kingdom, Channel 4)

Coronation Street (1960 – present, United Kingdom; ITV)

Eastenders (1985-present, United Kingdom; BBC1)

Fame Academy (2002-3, United Kingdom, BBC1)

Pop Idol (2001-3, United Kingdom, ITV)

See Hear (1981-present, United Kingdom, BBC 2)

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[1] An aim emphasised in the research of both Barnes (1992) and Sancho (2003) as a prerequisite for better portrayals

[2] It is common to see reporting of this type in UK broadsheet newspapers such as The Guardian; for example see O'Hara (2015) http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/oct/28/disabled-people-movie-tv-becoming-bulletproof [Accessed 29th December, 2015]

[3] In a somewhat ironic twist Morgan became an ambassador for a robotic exoskeleton a few years later, giving her a much desired opportunity to stand and walk again, and was Cosmopolitan magazine's campaigner of the year for her work on awareness of dangerous driving and the 'normalisation of disability' (Cosmopolitan.co.uk, 2014)

[4] Sophie Morgan was one of eleven disabled people with physical impairments who took part in the first series of BBC2's *Breaking Boundaries* (in 2005).

[5] Sophie Morgan presented on Channel's coverage of the Paralympics and journalism for the Daily Express ADD