

The Double Objectification

by *Christine Malec*

Cet article examine la corrélation qui existe entre l'objectification des femmes et la façon dont les personnes handicapées sont déshumanisées par l'attitude des personnes non handicapées.

It's hard not to be aware of the ways in which women's bodies are turned into objects by pornography and the media. Learning to recognize this fact and to reclaim our bodies as our own is a long and difficult process, one which I wonder if I personally will ever complete. As a blind woman, my relationship to my body image and appearance has been a complex and dubious one. Alongside this, however, there is another kind of objectification with which I am confronted every day, one even more insidious and subversive than that represented in make-up and hair-care advertisements, namely, the mixture of fascination and repulsion which disabilities often elicit from non-disabled individuals.

I am reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's identification of women as the "other." In a somewhat similar way, persons with physical disabilities are made into the "other" by many, if not most, non-disabled people. People are interested in difference. Physical disabilities constitute a difference which seems to at once attract and repel. I think that, upon seeing someone who is blind, for example, many people react immediately by trying to imagine being blind themselves. Based on innumerable experiences with strangers, I have concluded that this process is so

absorbing or distressing that I cease to be an autonomous individual with an identity, and become an object of curiosity. What appears to many as the enormity of my disability overshadows my existence as a human being, just as sexualization of women can result in dehumanization and objectification.

On public transportation, I am continually and unfailingly subjected to comments about my guide dog, questions about her performance, enquiries as to how I cope with this or that situation. Casual acquaintances of mine have passed me, given my dog a casual greeting, and failed to address me entirely. I am often told by campus employees who are unknown to me that they regularly watch me as I pass their place of work because they enjoy seeing my dog at work. Perhaps such statements are meant to be complimentary, but their effect is hardly flattering. It is seldom comfortable to know that one is on display, on stage, as it were. Often, such statements include some remark which makes it clear that the speaker perceives a relationship between the dog and myself. While recognizing the dog as an aid to mobility, they also infer the dog to be guide, protector, advisor, and intimate friend. "She keeps you walking pretty fast" is a typical response to my choice of a brisk walking speed. While such an assumption is, in part, a result of misinformation, it also illuminates their perception of myself as object, incapable of independent movement without the direction provided by a guide.

In my second year of undergraduate studies, another blind woman began attending the same campus. Though I'm told we are physically quite different, campus employees with whom I had been on first-name terms began to address me by her name. Because we are both blind, we were grouped together, regardless of our individual differences, physical and mental. Even people who know me by name see predominantly my disability. In public places, whether alone or with friends, I'm constantly aware of remarks made by others in my hearing, remarks about my dog or warnings to be watchful lest I trip on the steps of the bus or misjudge a traffic signal. Friends are also unwilling targets of stares from the curious. When I am alone, I know that I am being watched as I walk down the sidewalk or through buildings. I am told that people in cars will turn their heads as they pass me in order to continue staring.

Those who intrude on my privacy are motivated, quite often, by genuinely felt admiration for what they perceive as my courage. When confronted with an impolite and intrusive question or comment, I find it difficult to answer rudely because I can see the sincere desire for knowledge or the awe they feel because they are unable to imagine living without sight. Infrequently, I encounter strangers who ask questions but whose manner clearly demonstrates their respect for me as an individual first, and then as someone coping with a challenge. More often, however, I know that I am being viewed as an

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inexplicable oddity. A person with a disability seems to appear as an interesting diversion to many people. No matter what the motivation, they seem to feel entitled to objectify a person with a disability. Just as groups of males will whistle at a passing woman with no consideration of her dignity or privacy, so both genders confront a person with a disability intrusively.

Disturbingly, friends observe that it is often women who are most guilty of this rudeness. From what I'm told, women are most likely to stare at me and will tend to stare for longer periods than men. I have spent considerable time reflecting on this fact but am unable to reach any conclusion. Several potential explanations have suggested themselves to me, many of which flatly contradict one another. Women are socialized to display caring and sensitivity to others more freely. Are they more likely to attempt to empathize with what society perceives as a handicap? I've also wondered whether this tendency is linked to gender objectification. Having internalized the value which our culture places on female appearance, are some women compelled to assess how well a blind woman attends to clothes, make-up, and hair? My ethical objections to "feminine" artifice are sometimes difficult to defend. More appearance-oriented women (undoubtedly with my best interests at heart) try to explain to me kindly how important visual impressions are in the sighted world in which I live. It is difficult for me to assess how people's

reactions to me would change if I chose to conform to norms of "feminine" grooming as some blind women do. My attempts to understand the tendency of women to objectify me as a individual with a disability are on-going and anything but conclusive. It is a phenomenon which continues to puzzle me and which can perhaps never be satisfactorily explained.

Likewise, I find it difficult to determine whether the kind of objectification I have described has had an impact on my personal development. I feel that, to some extent, society's tendency to dehumanize me has had the effect of forcing me to become a strong-minded individualist. I have often encountered a stereotype which imposes a wholesome, ideal, flavourless, odourless, colourless, and non-threatening identity upon me. I suspect that blindness is such an overwhelming concept for many sighted people that it helps restore their equilibrium to perceive me as essentially innocuous in other ways.

Relative to my up-bringing, however, I have made some choices which have been labelled as radical by some. I am openly bisexual and am actively involved with the homosexual and bisexual community in Kitchener/Waterloo. Many of my opinions and choices constitute what is generally seen as an alternative life-style. I cannot draw clear connections between these choices and my position as a woman with a disability. Many women with disabilities I know have dealt with public attitudes in very different ways. For me, however, the objectification I experience

daily pushes me to establish my own individuality against the dehumanizing effects of being made into an object of self-absorbed curiosity and sympathy. In refusing to be defined by my "problem," I actively assert my individuality by my life choices. I need to assert my uniqueness as a kind of protest against being seen exclusively as "a blind woman."

I cannot say definitively what the effects of disability objectification have been on my life. I only know for certain how I react on a day-to-day level. The rudeness which I encounter from complete strangers has led me to conclude that, for many, a person with a disability is not a person but an object to be examined. Even the most well-intentioned individuals are utterly unaware of their assumptions. I am a human being, a woman, a student, a friend, a lover, a daughter. I know this in myself, but my self-perception cannot help but be injured by overhearing (as I have done) the emotion-laden voice of a passing stranger say "I'd rather die than go blind."

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