

From Propaganda to Paralympics: Images of Disability as a Matter of Othering



Figure 1. Slide from *Blood and Soil*, 1936. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Roland Klemig.
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1072055>.

AUTHOR: YASMINE SEMENIUK

From the late 1920s through to the end of the Second World War, Nazi media fed German society a “utopian fantasy of a future world uncontaminated by defective bodies” through a propaganda campaign that relied heavily on images of people with disabilities.¹ The goal of this propaganda was to garner public support for a healthy “body politic” that put the good of the community before the individual. These ideals eventually led to the T4 euthanasia program—a means used by Nazis to exterminate people with genetic disabilities. Today, images of disability in media—though often hard to find—may seem benign in comparison to those used by Nazi Germany. In this paper, I will argue, however, that contemporary disability images also engender negative perspectives of disability, much like those used by Nazi propagandists. First, I will examine the propaganda of the Nazi regime, which depicts disability as evil and a burden. This will culminate in an in-depth analysis of visual elements from Nazi slides used to spread State-approved values. I will then look at Hugh Gallagher’s article “What the Nazi ‘Euthanasia Program’ Can Tell Us about Disability Oppression” to compare Nazi Germany and North America today. Gallagher’s comparison sets up a juxtaposition of Nazi images around disability with those of the modern day. Looking at current Western portrayals of disability in media, drawn from Quinn and Yoshida’s work on images of Paralympic athletes, formal analysis reveals how a photograph can also “other” disability. This perspective will demonstrate how disability, as represented in recent media, extends a harmful tradition that echoes eugenics motives. This raises a cause for concern as it demonstrates how current images of disability evolved from a harmful, intolerant history—one that is still visible in contemporary Western society.

Nazi German eugenics focused on disabilities that were inheritable; this is a fact which revealed itself in my family's history. My great-grandfather's blindness was not a congenital condition; rather, it was caused by an oversight during infancy. As a newborn in 1912, Wolfhard soon developed eye infections that were not treated appropriately by nurses. This mistake changed the course of his life. Fortunately, things were not as terrible as they could have been—since this was not a genetic disease, Wolfhard could live a relatively normal life if he could obtain the paperwork necessary to prove his genetic purity. By filling out extensive medical records, he was eventually granted permission to marry and could even obtain an education—albeit only through a factory for blind people that produced woven chairs and brooms. Wolfhard's life with disability in Nazi Germany contrasted with those whose disabilities were genetic. My grandmother also spoke of a family friend whose daughter had a mental disability. Their family was told she would be taken to a summer camp; however, after a short time, they received a letter stating that she had died. They would later realize that she had been killed as part of the T4 program.

Although it is often associated with Nazi Germany, the concept of eugenics—that the human species can be improved through selective reproduction—reached most parts of the world. The dawn of the eugenics program in Nazi Germany began similarly to the American eugenics movement as they both strived to “engineer a healthy body politic.”² Germany, however, took eugenics ideology significantly further. They classified eugenics into two types: positive and negative. Positive eugenics attempted to encourage the breeding of healthy stock, whereas negative eugenics was aimed at eliminating perceived “undesirable” traits from the gene pool. The Third Reich took negative eugenics to extreme and egregious ends by developing a mass euthanasia undertaking that was “intended to ‘free’ Germany of disabled people.”³ The progression from eugenics theory to genocide began with increased control of the State over genetically disabled individuals' rights through institutionalization, forced sterilization, and marriage regulations. This, in essence, was total control of their reproductive rights. These laws evolved into what would become known as the T4 program. Taken from the

address Tiergartenstraße 4—the location of the office that oversaw the program—T4 involved mass killings of disabled people who were seen as a burden on both society and themselves.⁴ While the program officially ran from 1939 to 1941, the killings continued until the end of the war.⁵

The majority of these killings happened without the public's knowledge, but the State tried to skew views against “carriers of inferior genetic material”⁶ through the use of propaganda. Carol Poore, a professor of German studies at Brown University, discusses in her book *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* how visual depictions of disability were vital to the Third Reich's agenda. She notes that “broad masses were exposed to these images in many different contexts whether or not they were inclined to sympathize with eugenics.”⁷ However, as historian David Welch notes, the efficacy of this Nazi propaganda remains unclear.⁸ He suggests that Nazis attempted to appeal to a base of their constituents with the hope “to establish at least passive acquiescence”⁹ from groups who might be less persuaded. With this approach, Nazis were able to suppress opposition to their unethical policies. Essentially, their goal was to “label some people as valuable, superior Germans and others as undesirable, inferior, and even subhuman outsiders.”¹⁰ This othering was a central theme in their propaganda, and it can be seen in many “slide presentations” in which Third Reich values were celebrated. These slide presentations propagated Nazi ideologies to parts of the population that had not previously subscribed to them. “The problem for the Nazis was how to combine the visual effectiveness of printed material with the popular appeal of the spoken word in presenting this issue.”¹¹ Bruno Czarowski engineered the idea of slide presentations as a way to inexpensively combine the two aspects; “[Heinrich] Himmler officially adopted it on behalf of the propaganda section as ‘a worthwhile project for 1929.’”¹² Although the official records of these slide presentations are lost, it was reported that the presentations were “both well attended and well received.”¹³ They also functioned as an economical way of letting the “smallest village put on a great show.” One such slide from a presentation in 1936, *Blood and Soil* (fig. 1),¹⁵ exemplifies this approach and demonstrates the subtle (and not so subtle) ways through which propaganda was designed to influence.

“THE DISABLED MAN HAS A SHADOW BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER HIM SIGNIFYING THAT HIS FUTURE AND PAST ARE BOTH THE SAME. AS HITLER WOULD IMPLY, HIS LIFE WILL BE FULL OF SUFFERING AND IS ‘A LIFE NOT WORTH LIVING’”

This monochrome image exemplifies how disability was portrayed in Nazi German propaganda. The image clearly vilifies one side and heralds the other. The work is framed in a diagonal line of sight with a disabled man holding a sign on the left, and an idealized white family of five on the right, holding a similar sign. Within this line, the disabled man looks to the left and off the image (into the past) while the family looks directly at the viewer and is asking for action. This timeline is also seen in the figures' shadows. The disabled man has a shadow both before and after him signifying that his future and past are both the same. As Hitler would imply, his life will be full of suffering and is “a life not worth living.” Above the figures are two statements that translate to, respectively, “A genetically disabled person costs the State 5.50 *Reichmarks* daily” and “5.50 *Reichmarks* can support a genetically healthy family for one day!” The script, which seems to loom over the disabled man, emphasizes the word *Erbkranker* (genetically disabled) by using it both in the noun form and in a larger font while the text above the family de-emphasizes the word *erbgeseunde* (genetically healthy) by covertly incorporating it into the phrase. These differing font sizes emphasize the othering of disability and reinforce the idea that being genetically healthy is the default. The meaning of the text also gives an economic justification to the perceived inferiority of the disabled and echoes Dan Goodley's analysis of *Mein Kampf* in “how significant binary opposites are constituted through social, cultural and economic practises in relation to one another.”¹⁶

While both sides hold a sign with the price listed, the disabled man leans on his much-larger sign while the family holds up their smaller sign with pride and gratitude. This shows both that the disabled man cannot survive without the taxpayers' money, and that he will “leech” funds for the rest of his life. This contrasts with the family. Here, the patriarchal “breadwinner” has clearly worked to support his family. The differences between the figures are also highlighted by both the clothing and lighting. The disabled man, shrouded in black with his frail body hiding in an oversized suit, looks deathly ill. On the other hand, the family sports fashionable and respectable clothing in light colours to mirror both their pure morals and genes. As is suggested by his high-quality suit, the father has a stable job. Similarly, the mother is dressed modestly with her hair up and out of her face; this implies that she is working in the home and raising the children. These children are following in their parents' footsteps. The girls cling to the mother, suggesting that they will also produce Aryan children and help further the “ideal” race, while the son is next to his father. The boy is holding books, indicating that he is being educated (perhaps in a Hitler School) and will be following his father into the workforce. The stark contrast between these two sides of the slide, from a contemporary perspective, seem almost comical in their caricature. However, when compared to images today, the exaggeration remains.

Hugh Gallagher looks at the oppression of disabled individuals in Nazi Germany and questions whether such a genocide could happen in modern-day America.¹⁷

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This thought experiment focuses on the two countries' socio-cultural similarities; this includes social hierarchies, limited healthcare funding, and the importance of beauty and health.¹⁸ He concludes that because of the American Disability Rights Movement, modern laws, and social views, persecution of the disabled community would not happen in the modern era. However, the similarities Gallagher finds between the two countries are worthy of discussion—especially from the perspective of critiquing visual representations of disability. Noting that “both societies worship well-being and fitness [and that] youth, beauty and athleticism are idolized,”¹⁹ Gallagher implies that public opinion in modern America, like Nazi Germany, holds that there is such a thing as a “perfect body.” He goes on to note that “the starkest difference between the two societies, however, is that the state is paramount in the culture of Nazi Germany whereas the individual is paramount in American culture.”²⁰ The importance of the individual is what is emphasized in modern images of disability in the West; this is epitomized by Paralympic athletes. A prime example of this in Western media is a photograph published in the *Telegraph* (UK) during the 2012 Paralympic Games in London.²¹ Overall, the image has an effect that harkens back to Nazi German propaganda.

The photograph shows Jonnie Peacock, a Paralympian runner with a prosthetic leg, in a stadium absent of spectators. The lack of spectators in the stands behind him reminds the viewer that the Paralympics are less watched, and consequently, less relevant to able-bodied society than the Olympics. The single competitor in the image also becomes easier to recognize as “not the default body” since he is not shown among his competitors. In this photograph, Peacock is seemingly frozen in space and time, which makes him an object for able-bodied viewers to spectate and allows the emphasis to be on his disability and not his athleticism. This misrepresents the disabled athlete as not fully human.

In this shot, the photographer accentuates the athlete's left leg and right arm, while his prosthetic leg is cast in the darkness—thus juxtaposing these limbs against his missing one. This hints at a morality between good and bad, light and dark. This also mirrors the German propaganda image, with the disabled man cast in shadow. Although the figure's dark pants draw the viewer's eyes further down

towards his disability, the perspective of this image has the viewer literally looking up at the runner and puts him on a different level from the observer. Moreover, the bright lighting targets the figure and nothing else that further emphasizes the idea that the athlete is put on a pedestal for viewers. Unfortunately, this pedestal prevents him from being portrayed as a real human being and continues to further differentiate him for his body.

This image exemplifies a common trope among modern images of disability. Borrowing from Garland Thomson's identification of stereotypes of disability in photographs, this specific example can be categorized as “The Wondrous.”²² This type of shot is achieved by “position[ing] the viewer below the image of disability, [and] inviting the viewer to look up with wonder and awe. Deification constructs disability as something different and removed from normal life.”²³ This manipulation of distance and the spatial difference changes how the viewer perceives the subject, and in turn, evokes a feeling of othering. Nancy Quinn and Karen Yoshida confirm this othering through an examination of the CBC's coverage of the 2004 Paralympic Games. Here, they conclude that sport journalism and media reinforce ableist views on disability, which consequently shape how society views disabled people. They note that a key way this is accomplished is through the concept of “supercrips”: a supercrip representation is when an “athletic achievement triumph[s] over the personal tragedy of impairment.”²⁴ In the end, this harms disabled people by indicating that disability is not acceptable within society unless it is overcome. This idea echoes how Nazi ideology dictated what type of contribution to society was acceptable.

The idea of shared values when some of those values are, as Gallagher identifies, beauty and health, can be oppressive for those with disabilities. A movement towards embracing multiple body types in modelling has grown within the past decade. These changing ideologies show that the process for lifting stigmas is a long and arduous one, but they also demonstrate that visual depictions in society reflect social values. As our society changes towards valuing many types of bodies, so too is what we see depicted. These values get reflected in both images through a clear othering of disability, which is accomplished within three specific

frameworks: financial, moral, and the objectification of bodies. First, an economic perspective is used in both images to denote the difference between disabled and able-bodied people. The Nazi propaganda slide declares that people with disabilities leech off of the State and represent an economic burden to society. This is similar to the image of the Paralympian, as the stadium behind the athlete is shown empty to subtly remind the viewers that the Paralympics are poorly attended and generate less revenue. Secondly, by manipulating light and darkness in the images, there is a vilification of the disabled men. The Nazi propaganda slide accomplishes this by depicting the disabled man wearing a dark suit to contrast the genetically healthy family in the light. The Paralympic image takes a similar approach as the athlete's prosthetic leg is cast in darkness and posed in the background while his other limbs are basked in light and take forefront. Finally, an altered sense of time in both images contributes to the othering of disabled bodies. The Nazi propaganda image depicts the disabled man's shadow both before and after him while the Paralympian is shown frozen in space and time. This technique others the disabled figures in that able-bodied viewers can continue to examine their bodies and project their views of disability onto the figures without considering their humanity.

There is a relationship between modern images of disability in media and the two-dimensional portrayals that flourished in Nazi Germany. These portrayals began as a way to exhibit racist and ableist cartoons through slideshows that worked towards "a central goal of the Nazi project ... [in] the shaping of a new subject that was to be an active, willing and worthy participant of the new society."²⁵ This goal was partially achieved through propaganda. Therefore, as citizens, we must constantly be vigilant of the narrative that is being told to us. Modern images of disability still carry elements that are used to fictionalize disability as a "life not worth living" through dehumanization and an appeal to both economics and morality. Although Gallagher asserts that something akin to the T4 program would not occur in contemporary North America, a critique of the economic

and moral values that could cause such a thing is necessary, especially when these values are being perpetuated in images by the media. Moreover, while Western media has improved significantly in terms of inclusivity and free speech, the underlying representation of disability in the media fails to present well-rounded humans who have stories to tell outside their disability. ■

EDITORS

Tatiana Povoroznyuk & Dankile Lin

NOTES

1. Staffan Bengtsson, "The Nation's Body: Disability and Deviance in the Writings of Adolf Hitler," *Disability and Society* 33, no. 3 (2018): 419.
2. Bengtsson, 418.
3. Bengtsson, 418.
4. Michael Berenbaum, "T4 Euthanasia Program," Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/T4-Program>.
5. Hugh Gallagher, "What the Nazi 'Euthanasia Program' Can Tell Us about Disability Oppression," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 12, no. 2 (2001): 97.
6. Bengtsson, 419.
7. Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 68–69.
8. David Welch, "Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 214.
9. Welch, 218.
10. Poore, 67.
11. Thomas Wiles Arafe Jr., "The Development and Character of the Nazi Political Machine, 1928–1930, and the Nsdap Electoral Breakthrough," *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses, 2909* (1976): 143.
12. Wiles Arafe Jr., 144.
13. Wiles Arafe Jr., 158.
14. Wiles Arafe Jr., 145–46.
15. *Blut und Boden* ("blood and soil") was a phrase used to emphasize purity of race (blood) within German borders (soil).
16. Dan Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.
17. Gallagher, "What the Nazi 'Euthanasia Program' Can Tell Us about Disability Oppression," 98.
18. Hugh Gallagher, *By Trust Betrayed: Patients, Physicians and the License to Kill in the Third Reich* (Arlington, VA: Vandamere Press, 1995); Gallagher, "What the Nazi 'Euthanasia Program' Can Tell Us about Disability Oppression," 96.
19. Gallagher, "What the Nazi 'Euthanasia Program' Can Tell Us about Disability Oppression," 96.
20. Gallagher, "What the Nazi 'Euthanasia Program' Can Tell Us about Disability Oppression," 97–98.
21. Gareth A. Davies, "London 2012 Olympics: GB's Jonnie Peacock Breaks 100m World Record at Paralympic Trials," *Telegraph* (UK), July 1, 2012, photograph by David Rose, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/athletics/9368573/London-2012-Olympics-GBs-Jonnie-Peacock-breaks-100m-world-record-at-Paralympic-trials.html>.
22. Nancy Quinn and Karen Yoshida, "More Than Sport: Representations of Ability and Gender by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) of the 2004 Summer Paralympic Games," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 5, no. 4 (December 2016): 110, <https://cjds.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/cjds/article/view/316>.
23. Quinn and Yoshida, 113.
24. Quinn and Yoshida, 107.
25. Bengtsson, 419.

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