Reading (readings of) UK Channel 4's 2012 and 2016 Paralympic advertisements: On the undecidability of texts and dis/ability itself

Cockain, A.

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Abstract

Much of this article deconstructs UK Channel 4's 2012 and 2016 Paralympic advertisements, illustrating how the structure and arrangement of signs combine to challenge *and* reinforce stereotypical attitudes about ability/disability. However, my focus extends beyond taken-for-granted and commonsensical boundaries of a "text" to contemplate how readers' readings (e.g., on weblogs, in newspapers, journals, books, etc.) in specific contingent contexts combine to produce paratext that authors meanings relating to ability and disability. Both the advertisements and the readings they engender produce ambiguous and complex meanings that seem to resist, or thwart, authorial intentions to produce positive representations and efforts to master, or govern, texts through binary oppositions. Although such fragility and undecidability in the representations, readings and the texts they combine to produce give them double-edged qualities that make them comparable to pharmakon, namely a beneficial remedy and/or drug/poison, with regard to their likely impact upon a media landscape containing other portrayals of disability, they coincide with the undecidability of the dis/ability and dis/abled identities to which they refer.

Keywords: Paralympic advertisements; text; paratext; pharmakon; binary oppositions; dis/ability; undecidability

Introduction

Much of this article examines UK Channel 4's 2012 and 2016 Paralympic advertisements, namely "Meet the Superhumans" (hereafter, MTS) and "We're the Superhumans" (hereafter, WTS) respectively, focusing especially upon the structure and arrangement of signs within these representations. Substantial textual analysis in newspapers, journals, blogs and books has either emphasized their positive[1] or problematic content (e.g., Bruce; Crow; Catchpole; Kelly; All Fur Coat and RA; Drake) although scholars have, more recently, shifted focus from text and content to the production practices and decisions of Paralympic broadcasters, highlighting their efforts to balance stakeholders' goals with stated intentions to make the Paralympics a commercial and socially progressive success (Pullen *et al*). This article seeks to contribute to such discourse by highlighting the coexistence of positive *and* negative content that *both* challenges *and* reinforces (or recycles) stereotypical attitudes and formulas (e.g., Cameron 95-98) about disability and disabled identities. In so doing, I attempt to avoid perpetuating reductionist claims that representations are either "positive" *or* "negative;" a "template of visual rhetorics" that obscures how different "modes of representing disability converge and inflect one another", even within individual depictions (Garland-Thomson, *Seeing the Disabled*, 339). Nevertheless, the scope of this article extends beyond the commonsensical boundaries of texts to consider how readers' readings (e.g., on weblogs and websites, in newspapers, journals, books, etc.) combine with representations in specific sociocultural, discursive and material circumstances to author meanings relating to ability and disability. Such readings constitute "paratext" although, admittedly, Gérard Genette deploys the term to refer to the material provided by editors, printers, and publishers that surrounds what is ostensibly the main text (e.g., the cover and its appendages (23) and title page (32)) and which produces a threshold, or undefined zone, "between the inside and the outside, a

zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text)" (2). In this article, paratext has a wider connotation and encompasses readers' readings; or literature either "written over" or alongside older ones, in ways that complicate commonsensical notions regarding the sanctity of a text. We might also regard MTS and WTS, as well as other trailers and promotional materials (e.g., Channel 4's "Freaks of Nature," the marketing campaign for the 2012 Paralympics (Silva and Howe, 176)) and perhaps even the entirety of the "main" Paralympic coverage as paratext to Channel 4's "Year of Disability" in 2016, in ways that further exemplify the conceptual blurriness between paratext/text. Paratext is neither inconsequential nor superfluous although it is "supplementary" in the sense to which Jacques Derrida enigmatically refers: namely that it is "neither inside nor outside, and/or both inside and outside at the same time" (Royle 49).

Advertisements, paratext and the ambiguity they produce seems to thwart authorial intentions to produce positive representations and efforts to govern texts through binary oppositions. Such fragility and undecidability in the representations, readings and texts they combine to produce give them double-edged qualities, in ways that make their impact upon a media landscape containing other portrayals of disability comparable to pharmakon: a beneficial remedy and/or poison (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 75). Put differently, as the advertisements potentially "validate cultural guidelines that promote meaningful inclusion" so they might shape and cement problematic social attitudes toward disability, as Heidi Mapley explains of cultural models of disability elsewhere (2). In addition to such notions as paratext, supplements and pharmakon, the arguments in this article are informed by principles associated with deconstruction and, especially, Derrida's notion of undecidability. Deconstruction is not intent upon decoding texts in order to reveal a "true" meaning but displaces concepts like "the unity of the text, the meaning or message

of the text, or the authorship of the text" (Schwandt 63). Deconstruction is not the same as "destruction" but,

> "means 'to undo' [and] ... does not proceed by random doubt ... but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification *within the text itself*. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another" (Johnson xiv).

Derrida's notion of undecidability, meanwhile, does not simply denote deliberate efforts to trouble dualisms but registers "how they are *always* already troubled" (Reynolds 46, emphasis added). An undecidable—e.g., pharmakon, although Derrida contends that in "all texts there are ... points of undecidability that betray any stable meaning that an author might seek to impose upon his or her text"—"cannot conform to either polarity of a dichotomy," thereby constituting an equivocation that "breaks open the meaning" authors seek to "impose upon their work," exposing it to "alternative understandings that undermine the explicit authorial intention" (Reynolds 46). In the context of this article, undecidability and deconstruction is evident within and between messages and threatens the unity and apparent identity of the "text" although, crucially, such "undecidability" (e.g., Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, 61) coincides with the undecidability of the dis/ability and dis/abled identities to which they refer.

To the advertisements themselves

MTS opens at night in a city before lights turn on disclosing reflective surfaces, a swimming pool and a running track sodden with rain, perhaps connoting insecurity and danger as well as commitment (i.e. training outside "ordinary" working hours, even in inclement conditions). This might even register more general issues of precarity in neoliberal societies, especially as they relate to, and are experienced by, disabled persons (e.g., Shildrick) as a consequence of the world outside

(e.g., systems, structures, environment etc.), as the running track undoubtedly is. After this, we meet the "superhumans", namely Paralympic athletes training, in competition, before and after events and simply facing the camera (and "audience"). Technical codes, particularly editing and music (Fiske 5), namely Public Enemy's *Harder than you think*, produce an energetic momentum. After 42 seconds, images of disaster and tragedy disturb: an explosion in a military context, a car crash and, between, a shot of a fetus in utero, an expectant mother and the voice, presumably of a "medical expert", saying "I know this is a shock". Continuity between the second tragic act and the uplifting third act is accomplished by song lyrics (i.e., "twenty years later") and visual codes (i.e., an "athlete" in a wheelchair beside the crushed shell of a car) that limit potential polysemy by explaining the sign to the reader. These make clear readers are to imagine the Paralympic team in the first and third acts are the same persons who meet and overcome the disasters unfolding in the second act. The third act contains images of competition and achievement, accompanied by upper-case words that further anchor meaning: "Forget everything you thought you knew about strength", "Forget everything you thought you knew about humans", "It's time to do battle" and, finally, "Meet the superhumans".

WTS begins with a drum filling the screen. The drum is being played and the drumsticks transpire to be in the feet of a man with no arms. A swing band featuring a one-armed bass player and a blind pianist join in. A lead singer in a suit spins in a wheelchair singing Sammy Davis Junior's *Yes, I can*, before rolling off the stage onto a road where he races alongside Paralympic athletes. A one-legged man does high jump before images of "ordinary" people doing things with their feet (e.g., an office worker "holding" a pen while smiling and a "mother" "holding" a baby). Wheelchair users perform ballroom dance moves and various sports intermingle with scenes of people in wheelchairs in quotidian spaces (e.g. a supermarket), to the soundtrack of *Yes, I can*.

Various persons disclose their abilities while saying "yes, I can". Just after two minutes, the febrile atmosphere collapses, in ways that echo MTS, to unfold a similarly tragic, albeit more quotidian, second act. A careers advisor talks to a boy in a wheelchair saying "no, you can't". A bell rings. Then, a man, seemingly the boy's adult self, gazes into the camera saying "yes, I can", apparently adrenalized while playing rugby in a wheelchair. This is the third act. Children using prosthetic limbs appear at home and at school. The side-by-side juxtaposition of sporting and everyday accomplishments is most explicit when the band plays at the top of a high ramp in a stadium. From there, a man in a wheelchair performs a stunt, after which a man with partially formed arms brushes his teeth. The advertisement ends with the chorus "yes, we can" and "we're the superhumans" on the screen.

A twice told tale

The paragraphs below imitate Frederic Jameson's presentation of Vincent Van Gogh's *A Pair of Peasant Boots* and Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, paintings that he reads in tandem in order to distinguish between modernism and postmodernism (*Cultural Logic* 58-60). Jameson reads *Peasant Shoes* twice, first as the "willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into ... a Utopian gesture: as an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses" (*Cultural Logic* 58-59) and, second, as calling forth "the whole missing object world which was once their lived context" (*Cultural Logic* 59). Warhol's shoes, by contrast, are "shorn of their earlier life world" (*Cultural Logic* 60) and thereby display the depthlessness and affectlessness Jameson claims characterizes the cultural logic of late capitalism. While the significance of this allusion to Jameson may surface as this article unfolds, readers might anticipate these by contemplating the extent to which such binaries may either be capable of governing not

only advertisements and paratext but also *this* discussion or, conversely, that they fail to hold themselves in place; "inverting or collapsing themselves," getting into "trouble", coming "unstuck" and offering "to contradict themselves" (Eagleton 115-116).

A utopian gesture

The production, content and reception of these representations may combine to produce a utopian text. For WTS, Channel 4 purportedly involved disabled persons in the pre-production phase of the message-making process (Ellis 131) and, according to *The Telegraph*, "sought the constant guidance of various figures in the disabled community – from leading charities such as Mencap and Scope, to many disabled employees of Channel 4 ... to ensure the tone of the film was right" (Kelly). Such inclusion of disabled persons in the message-making process might suggest an "epistemology that refutes the medical model of disability by treating the voices ... of people with disabilities as valid sources of knowledge" (Ellcessor *et al* 8), thereby reversing tendencies in media for disability to be "'written about' rather than 'written by' people from the margins" (Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing*, 38).

Meanwhile, characters, their ways of being in certain places, codes and plot combine to challenge recurring stereotypes of disabled persons as "pitiable" and "pathetic" (e.g., Barnes). By contrast, disabled persons appear in MTS as "strong" and "determined," thereby providing "much needed ... role-models for both males and females living with disability; it presents positively different 'healthy' body-types for mass consumption; and ... it challenges public perceptions and assumptions of what people with disabilities are capable of" (Drake np). Stereotypical representations of pitiable characters are reversed to such an extent that persons in these advertisements are named "superhumans": a label that coincides with the "supercrip", a trope that

places attractive, gifted, often athletic disabled people as inspirational role models; an image I explore later in this article. Such characters who *are* disabled persons—rather than actors "feigning" impairment—are central to, instead of on the margins of, a representation populated by "abled" characters.[2] This contrasts with tendencies to position disabled persons either on the margins of representations or as plot devices enabling abled protagonists to "show their spirit" (Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing*, 181). Instead of disabled persons appearing as "villains" within representations (e.g., Barnes), "abled" characters are cast as "villains" who speak ableist and disablist discourse. Such "villains" divulge the attitudinal barriers disabled persons encounter and which contribute to the production, maintenance and reinforcement of disabling experiences and disability itself (e.g. the doctor's medical gaze, the careers advisor). Disabled characters perform active roles within various settings (e.g. an Olympic-sized swimming pools, stadiums, etc.) although ostensibly mundane locations are more crucial to the utopian visions the advertisements disclose. For example, WTS shows an office, dining room, living room, company boardroom, supermarket, petrol station, classroom and bathroom. Depicting disabled persons as "part of the workforce", "parents," consumers and so on challenges not only a stereotype of "omission" (Barnes 17) whereby disabled persons are portrayed as incapable of participating fully in community life but also discloses the mundane and unspectacular everydayness of disability.

Confrontation is dramatized through plot, especially encounters between a student and career advisor and a parent and doctor that appear to dramatize collisions between the "medical" and "social" models of disability (Cameron 137-140). The abled, ableist, medical, and normalizing gazes of the doctor (in MTS) and "advisor" (in WTS) divulge the micro-politics of power, illustrating how stigmatizing labels filter into locations (e.g. hospitals, schools, etc.), in ways that restrict life opportunities. However, characters resist and refuse power, thereby becoming active

rather than passive prisoners of discourse, and the persons and policies they speak through. In so doing, the representation refuses to prioritize the medical model and, instead, discloses its lack of rhetorical, and positioning, power. Confrontation is also enacted through characters' gazes that challenge viewers "to dare to look back, dare to pity" (Crow 171), in ways that reverse tendencies for "non-disabled" persons to stare at "disabled" persons (Garland-Thomson, *Politics of Staring*, 56).

Technical codes, especially music and editing, combine with plot to produce "readerly" representations (Barthes, *S/Z*, 4). Vital to this readerly "recipe" is the "overcoming story" (e.g., DeVolder). Admittedly, the advertisements reproduce a problematic "personal tragedy theory of disability" (Oliver 20). For example, MTS shows how war, a car accident and physiology produce impairment. In so doing, and albeit while perhaps disturbing some readers, the advertisements disclose the fragile permeable borders between "ability" and "disability" in ways that confound how societies and cultures ideate them as hermetically sealed states of being. In this regard, as Catherine Kudlick observes elsewhere, the advertisement highlights the "porous boundaries between disability and apparent health ... because it can potentially happen to *anyone* at *any time*; an accident" (34), thereby unfolding possibilities for apprehending life, and identities, beyond a dialectics of "ability" and "disability". Such codes inside the representation combine to reverse the typical positioning of disabled persons within mediated portrayals (Figure 1) as the subordinate pole in a violent hierarchy; the other of which has the "upper hand".

Traditional position in binary opposition	Position in MTS / WTS
Written about	Written by (or at least with)
Pitiable	Courageous (supercrip)

Periphery	Centre-stage
Villain	Hero / inspiration (with 'abled' persons = villain)
Stared at / object of gaze	Gazing at / subject of the gaze
Patient / prisoner / passive	Agent / assertive
Object of medical model / gaze	Subject; confront / challenge medical model / gaze
Omitted (absent) / excluded	Present / included
Silent / invisible	Vocal / visible

Figure 1: Reversals to the positioning of disabled persons in binary logic

Readers produce further supplementary matter that suggests advertisements and paratext combine with readers' readings to disrupt the taken-for-granted and "natural" hierarchies of "abled" and "disabled" identities. For example, Guy Kelly cites a Paralympic athlete:

> "'If I walked anywhere before I'd get stared at ... But recently I was out and a little girl turned to her mum and said, 'Mummy, why don't *I* walk like that?' I loved it. She questioned herself, not me, and saw it as just a different way of doing things. It shows how far we've come'" (np).

On YouTube, much commentary suggests preferred rather than either negotiated or oppositional readings although, admittedly, other messages might have been removed. Numerous posts, seemingly by "nondisabled" readers on *YouTube* suggest *they* feel inspired and moved in ways that might disclose how the figure of the "supercrip" functions within ableist media framing.

> "This has got to be the best and most powerful advert of all time".
>
> "Seriously, kudos to Channel 4 for making these Paralympics one of the most watched ever and portraying the athletes in it, as ... athletes. Adverts like these ... break with misconceptions and actually get people excited [about the Paralympics]"

> "4 years later and I still fight back a tear or two watching this. Incredibly motivational. Powerful
>
> message. Amazing."

Paratext by persons who combine disabled and either academic or journalistic identities registers positive content and consequences albeit while emphasizing problematic matters. For example, Lucy Catchpole, writing in *The Guardian*, suggests WTS is "witty, slick", does not "prettify disability", explaining that "positive is an understatement" because "able-bodied people who never tweet about disability" show great enthusiasm for the advert (2016). Frances Ryan, also writing in *The Guardian*, also deploys the word "positive," albeit while emphasizing the disabling effects of "inspiration porn" (np).

Dystopian pictures

Such representations may combine with paratext to produce more dystopian texts that reinforce traditional binary oppositions between "ability" and "disability" and the connotations typically ascribed to each; even while seeming to subvert them. Even the apparently inclusionary dimensions of pre-production and production may conform to, rather than subvert, exclusionary patterns. For example, although Channel 4 purportedly consulted disabled members of staff, media employment patterns suggest this strategy would likely only reach a very narrow demographic. Meanwhile, even though Mencap and Scope (who Channel 4 consulted) are national organizations that campaign for disability rights and deploy the social model, they are not disabled persons' organizations—namely entities that are governed and controlled directly by disabled persons and in which a majority of members are disabled. This seems likely to limit the extent to which the messages might represent disabled persons themselves and, instead, imply that Channel 4 speaks *for*, and *about*, rather than *with*, disabled persons in ways that conform to a "traditional," problematic, politics of representation. Such circumstances might even suggest that as disabled

persons often function within stories as an ableist opportunity, namely devices through which abled persons may display *their* spirit (Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing*, 184) so disability might be a means through which Channel 4 might display *their* value; and who *they are*. Such an interpretation is made more compelling by abundant paratext by Channel 4 executives that repeatedly refers to *their* "DNA" and *their* commitment "to challenge the status quo" (Pullen and Jackson np) in ways that might suggest Channel 4's identity work (e.g. their desires to challenge viewers, etc.), combined with commercial imperatives, might eclipse intentions to make messages disabled persons endorsed. Consequently, MTS and WTS might be regarded as saying as much, and perhaps even more, about senders and their intentions than the subject/object to which they purportedly refer.

Admittedly, casting disabled persons as "heroes," or "superhuman", and abled persons as "villains" might seem to reverse the traditional relational and interactional roles and identities of disabled and abled characters within mediated forms. In fact, the structural elements in the advertisement, namely the "hero" (i.e. Paralympian athletes), "villain" (e.g. the doctor, careers advisor, their gazes and discourse, etc.) and obstacles (e.g. exclusion, tragedy, labelling, impairment, etc.) combine in ways that seem to reverse the positioning and characteristics of the master binary, i.e., "ability" and "disability". This is especially because the heroes act in ways that render the disabling powers of abled, ableist, disablist and dis/ableist society as lacking in potency. Nevertheless, the plot in which protagonists are implicated conforms to a problematic "disability as problem", or disability as "personal tragedy" narrative trope. This is a story in which disabled persons experience disaster, become fixed—or fix themselves—in ways that not only perpetuate the dominant cultural trope of disability as a "problem", "for which solutions *must* be sought" (Titchkosky and Michalko 2) but also, by virtue of portraying disability as a state requiring

adjustment, contribute to the "tacit production and maintenance of 'normalcy' as the 'natural order of things' and 'the way things are'" (Titchkosky and Michalko vii). Furthermore, the structural constraints and conventions of the genre (i.e., the short length, and formulaic acts, of advertisements, etc.) fix the "problem" in fast-forward and attribute the overcoming of barriers as a consequence of personal characteristics—e.g. courage, determination, diligence, commitment, etc., thereby producing an accelerated overcoming narrative. This speeded-up overcoming story erases, absents or writes over alternate accounts that could "bear witness to histories and continuities of deep-seated structural violence" that produce barriers and exclusion, transforming them into stories that resemble those "tales of individual hardship and redemption" to which Beth DeVolder refers elsewhere that suggest anyone "with enough pluck", and "good luck" can "'come back' from ... anything" (747). Consequently, disability is produced as an "asocial condition" (Titchkosky, *Disability Studies: Old and New*, 45) and a private reality with the characters, their roles and identities, possessing an ideological function, the effect of which re-inscribes the violence of traditional hierarchical relations, thereby rendering the apparent obfuscation to the master **ability**/*disability* binary illusory.

Although the *yes I can* lyric that saturates WTS speaks an affirmation model of disability (e.g., Swain and French 569), it also combines with those aforementioned elements of character and plot to intensify and exacerbate the violence and inequality of **abled**/*disabled* relations. In fact, the advertisements might function as myth. As Claude Levi-Strauss explains, myths work "from the awareness of oppositions toward their progressive mediation ... two opposite terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which allows a third one as mediator" (440). Myth "performs the specific task of mediating irreducible opposites" (Crossan 51), thereby bridging the gap between apparently irreconcilable stances, individuals and situations

and demonstrating that mediation, or reconciliation, *is* possible (Crossan 53). The advertisements register the binary of ability and disability although this becomes replaced with the equivalent terms *yes I can* and although the other pole in this binary, namely *no I can't* only appears fleetingly, it is an "absent presence" because "when one term of a binary pair is present ... it's opposite is also implied" (Ryan, *Novel after Theory*, 52). By deploying commonly employed analogy symbols where : means "is / are to" and :: means "as", the advertisements imply ability : disability :: can : cannot. The figure, or construct, of the "superhuman" mediates between, or reconciles, these apparently hermetically sealed ontological states of being although the ways this myth works to stabilize **abled**/*disabled* relations is both violent and ideological (e.g., Barthes, *Mythologies*, 139-140). This is because the "superhumans" do not navigate a "middle" path between these poles but, instead, assimilate toward the powerful, and desirable, side of normalcy: overcoming their impairment "to achieve and to be 'normal'" (Bruce 1446) while the "ontological precariousness" (of ableism) and the "visceral realities" of impairment are erased (Hughes 17, 23). Such "supercrip" iconography might also encourage the "able-bodied majority" to expect those "who are 'different' to develop and adapt (Silva and Howe 179) to abled, and ableist, norms while repudiating other forms of "unspectacular" disabled experience which involve un-aestheticized and perhaps even unacceptable and non-normative dimensions of human experience—like defecation, agony and so on. Consequently, the advertisements fail to "interrogate normalcy" (Titchkosky and Michalko 6) and "reconstitute the unquestioned, hegemonic normalcy of ... able-bodiedness" (Titchkosky, *Disability Studies: Old and New*, 46-47). In fact, the seemingly innocuous, yet insidious, *yes I can* in WTS is crucial to the *apparent* resolution, or reversal—yet reinforcement—of the "ability" and "disability" binary and constitutes "dividing practices" that index the dual processes of ableism and disablism (e.g., Goodley xi) through constructions of the "ideal citizen" as "competent" and

"capable" (Goodley and Lawthom 482). Such traits also index, albeit in shorthand, those who are and those who are not ideal neoliberal subjects, namely subjects displaying "self-cultivating" and "self-regulating" tendencies even when confronting structural barriers and impairment effects.

Paratext produced by disability studies scholars on blogs and in print media and journals supplements the "superhuman" who *can* by highlighting the violence and restrictiveness of this subject position. For example, Catchpole complicates the lyric *yes I can*, and the hashtag promoting it, namely #yesican, revealing how this quickly became: "There's no such thing as can't" on Channel 4's official Twitter account (np). Catchpole lists the manifold things persons—both disabled and non-disabled—*really* can't do while also ruminating upon how this *yes, I can* discourse might affect not only how the general public view disabled persons but also how disabled persons understand themselves (np). Meanwhile, a blog post by All Fur Coat and RA who names herself as an "Autoimmune RA writer of socio-political perspectives of disability, ableism and discrimination" explicates upon the tyrannical, hegemonic, qualities of *yes I can*, the incessant reiteration of which she describes as making her feel "harassed" while also suggesting the Paralympic advertisement aestheticizes disabled persons and their everyday experiences to such an extent they become unrecognizable to others and to themselves (np). This blog post also contains abundant links to other posts and videos as well as embedded paratext from "readers" of posts in *The Guardian* some of which recall the materiality of impairment and the ways this cannot be contained by representation, albeit while acknowledging the disabling impact representations have on the daily realities of disabled persons.

> "As an invisibly disabled person ... when I can't do Paralympian stuff I have the DWP ... stopping my benefits ... people literally screaming "liar" in my face when I use the "less able to stand" seats on the bus or friends ... talking about "scroungers and cheats" but reassuring me they didn't mean a good disabled person like me".

"If they wanted to send a message about bravery, resilience and ingenuity channel 4 could have come round to my house and filmed when I lose control of my bowels and spend the whole afternoon cleaning up my shit, despite not being able to stand or use both hands ... Except that doesn't seem to be a picture of disability that's acceptable ... despite it being a reality ... for thousands. Much easier, to show a few films of disabled people doing similar things to that of an abled bodied person, creating nice fuzzy feelings in the audience" (np).

Such paratext not only exemplifies the open-endedness of messages, illustrating how they form in ways that exceed authorial intentions but also registers how the advertisements fail to perform the double function of myth, namely to "resolve particular contradictions and, more important, to create a belief in the permanent possibility of reconciliation" (Anderson and Foley 13).

Beyond binaries and the undecidability of texts and dis/ability *itself*

This article has hitherto presented two readings of MTS and WTS and the paratext they conjoin with to textualize meanings relating to ability and disability: first that they complicate, and perhaps even subvert, stereotypical recipes for disability representation and second that they perpetuate a violent **ability**/*disability* binary even while seeming to obfuscate this. Some readers might perceive the side-by-side juxtaposition of such apparently incommensurable views an affront to commonsense beliefs that texts say what they mean, display unity and communicate the singular, or unary (and unambiguous), intentions of a writer-author. According to such logic, there is only one "right" meaning: namely that representations are either "positive" or "negative". Such "settling accounts," as Tanya Titchkosky observes with regard to rival interpretations elsewhere (*Disability Studies: Old and New*, 41), fills pages in many media studies textbooks, often with discussion of specific images arranged under separate headings, e.g., "positive" and "negative" although, admittedly, such assessments typically acknowledge that "positive" and "negative" elements

might coexist, albeit not necessarily within the *same* message. Such discussions are likely to develop into claims that it may be possible to overturn demeaning images by substituting them with "positive" pictures albeit while recognizing there may be disagreement regarding what constitutes a positive/negative image and, furthermore, that "positive" images may be futile if the "underlying material conditions" remain "unreformed"—"negative images may be *accurate*, in other words" (Hartley 203, original emphasis). Nevertheless, a singular reading may emerge as one pole of the positive/negative binary is storied as being more substantial than the other. This is, perhaps, how this article has arbitrated between seemingly competing interpretations: namely placing them beside each other while, implicitly, suggesting that despite well-meaning intentions and deliberate deployment of codes within the messages, problematic meanings corrode the character of the text in ways that illustrate how, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder claim, even "'well-meaning' representations [can] ... result in violent justifications" (212).

However, it is possible to evade a "true/false dichotomy", and side-step "the 'settling of accounts'", by treating "the conflicting arguments as documents ... of the way ... culture" and its people "interpret, and thereby represent, disability" (Titchkosky, *Disability Studies: Old and New*, 41). With this in mind, we might regard "utopian," or positive, and "dystopian," or negative, readings as figurative strands within an intricate entanglement that conflicting models of representation and author-centered, text-centered and transactional doctrines regarding composition may help to unravel. For example, Stuart Hall distinguishes between reflective (i.e., language reflects meanings already existing "out there in the world"), intentional (language expresses what speakers want to say (15)) and constructionist approaches to representation, the latter of which recognizes the "public, social character of language" and acknowledges that "neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning" (25). Matters

become more complicated when a constructionist (or transactional) approach to representation becomes subject to Michel Foucault's insistence that knowledge, power and "truth" come together in situated yet contingent discursive practices (131). As Hall explains:

> "It is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the *discursive formation*, the *regime of truth*, of a particular period and culture' (55).

To such ideas, we might add Derrida's enigmatic notion that language is not a "transparent representation of the world and/or of the minds which populate it" (Crowley 31) but produces "meanings that proliferate *beyond* an author's *conscious* control" (Crowley 7–8; emphasis added). Consequently, texts become a layered collage composed, or constituted by, overlapping and intersecting authors who combine within specific sociocultural, discursive and material conditions of possibility to produce content that alters through processes of production, construction and reception.

Constituting the "text" to which this article refers are such elements as senders' "good" intentions, their desires to be innovative while producing an audience; the conventions (and codes) of genres; specific, and particular, material (and technological) circumstances, or conditions of possibility, in which "truth", power and knowledge coincide; and a real world "out there". We might also detect the epistemic frameworks, or discourses, that speak, while being spoken by, "senders" and "readers". Each element within this enmeshment may unfold further—like a Russian doll, or Chinese box—to disclose plenitude. For example, inside the advertisements and paratext there are traces of a profusion of discourses, e.g.: the medical model, the social model, neoliberalism, teleological discourses of progress, social inclusion, social exclusion, heteronormativity, ableism, disablism, dis/ableism etc., and these "inflect one another", like those "different modes of representing disability" to which Rosemary Garland-Thomson refers (*Seeing*

the Disabled, 339). Texts are, therefore, "sites of struggle" that not only "show traces of different discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance" (Wodak 187) but also tensions, or conflicts, between imagination and reality—or utopian wishfulness and material conditions. The advertisements might be regarded as imaginary inventions, or "'formal' solutions to unresolvable social contradictions" (Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 79) that the former, despite trying, seem unable to resolve.

Such a confluence of messages are supplementary to the advertisements in the sense to which Derrida refers: they are "neither inside nor outside, and/or both inside and outside at the same time" (Royle 49) in ways that exemplify Derrida's "notion of a structure lacking any centre" (*Writing and Difference*, 279). These thwart efforts to construct an interpretation predicated upon frozen, stabilizing, dichotomies like "utopia" and "dystopia" and defy attempts to ideate as separate such terms as "author", message, "reader", "text" and context, disclosing how countless co-present aspects of the same reality or process contribute to meaning-making. More specifically, "texts move, open and close, come and go", leaving a plentitude of traces—some fleeting, and perhaps almost hallucinatory, others enduring—that "refuse to submit ... to [a] stabilizing dichotomy" (Crowley 39): "the text is no longer the snug airtight inside of an interiority or an identity-to-itself ... but rather a different placement of the effect of opening and closing" (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 36).

In such conditions, closure is impossible because each time a message is read it produces a different reading; and each re-reading another reading which opens up new possibilities. Claiming what a text is "about", or to have "uncovered" it's essential meaning is, therefore, false: there is "no correct interpretation ... and further ... texts authorize innumerable interpretations": "texts do not hold still and docilely submit themselves to repeated ... readings; they can be read

and reread, and each reading differs from the last" (Crowley 20). By virtue of such unambiguous ambiguity, we might regard the advertisements and texts to which this article refers as resembling pharmakon (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 75) that may either help or hinder—and most likely a combination thereof—symbolic worlds that contain other representations of ability/disability. In this regard, they resemble floating signifiers that register how "undecidability" may haunt representational decisions (e.g., Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, 61).

As texts, like the pharmakon, have "no stable essence, no 'proper' characteristics" and are not "in any sense ... of the word, a substance"—with no fixed, and finite, identity of their own (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 125-126) so is the "ability" and "disability" to which they refer. In fact, each of the terms permeating this article—e.g. "author", "message", "text", "context", "utopia", "dystopia", etc.—"bear the mark of the trace": their meanings are established in relation to, while being contaminated by, the meanings of other concepts that they nevertheless rely upon for meaning in a never-ending chain of signification, the meaning of which is always deferred. Such undecidability is encapsulated in the term dis/ability. As Dan Goodley explains, this "split term … acknowledges the ways … disability and disablism (and disability and ability) can only ever be understood simultaneously in relation to one another. The slashed and split term denotes the complex ways in which opposites bleed into one another" (xiii).

Concluding thoughts

This article has primarily deconstructed two representations of disability, namely UK Channel 4's 2012 and 2016 Paralympic advertisements, albeit while contemplating them in conjunction with other messages, or paratext, that combine to produce a contingent and situated, or positioned, "textual enactment of disability" (Titchkosky, *Reading and Writing Disability*, 79). The fragility

of these texts is evident in their capacity to deconstruct themselves and the ways they come undone through readers' involvement and paratext. The capacity of these readings, and re-readings, to penetrate, interpenetrate, and "invade", as well as become "absorbed" makes them comparable to those liquids to which Derrida refers (*Dissemination* 152). Although this article sought to structure a discussion by deploying binary oppositions, especially "utopia" and "dystopia", or "positive" and "negative" respectively, such apparently stabilizing devices were unable to hold or govern not only the advertisements and paratext but also the discourse I sought to produce about them, in ways that expose the limits of thought that relies upon absolute oppositions in order to contain it. Such slippage exemplifies how for *all* persons implicated in this article language does not willingly succumb to authorial intentions but, instead, produces "meanings that proliferate *beyond* an author's *conscious* control" (Crowley 7–8; emphasis added). Consequently, we may regard the Paralympic advertisements and paratext as resembling pharmakon, namely a remedy *and* poison with regard to a figurative world of extant and yet-to-come representations that they supplement.

Meanings are, therefore, undecidable despite efforts to "master" ambiguity "by inserting its definition into simple, clear-cut oppositions", as Derrida notes with regard to Plato's efforts to close, or "dominate", meaning (*Dissemination* 103). Accordingly, the advertisements, paratext and text are, as Derrida observes of pharmakon, "at once good and bad" and, crucially, "it is not *at the outset* governed exclusively by goodness or truth" (*Dissemination* 115, emphasis added). As the pharmakon lacks a "stable essence" (Derrida, *Dissemination*, 125) so does ability/disability and it is, accordingly, productive to dwell alongside the fragility of texts and the things in the world and to apprehend how ostensibly separate terms are "inhabited by differance" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 127). Apprehending undecidability—in both texts and the "thing" of dis/ability—offers escape from the frozen, stabilizing, dichotomies that strive, while failing, to fix the world. This also

invites/provokes/compels the frightening/exciting notion that both texts and dis/ability are not final products but may constantly be supplemented—even in, and by, articles like this. They are, like the worlds in which they acquire meanings, iterative constellations of temporary coherence constituted by materials that, as Tim Ingold explains, "mix and mingle ... in the ongoing production of life": "a locus of growth ... [that] ... is open to the world" (78).

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[1] WTS won "huge acclaim" and a Bafta. The senders specifically claim they intended the message would change society's attitudes and redefine how the public viewed disability sport, as Channel 4's Director of Marketing and Communications explained: "The dictionary definition for 'disabled' is very negative and limiting. We wanted to change that and turn it into an extraordinary thing". WTS was "about broadening what 'superhuman' means" and for the word to not only "apply to ... the thin sliver of people that are world class athletes, but anybody with a disability. Even if it's just getting around in everyday life, we wanted this to be a celebration of that" (Kelly).

[2] The prevalence of 'non-disabled' actors playing 'disabled' characters in film is a contentious issue in critical disability studies scholarship.