

Superhumans-Parahumans

Disability and Hightech in Competitive Sports¹

Karin Harrasser

The visual language of the Paralympic Games 2012 provides a good point of departure to examine how public perception of disability in sports and, perhaps of impairment in general, has changed in recent years. The Paralympics in London were the biggest games of their kind with the greatest media coverage up until that point and 4,237 competing athletes from 146 nations. Already during the preliminaries of this event, spectacular pictures were brought to the public's attention through campaigns such as "Meet the Superhumans," which was the widest-ranging campaign ever launched by Channel 4, a private TV company based in Britain.

Image: Campaign Poster "Meet the Superhumans," Channel 4, 2012 ²



1 | This article is based on a translation from German into English by Eleana Vaja.

2 | Source: <http://leidmedien.de/sprache-kultur-und-politik/sport-analyse/paralympics-london-sotschi/>. Accessed September 22, 2016.

The poster series and television commercial advertises the Paralympics and, naturally, Channel 4's coverage of it. The short film is driven by the song "Harder Than You Think" by *Public Enemy*. It focuses on the training activities of eight athletes from the United Kingdom and presents a narrative of how impairment can be overcome through self-discipline. The visual language of the spot connects dramas of accidents and war injury with elements taken from action movie and video clip aesthetics. For congenitally disabled athletes, who have no dramatic incident to narrate, images of sonograms and shocked mothers are inserted. The final scene depicts the group of athletes as a league of superheroes. All of them look straight into the camera, displaying a body language of defiance.

Although these elements are well known, the staging of disability in this specific combination is relatively new. Its impact on disability sports and disability politics is difficult to estimate. On the one hand, the spot highlights the professionalization of disabled athletes. Echoing Oscar Pistorius' demand to participate in the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, these athletes demonstrate strength and will power. This is what is written in their faces. The term "superhumans," as used in the campaign, however, is ambivalent. One trajectory of the visual argument is that impairment, the biological 'deficiency,' *enables* these bodies to be enhanced by the latest developments in technology, thus transforming them into "humans 2.0," a term used to advertise a conference on prosthetics and robotics at the MIT Media Lab in 2010. Hugh Herr, one of the organizers, uses it in a quite straightforward manner to connect with posthumanist discourses.³

Secondly and probably more importantly, the video clip promotes motifs of will, self-conquest, and self-mastery. Peter Sloterdijk's considerations on "crip-anthropology" echo through these images (see Sloterdijk 40-60). By examining cases from the Weimar Republic, Sloterdijk reconstructs a self-concept of disabled persons that he calls "existentialism of defiance." The 'heroes' of his narrative not only integrate adversities of life as part of the game, they also consider these as sources of self-enhancement. A historically striking example Sloterdijk provides is Hans Würtz's 1932 book *Zerbrecht die Krücken: Krüppelprobleme der Menschheit* [*Smash the Crutches: Cripple Problems of Humankind*]. Würtz was a pioneer in pedagogy for disabled people in his time. This book encompasses an extensive register of over 472 "known invalids and deformed people," a collection of the depiction of "cripples" in art (2,502 examples), an annotated bibliography on *belle-lettres* and "cripples" (Würtz 779), as well as information on "cripples" in myths, fairy tales, and proverbs. Würtz's downfall resulted from mentioning Joseph Goebbels club foot (88). In spite of his being put into the rather upscale category of "revolutionary politicians,"

3 | See the website of the h2.0 conference (<http://h20.media.mit.edu/>).

Goebbels did not appreciate this impairment-based classification at all and thus could not be convinced of the Würtzian concept. The book was banned, and Würtz left Germany.

Würtz's concept, despite its awkward terminology, positions itself against an ideology of exclusion of differently abled people. In fact, it views and depicts "cripples" as initiators of cultural evolution. The slogan "Meet the Superhumans: Forget Everything You Thought You Knew About Humans" in certain ways echoes Würtz's concept, which addressed and was aimed at motivating disabled veterans. "The will is the one true prosthesis" Würtz claimed in one of his pamphlets for veterans. Of course, from a contemporary perspective this guiding idea is highly questionable. Yet, it resonates well with the new spot. What is striking, in any case, is how the same combination of two narratives occurs in both accounts: impaired bodies as sources of technological enhancement and the metaphysics of will, and overcoming of adversities. How could a concept of self-discipline resulting from the devastations of war and a general crisis of European subjectivity nowadays be reanimated and recombined with technophilic futurism?

THE X-MEN'S POLITICS OF PHYSICAL DIFFERENCE

The visualization of the Paralympic athletes as a league of superheroes triggers images of another famous group of "disabled" superheroes: The X-Men (who of course include quite a number of X-Women).⁴ The X-Men comic books were created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963. Since 2000, five popular movies about the league and another two with the character of Wolverine at the center of the narration have been published. These movies deal in a multi-faceted way with issues of otherness, biopolitics, normalism, and with phantasies of superiority: The protagonists are mutants whose X-Gene makes them social outsiders. They possess wings, wolves' claws, or lions' manes, they can release storms, and have telepathic or magnetic abilities. As the mutation of one of the protagonists manifests while he is imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, it is evident that we should understand these movies as a critical commentary on the treatment, or in the worst case, on the extermination of minorities. The movies address two generic ways of handling minority status (see *X-Men: First Class*). One group, led by the character Magneto, regards itself as an evolutionarily superior "species" and relies on identity politics, the idea that (biological) otherness means physical superiority, and recodes past experiences of suppression as moral superiority. Charles Xavier, a Holocaust survivor, is the leader of the second group, whose strategy aims at assimilation or normalization:

4 | Regarding otherness and disability in the X-Men movies, see Harrasser and Lutter.

Young mutants, mainly adolescents, are taught to apply their talents for the benefit of society at the 'Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.' Simultaneously, they are trained to protect themselves against Magneto's people by channeling their powers as efficiently as possible towards the enemy. Society is ambivalent with regard to the mutants: Politics oscillate between political inclusion (the attempt to make use of the X-Men's power) and physical violence, between fear of otherness and fascination with 'the other.'

The plot of the third X-Men movie (*X-Men: The Last Stand*) revolves around a drug that reverses the mutation. It has been developed by the father of the mutant Angel and as part of the plot the biopolitical strategies of the drug's application are discussed and juxtaposed. Both the compulsory administering of the drug and a policed intake on a voluntary basis are considered issues of political controversy. The movie does not give a simple answer to this question. Angel decides not to take the drug and to keep his wings, while Rogue, a fellow mutant who is unable to touch other beings without killing them, in the end decides to take it.

A large variety of strategies to deal with physical difference is presented in the X-Men series, all of them problematizing individual happiness, identity conflicts within the group of mutants, the historicity of experienced violence, and finally scientific expertise as a foundation for decision-making. The movie poses questions that are discussed in postcolonial, gender, and disability studies today, and which become essential with regard to the example of the "Superhumans" in the Paralympics trailer: What role does bodily otherness play with regard to participation in political and social institutions? Is 'identity' an adequate foundation for political agency? How are otherness and difference to be understood in the context of normative and normalizing regulations?⁵ Which models of agency are feasible and imaginable beyond a Kantian conception of the subject as autonomous and 'abled?' And, how does the notion of otherness change in the context of the growing possibilities presented by medical-technical procedures?

This issue is literally embodied by the character of Wolverine. His mutation is characterized by his ability to heal extremely quickly, an ability that makes him an attractive object of investigation for military research. Due to his self-healing powers – the claws can cut through flesh and skin but both heal immediately – he is experimentally and involuntarily equipped with lethal claws to be released in a fight. In order to escape from military research and instrumentalization, Wolverine withdraws from human contact as far as possible. However, he cannot flee from his past which, as it is implanted in his body, haunts him. As a result of his irascibility (presumably a relic of the forced surgery) he is not in full control of his fighting-claws. Both physical (and social)

5 | On the shift from normative/disciplinary to normalizing regulations, see Krause.

disability and physical superiority are placed in a fragile relation as a result of their technical incorporation.

FICTIONS OF EQUALITY AND THE MEANING OF TECHNOLOGY IN SPORTS

With these fictional and semi-fictional, rather spectacular images in mind we can reassess the Würtzian paradigm of self-mastery under technological conditions. How are ethics of self-mastery and technical enhancement related? The issue was discussed broadly with respect to South African runner Oscar Pistorius: Are disabled people who use state-of-the-art technologies still 'disabled' or are they 'superabled?' In the language of sport officials: Are prostheses to be seen as 'neutral' or rather as 'performance-enhancing?' In the language of the media: Is Pistorius a *wunderkind* or are his prostheses the actual wonder? When it comes to technology in sports, we are usually trapped in a pattern of arguments that considers technology (be it drugs, clothes, equipment, or prosthetic devices) to be 'barely acceptable' or 'no longer acceptable.' Can the swimsuit which imitates a shark's skin still be regarded as neutral or is it already performance-enhancing? How much engineering is allowed when it comes to running shoes? Which chemical substances maintain and provide the health of an athlete, and which should be considered doping?

The idea of the neutrality of technology becomes even more questionable when one thinks of sports such as skiing and Formula 1 racing. In fact, despite a certain mystification which sees the pilot as the key agent, motor sports has always been an arena where the engineers, the car, the speedway, and the weather conditions are the focus of interest. The equipment is shown, so to say, to be the *milieu* of the pilot, an environment which enables him to perform. One could therefore consider coaches and training facilities in other sports as such milieus. They demonstrate the 'technical' character of every other kind of training. The athlete is always an assemblage consisting of various ingredients: the body s/he is working on, the training team, the facilities, sports regulations. I therefore wish to bring the discussion surrounding Oscar Pistorius' Flex-Foot Cheetahs to a different realm by questioning the implicit presuppositions about body, performance, and technicality in competitive sports in relation to this prominent case. The Pistorius case illustrates how deeply the competitive body is an artifact, something fabricated, intertwined in social and technical networks, a 'construction' full of preconditions. This of course marks a contrast to the defining myth of sports based on the principal equality of bodies that are perfected by individual performance. The body in sports is a construction in a literal sense: culturally, materially, socially, and even biologically.

If we study Pistorius' childhood, we learn that his parents decided to surgically remove his dysplastic legs when he was very young. The motif behind this decision (and every following decision) was to enable Pistorius to grow up 'normally.' If a child learns to walk with prosthetic legs from early on, it will 'walk normally' compared to a child that, due to an impairment, cannot walk at all and instead learns how to use a wheelchair. Judging from Pistorius' statements, the family cultivated an ethics of competition. In his autobiography Pistorius recounts scenes in which he and his siblings arranged races the winner of which earned the bigger plate of food or more pocket money. Individual motivation and self-conquest are thus integral parts of Pistorius' value system. He relates to his body from within a set of values strongly attached to a protestant ethics of achievement. This is the topic of his tattoo, an inscription of 1 Corinthians 9:26-27: "Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." The pride he takes in self-discipline and in suffering in the line of duty are framed by the doctrine of salvation. One's own accomplishment is essential for this ethos. But how do the performance-enhancing character of the prostheses and the ethos of self-conquest and fairness go together? Through the discussion of Pistorius' case rings the suspicion that he behaves unfairly, that he extracts advantages from his disability. Taking his ethos seriously, and not simply as a clever way of self-marketing, it is necessary to take a closer look at the threshold between 'permitted self-technologies,' which are those that legitimately form the athlete's body and are grounded in this very ethics, and those that are only partly permitted and often seen as 'external technologies.' With increasing technological possibilities, the line between these domains becomes more and more blurry. It is not the dilemma of deciding between a natural versus a technified body that troubles the debate, but the fact that every body in sports is technical in some sense.

The scientific studies on the Pistorius case dealt exclusively with the question of the possible 'advantages' of running with the blades. As the Cheetahs are not patterned on the human leg but, as the name implies, on the legs of cheetahs, the question arose whether the cheetah-like motion is a) comparable to the human way of running, b) tantamount or c) even superior to it. Scientists tried to solve the case through measurements made in high-tech laboratories, which added even more technology to the assemblage. The first study by the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) on the case, commissioned by Gert-Peter Brüggemann, stated that the prostheses' suspension benefits the athlete's performance (see Brüggemann et al.). The study in favor of Pistorius' plea argued that although the Cheetahs lead to a different running style, it might not automatically be a better one. The core of

the latter argument is based on the acceleration force of the bouncy prostheses: At the beginning of a race they are rather slow. They evolve their marvelous acceleration skills only in the course of the race. Brüggemann's first study only focused on this last sequence and did not take into account the acceleration time needed to achieve speed.

In 2008, the Court for Arbitration in Sport (CAS) in Lausanne allowed Pistorius to participate in the Olympic Games in Beijing, based on the argument of the second study. However, the verdict included the addendum that despite the fact that the performance-enhancing features of the prosthetic legs could not be verified, this issue was still regarded as unresolved. A strange result: No violation of the regulations could be attested to, but the fundamental question is still under discussion. Similar verdicts had already been announced. In 2009 Usain Bolt, for example, set the world record in sprint, wearing shoes uniquely designed for him. Again, no violation of the regulations could be attested to, but the fact that only top-ranking athletes have access to such high-tech products initiated many discussions about fairness in competitive sports. To further complicate this discussion, on the occasion of the Paralympics in 2012, Oscar Pistorius suffered a defeat in the 200-meter race. He was relegated to second place by the Brazilian sprinter Alan Oliveira, whose blades were higher than Pistorius'. Pistorius commented on Oliveira's victory in the following way: "It was not unfair, he stuck to the rules, but the fact is he has never been that fast before, not even close to it" (cited in "Pistorius verliert gegen Wunderstelzen;" translation by Eleana Vaja). Again, the same dilemma: Oliveira's prostheses are not unfair, but neither are they fair. What, then, are they? It seems that using sports terminology we are not able to address what is at stake here. Let me try some detours.

POSTHUMANIST SPECULATIONS

Some studies from sports science approach these multilayered problems by correlating legal (regulations), ethical (fairness, economic accessibility to technology), and physiological questions. They formulate questions traditionally dealt with in cultural studies and media studies: the entangledness of biology and technology, and the cultural codification of corporality. Brendan Burkett, Mike McNamee, and Wolfgang Poothast raise the question of the modalities of human running, and how 'disability' is to be understood in terms of competitive sports (see "Shifting Boundaries"). Interestingly, biomechanical research approximates the question of the status of 'the human' and of the cultural construction of the body. If the debate on the enhancing abilities of the blades is tackled, the demarcation between humans and machines on the one side, and humans and animals on the other side is simultaneously

called into question – a prevailing issue in cultural theory situated within the scenario of the human as *Mängelwesen*, as ‘deficient by nature’ (an idea conceived already by Johann Gottfried Herder that was prominently advocated by Arnold Gehlen in the twentieth century). In this sense, Pistorius would be the master of successful ‘technological’ adaptation. He would be paradigmatic for all humans and their ongoing struggle for survival against specialized and brutal nature by technological means.

On the one hand, the Nietzschean *Übermensch* who overcomes the softly cultivated form of the ‘humanist human’ is knocking on our door. On the other hand – and this might be the really disturbing part of that discourse – some contributions in disability studies (Swartz and Watermeyer) call to attention to how such a perspective on people with disabilities puts them into a categorical system that might be devaluating, as it operates through categories such as ‘not-human-anymore’ or ‘not-human yet,’ with the ‘human’ as the unquestioned center. I want to understand categorization in its original Greek sense: an accusation that entails social consequences. Images as a way of representing disability are a means of drawing the line to the ‘non-human,’ for instance through the decomposition of the human figure or, as in the case of Pistorius, by showing him as predator-like and ready to ‘hunt.’ With this discussion we enter the dangerous terrain of the monstrous that is guarded by the ‘non-thinking animal’ on the one side of the border, and the *Übermensch*, the robots and cyborgs, on the other. Along with Pistorius’ blades, which are technically quite simple, well-built mechanical cat-stilts, we risk either under- or overestimating what is commonly understood as ‘human.’ This territory requires careful and deliberate intellectual exploration, and an encapsulation of all presuppositions about animals, humans, and machines.

In their article “Cyborg Anxiety,” Leslie Swartz and Brian Watermeyer place Pistorius’ case within a posthumanist discourse, which argues that the territory of the “exclusively human” is shrinking. Posthumanist theory deals with the emancipatory revaluation of various modes of existences and forms of life that do not conform to the normative ideal of an autonomous, self-transparent, reflexive, and conscious thinking subject, namely the ‘humanist human.’ It takes the side of modes of existences and agents which, when measured against these norms, easily appear to be ‘deficient’ and have therefore been excluded from political and societal participation. This is a political promise of inclusion, but it should be handled with care as it bears the danger of a loss of rights: As long as positive and negative rights are tied to humanness and personhood, it is extraordinarily dangerous to not be able to claim this status for oneself.

The strategy of Pistorius and Herr is to reach out for a posthuman that is ‘superhuman.’ This strategy, so to say, includes the cultivation of one *ability* that is considered to be specific to the human in many philosophical discourses: to overcome the given and to leave all obstacles behind. The price they pay for this

leap into a techno-evolutionist future is high, both individually and socially. The superhuman individual has to achieve complete self-mastery, abolish every weakness, and embrace competition as the driving force of the social. Socially and culturally the price is equally high: Whoever establishes the superman as an ideal affirms the concept of the human as a *Mängelwesen* (deficient by nature) and, more importantly in pragmatic terms, supports a neoliberal ideology of continuous self-improvement that pushes individuals to the limits of their biological and cognitive possibilities.

SPORTS REGULATION AND FAIRNESS

How do regulatory authorities in sport navigate through this minefield? They evidently know that Pistorius' case is only the tip of the iceberg. They struggle to maintain the threshold between genuine individual performance and technological, artificial performance. Also, quite often, fear of losing the 'purity' of sports is articulated. The whole idea of a purity of sports is based on the fiction of an equality of all bodies, the myth that every body can be virtuously perfected by training, but should not be spoiled by technology. Elio Locatelli, Members Service Department (MSD) director at IAAF, puts it like this: The Pistorius case "affects the purity of sport. The next step will be another device where people can fly with something on their back" (cited in Longman). Bluntly put, posthumanists would love to see flying athletes; for them, technology is a reliable means to propel us out of the humanistic swamp that holds back our transgressive abilities. The sports institutions, in opposition, hold on to the ideal of the natural, universal and therefore comparable body, while at the same time reworking it with the extensive use of technology. However, this ideal has already been damaged beyond repair through ongoing doping scandals and the like. Although they are the driving force behind them, sports institutions ignore the world-changing power of science and technology, the social character of exercise and training, and the historic-cultural genesis of physicality as a whole.

Some sports journalists address the problem at its core and come to a rather radical conclusion. In 2008, Eric Adelson wrote a long commentary for the sports magazine ESPN, whose tone alluded to the end of competitive sports:

"A swim cap is a prosthetic; it smooths the 'defective' surface of a swimmer's head, making it more hydrodynamic [...]. Some will complain that only the disabled have access to prosthetic limbs, while everyone can lace on space-age shoes [...]. Is any of this fair? [...] Advocates for the able-bodied will say that these athletes don't have fake parts; their advantages are natural, unlike those offered by prosthetics and performance-enhancing drugs [...]. What's the difference between an amputee with a prosthetic and a lineman who has lost and regained use of his limbs? Or a point guard

with a pacemaker? If a right wing loses an eye, would we make him wear a patch on the ice even if a mechanical eye allowed him to see off of it?" (Adelson n. pag.)

Adelson's tone fits the well-informed coverage of a journalist who questions the very foundation myth of a natural body perfected by a talented individual. Nevertheless, the consequences of an increasingly blurred distinction between naturalness and artificiality are dangerous, especially since frivolous scenes of self-mutilation, as preconditions for super-performances, appear on the horizon. What is unquestionable, however, is that the future of sports lies in the hands of engineers:

"The International Association of Athletics Federations is supposed to decide if Pistorius is eligible for the Olympics this spring [2007]. The possibilities: If Pistorius is a black swan, a statistical freak who would have been a world-class sprinter on natural legs, too, then no problem – let him run. And, if being an amputee is what gave Pistorius something to prove and turned him into a world-class sprinter, then no problem – let him run. But if he is the vanguard of a legion of plastic track-and-field terminators whose upper speed is a function of materials science and software instead of determination and training? The International Olympics Commission better start hiring some engineers." (McHugh n. pag.)

'Statistical freak' or precursor of a future à la Terminator would be two sad alternatives indeed. Without doubt, even Pistorius has incorporated the myth of self-mastery, challenges such an understanding of mastery by way of technology. In his biography we find several situations that deal with the impact of his social milieu and the concrete doings of technical artifacts. We can see "parahuman" (see Sofoulis) agencies at work, all the agents that make – that literally fabricate – the assemblage we all too quickly call 'athlete.' Pistorius speaks at one point of the many hours of his childhood that were consumed by making adjustments to the prostheses. The prosthetic fitting is an extremely tedious matter, a process in which both the orthopedic specialist and the patient need to work together, measuring, fitting, testing, measuring again, fitting again, and testing again. The adjustment is important, as otherwise the stump is injured, which is very painful and, in a worst-case scenario, might obviate wearing the prosthetic leg for months. Pistorius describes how his brother was in charge of constantly observing and controlling the interfaces between the prostheses and the stumps to prevent injury.

When it comes to the *agency* of technology, the story of how Pistorius decided to become a runner is most interesting. Despite his being an ambitious sportsman, he used to be quite indifferent to running as a sports activity. "Becoming interested in running" is ascribed to the very materiality of prosthetic technology. The heavy prostheses of his childhood enabled him

to wrestle, ride a bike, lift weights, play rugby, and water polo, but he was not able to run as fast as was necessary for competitive sports. It was only with the Cheetahs that he discovered his body as perfectly constituted for short-term performances such as sprinting. He had to quit all endurance sports in order to build up the necessary muscles for running. To put it in a nutshell: Many of Pistorius' descriptions highlight the important role of a human and non-human collective, to use Bruno Latour's terminology (see *Reassembling the Social*), to produce his 'individual' performance. From such a perspective, 'individual performance,' which constitutes the very regulation system of sports, appears as something of a fetish. It is probably no more than a relic of the 19th century idea which celebrated the individual's will and ability to master their own body. This view still structures athletes' ethics and the viewers' expectations today.

GROTESQUE SPECTACLES

Another interpretation of the increasing popularity of the Paralympics deals with the exoticistic pleasure of 'grotesque' spectacles. The focus here lies on the body celebrating and exposing in a Dionysian manner its transgression of normalcy. In such a discourse, the interest is not in a body that is forced to adjust according to 'normal' distributions of attractiveness and popularity. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's commentary on the Paralympics 2012, which appeared in the daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), offers such a reading. He associates the classical ideal of Apollonian, graceful beauty with dull egalitarianism. Furthermore, he contrasts this dullness with a current, fundamental distrust in the adequacy of humanist ideals of equality. In his view, the drastic and grotesque body of disability sports hypostatizes this challenge for democratic politics. Similar to the aesthetics of the artistic avant-garde of the 20th century, the disabled body holds a particular erotic attraction and fascination that highlights an affinity to the horizon of the Dionysian.

"There is something potentially frightening about this new view because it distances itself from the friendliness of any progressive humanitarian. Then again, no one can tell me that the atmosphere in the sold out stadium at the London Paralympics closing ceremony was just another apotheosis of the ethics of tolerance and egalitarianism." (Gumbrecht, translation by Eleana Vaja)

Evidently the Paralympic bodies are fascinating. Moreover, they evolve into a sublime aesthetics that is more closely related to inaptitude and intangibility than to the Apollonian, athletic body. The closing ceremony of the Paralympics with its apocalyptic cyberpunk aesthetics evoked images of the "flesh fair" in Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* (2001), where androids are forced to fight with each other

for an audience salivating with pleasure at the sight. Yes, it is tempting to read this fascination as a revolt against the ethics of normalization or maybe also as an ethicization of the marked body as a political foundation. Furthermore, the Paralympics could be seen in the tradition of libertarian utopias of emancipation and exuberance, directed against the biopolitical institutions that softly regulate and navigate our desires into productiveness and reproduction. In this case, the Paralympics would be located in the tradition of the perverse or carnivalesque rituals that facilitate a temporary transgression of the acceptable and preferable.

Similar to normalization, transgression has its limits, which may paradoxically be caused by contradictory effects of what has been called “flexible normalism” (Link). Contrary to the disciplining model that restricts them, transgression expands one’s possibilities. However, transgression as an ideal is also ambivalent, since it is already included in the system of cashing in on difference: Transgression has a symbolic value, it is capital. The power of the Paralympic athletes to fascinate is rooted perhaps in their verification of the myth of cognitive and affective capitalism. Everyone can transgress; you just need to work hard enough on yourself. *Hands Up for GOLD*, which celebrated its premier at the Berlin film festival in 2013, portrays three Paralympic athletes reiterating this particular message. Smaller movie productions such as the American *The Gimp Monkeys*, which deals with three disabled climbers and their ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, also stress the importance of self-discipline. Because it fascinates, the disabled body is an effective promoter for this message. This is the reason why Gumbrecht’s statement requires modification. The fascination for the deformed, Dionysian body is not simply a revolt against a boring, Apollonian egalitarianism, but rather an expression of a last hope for equality in competitive sports: If *they* can make it despite their disability, then I (the ‘normal’ being) can certainly make it as well.

Is there a possibility to avoid the traps of normalization, exoticization, and posthumanization when it comes to disability and sports? I want to propose a *parahuman* perspective that allows for a re-interpretation of the Paralympics. The term Paralympics, although it is greatly problematic in terms of its history and my usage is consciously etymologically incorrect, fits, quite unexpectedly, quite well. The name can be traced back to 1948, when the physician Ludwig Guttman initiated the first competitions in sports for ‘disabled people,’ namely paraplegics. At that time they were called the Stoke Mandeville Games. Nowadays, “para” is also related to the location of the Paralympic Games, which is identical to that of the ‘normal’ Olympic Games. It would be a step forward to stress the prefix “para” in the sense of ‘being next to each other’ by synchronizing the competitions not only in place but also in time. Such a grouping would undermine the tendency to classify the Paralympics as second division sports and it would also bring to light the artificiality of all bodies in

competitive sports. Finally, to consider the Paralympics as a parahuman event would stress the side-by-side principle of human and non-human agents, as outlined above. This could challenge the very foundation of our understanding of performance in sports. The Paralympics could work as a probing tool to question the presuppositions of those regulations which *produce* performances in the first place.

The fiction of equal bodies, the sense of equal 'primal conditions' that can be altered individually, connects to the idea of a 'free' and fair competition. It therefore links the body to the idea of freedom on a 'free' market: Every body and everybody is the same as long as they are marketing themselves. Both the market and the sports arena are not unfair and violent *because* they are full of preconditions and expectations. They are unfair and violent because they pretend not to be. The market and sports hide the inequality of their basic assumptions by way of fictions of equality and equivalence. In this respect, the obviously different bodies of the Paralympics could at least be a provocation. Let us not tame them all too quickly by inserting them into posthumanist narratives.

REFERENCES

- A.I. *Artificial Intelligence*. Dir. Stephen Spielberg. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2001. Film.
- Adelson, Eric. "Let'em Play." *ESPN* 14 April 2008. Web. 20 April 2015. <<http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?id=3357051>>.
- Angerer, Marie-Luise, Kathrin Peters and Zoe Sofoulis. *Medienkultur*. Wien, New York: Springer, 2002. 273-97. Print.
- Brüggemann, Gert-Peter, et al. "Biomechanics of Double Transtibial Amputee Sprinting, Using Dedicated Sprinting Prostheses." *Sport Technologies* 1.4-5 (2008): 220-27. Print.
- Burkett, Brendan, Mike McNamee and Wolfgang Poothast. "Shifting Boundaries in Sports Technology and Disability: Equal Rights or Unfair Advantage in the Case of Oscar Pistorius?" *Disability and Society* 26.5 (2011): 643-54. Print.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. "Dionysische Faszination der Paralympics." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 18 September 2012. Print.
- Harrasser, Karin and Christina Lutter. "Spielräume. Zwei Szenen zur Differenz." *Dritte Räume. Homi K. Bhabas Kulturtheorie. Kritik. Anwendung. Reflexion*. Eds. Babka, Anna, Julia Malle and Matthias Schmidt. Wien: Turia + Kant, 2012. 237-48. Print.
- H2.o: *New Minds, New Bodies, New Identities*. Conference Website. Hugh Herr and John Hockenberry. Web. 20 April 2015. <<http://h2o.media.mit.edu/>>.

- Krause, Marcus. "Von der normierenden Prüfung zur regulierenden Sicherheitstechnologie. Zum Konzept der Normalisierung in der Machtanalytik Foucaults." *Spektakel der Normalisierung*. Eds. Krause, Marcus and Christina Bartz. München: Fink, 2007. 53-75. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- Link, Jürgen. *Versuch über den Normalismus. Wie Normalität produziert wird*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998. Print.
- Longman, Jeré. "An Amputee Sprinter: Is He Disabled or Too-Disabled?" *New York Times* 15 May 2007. Print.
- McHugh, Josh. "Blade Runner." *Wired* 15 March 2007. Web. 20 April 2015. <<http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/15.03/blade.html>>.
- Pistorius, Oscar. *Blade Runner*. New York: Random House, 2009. Print.
- "Pistorius verliert gegen Wunder-Stelzen." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 03 September 2012. Web. March 04 2013. <<http://www.faz.net/themenarchiv/sport/paralympics-2012/paralympics-pistorius-verliert-gegen-wunder-stelzen-11877393.html>>.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*. Trans. Hoban, Wieland. Cambridge; Malden: Polity, 2013. Print.
- Sofoulis, Zoe. "Post-, Nicht- und Parahuman. Ein Beitrag zu einer Theorie soziotechnischer Personalität." *Future Bodies. Zur Visualisierung von Körpern in Science und Fiction*. Eds. Angerer, Marie-Luise, Kathrin Peters and Zoe Sofoulis. Medienkultur. Wien, New York: Springer, 2002. 273-97. Print.
- Swartz, Leslie and Brian Watermeyer. "Cyborg Anxiety. Oscar Pistorius and the Boundaries of What It Means to Be Human." *Disability and Society* 23.2 (2008): 187-90. Print.
- Würtz, Hans. *Zerbrecht die Krücken. Krüppel-Probleme der Menschheit. Schicksalsstiefkinder aller Zeiten und Völker in Wort und Bild [Smash the Crutches: Cripple Problems of Human Kind. Doomed Stepchildren of all Times and Peoples in Text and Image]*. Leipzig: L. Voss, 1932. Print.
- X-Men. Dir. Bryan Singer. Twentieth Century Fox, 2000. Film.
- X-Men: The Last Stand. Dir. Brett Ratner. Twentieth Century Fox, 2006. Film.
- X-Men: First Class. Dir. Matthew Vaughn. Twentieth Century Fox, 2011. Film.
- X-Men: Days of Future Past. Dir. Bryan Singer. Twentieth Century Fox, 2014. Film.
- X2. Dir. Bryan Singer. Twentieth Century Fox, 2003. Film.

Responses to Karin Harrasser

Eleana Vaja

PROSTHETIC CONCRETIZATION IN A PARAHUMAN FRAMEWORK

In her essay “Superhumans-Parahumans. Disability and Hightech in Competitive Sports”, Karin Harrasser attributes the public success of the 2012 Paralympics to the visual staging of the competing athletes as masters of willingness, discipline, and self-conquest. These visual markers of individual exceptionality rely on a concept of the human that at its core fortifies a pillar of competitive sports: human comparability. Harrasser’s overall aim is to demystify this conceptualization and to highlight the constructed character of competitive sports on the basis of an alterity of bodies. She begins her theorization of disability in competitive sports with Peter Sloterdijk’s existentialism of defiance, which is echoed in Hans Würtz’s paradigm of disability and self-mastery. These latter theories affirm the promoted ideal of exceptionality and disability. By including the posthumanist reading of the Paralympics, she pays tribute to the exhibition of these athletes as superhumans.

While impairments designate the pivotal parameter attesting to the Paralympics athletes’ unique sense of determination, the relation between body and technological enhancement amplifies the ideal promoted by superhumanism. Impairments thus underscore the extraordinary strength needed to deal with misfortune, thereby promoting an ableist view of impairments as obstacles. The discourse on technological enhancement, which is simultaneously triggered in this context of bodies and performance, deflects from this position and poses impairments as platforms for biological engineering. These two leitmotifs of disability allow Harrasser to address the coping mechanisms acquired by many people with impairments confronted with an enforced normal ideal. She generates three modes from this enforcement, framing her argument with the X-Men movies as another group of staged disability: dealing with one’s minority status, one’s self-concept, and the societal reaction to alterity. This minority status can be dealt with either by assimilating to the alleged majority or by exercising superiority over it. In terms of self-concept, one is torn between either accepting or rejecting the biological difference that marks one’s minority

status. The societal reaction oscillates between practices of inclusion and exclusion. Harrasser sees these antagonizing strategies of coping with physical difference best explicated by the X-Men character Wolverine. Wolverine's social and psychological predicaments, remains of his technological enhancement, frame Harrasser's addressing of the equality of bodies in competitive sports, focusing on technological neutrality.

By connecting the issue of technological enhancement with the Würtzian paradigm of self-mastery, Harrasser highlights the dispute between "permitted self-technologies" and "external technologies" *ad absurdum* by illustrating the artificiality of competitive sports as such (Harrasser 176); the milieu itself is technical. The technicality of each sport decisively influences the performance of the athlete. Her argument revolves around the technicality of physical contests that turns every participating athlete into a technical body. This derivation of the construction of competitive sports annihilates any difference between disabled and abled athletes, since the overall milieu is the one imposing the technicality on each body, constructing it "culturally, materially, socially, and even biologically" (175). She illustrates this thesis by referring to Oscar Pistorius's life as a professional athlete. From his birth onwards, every decision was based on forming and 'constructing' him into a perfect athlete. Thus, the issue of fairness in competitive sports cannot be solved from a technological standpoint. For Harrasser, discussing permitted technologies, as sport officials and the media continue to do, functions as a distraction from the main issue at stake, which is the illusion of bodies as equal and thus comparable.

Although the issue of fairness cannot be addressed from a technological standpoint, prostheses and performance enhancements trigger extreme positions in the posthumanist discourse that require attention. Biological enhancement through technology includes two positions, both of which tackle the *humanist* human. On the one hand, technical enhancement blurs the demarcation between animal and human by defining the human being as *Mängelwesen*. On the other hand, it endorses the fusion of humans with machine. Testing the normative kernel of the *humanist* human, as posthumanist voices endorse, is in Harrasser's view dangerous since it comes along with the rejection of legal rights. The chosen posthumanist ideal in the context of competitive sports is the superhuman. Athletes incorporating this implied perfectionism endeavor to exterminate all weaknesses. Like the staging of the Paralympics and the debate on the neutrality of sports technology, this superhumanism advocates self-mastery and instantaneously affirms the human as deficient by nature promoting, hence, an ethics of perfectionism.

This ethics resonates within the regulatory practices of competitive sports. They adhere to the ostensible fairness of physical contest, which affirms the equality of bodies. *Regulation* implies order; categorizing bodies in athletics sets forth a given standard of biological equality that would be disturbed by any

enhancement other than the athlete's own determination. The alterity of bodies is again replaced by the illusion of their comparability which encourages, above all, self-mastery. By following this view, Harrasser criticizes the discourses that have evolved around the aesthetics of these bodies. The alluring eroticism of these bodies did not result from their somato-normative transgression, but rather from the advocacy of self-mastery.⁶ The success of the visual staging of the Paralympic athletes is rooted in this perpetuation of self-mastery, which thrives on sustaining the comparability of bodies, the related notion of fairness in competitive sports, and the dismissal of this milieu's constructed character. Harrasser's proposed parahuman approach, however, places abled and disabled bodies next to each other, highlighting the constructed character of sports in general, and thus helps to initiate a demystification of the illusion of biological equality. *Para* first needs to be understood here in its etymological sense of *beside*. A contemporaneous staging of Paralympic and Olympic Games would dismantle the artificiality of all bodies in competitive sports, and contribute to a side-by-side principle of human and non-human agents.

My aim is to strengthen Harrasser's argument about competitive sports as constructed milieus by concentrating on the three modes of existence she introduces and intermeshes: human (individual), prosthesis (technical object), and environment (milieu). While she builds her argument from the perspective of the human in this milieu, I intend to revise the order by focusing on the prosthesis, the non-human agents in this configuration. The prosthesis' environment plays a decisive role in how it is perceived. In a milieu of mastery, discipline and willingness, the prosthesis becomes a device of pure utilization as well as a means of capitalistic interests. It is the prosthesis, its shape, form and technicality that, according to Harrasser, attract the interest of the media, philosophers, and sport officials. The questions that arise regarding the prosthesis in the juxtaposed milieus of superhumansim and parahumanism are: Why is the value of a prosthesis, its importance for the individual, bound to its serving to win? How is participation to be conceived in terms of the prosthesis and the individual? To answer these questions on the ground of technologies – since so far the *para* has addressed the human agents, and *super* has been discussed in terms of technical enhancement – I will develop Gilbert Simondon's notion of the genesis of the technical object and its associated milieu because

"[f]rom the opening lines, rather than a 'thinker of technics,' [he] appears as a thinker of the resolution of a crisis of humanity in its relation to the world of technics. The reasons for such a crisis seem to reside in the secular opposition between, on the one

6 | In her TED talk from 2014, Stella Young coins the term "inspirational porn" to designate the objectification of impairments as overcoming an obstacle.

hand, the world of culture as a world of *meaning*, and on the other, the world of technics considered exclusively from the angle of *utility*." (Combes 57-58)

For Simondon, our lack of understanding the technical objects surrounding us – even those which are part of our daily life, be it our cars or even our mobile phones – plays a decisive role in evoking an uncertainty towards them, which diminishes them into devices of utilization. They are thus separated from the world of culture. Regarding prostheses, the problems that derive from this utilization, this exclusion, becomes striking since these technical objects are connected to the humans who are using them. Understanding prostheses and how they develop would thereby help to harmonize the human and non-human agent relationship in this constellation. Understanding a technical object means, for Simondon, first and foremost to introduce its genesis. Through this perspective on the technical object as something that becomes, it enters both culture and ethics, which elevates the technical object from mere utility into a participating entity. This participation is based on the technical object's genesis in relation to the individual who is inventing or using it, as well as their common environment. Within a disability studies context, Simondon's philosophy of technology helps to theorize this relation between human and non-human agent, focusing however on the latter entity and on the consequences of an ideology of self-mastery, or rather anticipated perfection, with respect to the technical object, which is here the prosthetic leg. Therefore, this theorization introduces Simondon's notion of the coming into being of a technical object, its "concretization" (Simondon, *On the Mode* 11), and pays tribute to the constructed character of competitive sports.

The onset of this analysis first requires, nevertheless, a definition of the relation between technical objects that provide a "human reality" (*On the Mode* 1) and the individual. Technical objects and individuals, although both modes of existence for Simondon, are not equated with each other. Several features distinguish them from each other, such as the ability to rebel or to change one's aims, the difference between the learning processes of an individual in contrast to the adaptation of a technical object, as well as the human feature of questioning oneself and one's actions (*Note* 517). This relation is marked neither by any form of mastery of the one over the other nor by complete indifference toward the other, but rather by the principle of complementing each other. I consequently include a reference to Simondon's notion of "individuation" (*The Genesis* 298) in order to highlight this relation and also to apply these findings to the technical object at hand: the prosthetic leg. Finally, the resonance of the traits of the technical object's genesis within superhumanism and parahumanism are explicated.

'Concretization' describes the genesis of technical objects. The inherent potentiality of every technical object is to become more concrete rather than

abstract. This means that the single constituents of a technical object undertake more tasks, interacting more smoothly with each other on several levels in order to decrease any occurring disturbances, which consequently reduce the need for maintenance, and ultimately increase the coherence of the object so that it can become “entirely unified”⁷ (*On the Mode* 16). Neither unification nor coherence, however, should be equated with perfection. Perfection denotes an end-state of being incapable of further development, a static equilibrium or stability, an automatism, a closed system. To exemplify the process of ‘concretization’ according to our technical object of interest, the prosthetic leg, one needs to compare the first prosthetic leg made from wood with current versions. The latter anticipates the natural motion of walking by refining the material in terms of friction, weight, the relaxation of joints, the fitting to the body, the handling, weather resistance, and shape. These features already allude to the next two indispensable moments of the genesis of the technical object, its over-specialization⁸ and its surrounding: “hypertelia” (*On the Mode* 51) and the “associated milieu” (*ibid.*).

According to Harrasser, one of the major debates around the prosthesis in a superhumanist idealism revolves around its technological enhancement. In dealing with the issues of technological neutrality in sports as well as the idea of fairness, it is helpful to consider the notion of technological over-specialization and its consequences for the technical object, as introduced by Simondon under the umbrella term of ‘hypertelia.’ Hypertelia is a phenomenon which occurs during the enhancement procedures of increasing a technical object’s technicality and can, in some cases, strip the technical object of its autonomy, turning it into a “hypertelic-technical object” (*On the Mode* 52). A common example to illustrate one form of over-specialization is the Google Watch, where reading the time becomes a mere side effect of this technical object rather than its main function; it is not an enhancement that focuses on the ‘schematic essence,’ reading the time. Regarding Harrasser’s discussion, the prosthesis’ shape, its acceleration potentiality, material, or length initiated the analogy of athletes using prostheses with cyborgs, blurring the demarcation between human and machine. While Harrasser characterized these discussions as distractions from the main issue at stake, the constructed character of sports, a Simondonian philosophy of technology dismisses these readings even within

7 | Pascal Chabot also sets this feature of unification as the main aim of any technical object during its process of refinement; “[c]oncretization may be understood as the unification of certain fundamental concepts: synergy, superabundant functionality, coherence, internal resonance and formalization” (15).

8 | Although the English translation refers here to “specialization” (*On the Mode* 51), note that the original French version speaks of an spécialisation exagérée (MEOT 50) therefore I added the preposition “over.”

a technological argument since the Cheetah preserves the 'schematic essence' of prostheses by supporting the individual in walking, standing, and running. The Cheetah marks a new phase in the becoming of prosthetic legs, engineered to strengthen the schematic essence by reducing maintenance and increasing the adaptation of the technical object to the individual and to the surroundings. This inclusive form of a technical object's genesis mirrors best what Simondon juxtaposes to hypertelia and coins "adaptation-concretization" (*On the Mode* 58).

Although Simondon does not include prostheses in his treatise, one can derive that prostheses fit his notion of "adaptation-concretization," which is the successful genesis of the technical object because it refines two milieus by connecting them during their geneses, and therefore enables them to form a synergetic compliance where the single elements of both milieus work in a multifunctional manner on both sides: in this case the individual and the prosthesis in daily life. Therefore, they strengthen each other's autonomy rather than depriving each other of it. Both the prosthetic leg and the individual are in individual processes of becoming, helping each other to become what is potentially inherent within themselves, and are not reduced to the pursuit of *self-mastery*. They do not form a closed system but participate with each other and with their surrounding, being sensitive to new information. They need to participate and react to their common 'associated milieu,' and this is where the constructed character of competitive sports enters and hinders both entities to become. Both agents, the non-human and the human, are deprived of their own genesis in favor of a given ideology: self-conquest and perfection. The individual in a parahuman framework perceives and lives from a new perspective and thus shifts into a subsequent phase of her/his becoming. Although the individual, as we have seen, is not equated with the technical object, the cases of individuals with prostheses require the genesis of the individual to be thought of in line with the technical object, since the technical essence of a prosthesis can only be constituted in relation to the individual. Additionally, "being as becoming" ("Genesis" 301) follows a similar principle in the technical object as it does in the individual, namely 'concretization' and 'individuation.' In the case of prostheses and individuals, these two modes of existence and genesis need to be thought of in accordance with each other in order to grasp the various notions and concepts applied to individuals using prostheses. Thomas LaMarre's comment on Simondon's theory stresses that "any inquiry into the relation between humans and machines [...] has to deal with a genealogy of the human alongside a genealogy of the technical object" (100). Relating this concept to prostheses and individuals highlights the difference between superhumanism and parahumanism from a prosthetic point of view which, in the case of 'adaptation-concretization' is always the individual and its own created 'associated milieu.' The associated milieu of any kind of prosthesis is daily life along with its variations, disturbances and

challenges. New information appears naturally, be it the material, stability or fitting of the prostheses or the individual's decision to decide freely when to put on the prosthesis or to leave it:

"In the modern tendency toward the construction of technical individuals (machines) [or prostheses], Simondon sees the emergence of a new kind of relation in which technical objects become more and more like natural objects – in that they carry their associated milieu with them, generating it through their relations." (LaMarre 90)

Looking at the prosthesis' 'associated milieu' which is, on the one hand, identified by Harrasser as superhumanism in the form of competitive sports and, on the other hand, by parahumanism as individual bodies distinguished by and through their alterity, one can argue that the discussions around prostheses mirror the implied concepts of both settings. Superhumanism is marked by self-conquest, enhancement, self-mastery and competition, leaving no space for the prosthesis to be seen as a technical object in the process of 'adaptation-concretization' in relation to the individual, but rather as a mere tool to form the perfect athlete. This anticipated perfection, however, contradicts the genesis of the technical object as well as the genesis of the individual. It initiates in the first place the discussions of monstrosity, cyborgs, and the grotesque by defining the prostheses and the individuals as pure modes of function rather than of existence. Functionality runs smoothly when perfection as an end-state, an equilibrium, is achieved. Prostheses in everyday life, rather than heading towards perfection, highlight the moment of *para* as next to each other. This form of humanism captures the principles of both geneses; the technical object's and the individual's. Both participate with and influence each other, as well as react toward one another, forming an open milieu of their own. This reflects the prosthesis' and individual's moments of being. In their final instances, daily life, the "*rupture[s]* in the process of becoming" (Salter 123), mark the difference between superhumanism and parahumanism. While in superhumanism *ruptures* define failure and reveal the illusion of the comparability of humans, thus shattering the very foundation of self-conquest, they simultaneously form the essence of parahumanism. Oscar Pistorius's relation to his prostheses is from the beginning bound to success and to the elimination of *ruptures*, utilizing the prostheses to achieve this aim by mastering them. *Ruptures*, however, mark moments of despair, loss, acceptance, reorganization, and happiness. These obstacles add new characteristic features to the prostheses, and allow them to participate in the person's life as more than pure utility whose value is measured in terms of success. Parahumanism hints at another important aspect that highlights the prosthesis' upgrade from pure utilization and capitalization to culture. The prosthesis and the individual form a team in which both sides are connected with each other. The prosthesis

participates in the life of the individual and gains a value that is not measured in numbers. Simondon introduces an ethics that emancipates the technical object from pure utilization and through this also liberates the individual and the prosthesis from any ideology of self-mastery and perfection.

References

- Chabot, Pascal. *The Philosophy of Simondon. Between Technology and Individuation*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003. Print.
- Combes, Muriel. *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*. Trans. Thomas LaMarre. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013. Print.
- Harrasser, Karin. "Superhumans – Parahumans. Disability and Hightech in Competitive Sports." This volume. 171-184. Print.
- LaMarre, Thomas. "Afterword: Humans and Machines." *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*. By Muriel Combes. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013. 79-108. Print.
- Salter, Chris. "Just Noticeable Difference. Ontogenesis, Performativity and the Perceptual Gap." *Inflexions* 5. *Simondon: Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics* March (2012): 119-129. Web. 6 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.inflexions.org>>.
- Simondon, Gilbert. [MEOT] *Du Mode d'Existence des Objets Techniques*. Paris: Aubier, 1958. Print.
- . *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Trans. Ninian Mellamphy. University of Western Ontario: 1980. Print.
- . "The Genesis of the Individual." Trans. Marc Cohen and Sanford Kwinter. *Zone 6. Incorporations*. Eds. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter. New York: MIT Press, 1992. 297-319. Print.
- . "Note Complémentaire sur les Conséquences de la Notion d'Individuation." *Individuation à la Lumière des Notions de Forme et d'Information*. Grenoble: Millon Krisis, 2005. 503-527. Print.
- Young, Stella. "I Am Not Your Inspiration, Thank You." *TED*. 2014. Web. 20 Oct. 2015. <https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much>.

Olga Tarapata

PARALYMPIC, PARAHUMAN, PARANORMAL

In her article, Karin Harrasser elaborates on disability and technology in competitive sports, offering an alternative perspective on the 2012 Paralympic athletes whose medial representation, as she argues, leans towards the 'superhuman.' With the introduction of 'parahumanism,' Harrasser rivals the omnipresent 'posthumanism' that has been proposed as the emancipatory spearhead in the erosion of what, not only since the Enlightenment, it means to be 'human.' As one of the first to popularize 'the posthuman' in her 1999 book *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles set the tone for future publications such as Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), Patricia MacCormack's *Posthuman Ethics* (2012), and, most recently, Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013). In these works, the specter of disability is persistently evoked as the preeminent site for the negotiation of the cultural and political transformations of human embodiment in an age in which "[w]e cannot think realistically any longer of the human species" as Bruce Mazlish claims, "without a machine" (6). Although Harrasser agrees with the debunking of the "autonomous, self-transparent, reflexive and conscious thinking subject" as the myth ("Superhumans" 178) at the heart of posthumanism, Harrasser eventually comes to advocate an approach that eschews the progressive undertones of human obsolescence in this renegade discourse. Instead, by means of what she calls a 'parahuman perspective,' Harrasser proposes a re-interpretation of the Paralympics.

This response attempts to flesh out this notion of the 'parahuman' by complementing its vocabulary with philosopher and cognitive scientist Andy Clark's concept of 'wideware,' and finally by taking these observations into the realm of American science fiction literature. The fiction of cyberpunk icon William Gibson not only displays cyborgs, AIs, humans, non-humans and their milieu, but highlights their interplay, the ways in which collectives emerge, blend, and dissolve. Gibson's 1996 novel *Idoru*, in particular, embraces the mutually formative resonance between environment and protagonist, making the latter "the equivalent of a dowser" (25); a figure I consider most appropriate to ground Harrasser's conceptualizations.

The Paralympic Games 2012 constitute the anchorage for the numerous excursions⁹ Harrasser undertakes in giving the conceptualization of disability a new spin. On her trajectory from disability to superability, from posthumanism to parahumanism, the 14th Summer Paralympic Games in London serve

9 | Harrasser moves swiftly from, for instance, the philosophy of Peter Sloterdijk and the writings of Hans Würz to the X-Men movies, from legal reports assessing Oscar Pistorius' athletic condition to Channel 4 advertisements and Formula One.

a threefold purpose. They function as a historic marker of a turning point in the “public perception of disability in sports and, perhaps of impairment in general” (Harrasser, “Superhumans” 171), as a focal point for the most divergent notions of the competitive disabled body and the technology involved, and finally, as an entry point for her introduction of parahumanism.

Paralympic

The strikingly visual conjunction of disability and high technology in the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as the individual contests, raises the question for Harrasser whether “disabled people who use state-of-the-art technologies [are] still ‘disabled’ or [whether] they [are] ‘superabled’” (175). As Harrasser argues, the turning point in the perception of disability is reflected in the depictions of ‘superability’ not only invoked in the media coverage of and advertisement for the Games, but also underlying many scientific and legal reports and classification systems orbiting the participants. The sprint runner Oscar Pistorius serves as Harrasser’s primary example for ambivalent ascriptions ranging from “disabled” to “too-abled” (Longman) and from “super-legs” (“5 Super Powers”) to “No Legs” (*The Fastest Man*). Questioning the possible advantages that athletes draw from their disability leads to the evaluation of the technologies involved in their performance. Such questioning, however, proves deeply disruptive for competitive sports in general, since it also draws attention to the equipment involved in ‘regular’ sports, such as running shoes, swim caps, swim suits, and personal trainers. Despite the endangerment of the ‘neutrality’ or even the possible “end of competitive sports” this interrogation provokes (179), Harrasser illustrates how questions about the props and aids involved in sports reveal that “the competitive body is an artifact, something fabricated, intertwined in social and technical networks, a ‘construction’ full of preconditions” (175). Whereas Harrasser focuses primarily on the corporeal dimension of cultural, material, social, and biological agents, Andy Clark argues that “[o]ur cognitive profile is *essentially* the profile of an embodied and situated organism” (21). An advocate of the extended mind hypothesis, Clark contends that the skin no longer delimits the organism, which he conceives as a “deeply interanimated triad” (21) of brain, body, and environment. Human agency, he argues, “includes the humanly-generated ‘whirlpools and vortices’ of external, symbol-laden media: the explosion of wideware made available by the ubiquitous devices of language, speech, and text” (21). Clark’s notions of wideware encompasses

“states, structures or processes that satisfy two conditions. First, the item in question must be in some intuitive sense environmental: it must not, at any rate, be realized within the biological brain or the central nervous system. Bodily aspects and motions,

as well as truly external items such as notebooks and calculators, thus fit the bill. Second, the item (state, structure, process) must play a functional role as part of an extended cognitive process.” (16)

Clark draws attention to the ways in which the environment is fundamental to an organism’s functioning and subjectivity. Accordingly, the agency and abilities which one might believe to be inherent properties of the individual body only emerge in conjunction with the proper milieu, a notion that supplements Harrasser’s break with the “defining myth of sports based on the principal equality of bodies that are perfected by individual performance” (Harrasser, “Superhumans” 175). From bathing suits that imitate shark skin to the trainer’s instructions, the team-mates’ cues or the spectators’ cheers, all the innumerable props and aids that structure the athlete’s performance contribute to the illusion of an autonomous, independent, and powerful individual. In this light and with a distinct Deleuzian undercurrent, Harrasser pointedly reconceptualizes the athlete as “always an assemblage” (ibid.). In her discussion, Harrasser examines less a turning point from disability to superability, than the transition from posthumanism to parahumanism, implicitly acknowledging Clark’s notion of the “organism-plus-wideware” (Clark 23). In this regard, both share the recognition of the specific milieu as an integral part of the organism itself. The distinction of disability and (super)ability is no longer an absolute, but rather a relational matter, a bodily formation that must be viewed in terms of its embeddedness in its material context. When “wheelchair users describe how the chair becomes ‘part of them’” (Reeve 104), we can effectively understand the wheelchair to be what Harrasser identifies as a non-human agent, or what Clark characterizes as wideware. In the context of disability (or any other context), all sorts of assemblages are conceivable. Likewise against the backdrop of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s philosophy, Barbara Gibson, a professor of physical therapy and rehabilitation at the University of Toronto, conceives of her patients as interconnected in “human-machine assemblages [...] human-animal assemblages [...] and/or human-human assemblages” (“Reimagining” 1895-6). Considering the infinite number of wideware agents involved, I strongly agree with Harrasser that the myth of the superhuman, as proclaimed by the Channel 4 video ad in its celebration of will power, self-mastery and self-conquest, is only half the story.

As a focal point, the Paralympic Games 2012 serve Harrasser’s unfolding of the broad spectrum of implications regarding the competitive technologized disabled body, be they ethical, political or sociological. She reminds us that the acceptance and propagation of the myth of the superhuman “affirms the concept of the human as a *Mängelwesen* (deficient by nature) and [...] supports a neoliberal ideology of continuous self-improvement that pushes individuals to the limits of their biological and cognitive possibilities” (“Superhumans”

179). While her wide-ranging discussion reaches from Herder's *Mängelwesen* to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, from official sports regulations to the protestant ethics of self-mastery, Harrasser manages to weave these strands into a lucid critique of the position of the human in the greater scheme of competitive sports.

While, for instance, Jürgen Link's sociological concept of flexible normalism, on the one hand, does not discard non-normative bodies per se and offers inclusion for commodifiable bodies, it is, on the other hand, the spawn of cognitive and affective capitalism, since it creates a 'new deviant' that is by and large responsible for its own exclusion. On this basis, the Games constitute a site of normalizing practices since athletes are presented as having to overcome their disabilities and master superabilities by broadly denying the wideware involved. Harrasser outlines this even more forcefully in her book *Körper 2.0* with reference to Aimee Mullins, whose claim for the acknowledgement of otherness is fundamentally competition-based. As Harrasser argues, Mullins embodies qualities valuable to capitalism, such as self-discipline, commitment, cleverness, wit and curiosity, all of which result in Mullins' self-proclaimed superability.¹⁰

Parahuman

From these ossifying categorizations, Harrasser concludes the need for a side-by-side-form of humanism, which I read as a need to bypass the static hierarchies implied by the prefixes of 'dis-' and 'super-' or the seemingly progressive linearity of 'post-.' Endorsing her colleagues' strong skepticism towards the posthuman, Harrasser takes up Zoe Sofoulis' idea of the 'parahuman' as a potent alternative framework for conceptualizing the (non-)human agents involved not only in the choreography of sports but of agency in general. While acknowledging certain aspects of Hayles' notion of the 'posthuman' in the 2002 volume *Future Bodies*, Sofoulis finally rejects the term altogether. Due to its tacit suggestion of human redundancy, insignificance and the consequential release from responsibility, Sofoulis argues that the 'posthuman' is neither an adequate nor a viable term to describe the state of the human and its subjectivity. Rather as an impetus

10 | Harrasser's original reads: "Die von Mullins propagierte Form der Anerkennung des Andersartigen ist nämlich nur in Form eines Wettbewerbs zu erreichen. Grundlage dieses Wettbewerbs sind einerseits teure, bei weitem nicht allen zugängliche Technologien und andererseits bestimmte persönlichen Eigenschaften, die im kognitiven oder affektiven Kapitalismus als wertschöpfend erachtet werden. An erster Stelle stehen Leistungsbereitschaft und körperliche Selbstdisziplin. Ebenfalls wichtig sind emotionale und kognitive Kompetenzen: Klugheit, Witz, Lernfähigkeit, Neugierde. Hand in Hand damit geht eine Idee von Schönheit, die den gegebenen Körper als empfangsfähiges und modellierbares Material behandelt und in den Fällen Mullins, Herr, Pistorius mit der Prothese als Technofetisch legiert ist" (*Körper 2.0* 21).

than as a full-fledged concept, Sofoulis proposes the 'parahuman' as a possible alternative to conceive of the agency and intelligence that exists – in a Latourian sense, symmetrically – outside and next to the human.

Carrying Sofoulis' notion from gender to disability studies allows Harrasser to consider all the partially sovereign agents involved in the Paralympic Games 2012. By adopting the idea of the "side-by-side principle of human and non-human agents," ("Superhumans" 183) Harrasser's argument exceeds mere discussions of disability as the resisting force threatening the normative body or the disordering force threatening the social body, as has been conceptualized under the medical and later the social model of disability. Rather, it allows her to draw attention away from the individual and its accomplishments and instead towards the form of association between humans, machines and infrastructures, which appear in their collectivity as virtuous. Not only is the athlete conceptualized as a collective of 'human and non-human agents' but in consideration of the athletic body, the term 'parahuman' foregrounds its spatio-temporal character side-by-side with other collectives. Here, Harrasser's conception of parahumanism, to my understanding, breaks with the Euclidean geometry underlying our Western thinking. While, the notion of 'side-by-side' existence connotes a Euclidean parallelism, the 'para' Harrasser endorses necessitates, by definition, the overlap, intersection and entanglement of trajectories. In other words, parahumans are in a continuous process of messy becoming with their wideware, constantly dissolving one collective and establishing another in a partly sovereign fashion. From such a parahumanistic perspective, ability is wideware-related and not tied to a statistical norm, as it is with the notions of dis- or superability. By means of the parahuman, Harrasser disposes of the normative ideal, as well as the norm as the static reference point for categorization. The abilities conceived under parahumanism are therefore, I would like to suggest, in effect paranormal.

Paranormal

Abounding with figures embodying both paranormal ability and a fundamental connectedness with the environment, the work of William Gibson provides an extensive repository of extraordinary corporeality. His invention of 'cyberspace' and the pervasive "[t]he body was meat" (6) morale found in his early work earned the author a reputation as a technophile supporter of virtual reality and disembodiment. However, I would argue that Gibson's fiction does much more than offer cyberpunk prophecies of dystopian futures. Rather, it meticulously negotiates the margins of the 'human,' the nature of its embodiment, the status of its flesh, its entanglement in technology, and its inseparability from the world.

Idoru (1996), set in 21st century Tokyo, revolves around the marriage of the characters Rez, a world-famous rock star, and Rei Toei – the idoru – a computer-

generated virtual celebrity. Thus, at its core the novel addresses the relationship and unification of a human and a non-human actor. All characters intentionally or accidentally involved in this undertaking display forms of corporeal or mental damage, deformity, lack, suture, rehabilitation, or technological enhancement all of which challenge the white, autonomous, heterosexual, able-bodied, employed, Western male, which Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls 'the normate' (8). As a data specialist, the protagonist Colin Laney is hired by Rez's team to initiate the marriage. In the course of the narrative, Laney is revealed to be an orphan with a "medically documented concentration-deficit" (25), whose mental deviance could not be cured or corrected during his childhood. Laney's condition, however, is presented as a binary flicker between disability and superability, in that his skill to "toggle [his concentration-deficit], under certain conditions, into a state of pathological hyperfocus" (25) turns him into "an extremely good researcher" (25). Because of his talent for scanning infinitely complex sets of data, Laney is characterized as

"an intuitive fisher of patterns of information: of the sort of signature a particular individual inadvertently created in the net as he or she went about the mundane yet endlessly multiplex business of life in a digital society. Laney's concentration-deficit, too slight to register on some scales, made him a natural channel-zapper, shifting from program to program, from database to database, from platform to platform, in a way that was, well, intuitive. [...] Laney was the equivalent of a dowser, a cybernetic water-witch. He couldn't explain how he did what he did. He just didn't know." (25)

While this depiction captures Harrasser's notion of a changed perception of disability, a parahuman perspective, in contrast to classificatory attempts, directs attention away from the states and essences of deficit and talent or dis- and super-abilities towards the 'associations between humans, machines, and infrastructures.' Such a focus reveals that it is only when suspended in the infinitely complex architectures of data that Laney's specific ability to identify so called 'nodal points' arises. During a job interview for the sensational television show *Slitscan*, employer Kathy Torrance asks for a demonstration of Laney's skills and instantly realizes its paranormal quality, stating,

"I could almost believe there might actually be something to that nodal point bullshit. Some of your moves made no logical sense whatever, but I've just watched you hone in, cold, on something it took three experienced researchers a month to excavate. You did it in just under half an hour." (38)

Similarly, Gibson writes, "*Slitscan* allowed him [Laney] to do the one thing he possessed a genuine *talent* for" (40; emphasis added). However, Laney's talent, strictly speaking, only arises in that 'proper context,' which consists

of the deployment of computer facilities, the free access to “low-level, broad-spectrum input” (148), and the recognition of his paranormal abilities by his employer. As a consequence, Laney’s ability cannot be regarded as an inherent skill enclosed in the individual but instead represents, in Harrasser’s sense, a partially sovereign system in resonance with its environment. Since the milieu co-constitutes the netrunner as much as he co-constitutes the milieu, Laney illustrates precisely the fundamental entanglement between organism and wideware that marks Harrasser’s parahuman|paranormal collectives.

When Gibson identifies Laney’s ability to “locate key data in apparently random wastes of incidental information” (38) with that of dowsing, this analogy, in the context of Harrasser’s materialist parahuman approach, proves even more appropriate. While the ‘cybernetic water-witch’ resonates with digital information, dowsing originally describes the act of locating subterranean substances such as water, oil, metals, or mineral deposits. The various instruments used by dowsers range from rods, sticks, and pendula to their material bodies, which usually demonstrate an attraction to the respective materials. Although explanations of dowsing vary widely and wildly, many center on the flow of corpuscles or atoms between the respective material and the body, between the environment and the dowser as, for instance, explained by William Pryce in his *Mineralogia Cornubiensis* from 1778:

“The corpuscles [...] that rise from the Minerals, entering the rod, determine it to bow down, in order to render it parallel to the vertical lines which the effluvia describe in their rise. In effect the Mineral particles seem to be emitted from the earth: now the Virgula, being of a light porous wood, gives an easy passage to these particles.” (114)

The dowser, who must be of an appropriate “constitution of mind and body” (116), detects the flow of particles by means of a rod in order to enter into a material feedback loop with the environment and to form a temporary collective of human and non-human agents. Adopting Harrasser’s parahuman lens and echoing Mazlish, we thus can no longer think realistically of the human without considering its fundamental entanglement with agents in networks. Reading the paralympic athlete as a parahuman being with paranormal qualities and thinking the sprint runner through the netrunner and back, this response embraces Harrasser’s re-reading of the Paralympic Games and adapts this new approach to the non-humanist human in re-reading American literature.

References

- Clark, Andy. "Where Brain, Body and World Collide." *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 127.2 (1998). 257-280. Print.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Print.
- Gibson, Barbara, et al. "'This is my way': Reimagining Disability, In/dependence and Interconnectedness of Persons and Assistive Technologies." *Disability & Rehabilitation*. 34.22 (2012). 1894-1899. Print.
- Gibson, William. *Idoru*. London: Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Harrasser, Karin. "Superhumans – Parahumans. Disability and Hightech in Competitive Sports." This volume. 171-184. Print.
- Harrasser, Karin. *Körper 2.0: Über die technische Erweiterbarkeit des Menschen*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2013. Print.
- Hayles, Katherine N. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.
- Longman, Jér. "An Amputee Sprinter: Is He Disabled or Too-Abled?" *The New York Times*. 15 May 2007. Web. 12 August. 2015.
- Mazlish, Bruce. *The Fourth Discontinuity: The Co-Evolution of Humans and Machines*. Yale: Yale University Press, 1993. Print.
- Pryce, William. *Mineralogia Cornubiensis: A Treatise on Minerals, Mines, and Mining*. 1778. Web. 15 Jan. 2015. <<http://www.mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn/resolver.pl?urn=urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10214410-0>>.
- "5 Super Powers You Can Have Today." *Weird News*, 1 May 2009. Web. 22 Oct. 2015. <<http://wtf.thebizzare.com/offbeat/science-and-technology/5-super-powers-you-can-have-today/>>.
- Reeve, Donna. "Cyborgs, Cripples and iCrip: Reflections on the Contribution of Haraway to Disability Studies." *Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions*. Eds. Dan Goodley, Bill Hughes and Lennard Davis. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 91-111. Print.
- Sofoulis, Zoe. "Post-, Nicht- und Parahuman." *Future Bodies: Zur Visualisierung von Körpern in Science und Fiction*. Eds. Marie-Luise Angerer. Wien: Springer, 2002. 273-300. Print.
- The Fastest Man on No Legs*. Dir. David Notman-Watt and James Routh. October Films, 2009. Documentary.