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On: 04 October 2014, At: 09:56

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Disability & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdso20>

### Cyborg anxiety: Oscar Pistorius and the boundaries of what it means to be human

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Published online: 03 Mar 2008.

To cite this article: Leslie Swartz & Brian Watermeyer (2008) Cyborg anxiety: Oscar Pistorius and the boundaries of what it means to be human, *Disability & Society*, 23:2, 187-190, DOI: [10.1080/09687590701841232](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590701841232)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687590701841232>

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## CURRENT ISSUES

### **Cyborg anxiety: Oscar Pistorius and the boundaries of what it means to be human**

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*(Received May 2007; final version received September 2007)*

Disabled people have a history of being viewed as not entirely human. In the age of spare part surgery and increasing sophistication of drugs, there are increasing concerns about what it means to be human, and, in particular, in what distinguishes people from machines. These concerns have clear resonance with anxieties about disability, and with disabled people being seen as not human. Oscar Pistorius is a disabled athlete whose wish to compete alongside able bodied competitors is causing great concern and worry that his prosthetic legs may give him an unfair – and non-human – advantage. The case of Pistorius breaks entrenched boundaries and lays bare core concerns in society about disability and the body.

**Keywords:** disabled sport; cyborgs; prostheses; social exclusion; paralympics

At the heart of much discrimination against disabled people is an idea, explicit or implicit, that disabled people do not qualify to be seen as fully human. Similarly, with the advent of spare part surgery, including prosthetics and organ transplants, there are anxieties about what the boundaries of being an individual human being may be. If, for example, I have in my body the heart of another person, to what extent am I still me? If, furthermore, I am dependant on technology, through a pacemaker or a prosthetic limb, for example, to what extent can I be said to have a human body? When biotechnologies and new genetic engineering techniques allow human tissues to be bought and sold the body becomes more porous, and a site of exchange (Rajan 2006).

In the age of new technologies, including computers, the Internet and biotechnologies, fundamental questions arise regarding the nature of humanness and human consciousness. Turkle (1997), for example, has shown that as computer technologies develop and computers break new boundaries in their ability to ‘think’, lay definitions of what is distinctive about being a human as opposed to being a machine have had to adapt, and humanness has had to be defined more narrowly (Hayles 1999). Similarly, as research on animal behaviour develops, we have had to rethink what is distinctively human – for example, whereas the attribution of emotions to animals was at one time dismissed as anthropomorphism, it is now accepted that animals do in fact experience emotions once thought of as distinctively human (Masson 1997). The domain of ‘exclusive humanness’ thus seems to be shrinking.

The disabled body then becomes a particularly interesting site for cultural analysis, as well as cultural projections. Once, people with severe impairments were openly deemed not human and even, in the case of severe mental impairment, labelled as ‘vegetables’. Although this stigmatizing discourse is still with us, the disabled body now draws renewed attention, by its difference and otherness, to fundamental questions about what it means to be human. Postmodernity and

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new technologies summon all to question old received ideas of humanness; disabled bodies draw attention to the shifting boundaries of how people define themselves.

As with other forms of segregation (like the racial ‘science’ of Nazism and apartheid), the policies of keeping disabled people away from others fulfilled a central function of imposing order on chaos and diversity. Once firmly in the category of disabled (or, for example, ‘black’ in apartheid South Africa), people whose existence might have been perceived as disturbing or dangerous to others could be controlled through the ascriptions that are made about large categories of people. Control is palpable, notwithstanding the apparently benign nature of these ascriptions, as in ‘Disabled people are very brave to bear what they have to bear’ or ‘People with Down’s syndrome are happy and friendly’. Policies of inclusion threaten the order of established categories and remove the comfort of clear boundaries.

As an example of processes of inclusion, disabled sport has made substantial progress over the past few decades and it is no mean achievement that now, for example, the Paralympics are held together with the Olympic Games and gain a large degree of media attention. Occasionally disabled athletes compete alongside their able-bodied peers, for example the South African swimmers Natalie du Toit (who has a leg amputation) and Terence Parkin (who is deaf). In the main, though, disabled athletes compete in their own realm against other disabled athletes, in the name of fair play – in order that those who have bodily impairments are ostensibly fairly matched against those with similar impairments.

What happens, though, when the boundary between disabled and non-disabled is challenged in an unexpected way? Oscar Pistorius is a South African sprinter who runs with prosthetic legs and who now wishes to have the opportunity to compete not against disabled athletes, as he has been doing for many years, but against his able-bodied peers. A series of debates about the fairness of the situation has consequently taken shape. Do Pistorius’s legs give him an unfair advantage? If, as one commentator warned, he falls when he runs, will he hurt other athletes? The overall question, at a time when there are many worries about the use of technologies (including doping) in sport, is whether it is fair to say that Pistorius can be seen as an athlete to whose body (like the bodies of his able-bodied competitors) his possible success can be attributed.

The investigations launched carry an earnestness which tells of a situation which has called into question something quite fundamental, quite invisible, about the boundaries between disabled and non-disabled groups. The control described above, rooted in bureaucratic categories and physical segregation, must clearly protect and perpetuate much needed modes of construing the world and ourselves. But what, precisely, are these aspects? What does the case of Oscar Pistorius threaten to destabilize?

‘Good’ people around the world would, if asked, probably align themselves with a form of ‘humanitarian’ or ‘human rights’ discourse of ‘inclusivity’ surrounding the issue of what qualifies one as human. Of course, we all should have access to basic rights, inclusion and respect by virtue of our simple humanness. Whilst this approach is clearly laudable, it sits oddly with the more apparent, yet perhaps less consciously articulated, mechanisms of social closure which surround us, saturate our media and preoccupy our private moments. These processes occupy the cultural turf of real inclusion and exclusion. Inclusivity and legitimacy here are contingent on the approximation of bodily ideals and on performance, status and association; the neo-liberal pecking order of capital accumulation and the economy of power. What Oscar Pistorius threatens to do is move successfully from one discursive meaning system, where he may be seen to belong, to another. His presence in this discourse, based on personal prowess of a bodily nature, serves to shake the very foundations of the attribution system which maintains the separation as meaningful.

Athletics, quite clearly, is about the body and bodily strivings. As such, the meanings associated with the imperative to bodily perfection, with the obsession to perform, are closely linked to

broader cultural ideas regarding bodily ideals and what that signifies within the individual. Athletes, like supermodels, shape and sculpt their bodies, for engagement in, in some sense, a pure form of hierarchization through competing. Myths regarding the virtue associated with bodily perfection are as relevant in the athletic world as in the world of tabloid models, rooted as they are in shared discursive foundations. It is in the nature of these worlds of striving that bodily difference or 'abnormality' has no place. The idealized, mythic valuing of the perfect body, with its associations of personal virtue, carries as its counterpoint the denigration of persons with different bodies. The unspoken assumptions about these bodies, and their inhabitants, relate to undesirability, psychological damage, abjection and failure. Oscar Pistorius finds himself, and is found, on the brink of straddling these binary universes. If he is indeed able – allowed – to do so this may lead to the rendering of catastrophic questions regarding what we are striving for in terms of the attendant virtues of culturally designated bodily perfection. He will have encroached on hallowed ideological territory, where deeply entrenched ascriptions of human desirability and value not only buttress our imaginations within the media, but also provide the meaning system which supports daily strivings and aspirations. The imperative to strive for an image of perfection is not only a cultural one, but also carries a moral aspect. Surely, the place of bodily perfection and desirability we are called to reach for is not a place inhabited by disabled people. Or is it?

The 'cyborg' (part human, part machine) aspect of Pistorius' disability deepens the problem, through opening the way to a treacherous debate regarding what technologies are allowed to be 'used' to achieve inclusivity. Irony is not in short supply here; one only has to turn to the ballooning industry in so-called 'technoluxe' medicine. Here we meet New York women who bring the designer shoes they wish to wear to exclusive podiatrists requesting surgery to 'make my feet look good in these' (Frank 2006). The intersection of bodies and technology for the purposes of gaining inclusion seems to shift the goalposts on many fronts. Yet, the ascription of intrinsic virtue rooted in essentialist 'fairness' lives on. No questions regarding the 'humanness' of such surgical fashion devotees are in evidence.

All of this, though, takes us far from the simple issue of a young athlete wishing to participate in his chosen sport. The International Association of Athletics Federations' (IAAF) somewhat tight-lipped, non-committal response to the issue was based on the idea that there is uncertainty regarding whether Pistorius may be 'unfairly advantaged' by his carbon fibre prostheses. This utterance, surely, exposes the official position on the issue of unfair advantage in paralympic competition as disturbingly unthought through. If there is any reason to believe that Pistorius's prostheses afford him some degree of unfair advantage were he to compete in 'mainstream' athletics competitions – and we are informed that there is – then surely there has been a similar, nay greater, risk of unfair advantage in all of his paralympic competing up to the present. What is being shown up here? Is it the sorry reality that, upon closer scrutiny, the IAAF's attitude towards paralympic competition reflects a *laissez faire* stance not concerned with competitive rigour? The picture of paralympic athletics which, all too readily, springs to mind on consideration of this issue is a bilious one involving 'participation' being 'the most important part' and the question of who wins prizes being of little relevance. Or does the IAAF simply have undisclosed, or unexplored, difficulties with setting limits in competitive regulation for disabled athletes? Whatever the case, such fuzzy boundaries fall away most sharply at the advent of Pistorius's bid for mainstream participation.

A familiar binary stereotype within which disabled people are snared is that which splits disabled people into two opposing, yet somehow inextricably linked, categories. These are the invalid, dependent, incapable, damaged both inside and out, and the so-called 'supercrip' (MacDougall 2006). The latter is that much celebrated media persona of the disabled person who has 'overcome adversity' in a heartwarming manner and not been restricted by his or her 'flaws', but believes that 'everything is possible' for those who work hard. Naturally these ideas of

fairness and reward for hard work are cornerstones of the neo-liberal just world tradition. Both poles of the stereotype of course fail to make it possible to see individual lives, much less conceptualize such issues as disablism oppression and exclusion. Further, all disabled people are oppressed by the imperative to ‘overcome’ in some superhuman fashion in order to be afforded basic acknowledgement.

At the idealizing pole of the stereotype rests an opportunity for the observer to ‘rest assured’ that those ‘less fortunate’ can still, albeit in virtually microscopic minorities, find a sort of inclusion, success and ‘ability’, in the manner of Al Pacino’s character in *Scents of a woman*. This discourse, though, is about some hope of a fantasy redemption from the ‘horror’ of occupying the bottom-most rung of a social power and desirability hierarchy; it is about a sop to those who may be less fortunate but yet are inspiring. It is definitely not part of this script for one such ‘inspiring’ character to enter the fray on (at least legally) equal terms and prove himself to be stronger, fitter, better than his well-shaped competitors. Consequently, perhaps, the result is a confused flurry of gatekeeping, not only in top flight athletics but in defence against the cascading implications for body culture and othering which emanate from this peculiar situation.

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