



Controversial Embodiment: Sport, Masculinity, Dis/Ability

by Marilena Parlati

With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning. [...] Man has, as it were, become a *prosthetic god*. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent: but those organs have not grown on him and they still give him much trouble at times. (Freud 1930: 42, my emphasis)

This essay is an attempt at investigating some visible forms of complex, indeed controversial, embodiment, with the specific intention of concentrating on the ways they interrogate delicate issues, such as disability, masculinity and prosthetic sport performance. I intend to sound the shifting boundaries between dis-ability and super-ability as manifested in iconic figures such as Stelarc and, in other (sports) fields, Oscar Pistorius, whose unsteady position as privileged/disabled *bladerunner* seems to require – and indeed to attract – particularly intense scrutiny. I shall introduce a few contemporary discourses on corporeality and embodiment, which focus on the ‘troubling’ nature of auxiliary organs Freud refers to in the much contended paragraph I use as epigraph. I am well aware of the layers of difficulty arising from Freud’s obliteration of the feminine, to mention just the most relevant critique against his



work suggested by L. Irigaray, for instance. I use this passage *only* as a cue to my intended discourses, without forgetting the unease his use of the term 'Man' does cause (me): no 'prosthetic goddess' is envisionable in his writing, transformed like 'woman' in general into the utterly haunting negative shadow he was allegedly obsessed with. I shall try and offer other views of the always gendered and always rooted, corporeal 'body' I am here following in its 'prosthetic' perambulations; I shall therefore move from Butler and Giddens to Jean-Luc Nancy's work on transplants and/as prostheses to include theoretical debates on disintegrating embodiment and disability studies. My concluding remarks will focus on the short-circuiting of allegedly secure practices of (masculine) embodiment in sports culture and theory brought about by prosthetic questionings of stereotypical subject positions.

SOUND(ING) INTEGRITY

In what I find a very rich and demanding essay on the limits, or lack of, of bodily integrity, Diane Perpich poses very radical, indeed essential, questions:

What do we mean when we say "here is my body"? What, after all, is a body? Are bodies (human bodies, for example) natural kinds? Are they substances? Organic wholes? Or is the unity that we accord to the body conventional, arbitrary, and linguistic in nature? And in what sense can a body be said to be mine? Where exactly are its limits? How or in what sense does it *belong* to me, and who is this me that would be in some sense other than my body? (2005: 81)

Among the issues which are raised in this passage, Perpich hints at debatable legal rights to agency and to the entitlement to modifying an allegedly already-extant entity – the body, *my* body – with clear-cut profiles and boundaries. In an early work on de Beauvoir, Judith Butler had also, already, stated that "the body is not a static phenomenon, but a mode of *intentionality*, a *directional force* and a *mode of desire*" (1986: 33, my emphasis). While this would later lead her to her famous contentions on the performativity of gender, in this paper I am more interested in following her suggestion that "as a condition of access to the world, the body is being *comported beyond itself*, sustaining a necessary reference to the world and, thus, never self-identical natural entity. *The body is lived and experienced as the context and medium of all strivings.*" (ibid.: 33, my emphasis) The lived, situated aspect of what she terms a "comportment beyond itself" ties in with my interest in prosthetics. In his *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida referred to this being beyond in his reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*: for him, writing (as technology) is a supplement that "signifies nothing, [but] simply replaces a lack" (1974: 921); his "logic of the supplement" might thus seem to suggest that writing, technology and by analogy body



prosthetics/addition/augmentation are necessary attempts at fixing otherwise unstable, malfunctioning bodies which are yet to be perfected (1974).

In very different terms, Anthony Giddens suggests what might, at first face, be deemed in opposition to Butler's arguments, especially when he stresses that

a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self." (1991: 54, my emphasis).

For both scholars, I think, the body lies at the crux between biology and language, as articulate medium and as intentional plan alike in an unresolved aporia which must remain such. This "mode of intentionality", especially in connection with Butler's work, has caused intensely heated debates among disability scholars, who argue that the American philosopher idealizes her cyborgs and obliterates the very real obstacles which disabled people around the world must daily face (see Siebers 2008). It is true that, in her work on cyborgs, Haraway refers to "paraplegics and other severely handicapped people [who] can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices" (Haraway 1991: 178). Her statements perfectly exemplify what Mitchell and Snyder have bitterly remarked on disabled people often being only laterally present in culture as "self-evident cyborgs of modernity – transhuman subjects who rework the nature/culture divide." (Mitchell and Snyder 1997: 29)

I aim at adopting the view that the body, ambiguous and uncertain in its borders as it might be, may be conceived as a project, as literally, physically, "plastic". But, in doing so, I do not forget that the essential issue at stake here is the vertiginous variations that exist in accessing plastic transformation, ie prosthetic technology. Furthermore, to go back to Derrida's "logic of the supplement", one must realize that, truly, the very possibilities offered by technological implementation and 'augmentation' may be read as duplicating "the ableist assumption that disabled bodies are broken and require 'fixing'". (Kafer 2009: 224)

SHAPING BODIES

In a careful analysis of such delicate senses of "plasticity", John Jordan intervenes on the issues related to the "refurbishment" of human bodies which, I suggest, have an essential bearing both upon disability culture and representation and upon a sociology of sport culture and the representation, of idealized, sculpted, perfected (fixed?) bodies.



The plastic body is a *contested subjectivity* whose meaning shapes and is shaped by the ways that the body can be discussed, by whom, and toward what end, as well as the socio-political implications of people seeking to make their bodies conform to an idealized image. This perspective differs from the usual ways in which plastic surgery is discussed publicly, which is in terms of the end product — the visible, post-surgery body. Before a single incision is made, however, the plastic body as an object of discourse has been sculpted rhetorically to reflect the varied interests of patients, surgeons, and, in some instances, communities. Even in situations in which surgery is rejected, a new body is produced because the applicant's body is redefined as unsuitable for surgery, which alters its rhetorical status. Approval of surgery is made on the assumption that *the refurbished body will improve the individual patient and be a public statement affirming the benefits and appropriate uses of plastic surgery*. Rhetoric, thus, is a vital component of the development of bodies in plastic surgery culture, and it influences individual decisions about and public knowledge of the human body. (Jordan 2004: 333, *my emphasis*)

If one extends such reasoning to other forms of surgery, namely allegedly *reconstructive*, curative surgery, one may discover a different sense in the prosthetic approach I have been trying to put on the agenda. In Jean-Luc Nancy's words, bodies "take place neither in discourse nor in matter. They inhabit neither 'spirit' nor 'body'. They take place at the limit, as *the limit*" (2002: 18). And, to follow again Diane Perpich's refined argument, "every body divides and relates to itself and to others along multiple borders. The self is flesh and bone and mineral and water; it is healthy tissue and deadly viruses. Rather than defining a self, a corpus records the fault lines of the self's identity, lines that both separate and join the self with itself and with the world." (2005: 85) If bodies are limits, disabled bodies, or *the disabled body* as impossible category, are truly "a nightmare for the fashionable discourse of theory", in the terms offered by Lennard J. Davis (1995: 5). It seems to me quite undeniable, in fact, that very rarely have differently-abled subjectivities been under the spotlight of critical theory, unless as a symptom of what Ato Quayson has successfully defined "aesthetic nervousness" (2007: 26), as a means for "marking the constitutive points of aesthetic representation [...] in the suspension, collapse, or general shortcircuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation that may have governed the text." (ibid.)

It is in the work by Lennard Davis, who is indeed at the forefront of disability studies, that one clearly traces the connecting lines taking disability discourse from Georges Canguilhem's figuration of the "pathological" to Foucault's docile bodies and Davis's own arguments on "normalcy" and normativity as culturally constructed, yet physically perlocutionary discursive orders and political practices. Canguilhem (and Butler's involvement with his teaching is well known) stated that: "there is no difference between the birth of grammar [...] and the establishment of the metric



system. [...] It began with grammatical norms and ended with morphological norms of men and horses for national defense, passing through industrial and sanitary norms" (1978: 150). Seen from this stratified perspective, disability can indeed be read as "the master trope of human disqualification" (Mitchell, Snyder 2000: 3), in the sense that it articulates *physical* difference as inassimilable, as a biologically and/or culturally determined un-fitness to the normate spaces and discourses of modernity (see Price 2007).

The so-called *medical model* of disability – which intended disability as located in individual *cases* and in a pre-eminently corporeal distance from standardized normalcy – has long ago been replaced by a *social model of disability*, which inverted the terms of the question and posited a linguistic, structural difference between *impairments* and *disabilities*. It is true that, as Tom Shakespeare has made clear, this has also forced the body out of disability discourse, since "to mention biology, to admit pain, to confront [...] impairments has been to risk the oppressors seizing on evidence that disability is really about physical limitation after all" (1992: 40). In this essay, I suggest that the most convincing attitude towards the interpellation of disability is proposed by Tobin Siebers, whose *Disability Theory* is a thorough, somewhat painful, investigation into what he terms "complex embodiment". In his view, this theory "raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body [and] theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative." (2008: 25) Mutual transformation and *obligation* are useful keys to the following section of this essay, in which I pose questions related to *talking* about the body, to *acting* and *enacting* one's body, more specifically when it is or becomes dysfunctional (see Leder 1990) and *otherwise* integrated.

FAULTLINES

In his already-mentioned work on disability *as* nervousness, Ato Quayson introduces a chapter on J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2005), a novel the often contested Nobel prize winner dedicated to a male, muscular, fit body disfigured due to a street accident. A leg is lost, and a "ham" is what seems left in its place; yet the protagonist, Paul Rayment, "to himself [...] does not call it a stump. He would like not to call it anything; he would like not to think about it, but that is not possible. If he has a name for it, it is le jambon [the ham]. Le jambon keeps it at a nice, contemptuous distance." (Coetzee 2005: 29). From Quayson's perspective, that leg has become alienated, a mere Körper experienced as an objectual other, an intruding "thing", a transforming prosthesis *ante litteram*. I turn again to Diane Perpich's work on Nancy, to remind her suggestions in relation to *L'Intrus*, the short text the French philosopher dedicated to his own heart transplant and to considering the leaky boundaries of his body and his varied proprioceptive perspectives. For Perpich, *L'Intrus* discloses the body "as a being



singular plural through a process of denaturing and defamiliarization that weans us from a humanistic conception of body as a unified whole or *integrum* and thus as one's own in a way that would link identity to this wholeness and integrity." (ibid.: 80). If one considers not only the transplanted organ but all the other "auxiliaries" which intervene in the process of reconfiguring the body, in Nancy's case prostheses are imagined not as means for technological empowerment, but as "defamiliarizing" tools which seriously interrogate any banal, outmoded, sense of secure identity:

I am the illness and the medical intervention; I am the cancerous cell and the grafted organ; I am the immunodepressive agents and their palliatives; I am the bits of wire holding together my sternum; and I am this injection site permanently sewn into me below my clavicle; just as I was, for that matter, already these screws in my hip and this plate in my groin. I am becoming like a science-fiction android, or the living-dead, as one day my youngest son says to me" (Nancy 2002: 42-43)

If "identity *is* immunity and vice versa", such a relation is marked by "laws of intrusion" (Perpich 2005: 83) which may well refer to prostheses and dis/ability. Adopting remarkably innovative approaches to the very conception of body *property/propriety*, performers such as Orlan and Stelarc have taken those laws of intrusion – or ex-scription, to use a different coinage – to their very limit. In her manifesto on "Carnal Art", Orlan has offered her view over (her) body modification (and prosthetic reconfigurations): she argues that her artistic experimentation "swings between defiguration and refiguration. Its inscription into the flesh is due to the new possibilities inherent to our age. The body has become a 'modified ready-made', no longer seen as the ideal it once represented, not ready enough to be adhered and signed." (2001) In different ways, the Australian performer artist Stelarc has been investigating the impact of technology over human bodies and agency, and has been sounding the boundaries of ability and super-ability in his grafting a third, functioning and web-connected ear onto his arm (see Stelarc 1999). This unnecessary, marginal yet totally excessive prosthesis seems to me to function as a *monstrous* (in the sense of extremely visible, perpetually monitored and also, paradoxically, monitoring) faultline, a surface which unites, divides and affects the presupposedly demarcating lines between the human and the technological, the natural and the cultural, lack and excess.

FILL IN THE GAP?

Following this line of contention, Sarah Jain also suggested that "a prosthesis can fill a gap, but it can also diminish the body and create the need for itself." (1999: 44) Her words lead to my intended main focus, the case and visibly complex embodiment of South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, whose in-between status of enhanced



masculine/muscular icon and disabled person marks a particularly delicate set of radical questionings of disability, gender and sport culture alike. A. Asch and M. Fine stated that “having a disability [is] seen as synonymous with being dependent, childlike and helpless — an image fundamentally challenging all that is embodied in the ideal male: virility, autonomy and independence” (1988: 175). As a matter of fact, this “some body” (see Couser 2009) offers a self-narrative which contests any easily accepted allegiance and portrays himself as the ideal male the two scholars refer to; in fact, in his own words: “I don’t see myself as disabled [...] there is nothing I can’t do that able-bodied athletes can do”.(60) Instead of feeling marginalized as inhabiting what he publicly devalues as a form of *feminized masculinity*, Pistorius aligns himself with what Norman and Moola call “the institution of modernist sport [as] a manifestation of liberal humanism that assumes an organic body and a self-contained human subject.” (2011: 1271). Indeed, after the polemical debates following his attempt at and eventual failure in participating in the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, Pistorius’s body, his auxiliary organs, his extremely sophisticated Cheetah blades, the (allegedly accidental) shooting of his girlfriend have become a crucial network of topical discourses on empowerment and the intrusion of technology in the construction and policing of gender, class, race borders.

Norman and Moola concentrate on a 2013 *Time* magazine cover story on Pistorius which tied the revealing title of *Man/Superman/Gunman* to a previous photograph of the athlete posing as Terminator, in a posture which carefully reproduced stereotypical features of hegemonic white masculinity while also, obviously, hinting at cyborg representation and potential. In their view, though, “athletes [are] ‘always already cyborgified’. Sport is a central discursive site for producing and reproducing the modern body.” (ibid.: 1274) Yet, in mainstream sports competitions, able and disabled bodies almost never meet on an equal *field*; while it is undeniable that Paralympic Games have become growingly popular, the actual coverage of those events in mainstream media remains marginal and proves the utter topicality of DePauw’s insights into the lack of visibility of disabled athletes and bodies: “the object of our study is the body or specific aspects of the performing body, but traditionally our study has not focused on the body as whole, the body in a social context, or the body in connection with self” (1997: 419). Pistorius has, instead, been made extremely visible, indeed obsessively scrutinized from numerous different cultural and scientific points of view, all attesting to the extreme potential transgressivity of his multiply complex embodiment. To start with, the very materiality of his prostheses has caused intense debate and scrutiny, apparently with the declared intent of examining the validity of the accusations of annihilating fair competition through the use of his carbon-fibre blades. For some (scientists and scholars), those prosthetic tools enhance his athletic performance and transform him into a super-able, super-human theoretically unbeatable running machine. Pistorius defends



himself by adopting fair play – a major trope of stereotypically gentlemanly attitude in sports discourse – as his own master narrative and motivation:

I believe in the purity of sport. I don't like people who take short cuts. I'd never be involved in sport if I had the slightest doubts. It does get to me quite hard. The worst thing is when somebody says my improvements this year are down to changing my prosthetic legs. My prosthetic legs have stayed the same for seven years, down to the bolts and the lining. Then I read somewhere that my legs travel faster than those of an able-bodied sprinter. In sprinting, your opposite arm and opposite leg travel together, so that would mean I am having to move my arms faster, which means I am having to burn more energy in my upper body. (2011)

By referring to the energy expenditure his performance requires, Pistorius tries to reach a balance between the homosocial bonds siding him with the other able-bodied athletes, but also threatens to destabilize other bonds and boundaries (see Swartz and Watemeyer 2008). His status at the time of the games he vainly attempted to participate in (he did later succeed in participating in both the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics Games) was marginalized, legally contested although apparently elitarian and dominant; Anne Hickey-Moody proposes a very brilliant reading of the complex material relation triggered by the use of carbon fibre. According to her: "Carbon fibre is [...] the homosocial technology that propelled Pistorius beyond the socio-cultural politics of disability [...] and the surface that connects him to global assemblages of sporting masculinity." (2015: 146) The cases of other athletes and celebrities, Aimee Mullins and Heather Mills as notable examples, would indeed have bent Hickey-Moody's discourse to different conclusions and a more militant reading of gendered disabled bodies. Mullins, as actress, model and athlete, does indeed interrogate that concept of sporting 'masculinity', by reappropriating her dis-ability and claiming her rights to choose as many prostheses as she likes. In one of the many campaigns featuring her, in fact, she seems to be powerfully advocating the will of "walking in different shoes".

For Hickey-Moody, by transforming Pistorius's into a body colonized by an innovative material amalgam, carbon fibre "extends the surfaces of bodies and produces masculinity on and across surfaces, male and female bodies." (ibid.: 139). If one widens the scope of her discourse and introduces correctives to the apparently rigid sense the word 'masculinity' retains in this passage, or rather opts for a more politically-informed 'agency', it seems undeniable that both Pistorius and Mullins are/have acquired (due to their undoubtedly, unforgettably, class, race, and gender privileged positions) a posthuman, disabled, superable, impossible body (although carefully presented - and marketed - as 'simply' sexually attractive and socially powerful):



Posthuman bodies are the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality, sex and its consequences...a technology, a screen, a projected image; it is a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body...a queer body. The human body itself is no longer part of 'the family of man' but a zoo of posthumanities. (Halberstam and Livingston 1995: 3)

If, as Rebecca Coleman seems to suggest, it is necessary "to account for [...] [the things that] limit or extend [bodies]" (2009: 163), and if this contention leads us back to Freud's fruitful "prosthetic god[s]", one may well conclude with Diane Perpich's questioning of embodiment and also with Gregory Bateson's early essay on the cybernetics of identity: "If you ask anybody about the localization and boundaries of the self... confusions are immediately displayed. [C]onsider a blind man with a stick. Where does the blind man's self begin? At the tip of the stick? At the handle of the stick? Or at some point halfway up the stick?" (Bateson 1971: 7). To conclude, current theoretical work on corpo-reality, disability discourse, cultural disability studies and the sociology and cultural analysis of sports culture may well be seen as sharing a common framework, with sport, fashion and celebrity culture taking the lead in articulating, influencing and reproducing cultural icons which have already had an extremely profound impact on modern senses of collective and individual belonging and on an essential, often unpredictable, revision of prescribed boundaries and policed behaviours.

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