Is the Paralympics a modern freak show?

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Purpose:

Exploring the functions of representation of Paralympians and Paralympic Games themselves.

1. The gap between formal expectations and realities
2. Historical stages on Paralympic movement
3. Ableism and individual model of disability
4. Showcase of Transhumanism
1. The gap between formal expectations and realities

The International Paralympic Committee and national governments insist that Paralympic Games will positively impact the lives of disabled people.

- Paralympic Values (IPC)
  - courage
  - determination
  - inspiration
  - equality
1. The gap between formal expectations and realities

Expectations from the Tokyo 2020 Games

- promotion of understanding about disability and people with disabilities: 44.2%
- more sports opportunities for people with disabilities: 41.5%
- more barrier-free accessibility in public and other facilities: 35.7%

1. The gap between formal expectations and realities

- But this is at odds with the findings of DPOs and the experiences of disabled individuals.

- It's post-London Games legacy

- Attitudes towards them hadn't improved: 81%
- Things had actually got worse: 22%
- They have either experienced hostile or threatening behaviour or even been attacked: 17%
- They had experienced people refusing to make adjustments or do things differently: 75%

2. Historical stages on Paralympic movement

- rehabilitation and sport

- Ludwig Guttmann

“the father of the Paralympic Movement,” and the head doctor at the spinal injuries unit at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England

- to a life worth living, as useful and respected citizens
- discourses of bio-medical disability
- nationalist-capitalist discourses of economic usefulness
- freak-show inspired discourses of normalcy
2. Historical stages on Paralympic movement

- The freak show serves to reproduce the able/disabled and normal/abnormal dichotomies by orchestrating a spectacle that draws the audience’s focus to the abnormality of the freak’s body, thereby rendering the audience member’s body comparatively normal and able-bodied.

2. Historical stages on Paralympic movement

- A freak show’s cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text against which the viewer’s indistinguishable body fades into a seemingly neutral, tractable, and invulnerable instrument of the autonomous will.

2. Historical stages on Paralympic movement

mainstream sport

justified and asserted their authority through the addition of mainstream recreational sport discourses, most notably that of fairness

- fairness discourses
- Classification
- bio-medical discourses
- objectification
2. Historical stages on Paralympic movement

- more profitable and empowering sport-centred model
- discourses

nationalist  capitalist  elitist  neo-liberal
2. Historical stages on Paralympic movement

- The production of this spectacle often involved the explicit use of corporate and elite sport discourses to reshape and further justify practices that remained grounded in the discursive logic of bio-medical disability and freak show normalcy.

3. Ableism and individual model of disability

● Ableism
  ▪ myth of normalcy or able-bodiedness
  ▪ hierarchy of impairments
  ▪ system of discourses, practices, subjects and institutions
3. Ableism and individual model of disability

- individual model
  - classification based on impairments or functional limitations
  - inspirational stories about personal tragedy and overcoming
  - the term "superhuman"
3. Ableism and individual model of disability

● superhuman/supercrip

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"supercrip" is considered worthy of praise as they have approximated able-bodied athletic performance in spite of the "problem" of their disability

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● the term "super" means that disabled athletes is superior to nondisabled ordinary persons (not nondisabled athletes)

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● presumption of inferiority of disabled persons
4. Showcase of Transhumanism

- Transhumanism

- based on the premise that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase

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- Technocentric ideology

- Alliance between an ideology of radical enhancement and disability rights
4. Showcase of Transhumanism

- The ever-increasing speed of generating human bodily enhancements and the culture of transhumanism pave the way for a transhumanised form of ableism where people perceive the improvement of human body abilities beyond species-typical boundaries not only as desirable but as essential.

(Wolbring, G., 2008, "Oscar Pistorius and the future nature of Olympic, Paralympic and other sports.")