Materiality, mediation and affective encounters: ‘Rising Phoenix’ and the cultural representation of disability

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Abstract
Paralympic and Para sport representation has provided an important cultural site from which to explore the role of popular disability media in shaping everyday disability knowledge(s) through relations of power, ideology and meaning. Yet limited attention has been afforded to the affective dimensions of Para sport media that may help extend our understanding of its performative power on audiences. In critique of the recent Netflix Paralympic documentary film, ‘Rising Phoenix’, this article affords particular attention to the production of disability affects through the cinematic entanglement of things, bodies and language that work to involve audiences on an affective, emotional and sensorial level. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) cultural politics of emotion, it is argued that the film produces an economy of disability affects that contribute to the qualitative affective qualities of the film yet operate to (re-)configure sites of disabled normativity, gendered disability relations and nourish ‘supercrip’ and ‘medico-tragedy’ disability narratives. Attention is paid to the implications of this and the role of sport documentary film more widely in generating affective modes of representation for marginalised sporting groups.

Keywords
Disability, media, paralympics, qualitative, sport

Introduction
Sociologists, particularly those working at the intersection of disability and media studies, have paid considerable attention to the politics of mediated disability representation and the performative ideological dimension of disability texts (see Cuelenaere et al., 2019;
Ellis, 2019; Elcoccer and Kirkpatrick, 2017). Particular attention has been afforded to the Paralympic Games and Para sport — a hyper-visible site of disability media representation that attracts a global audience (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021). In doing so, scholars have provided important insights into the way Paralympic representation operates as a persuasive pedagogical site in shaping everyday disability knowledge(s) through relations of power, ideology and meaning (see Beacom et al., 2016; Brooke, 2019; Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; Silva and Howe, 2012).

Recently however scholarly attention has turned to the way mediated representation is not always immediately or ‘primarily about matters of signification, representation and subjectification’ (Grossberg and Behrenshausen, 2016: 1002). As Deleuze once claimed, mediated televisual forms involve a qualitative dimension that is ‘sensory (visual and sound), kinetic, intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal’ (1985 [2005]: 28) (see also Hepp, 2020 and Pisters, 2003). Indeed, the affective dimension of mediated representation that Deleuze points to has become an important heuristic for many sociologists wishing to more adequately theorise the qualitative capacities of representation that contribute to making representation meaningful for audiences (Heywood, 2015). As such, affect has been used to conceptualise the intensities of feeling (Kuntsman, 2012; Shaw and Warf, 2009; Sheridan, 2002) that are invoked through the entanglement of things, bodies, aesthetics (sound, visual elements, camera angles) and language and operate to mediate ‘the relationship between the psychic and the social … between the individual and the collective’ (Ahmed, 2004: 119).

Yet, despite its conceptual value in critique of mediated representation, there has been limited engagement with affect by critical disability scholars working in the area of Para sport representation. Paralympic media research has been largely limited to more traditional poststructuralist paradigmatic frameworks centred on debates concerning discourse and ideology in the politics and pedagogy of disability representation (Howe, 2011; Howe and Silva, 2017; McGillivray et al., 2021). For the most part, cultural critique has been focused on the prevalence of disability narratives and discourses in Para sport broadcasting, print media and marketing (see Brooke, 2019; Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; McGillivray et al., 2021) and the visibility and normalisation of some Para athletes within discourses of Nationalism (Kolotouchkina et al., 2021) and Ableism (Howe and Silva, 2017). Whilst this body of work has offered important contributions to Paralympic and Para sport media scholarship it has yet to adequately engage with the way ‘the visual serves as a gateway to broader somatic experiences’ (Heywood, 2015: 24) that give performative force to aspects of our mediated experience.

The release of the Paralympic documentary film, Rising Phoenix, in August 2020 on the popular video streaming service, Netflix, provides an opportunity from which to better explore the affective dimensions of Para sport media. Premiering globally in over 190 countries, the release of Rising Phoenix coincided with the countdown to the Tokyo 2020 (now 2021) Paralympic Games. The film is a powerful piece of cinematography that centres on the backstories of nine successful Paralympians and features footage from the 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Games. Written and co-directed by Peter Ettedgui and Ian Bonhôte, both of whom have previously won awards for their documentary film making, Rising Phoenix has received much critical acclaim for its ‘slick … rousing’ and ‘inspirational’ portrayal of Para sport. In a similar way to Paralympic
broadcasting, Rising Phoenix intends to capture and sustain viewer interest around spectacular athletic achievement through emotional disability stories and powerful images. Yet, the film also marks an emerging trend toward the inclusion of disability sport media content beyond broadcast television that benefits from the high-value production practices and cinematography of heavily capitalised over-the-top (OTT) video streaming services (see Burroughs, 2019).

My interest in this paper centres on the production and circulation of affect in Rising Phoenix. I focus particular attention on the role specific types of disability stories and Para sport bodies perform as part of the ‘cinematic assemblage’ (see Rizzo 2012) to produce an economy of disability affects that is pedagogically powerful and meaningful for audiences and operate to promulgate cultural sites of disabled normativity. In so doing, I suggest that mediated sport culture, increasingly characterised by extra content delivered through OTT streaming services designed to afford high degrees of affective and cognitive involvement (Pilipets, 2019), has implications for the political mattering of sport representation beyond the typical sport broadcast environment. In the balance of this paper, I draw largely on Sara Ahmed’s (2004, 2010) use of affective economies to begin to extend our understanding of how affect is mobilised through language, emotions and aesthetics intimately connected with the cultural, cognitive and material in contemporary Para sport media.

**Rising Phoenix and the mediated visibility of Para sport**

On 26 August 2020, the documentary film ‘Rising Phoenix’ was released on the video streaming platform, Netflix. The film, which premiered globally in over 190 countries, centres on the stories of nine Paralympians including English sprinter Jonnie Peacock, Australian swimmer Ellie Cole and South African track champion Ntando Mahlangu, and their experiences of disability and Paralympic success (IPC, 2020). Rising Phoenix tells the story of the modern Paralympic Movement from its inception following World War II to its current position as a global sporting mega event. Interwoven within this wider narrative arc is the disability backstories of the nine athletes that provide viewers with evocative accounts of their experience of disability. Whilst the film shows dramatic sporting footage from the 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Games, the stories of the athletes are the main feature and are captured through aesthetically powerful production logics and cinematography.

In the last decade, there has been a rapid growth in the representation of disability within the media (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick, 2017). In terms of television broadcasting, the investments made by National broadcasters in Paralympic and Para sport have helped stimulate the growth and popularity of disability media content (Brittain, 2017; Walsh, 2014). There now exists a wealth of studies that have paid attention to the shifting mediated representations of Para sport across the media economy; in broadcast and print media (see Brittain and Beacom, 2018; Corrigan et al., 2010; McGillivray et al., 2021; McPherson et al., 2016; Misener, 2012; Silva and Howe, 2012), film (Barounis, 2009; Gard and Fitzgerald, 2008) creative media (contemporary art, fashion, and Journalism) (Tamari, 2017), and on social media platforms (French and Le Clair, 2018; Toffoletti, 2018).
Many of these studies have paid particular attention to the ubiquity of certain disability narratives that structure Para sport representation and the role they play in organising and communicating disability discourses (see McGillivray et al., 2021; Silva and Howe 2012). For example, scholars have previously noted how the ‘medico-tragedy’ narrative that positions impairment as the result of an unexpected medical problem or pathology and casts it within a narrative arc or praxis centred on ‘fixing’ impairment (see Smith and Bundon, 2018), and the ‘supercrip’ narrative, centred on stories of disabled individuals who have successfully ‘overcome’ their disability through often extraordinary physical achievements (see Howe and Silva, 2017; McGillivray et al., 2021; Silva and Howe, 2012), are writ large in Para sport representation. There have also been important debates within this body of literature concerning how such narratives intersect with discourses of gender (see Barounis, 2009; Gard and Fitzgerald, 2008; Léséleuc et al., 2010; Pullen and Silk, 2020), assistive mobility technologies (Corrigan et al., 2010; Howe and Silva, 2017; McGillivray et al., 2021) and sporting nationalism (Batts and Andrews, 2011; Bruce, 2014; Misener, 2012) that make visible some disabled bodies over others (see for instance Howe and Silva, 2017; Pullen and Silk, 2020).

Yet, despite the corpus of work that has addressed the plurality of Para sport representation, limited attention has been given to the role of affect in such debates. Where affect has been central to critique, the focus has been on the role of prosthetic technology such as the carbon fibre running ‘blades’ of renowned Para athletes such as Oscar Pistorius and Aimee Mullins. Tamari’s (2017) work has offered important insights here. Drawing from the disciplines of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, design and cultural studies, Tamari (2017: 35) describes how representations of Pistorius and Mullins, with their individually designed and exhibited prosthetic limbs, ‘are perceived differently in terms of the sense of aesthetics from disabled bodies with cosmetic prostheses’ and have been influential in shaping a new cultural sensitivity toward the prosthetically enhanced disabled body – defined as a prosthetic aesthetic. According to Tamari (2017), the prosthetic aesthetic centres on the materiality of the lived body with the mechanical, technological immaterial body parts and arouses a particular somatic experience or quality of feeling that affects the cognitive and somatic responses of viewers. The prosthetic aesthetic, Tamari (2017: 29) argues, instils a ‘sense of shock and strangeness, but also a sense of curiosity, fascination and attraction’ that has influenced the cultural perception of prosthetic Para bodies.

In our own work on this topic, and drawing on Tamari’s (2017) important contribution, we have begun to explore the extent the prosthetic Para body is represented through a combination of supercrip and medico-tragedy narratives that contribute to the prevailing prosthetic aesthetic (Pullen and Silk, 2020). With scholars such as Hogan (2003), we have highlighted how the aesthetics of an image – and associated emotive responses – is always narrativised in a way that organises and gives meaning to the experience in culturally mediated ways. As mentioned above, disability narratives have been given considerable attention in Paralympic media studies – affording particular attention to the prevalence to the ‘supercrip’ narrative (Howe and Silva, 2017) – yet the role stories play in connecting the sensory, somatic and emotional (affective) dimensions of experience have been largely overlooked.

Indeed, I suggest there is scope to afford closer attention to the role of affect in Para sport stories as one part of the wider representational assemblage and the important role
affect plays in the communication of disability experience, subject formation and the associated cognitive and cultural sense making processes (Plantinga, 2018). Certainly, in the current Paralympic conjuncture, framed on increasing visibility and emerging cultural articulations of mediated disability, Rising Phoenix offers a unique if not pre-eminent space from which to add nuance to debates around the affective power of the prosthetic aesthetic and Para sport stories in popular sport media content.

**Affect, emotion and mediation**

Influenced by the works of Spinoza (2002), Deleuze (2004) and Kristeva (1980) (among many others), affect has been taken up by scholars across the social sciences and has been particularly influential in developing and extending Materialist theoretical perspectives (see Barrett, 2015; Braidotti, 2000, 2019). Whilst differing definitions of affect exist depending on scholarly fields (see for instance Blackman and Venn, 2010) there is a general consensus of affect as a circulation of relations, sensory energies, and intensities that extend across assemblages with the power to impel and direct emotions (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). As Seigworth and Gregg (2009) note, affect circulates within assemblages as ebbs, flows and states of sensation; as an always *encounter-ing* force that can be experienced as ordinary or extra, positive and negative, and in both relatedness and interruption. Whilst affect is ‘enfleshed’ (Braidotti, 2000: 159) insofar that it cannot be disassociated with the somatic dimension of lived experience and subjectivity (see Kristeva, 1980, 1986), it is also understood as situated and politicized within social interactions, narratives, cultural practices and representational and lived histories (Ahmed, 2004).

Affect has been used in specific ways to explore the power of media technologies and platforms on user interaction (Davis and Chouinard, 2016; Nagy and Neff, 2015), audience experience (Gamache, 2020), behaviours and identity (Reckwitz, 2017). However, it is the cultural role of affect associated with the work of Sara Ahmed (2004, 2008, 2010) that has been predominantly taken up by sociologists working at the intersection of cultural/media studies (see for instance Gamache, 2020; McDonald, 2020). Drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, sociology and cultural theory, Ahmed’s work highlights the way affect can be understood through the politics of emotion. Indeed, Ahmed (2004) notes how emotions do not reside in something – as is often theorised through psychological models of emotion – but, rather, are socially mediated, directional and orientated toward something. Emotions, according to Ahmed (2004), circulate and slide between signs, bodies, objects and across different levels of signification in assemblages, creating, sustaining, and mediating relations and intensities of feeling with, toward, and away from things. In this sense, Ahmed describes emotions as ‘sticky’. That is, as they circulate, they operate as a kind of glue to ‘align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments [and] mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective’ (Ahmed, 2004: 119). The intensity of alignment, or in other words, the power of emotional stickiness, is propagated on cultural histories of association that leave traces of ideas or more enduring relationships of association toward things. As Hook (2011: 111) puts it, ‘affective responses remain conditioned by a symbolic horizon, by
a (pre-reflexive) backdrop of historical values, meanings, roles and similar symbolic designations’. The stickiness that endures, however, and with Grosz (2004: 110), is that which ‘diverges and transforms itself with the passage of time’ and is reconfigured and rearticulated with the shifting political, cultural and historical conjecture.

Importantly, the stickiness of emotion goes beyond what Stuart Hall (1997, 2001) would describe as the ideological history and effect of a text. Indeed, the intensity of sticky associations become embedded in the collective and cultural memory and sensitivities of people, things and assemblages, and have the capacity to increase in affective value over time: ‘the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect’ (Ahmed, 2004: 120). Importantly, the more affective value an assemblage appears to contain, the more affective intensity or power it has in shaping the political and cultural meanings of things and collective identities.

Ahmed’s (2004, 2010) concept of affective economies has been a powerful heuristic for scholars in extending critique of representation to account for the way certain identities, bodies, objects and collective cultures take on forms of stickiness to become affective and thus politically and culturally effective in reconfiguring relations of power and identity politics (see McDonald, 2020). There exists, for instance, a corpus of work that draws on affect in mapping the way racialised (Zembylas, 2015; McDonald, 2020), queer and gendered cultures and identities are represented (Wong, 2020), as well as the limited attention to disabled Para bodies we have highlighted above (Tamari, 2017). These studies also go some way to demonstrating how affect is commodified and engineered (see also Wetherell, 2015) in mediated representation. Through the organisation and narrativisation of representational elements, mediated representation channels flows of desire, intensities of feeling and sticky associations towards particular subjects, objects and things, constructing affective encounters that mediate social formations (raced, gendered and ableist) and help shape cultural ideas.

In order to illuminate the role of affect in Para sport representation, this paper brings Ahmed’s (2004) concept of affective economies in critical dialogue with the popular Netflix documentary film, Rising Phoenix. As such, the intention is to explore the way affect flows within and is mobilised through the complex assemblage of ‘language, desire, power, bodies, social structures, subjectivity and materiality’ (Zembylas, 2015: 147) within the film that engages the viewer cognitively and emotionally. I pay particular attention to the performance of disability stories (language), Para athletes (bodies and subjectivity) and prosthetic surfaces (material) as part of the film’s cinematic assemblage that operates to elicit and direct emotional and sensorial experiences to produce forms of affective encounter-ing that contribute to making disability representation powerful and culturally meaningful for viewers.

A word on methods

There are various analytical strategies or approaches that can be used in the critique of moving images (see Lofland et al., 2000). In the analysis of Rising Phoenix, I drew upon a multimodal approach that seeks to better understand ‘how a sequence of moving images can be constructed in ways that guide its viewers to entertain certain lines of interpretation over others’ (Bateman and Schmidt, 2011: 1; see also Burn,
As such, the focus of a multimodal approach is the interplay and relations between the multiple modes of communication – semiotic, aesthetic and narrative elements, in addition to the spatial and temporal frames (e.g. camera angles, positioning, filmic sequence) – that contribute to the performance of the text as an assemblage of thematic meaning, representational scripts and affective renderings.

Having watched the film a number of times, each time with greater analytical consideration and note taking, I identified specific segments for deeper analysis that I felt were particularly important ‘moments’ in the film’s performative capacity. Taking each segment individually in the first instance, I used the following questions to help guide my analysis: How does the formation of the semiotic, narrative and spatial–temporal configuration or framing of events, things, and people produce particular representational scripts? What kind of non-representational effects (senses, emotions, qualities) or ‘haptic visuality’ (Marks, 2000) are elicited and regulated through this assemblage, and how? How does this operate to promulgate certain embodiments of disability, shape dominant cultural perceptions of disability, and align identities with (disability) communities? Following this, I considered the lines of analytical connection (or themes) between the segments and how these performed within the wider context and dominant narrative and representational structure of the film.

My analysis was informed by Ahmed’s (2004) work, previous Paralympic literature, and discussions with ‘critical friends’ who had watched the film. Indeed, it was these discussions with colleagues and friends (including a number of Para athletes) that sowed the initial idea for this paper and, through ongoing dialogue, contributed to the refinement of the three key themes I turn to below.

**Vulnerable encounter-ing**

Rising Phoenix narrates the development of the Paralympic movement with a particular focus on the success of the London 2012 and 2016 Paralympics and the social impact of the movement (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7Bek4jv0s). Interwoven within this wider narrative arc of progress is the personal and evocative accounts of impairment told through the bodies of several high-profile Para athletes such as Australian Para swimmer Ellie Cole, who has won over four Paralympic gold medals, and British Para track star Jonny Peacock known for his success in the 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Games.

The majority of stories featured in Rising Phoenix centre on the athletes’ experiences of physical and very visible forms of disablement. They are stories of limb amputation sustained via congenital disorders, chronic and rare forms of illnesses (e.g. cancer and meningitis), and physical injury sustained though military conflict. For instance, the Australian swimmer Ellie Cole tells of being ‘born a healthy child’ but was unexpectedly diagnosed with a rare form of cancer at a young age. Likewise Italian Paralympic Fencer, Bebe Vio, was diagnosed with Meningitis at a similarly young age emphasising that there was ‘no reason, no real answer’ to her impairment. In an almost identical plotline, both US basketball play Ryley Batt and US archer Matt Stutzman were both born with a congenital impairment that evaded any prior medical diagnosis or understanding. As Stutzman claims, ‘the doctors said there was no medical reason why I was born

Pullen 851

2014).
without any arms’, and for Batt, ‘nothing showed up, no disability showed up on the ultrasound, so when I entered the world, it was a huge shock for my family, I was missing legs and missing a few fingers’.

In the telling of the personal as part of the public, Rising Phoenix is not overly distinct from other Paralympic media in its narrative map and selective storying of disablement (see McGillivray et al., 2021). Further still, the stories are clearly propagated by a medico-tragedy narrative of disability that positions impairment as an unexpected and socially problematic medical abnormality (Smith and Bundon, 2018). However, with Frank (2010), stories are more complex than just semiotic forms of communication. Whilst stories are clearly critical to organising and communicating experience (see Bal and Van Boheemen, 2009; Rosiek and Snyder 2020; Smith and Sparkes 2008), they also operate as ‘material-semiotic companions’ insofar that they are ‘made up of signs – their semiotic being – and they are material … inciting love affairs and wars [and] in their capacity to take material forms’ (Frank, 2010: 43). In other words, alongside the communication of knowledge, stories are critical to projecting, organising, directing and orientating emotions and feelings toward forms, objects, things and bodies within assemblages and, in so doing, have material effects (see Haraway, 1991).

The material-semiotic capacity of stories is of critical importance here. Indeed, it enables us to better understand the role of the disability stories – or more specifically these particular disability stories – in creating a form of affective encounter-ing on and through audiences. For example, although the athletes’ stories differ slightly in their biographical accounts of disability, they remain similar in the collective focus on the sudden existential nature of disablement at a young age, described by one athlete as ‘experiencing tragedy’ and ‘[living] through something’. In doing so, they capture what Garland-Thomson (2017: 56) poignantly describes as ‘the truth of [the] body’s vulnerability to the randomness of fate’ whilst at the same time moving audiences to recognise and reflect upon ‘the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability’. Indeed, it is the collective sense of a shared vulnerability invoked through the medico-tragedy narrative structure that operates to effectively orientate and direct the viewers’ emotional responses toward disability in such a way that produces a kind of affective encounter-ing.

Clearly it is an affective encounter-ing centred on both relatedness and interruption; an emotionally charged encounter perhaps best described as ‘empathetic interruption’. Indeed, on the one hand, the stories provoke a sense of affective empathy from the viewer through the ‘enfleshed’ cognitive and culturally conditioned response that is experienced when one is faced with stories concerning the bodily suffering of others (Cassels et al., 2010; see also Shildrick, 2000, 2009), and on the other hand, a sense of interruption or disjuncture aroused through the anxieties experienced when one becomes immediately conscious of the fragility of embodiment, what Turner (2006) has described as ontological contingency, and Frank (2010) as the postmodern condition of embodied paranoia. Importantly, in such encounter emotions are neither ‘contained by an object … [or] in the spatial or temporal sense of the here and now’ (Ahmed, 2004: 124–125) but circulate within relations between self and other – between the ‘subject of disability’ and the ‘subject of prognosis’ (Puar, 2009) – as audiences who perceive themselves as able-bodied are orientated toward imagining disability and the
uncomfortable truth of the fundamental contingency that underpins the able-bodied life narrative (see also Garland-Thomson, 2017).

To a large extent encounters of empathetic interruption resonate with what Megan Boler (1997) has described as ‘passive empathy’ – a cognitive and sensorial experience that opens up tentative and fleeting connections and identification with others predicated on the very distinction between self and other, or as Boler (1997: 255) puts it, ‘that could be me but I am not you’. The role of passive empathy in encounters of empathetic interruption enables audiences to encounter the other through a sense of affective dissonance or apathy (Hemmings, 2013), somewhat resonating with Shildrick’s claim (2000: 216) that ‘… the encounter with the others who define our own boundaries of normality must inevitably disturb, for they are both irreducibly strange and disconcertingly familiar. They enable us to recognise ourselves; they are our own abject’.

Indeed, the stories of disability in Rising Phoenix are affectively powerful in engaging audiences emotionally and creating fleeting moments of affective identification with disability. However, considering the above, it can be argued that the storied features throughout Rising Phoenix, albeit immediately powerful for the viewer, fail to manufacture affect in such a way that can have positive material effects through invoking alternative ways of perceiving the ‘other’ beyond fleeting moments of recognition (Christie and Bloustien, 2010). In so doing then, the stories constructed for the viewer in Rising Phoenix propagated by encounters of emphatic interruption continue to sustain rather than subvert the normative boundaries of difference, which has to date been the central critique levelled at much of the seemingly ‘progressive’ Para sport media representations (see Howe and Silva, 2017; McGillivray et al., 2021).

**Affective ‘others’**

Alongside stories of dramatic and unexpected disablement is the very physical and highly visible nature of impairment. The Para athletes that feature in Rising Phoenix have physical impairments – such as amputated and/or missing limbs – which are made visible for audiences through carefully choreographed moments throughout the film. The film does indeed do well to present the viewer with images of disability that are aesthetically and visually powerful, clearly benefiting from cinematic curation and high-value production practices. One only has to watch the trailer to get a sense of the powerful images of athletes such as Ellie Cole and Jean Jean-Baptiste Alaize – both of whom feature heavily in the film’s marketing material (see www.paralympic.org/news/paralympic-film-rising-phoenix-premieres-globally-netflix) – and the centrality of physical disability.

It appears that the film is curated to engineer an intimacy in the viewers’ proximity to disability that is cinematically powerful and constructs a ‘closeness’ to disability for the audience that is highly visceral. However, as Barry (1997: 134) claimed, ‘the language of camera angles is … highly manipulative emotionally’ and the power of this manufactured ‘closeness’ lies not only in directing the audiences gaze toward disability but also their sensory engagement with the impaired body. A poignant example of this is the feature on French Para long jumper Jean-Baptiste Alaize. The feature captures him executing a Long Jump with his powerful and sweaty muscular body accentuated for the viewer through a low camera angle and slow-motion effects that suspend his muscular body mid-
flight. It is a visual framing that captures his powerful muscular body momentarily but just long enough to create what MacDougall (2006: 22) describes as a form of voyeurism that brings ‘a quasi-tactility’ to the assemblage ‘absent in ordinary human relations’.

It is also a feature that is emblematic of how the disability stories told through Rising Phoenix materialise and are consummated through a shared yet specific physically disabled embodiment – one that approximates varying degrees of normativity through a highly functional and heteronormative aesthetic corporeality. Indeed, whilst impairment is visible the athletes’ physical athleticism is showcased throughout the film via Paralympic footage and highly choreographic features that accentuate their sporting physicality. In this sense, stories materialise through what Mitchell and Snyder (2015) have termed as the ‘able-disabled’ – disabled bodies that can, and do, approximate normative ableist standards in both physical functioning and aesthetics.

Whilst this further engenders the viewers’ experience of a ‘closeness’ to disability (at least for many able-bodied audiences) through invoking a sense of body relatedness and familiarity, it also operates to construct relations of resemblance between the featured athletes that ultimately ‘bind subjects together’ and invests them with a collective affective value (Ahmed, 2004). In doing so, the viewers sense of, and emotional response to, the ‘other’ becomes detached from any individual Para body within the film and associated with, or rather sticks to, the very notion of the ‘able-disabled’ body. This process – what Ahmed (2004) describes as the collective surfacing of bodies – indicates the way cultural representation can mediate affect in such a way that it attaches, detaches and circulates between individually similar bodies to form culturally collective ideas and perceptions of identity groups.

Clearly the collective surfacing of disabled bodies is operational to the film’s thematic performance; it helps guide viewers toward a dominant interpretation and understanding of the sporting disabled body. However, as with all mediated televisual forms, Rising Phoenix holds pedagogical value beyond the film itself. Indeed, it is yet another cultural vehicle that cultivates and reproduces popular perceptions and sensibilities around the notion of disability that distinguish the boundaries of acceptable disabled subjectivities as affective others and the disabled ‘other others’ who remain excluded from the mediated circuits of affective culture or as Ahmed (2004: 119) puts it, aligning ‘individuals with communities … through relationships of difference’.

Thinking with affect then, it is possible to suggest that the ubiquity of the ‘supercrip’ (Silva and Howe, 2012) – a narrative heavily associated with popular media representations of disability – is partly a result of the collective surfacing of able-disabled bodies. Certainly, the cultural circulation and popularity of the supercrip narrative is perhaps in part a result of its affective value as an assemblage of inspirational stories and collectively affective able-disabled subjectivities. As Ahmed (2004) reminds us, the more a narrative circulates, the more affective it becomes and, importantly in this case, the more effective it is in doing important cultural work in the normalisation of some disabilities over others (see also Pullen and Silk, 2020).

**Prosthetic stickiness**

In holding together a discussion of affective others (the able-disabled and/or supercrips) in the above passage it would be remiss not to recognise the role of technology, or more
specifically carbon fibre prosthetic surfaces, which are a salient feature within the films carefully choreographed representation and a material surface that does important work alongside bodies and stories in mobilising affective encounters for audiences.

For the majority of the Para athletes that feature in Rising Phoenix, carbon fibre technology – through carbon fibre prosthesis and/or racing wheelchairs – form part of their sporting embodiment. Indeed, in the opening sequence of the film, the viewer is introduced to the athletes through a series of images that draw the viewer’s attention toward their prosthetic limbs and/or racing wheelchairs through various cinematic techniques. Perhaps the most fitting example in this sequence is the image of Ellie Cole who is presented through a full camera shot that captures her tall powerful figure before narrowing in to isolate her prosthetic limb within the central frame – the carbon immaterial surface accentuated by the effect of a dark backdrop and rainfall that forcefully bounces off the surface of her prosthesis. This image is subsequently followed by a sequence of images that includes athletes such as Ntando Mahlangu, Ryley Batt and Tatyana McFadden to a similar effect.

Previous studies have argued that the visibility of prosthetically enhanced Para athletes in Paralympic media is propagated by a culture of ableism and the technologisation or ‘cyborgification’ of bodies in neoliberal economies devoted to ‘physical normalisation [and] … the artificial alteration of both function and appearance’ (Hughes, 2000: 561; see also Howe and Silva, 2017). These important biopolitical debates have scholarly weight, however, I argue that the visibility of prosthesis in Rising Phoenix is also deeply related to prosthetics as a material interface that mobilises a certain cognitive and affective response in audiences.

Indeed, with Tamari (2017), in the current moment, there is a somewhat ‘prosthetic aesthetic’ at work within popular cultural representations of disability. Whilst prosthetics were previously designed to corporeally appropriate the lost limb through flesh-toned silicone surfaces, contemporary prostheses are increasing designed around a kind of human–machine aesthetic that makes explicitly visible the prosthetics material non-organic nature. The prosthetic aesthetic has been linked to concomitant shifts in identity politics as a site of expression and consumption (Hall and Orzada, 2013), however, Tamari (2017) notes how its aesthetic performs on a more cognitive and affective level. Indeed, according to Tamari (2017), the embodiment of the mechanical carbon fibre surface with the physical lived body of the athletes invokes the Freudian (2003 [1919]) concept of the ‘uncanny’ in the viewer whereby the material and immaterial in-betweenness generates ‘two contradictory sensitivities: attractiveness/’coolness’, which can derive from the image of a perfect human–machine synthetic body, and abjection/the uncanny, which can be evoked by the actual materiality of the lived body with lifeless body parts’ (Tamari, 2017: 29). In so doing, the experience of the uncanny has ‘reorientated’ – to borrow Ahmed’s (2010) term here – our sensory responses and perceptions toward the prosthetic that have invested it with an affective energy or force. In this sense, and best put by Hobgood (2016: 1292), the prosthetic surface has become mattering insofar as it ‘cultivates transformative interchanges between people and even other things’.

For some scholars, the prosthetic aesthetic has had a queering effect (see Shildrick, 2000, 2009) aligning select prosthetically enhanced disabled bodies with alternative
gendered disabled discourses and sexual subjectivities (see Caso, 2017). There is certain evidence of this throughout Rising Phoenix and especially in the case of the male Para body and performance of masculinity. For instance, the main feature of double leg amputee, Jean-Baptise Alaize, is characterised by camera angles that capture very visceral images of his naked and muscular torso juxtaposed against his prosthetic ‘blades’. This particular segment emphasises his material/immaterial embodiment and at the same time directs the audiences gaze to ‘explore, know and consume’ (Ahmed, 2013: 73) his prosthetic body within sets of productive gendered and sexual relations. Perhaps a more obvious example is the feature on Para sprinter, Johnny Peacock. The film features footage of Johnny Peacock appearing on a Satirical TV chat show following his success in the London 2012 Paralympic Games. On the topic of Peacock’s experience of living in the Paralympic Village during the Games the male host asks Peacock, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, ‘did you get your blade over much?’ In this instance, we witness how the prosthetic surface becomes ‘a third-party mediator’ (Hickey-Moody, 2015: 139) in the jocular interaction between the two men that is deeply coded with masculine heteronormative ideologies centred on male virality, sexual performance and control.

Going a step further here, I suggest the prosthetic aesthetic and its queering effect has intensified a specific form of prosthetic ‘stickiness’; a stickiness propagated by heteronormative alignments. While arguably prosthetic technology has long been present in the collective cultural consciousness, its stickiness has transformed and intensified with the development of prosthetic engineering and the increasing association of prosthetics with affective others, specifically, the physically fit and heteronormatively attractive Para athlete bodies such as Johnny Peacock and Jean-Baptise Alaize. From its historical more literal use as a locus of bodily repair – as it was in the early days of the Paralympic Movement – to its contemporary performative role as an affective locus of bodily sense (Deleuze, 2004) and desire (see also Hickey-Moody, 2015), the changing affectivity of the prosthetic is another example of how affect involves both subjects and objects in its circulation. Arguably then, the stickiness of the prosthetic has enabled it to operate as a key nodal point in a (gendered) economy of disability affects, particularly in conjunction with the affective ‘other’ and their position within supercrip narratives. For viewers of Rising Phoenix, the prosthetic surface operates as yet another contact point across the cinematic assemblage for affective encounter-ing on audiences.

Reflections

In this paper, I have offered a critical reading of the Para sport documentary film, Rising Phoenix, through the lens of affect theory, affording particular attention to Sara Ahmed’s (2004, 2010) concept of affective economies. In doing so, I have attempted to explicate how affect circulates within and is mobilised through an assemblage of disability stories, Para sport bodies and prosthetic technology that provide sensorial and emotional contact points for affective encountering that contribute to making disability representation pedagogically productive, powerful and culturally meaningful. The intent has been to build on Paralympic/Para sport media scholarship by extending cultural critique beyond dominant discursive approaches to consider the role of the aesthetic, cognitive and emotional dimensions of mediated experience (Kuntsman, 2012). For media/cultural scholars
interested in the power of sports media (broadcasting, documentaries, films, advertising) – especially at the intersection of marginalised bodies (gender, disability, and race) – this paper seeks to offer an epistemological opening to more adequately theorise the way certain affect(s) operate in mediated representation that invest it with political force in actualising cultural ideas, normalising collective bodies and constructing social imaginings.

I appreciate this paper offers the first attempt to hold together a discussion of affect in Para sport representation and as such, would certainly call for further work that can aid in empirical and conceptual development. There is of course much more to unpack around the disability representations in Rising Phoenix, and Para sport more broadly, however, within the scope of my initial and tentative contribution here I have focused on three key ideas.

Firstly, disability stories structured on a particular form of disablement mediate viewers’ emotions around bodily vulnerability – ‘between the psychic and the social’ (Ahmed, 2004: 119) – to invoke affective encounter-ing; what I have termed as encounters of empathetic interruption. I suggest such encounters are affective because they destabilise viewers’ sense of body-self ontological security and allow for emotions to circulate between relations of self-other, resonating with Ahmed’s (2004) claim that emotions are not wholly contained in something as an objective other but rather are affective in their very circulation between ideas and things within assemblages. Disability stories then are not simply modes of communication in mediated representation, but operate as powerful ‘affect generators’ (Nagy and Neff, 2015) or as material entities that carry and orientate emotion across diverse temporalities (see Frank, 2010). I thus argue that the selective stories told in Rising Phoenix are critical to the affective intensity of the film and thereby suggest we need to be greater attuned to the way affect is mobilised and circulates in and through disability narratives (such as the supercrip and medico-tragedy narratives) in our continued critique of Para sport coverage.

Secondly, and relatedly, I point to the way stories materialise through specific disabled embodiments in Rising Phoenix and in so doing ‘stick’ such bodies together, investing them with affective value that mediates the relationship ‘between the individual and the collective’ (Ahmed, 2004: 119) and shape the boundaries of disabled normativity. I argue that the cultural notion of the ‘supercrip’ in Para sport coverage has emerged through this collective and affective surfacing of specific disabled bodies. In future, when considering rearticulations of the supercrip in media representation, especially at the intersection of other identities (e.g. gender, race, sexuality etc.), attention should be afforded to the way affect operates to facilitate the inclusion of disabled ‘other others’ and, importantly, what ‘other others’ are included. Lastly, and with other authors (Hickey-Moody, 2015; Tamari, 2017), I suggest that contemporary prosthetic technology used by Para athletes – a central feature of Rising Phoenix cinematography – acts as a ‘sticky’ surface arousing various sensory and emotional responses in viewers and operates as a nodal point in the film’s economy of disability affects.

More broadly, the insights offered here demonstrate the importance of platforms such as Netflix in the representation of disability. Designed to afford high degrees of affective and cognitive involvement for audiences (Pilipets, 2019), platforms such as Netflix have become increasingly powerful in the political mattering of representation. Indeed, in
recent years Netflix, among other digital streaming services, have commissioned content that intends to represent various marginalised identities/groups through sports documentary and film. As consumption patterns change, sport media scholars must remain attuned to the way affect is manufactured through the curation of sport content delivered via OTT services and the impact this has on the cultural representation and politics of marginalised groups.

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**Notes**

1. The Paralympic Games, or Paralympics for short, refers to a quadrennial international sporting event for athletes with a range of impairments that parallel the Olympics. Para sport is an umbrella term used to describe disability sport events that are governed by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) (see https://www.paralympic.org/ipc/who-we-are).
2. See https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/rising-phoenix-review/5152601.article
3. Following Rizzo (2012), I use the term cinematic assemblage to refer to the organisational and interconnecting qualities of film (such as frames, shots, sequences and narratives) that extend outwards to connect with other assemblages and viewers.
4. Mattering has been used in Materialist literature to describe the ongoing generative capacities of assemblages (see Pitts-Taylor (2016)). Used in this context, it describes the way representation comes to be understood as actively transforming and not simply a site of ideological communication.
5. For many scholars the concept of affect extends beyond emotion (see for instance Massumi, 2015). However, Ahmed (2004; 2010) explains how emotion is entangled with culture and affect in complex ways and the division between the two only serves to reify false distinctions between the cognitive, somatic and social that the concept of affect intends to circumvent (see Schmitz (2014) interview with Ahmed).

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