

Chapter 7

A Run for your [Techno]Self

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces, using a race as an allegory, three competing conceptions of man, or three ideals, in its relationship to technology, namely a non-technological conception of man, a paradigmatic human cyborg, and the model of a man free from organic ties, typified by the android. These theories correspond not only to current trends in the philosophy of technology, but also to the possible paths our epochal technological geist can take at this juncture. The ideal of non-technological purity informs all modern versions of luddism. The hybrid model supports an attitude less concerned about technology's negative effects and more open to a more or less inevitable meshing of man and machine. Finally, the android is taken to be the end-goal of much of the trans-humanist or post-humanist movement, supporting an attitude of an open and total embrace of anything technological. These ideas of the human-machine relationship are paradigmatically competing in a way that will determine our future sense of identity. The chapter neither indicates nor suggests the winner in this paradigmatic race, but proposes a list of qualities that this winner will have to possess.

INTRODUCTION

On July 13, 2007, Oscar Pistorius came in second in the 400 meter race at the Golden Gala of Rome. We, all of us, *ran the risk* of him winning.

Pistorius is known in Anglo-Saxon countries as “blade-runner.” He is a blade-runner because his legs are not made of flesh and bone, but of two carbon fiber Cheetah Flex-Foot limbs. On that day, he was running against normal athletes, whose legs were given to them by their mothers, not by

an Icelandic bio-engineering firm. For Pistorius, running is no longer just a job or a passion, but has become a personal challenge. However, the nature of that challenge forces one to rethink the rules of the game, and, therefore, the game itself. In fact, Pistorius did well to not stop at the finish line of that race, but to continue it, challenging the established rules of the IAAF (International Association of Athletics Federations) to try and qualify for the Olympic Games (not for the Paralympic ones).

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On that evening in Rome, when Pistorius demonstrated on the track that it was not an unobtainable dream, a debate began which centered, above all, on the possible, unfair advantage, which Pistorius might have with his prostheses. It is not fair, it has been argued, that Pistorius could run on legs which do not feel the pain of lactic acid build-up which normal legs experience. Those legs, it has been quibbled, are longer than necessary. In addition, it has been suggested, the Cheetah legs function like a spring which unnaturally lengthens his step. Pistorius was put under observation, was monitored, while running, with high-definition cameras, and made the object of highly scientific studies, and the debate, although diminished in volume, still continues. In reality, the IAAF simply did not have any rule that could be applied to this case, and it is this lack which suggests that Pistorius' game is much bigger than it seems. In this *other* game, the IAAF, science, and technology, have very little to say.

The problem is that Pistorius' case cannot be solved with an *ad hoc* rule. For the first time, an organic deficiency has become an occasion, a condition for an advantage (at least, some suspect that to be so). The lack of an archaic mythology which represents this event is a sign of its novelty for the consciousness of the human race. Dedalus, for example, did not cut off his arms to make his body more aerodynamic. In fact, the only expression of this condition we can find is in science fiction, or in the comic book representation of the superhero. Just imagine, and his second place in Rome gives us a very vivid picture, what would happen if he were allowed to participate in the Olympic games and he won. I can imagine the unleashing of a worldwide debate which would require the intervention of experts from all fields of human knowledge, and everyone, from sociologist to physician, from physicist to theologian, would give his or her opinion in the attempt to understand what is happening.

This multi-field debate would come about because, with Pistorius' legs, it is the same conception of Man that is being put back in the race. The risk that we all run is that, finding the dominant idea challenged, it would have to change to meet the new conditions. On this day, I find the field leveled by a multitude of theoretical groundwork, the race scheduled and the public excited with expectations, but not everything is clear and distinct. The very idea of what is Man, after all, cannot be studied with films and experiments—we need a philosophical investigation.

This investigation is important because we are dealing with one of those founding categories of thought and judgment, whose historical metamorphoses always have practical consequences. Just think of the many examples offered by the concept of a rational humanity able to control and organize a chaotic nature. If one thinks that Man is a rational being, he will judge the man he meets on the street based on the level of rationality he shows in an eventual exchange of ideas. If one assumes that Man is irrational, he will tend to hold back in any invitation of critical exchange. He may say hello and continue on his way. To decide, even if only obscurely, what is Man, influences our relationship with the man we meet on the street. In this sense, the idea of Man works a little like the rules of a game, and we all know that changing the rules could end up destroying the game. In fact, changing the rules has happened more than once in our history, often without our knowledge, and sometimes has been a disaster—especially when the change has been too quick or too radical. This same notion of a Rational Man, Horkheimer and Adorno (2007) suggest, has bred its unhappy progeny, such as the very rational and efficient ingenuity of Nazi minds dedicated to the extermination of millions of people. If the rules are changing, it would be wise to give this change our utmost attention.

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