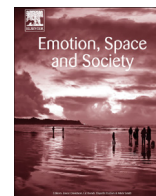




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## Assembling Oscar, assembling South Africa, assembling affects

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## ABSTRACT

The cover feature of *Time*, “Oscar Pistorius and South Africa’s Culture of Violence” (Perry 2013), assembles the shooting body of Oscar Pistorius and the dead body of Reeva Steenkamp in and as the body of post-apartheid South Africa. In analyzing this cover feature, mobilizing Deleuzian concepts, we consider how the bodily presence or absence of Oscars’ prostheses at the time of the shooting – critical to the juridical establishment of his vulnerability and fear, and hence his innocence or guilt – is figured in relation to the history of race relations through which the author, Alex Perry, builds the moral compass that points toward South Africa’s future. We also speculate about the relations through which the extra-textual material body of the reader is co-implicated in the event that is being assembled in this text. This is not to give a stable or final account of the text, the shooting, or the reader, but rather to contemplate the ways in which textual assemblages might become assembled for, by, in and as the collective body of a nation state or a reader.

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## 1. The event of the shooting of Reeva by Oscar

Oscar Pistorius is an elite athlete who ran in both the Paralympics and the Olympics in 2012, becoming the first amputee to compete in the Olympics. He had already won gold in the Athens Paralympics in 2004, and is known throughout the world as the Blade Runner. Reeva Steenkamp, his girlfriend, had described herself on Twitter as “SA Model, Cover Girl, Tropika Island of Treasure Celeb Contestant, Law Graduate, Child of God” (Perry, 2013: 32). Oscar and Reeva had begun dating in November 2012, after a long and determined pursuit on Oscar’s part. Then, in the early hours of 14th February, Valentine’s Day, 2013, in Cape Town, Oscar Pistorius fired his gun through the closed toilet door and shot Reeva Steenkamp dead. Reeva was struck in the elbow, hip and head. The shots were aimed, Oscar said, at the intruder who he feared was behind the toilet door; while Reeva, he believed, was asleep in their bed.

What will be mobilised in the court hearings is the belief that the event that took place in the past has a facticity that can be restored in the present. A Deleuzian analysis in contrast would argue that the past does not exist independent of the present. This

paper is an exploration of the constitution of the event of the shooting in Deleuzian terms. Deleuze argues that the past does not constitute itself “after having been present, it coexists with itself as present” (Deleuze 1992: 39). What happened is always yet to come. An event, then, is a *movement in thought and action* through which the world changes and continues to change. It is an assemblage of “semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows” that are simultaneously at work affecting each other, territorializing and de- and re-territorializing each other (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 25). An event is rhizomatic in nature, ceaselessly establishing “connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relevant to the arts, sciences and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural and cognitive ...” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 8). In emphasising principles of connection and heterogeneity, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other. Further, given that not every element in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature, semiotic chains form connections among very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, social, economic, etc.), and these connections not only bring into play different regimes of signs, but also things of differing status (semiotic, material, human, non-human etc.). In what follows we make visible the rhizomatic nature of the event of the shooting, focussing in particular on the semiotic chain produced in *Time* magazine and in Perry’s feature article.

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The semiotic chain produced in the law court will produce the event that was, fixing it in the past, deciding whether Oscar knowingly murdered his girlfriend or was in fear of his life from an imagined intruder—the court will find that he either knew it was Reeva behind the door or he did not. The legal finding will be understood by most as the truth of the matter, telling us whether he did or did not know it was Reeva behind the door. But the truth of the matter (in the past), we suggest, will be entangled in emergent “interpenetrating multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 41). Those multiplicities of purported facts, assumptions, speculations and beliefs will constitute *an event that is yet to come*. The *Time* article by Alex Perry is part of that event-yet-to-come.

The multiple forces at play in that event-yet-to-come will include not just Oscar Pistorius and the deceased Reeva Steenkamp. The law itself will be a powerful force, defining, for example, what the question is that needs to be answered (cf. Davies, 2012; Davies and Speedy, 2012). Cape Town itself will be actively involved—a city deemed to be so dangerous that Pistorius could quite rightly fear for his life at the hands of an intruder and/or, as Perry suggests, a city dependent for its own survival on the belief in Pistorius as innocent hero. Oscar’s missing legs, both biological and prosthetic, will also be agentic forces in the event-as-it-unfolds. If his missing biological legs (which were cut off at the age of 11 months) are judged to have exacerbated his fear, this too could add to the possibility that Oscar will be found to be innocent of knowingly killing his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp.

Media reports following the shooting placed considerable weight on whether or not Oscar was wearing his prosthetic legs at the time of the shooting. If he was on his stumps, as he claims he was, he could be found to be more than usually fearful for his and Reeva’s safety. Common definitions of fear as “primal—a kind of animal instinct for survival” (Frost, 2010: 158) are at work in such a reading. Forensic testing of the bullet holes in the door will determine the angle of the shots and so establish whether Oscar was on his stumps (or not) when he shot Reeva. The angle of these bullet holes is believed to have the power to determine Oscar’s character: as disabled man on his stumps or not, and as truth-teller or not. In August 2013, six months after the shooting, accounts of the forensic report, leaked to the defence team, suggested that Oscar was indeed on his stumps. If the door no longer has the power to establish whether Oscar Pistorius is a liar, then the question of whether he knew it was Reeva behind that door becomes once again indeterminate.

A further active agent in the event of the shooting that is yet to come will be the enclave in which the shooting took place. Will it be decided that such high level security makes you more fearful or less? And public opinion in South Africa will not be outside this event-as-it-unfolds. Will the public need Oscar Pistorius to remain a symbol of South Africa’s post-apartheid hope as Perry says they currently do?

A Deleuzian analysis is interested in how these multiple interpenetrating agents will affect the event-that-is-yet-to-come: “the event [that] is ... at once public and private, potential and real, participating in the becoming of another event and the subject of its own becoming” (Deleuze, 1992: 78). Every event is an instant of production in a continual flow of changes, and becomes different in the course of its production (and re/production), especially in its production through and as language. Deleuze (1992) emphasises that events are expressed by means of language, and that language is a mode of action, a way of doing things with words. Language functions not to communicate neutral information, but to enforce a social order by categorizing and ordering the world. What the event of the shooting of Reeva Steenkamp will be is a synthesis of past and future: not located in a single time, or “in the same time”

(Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 289). Rather it will be located in the indefinite time of the event, “the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too-early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 289).

## 2. The event-that-is-yet-to-come as assemblage, affect and becoming

In what follows we establish some of the connections between the multiplicities through which the event will be simultaneously brought into being, stabilised, dissolved, re-assembled, and “carried away” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 98). The concept of an assemblage is useful for keeping in play the combination or coordination of discrete parts that produce multiple possible effects. Assemblages are not simply objects or things, but qualities, speeds, flows and lines of force. Their character is defined not by what they are, but by what they can do, or become. And they are always in the process of becoming, not through an intention to arrive at a pre-determined end-point, but through multiple encounters with emergent multiplicities.

Bodies caught up in any event simultaneously continue to become other while continuing to be what they are (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004). These bodies, both human and not, undergo modifications or changes when they act upon, or are acted upon by other bodies in the assemblage. The modifications or changes that arise from relations between bodies, and the changes or becomings they instantiate, are referred to by Deleuze and Guattari as affects: “affect is not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic; it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 265). Affects are becomings emergent from relations between bodies, both human and not, and from the operation of movement and time on bodies. In Perry’s account of the shooting of Reeva, for example, when Oscar’s prostheses are on his body he is assembled as a strong and powerful sportsman who has heroically overcome his disability; and when his prostheses are not on his body he is re/assembled as fearful and vulnerable, needing to shoot to protect himself and his girlfriend precisely *because* of his disability.

Affects, as becomings, are the relations that compose, decompose, or modify an individual, and these relations have corresponding intensities that affect it, augment it, or diminish its power to act (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 256). These affective relations are emergent from engagements with the power of other bodies. Power is understood here as relational, and relations between powers or forces have the capacity for ‘affection’; that is, the cumulative forces, powers and expressions of change (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004). In Perry’s article for *Time*, for example, Oscar’s body becomes the body of South Africa, carrying both its hope and its potential dissolution in the future. Oscar’s security apartment carries South Africa’s past in itself and becomes a *laager*, a fortified, protective enclosure; Reeva becomes a black male intruder and a black male intruder becomes Reeva’s dead body, holding within itself all that is wrong with South Africa—the failure of reconciliation and the move to post-apartheid.

## 3. The assemblage in *Time*

So how might we say that Perry’s article in *Time*, along with the front and inside cover words and images, works on and in the assemblage of this event of the shooting of Reeva Steenkamp? We approach this text as a case to work with: “the starting point required by Deleuze’s method is always a concrete case ... [Y]ou

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