

## Welcome to the *Cyborg Circus Show*: Imagining Disability Futures beyond Normative Bodies A Manifesto

Shay Erlich

What is the *Cyborg Circus Show*? Is it a concept, a show, a practice orientation? Could it be all of the above, and what might it look like in each of these forms? The *Cyborg Circus Show* is an exercise in juxtapositions and possibilities peeking through the horizon. What are its genealogies? How do we imagine its futures? How can the *Cyborg Circus Show* provide new spaces to affirm the lived experience of disabilities in the circus arts?

The cyborg and the circus, each in their own way, have come to represent an unshackling of the human form from various types of bodily limitations. As such, to live as either a cyborg or a circus performer means that these bodies may have experiences that have not been previously understood, or even understood to be possible. In other words, both the cyborg and the circus share elements of the posthuman, where the limits of humanity and the human form are pushed to nearly the point of breaking and being perceived as another figure entirely (Braidotti 2013).

The figure of the cyborg (Haraway 1991), for example, can be understood to be the mediation of the human form via technology. From this perspective, a cyborg is a being that is neither fully biologically human nor completely technological. Whether such mediation is considered an elevation or a degradation of the human form often depends on one's view of technologies and of the seemingly irreversible incorporation of technology into every aspect of our being. In today's world, humans with disabilities are often at the forefront of cyborg technology. Wearable and implanted technologies are used to alleviate human suffering. They can replace bodily functions lost to disability, either through congenital conditions or simply as a result of the degradation of bodily functions over time. As such, these technologies evidence a posthuman potential.

Not entirely dissimilar from the figure of the cyborg, circus performances can also represent a conscious uncoupling from the apparent limitation of human biological possibility. Generally speaking, this uncoupling in circus does not result from technological amplification of the body's potentials alone. Instead, circus reveals the virtuosic exertion of the body against forces of gravity or the limitations of standard ranges of motion or strength, amplified through circus technologies such as aerial apparatuses. In the circus, traditionally-abled and disabled performers do the seemingly impossible by exhibiting superhuman feats of strength and endurance: the results of an ever-increasing effort to subjugate their bodies in order to overcome the limitations of the human form. Circus performers can be argued to demonstrate a posthuman—or even “über-human” (Carter 2014)—sensitivity through their pursuit of corporeal excess.

How could we harness the posthuman resonance between the cyborg and the circus to develop deeper understandings of the un-evoked potential in both circus and disabled futures? While sharing a common goal of escaping the limitations of the human form, the cyborg and the circus appear to

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**Shay Erlich** is a hard of hearing, multiply disabled, and genderqueer child and youth care practitioner and circus artist. Shay holds a master's degree in child and youth care from Ryerson University, and their recent thesis project explored how social circus can be understood as child and youth care practice.

accomplish this goal in diametrically opposite ways. One embraces the role of technology to supplant human experience, while the other demonstrates the absolute limits of what is possible without it. Is there a form of creative expression that can combine the posthuman element of these divergent realities?

I propose that what we can call the *Cyborg Circus Show* is a space of such convergence.

I entered the world of circus as a cyborg twice over, relying on technology to supplant the human functions of hearing and insulin production. Mine is a chronically ill, hard of hearing body, requiring the use of technology not only for being able to function in an audio-centric society but in fact for being able to survive. Prior to the discovery of insulin in 1922—and the evolution of technologies to extract, produce, and supplant insulin within a human body—diabetes was a death sentence, which could be delayed only through the utilization of starvation diets (Quianzon and Cheikh 2012). Today, many diabetics, myself included, use an insulin pump, a small battery-powered device about the size and shape of a pager, to continuously deliver the insulin required for survival through a small plastic cannula inserted into our fatty tissue and affixed to the skin. These technologies can be seen as both amplifying the human potential of my body and also recognizing the limitations present within it. While these technologies allow me to mediate the impact of my body's inability to perform metabolic and sensory tasks, they have not yet reached the point where they are capable of performing the tasks with the same efficiency as a typically functioning body. In short, while becoming a cyborg has enabled my survival, I have not regained the full set of normative human abilities via my use of technology.

What does it mean then to enter the world of circus—a world whose core tenet is to escape the limitations of the body—as a cyborg whose body is already simultaneously amplified and limited? Within the noncircus world, my experience of my body is one where my body limits me. My body places limits on my lived experience of humanity. Rightly or wrongly, many doors have been closed to me because of my disabilities. I am often seen by others as less than human. My disabilities fundamentally shape my experience of my body and my world and place limits upon me that would not otherwise be there. And so, on the one hand, my experience of circus has at times been one of profound liberation from bodily limitations. It has been an enchanting reexperiencing of the body and its capabilities. For one of the first times in my life, I have had the opportunity to experience my body as something that empowers me and allows me to accomplish things I never thought possible, rather than being something confining me to a subjugated existence. For example, prior to my participation in circus, my relationship with my body was frequently marked by significant pain and fatigue. These realities would keep me from being able to participate in my world as fully as I wanted. Through circus, my relationship with pain in my body has changed, and I can recognize that pain is not always problematic, but can be a signal of my increasing strength and capabilities. When this awareness is coupled with learning new circus skills that I would not have previously imagined were possible for me, I have experienced opportunities to experiment with a different transcendence of my apparent bodily limitations. These are instances where the quest to move beyond the limitations of my body hasn't been fuelled by a sheer need for survival, but rather for the sheer joy of it. To do something just to prove that I can. To luxuriate in the effort that a task can require.

This experience has been far from a utopic liberation from subjugation, however. It would be naïve to assume that, within the posthuman “anything is possible” world of circus, the inclusion of those with disabilities would be taken for granted. In fact, within the über-abled world of circus where physical virtuosity is celebrated, discrimination against cyborgs and others with disabilities can be

markedly harsher than within the noncircus world. Disabled people are often subjugated precisely because they remind others of the fragile status of their own humanity. This dynamic can be especially pronounced in a space where one's livelihood depends on the appearance of being an über-abled posthuman capable of surpassing typical body limitation, such as is the case in the professional circus. While circus creates the potential for an exploration of what it means to surpass a variety of limits placed upon the human body, it can be difficult to find spaces to participate in circus that are accessible to a wide range of bodies. Circus spaces are often inaccessible to those who can't climb stairs or require a quieter setting to be able to participate. Additionally, those with chronic or episodic disabilities may require classroom or studio training policies that can support late cancellations or unpredictable attendance. These are just a few of the common structural barriers to participation for disabled circus participants. It can also be difficult to find coaches or trainers who believe that those with disabilities belong in circus settings. Attitudinal barriers are significant, as the perspective of the coach and overall circus space play a large role in how welcome and supported in their progress students with disabilities feel.

These barriers, however significant, can also simply be understood to be an invitation to more progress. The juxtaposition of disabled cyborgs and über-abled circus performers can create opportunities for new partnerships and understandings. The circus world, if it is willing to give disabled cyborgs a chance and a space suited to their needs, can create the opportunity to explore new ways to be human, to release posthuman potential, and as such to redefine the ways bodily limitations can be surpassed. This could result in new partnerships with the disability community, fostered in respect and inclusion. By embracing the circus's focus on surpassing boundaries, the disability world can utilize circus as a medium to reimagine the beyond of the body—creating new ways of opening previously closed doors within circus and beyond. Exploring disability and über-ability simultaneously can give rise to new stories being told: stories that can only be told within the physicality of circus and the physicality of disabled, cyborg bodies; stories in which these bodies are not inspirational super-humans, but fully authentic bodies, telling stories that reflect the full reality of their experience in posthuman terms.

Ultimately, I think that both posthuman cyborgs and über-human circus performers teach us something profound about what it means to embrace our experience in all of its forms, within or beyond normative bounds of "humanity." There is a shared desire to reach out past what ought to be possible, and push just a little farther. To reshape what is possible within the confines and limitations of human experience. When combined they represent an acute juxtaposition, the cyborg circus, all too aware of the limitations of the human form, participating in an art form where limits only exist because someone hasn't found a way past them yet. From the removal of options to the discovery of those that only some might be able to achieve.

The *Cyborg Circus Show*: a limited world revealed to be without limits.

## References

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