

## A New American Freak Show

Human beings born with physical anomalies have always been treated as exceptions. As Elizabeth DePoy and Stephen French Gilson note: “As early as ancient civilizations, there is documentation of a range of responses to ‘the atypical human’ from fascination to revulsion” (9). While many cultures have revered those with physical differences, such as the Ancient Egyptians who worshiped and mummified them, most societies cast out or killed such people, such as the ancient Greeks and Romans who ritually killed people with disabilities and deformities. Despite the range in treatment of people with physical anomalies, history reveals some commonalities, notably that what is considered atypical varies depending on time, location, and context; explanations for atypical bodies are widely varied and conflicting; and these explanations not only reveal the “beliefs, values, politics, economics, intellectual trends, and level of technological development of the times,” but they have also shaped how we categorize and view such bodies today (9–10).

For many, including medieval Christians, such “anomalous births” were explained through teleological reasoning. Three common rationales were generally given by Christians for the existence of anomalous bodies: “as signs of God’s wrath, occasioned by sin; as a reminder that each birth was as miraculous as the original Creation; and as omens and portents, intended for our good” (Fiedler 230). These teleological reasons explained the existence of human “monsters” in terms of the purpose their existences ultimately served. Therefore, many medieval Christians felt that they must accept human oddities and the reasons behind their

existence. Many were killed anyway, accused of being products of witchcraft, and hence killed as part of God's work. Religious texts including "the Hebrew Bible, early Christian and Muslim documents, and [various religious] images of the times" are rich with literal and symbolic references to "atypical human conditions, appearances, and behaviors" (DePoy and Gilson 14). Islam and the Hebrews shared a particular disdain for those with anomalies, casting out or otherwise marginalizing people with disabilities, while Jewish texts show that those with anomalies were thought to be punished by God but were not excluded from communities or religious services (14).

While there is much disagreement among historians and scholars over accounts of disability during the Middle Ages, it seems clear that despite the prominence of the church, and its theological rationales that saw people with abnormalities as everything "from monster to miracle," Western Europe during the Middle Ages was the starting point for the medicalization of disability and the thinking that disabled bodies could and ought to be treated and cured if possible. The Middle Ages also saw the rise of both the institutional and charity models of disability, which placed people with disabilities as patients or persons in need of pity and charity (16).

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, views about physical difference were being significantly altered. In America, the view of human oddities as either "tokens of the Lord's vengeance or as instruments of the devil" was particularly powerful throughout the seventeenth century, and reached a peak with the Salem witch trials in the 1690s (Fiedler 230–231). However, the Enlightenment in Europe and the New World largely saw supernatural beliefs overthrown by science, and such scientific advances added to the increasing sense that the anomalous body "could be explained by observations in the physical world" (231). DePoy and Gilson acknowledge authors and artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Francis Bacon for contributing to the belief in separation between mind and body that saw the mind "characterized as logical and triumphant over and controlling of the flesh" thus "locating disability within the weakened body [and] opening it up for scrutiny and cure" (18). Disabled bodies, therefore, suggested not only a weakened body but a weakened mind as well. This thinking further marked the disabled body as a site for medical analysis.

Another significant change during the Enlightenment is the distinction made between deformities at birth and those acquired later in life.

Now carrying value distinctions, disabilities were ranked according to how they were acquired. DePoy and Gilson offer an example: “some birth-based failures in activities for typical growth were explained as ‘monstrosities,’ while differences in what individuals did that resulted from observable explanations, such as injury, were regarded as natural” (18–19). Finally, disability became associated with poverty during this era, in part, because the number of those with physical illnesses and abnormalities was disproportionately larger than those who appeared normal and in good health (19–20).

As this brief history shows, abnormal bodies have been scrutinized for meaning, social significance, and cultural value, and have been mostly negatively viewed, only accepted begrudgingly, for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Like the exceptional treatment of people with anomalies, the exhibition of human oddities has existed from antiquity, though they were first displayed for entertainment purposes in Europe during the Middle Ages. For many years, human oddities were displayed by their families in their own homes, or in private exhibitions at royal courts. Later, they were exhibited in groups to the general population, though only as omens from the Church. During the Elizabethan era, the public exhibition of freaks was first recorded, but it was not until the Restoration that they first became “stellar attractions” (Fiedler 279–280).

### BAKHTIN, BARNUM, AND THE EXHIBITION OF HUMAN ODDITIES

Folk culture, including art, theater, and carnival, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe, saw the spectacular body in practically the same way they did other sources of entertainment—with humor. Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes this humor as implicit to carnival, saying that “[i]n spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody—all these forms have one style in common: they belong to the culture of folk carnival humor” (4). Bakhtin’s examination of Renaissance literature offers terrific insight into

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<sup>1</sup>This is an extremely reductive retelling of a rich body of work concerned with disability throughout history. For an incomparably more thorough account, see the chapter “Looking Back” in *Studying Disability* by DePoy and Gilson, as well as *A History of Disability* by Henri-Jacques Striker, and even Leslie Fiedler’s “From Theology to Teratology” in *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*.

the way the body was once viewed, and it helps provide a framework for the way we currently read anomalous bodies.

Bakhtin tells us that carnival festivities, which included spectacles such as those noted above, were an important part of medieval life:

Besides carnivals proper, with their long and complex pageants and processions, there was the 'feast of fools' and the 'feast of the ass'; there was a special free 'Easter laughter,' consecrated by tradition. Moreover, nearly every church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized. Such, for instance, were the parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals. ... [There were] agricultural feasts as the harvesting of the grapes which was celebrated also in the city. Civil and social ceremonies and rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. (5)

Such events were non-official and non-political forms of entertainment and celebration, but to ignore them would be to miss a large and important aspect of the culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. These carnivals and their treatment of human spectacle suggest a unique moment in the relationship between viewer and freak. Here, the relationship to the freak body is lighthearted and celebratory; the freak body is something to laugh rather than scream at or shy away from.

The significance of this is underscored as Bakhtin clarifies that although carnival and its imagery resemble artistic forms, specifically the spectacle, carnival should not be mistaken for art. Rather, Bakhtin contends that carnival "belongs to the borderline between art and life." He adds that carnival was, in fact, "life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play" and, further, that "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" (6-7). The lines between performance and real life are blurred. Further, Bakhtin suggests that what happens in carnival is merely life performed, and that spectators felt no distinction between their lives and the spectacle before them. Fools, clowns, actors, giants, and other spectacles did not "act" onstage; they were the same wherever and whenever they went, standing "on the borderline between life and art" (8). Bakhtin's concepts of the body and the grotesque are crucial in understanding the presentation and definition of the freak body

because, although viewers have spent roughly two to three centuries treating the freak body with horror, disgust, and fear, I believe the new American freak show is characterized by a slight return to Bakhtin's notion of the freak body.

The American freak show began in the mid-eighteenth century. Following the lead of the English Renaissance Fairs discussed here by Bakhtin, human curiosities were traveling exhibits with "managers or showmen who did the promoting, made the business arrangements, and collected the admission charge" (Bogdan 25). Traveling animal exhibits were just as popular as human ones, if not more, at this time; both were referred to collectively as "living curiosities." Both human and animal oddities were unusual and unfamiliar to audiences who had never seen such a thing as a giraffe or a little person and, because science was not a developed field at the time, viewers "might very well believe that [oddities] were from the moon, or from the dark crevices of one of the mysterious landmasses not yet penetrated by Westerners." By the nineteenth century, Americans were captivated by freak show oddities who now saw freak bodies as "a part of God's great order of creatures" and who were therefore "subject to scientific study and classification." Scientific interest in *lusus naturae*, or human monsters, justified and reinforced the public's interest in such bodies (Bogdan 25–28).

Around 1840, the freak show was institutionalized. This means that freak shows moved from being unattached attractions—"single attractions that were not attached to organizations such as circuses and carnivals"—to an integral part of American entertainment (Bogdan 11). When independent and traveling oddities became more permanently housed in museums, they were able to develop, for the first time, a "community [and] culture of showpeople" (30). This permanence afforded freak performers the opportunity to become part of a larger collective—"the freak show"—rather than relying on a single manager or a small unincorporated traveling troupe (30).

Perhaps the single most important event in the institutionalization of the freak show was when Phineas Taylor Barnum established his American Museum in New York City in 1841. Barnum was the first to recognize the potential of the freak show to become a commercial success. In fact, it was only in the 1840s that the term "freak" came to be used in reference to the exhibition of people with anomalies. As Thomas Fahy notes, this is significant because it suggests a change in the presentation of freak bodies at this particular time, and that change—the

institutionalization of the freak show—was brought about largely by P.T. Barnum (7). Rachel Adams points out that “Barnum was responsible for transforming the freak show into a coordinated business venture enhanced by advertising, promotional materials, and celebrity appearances.” Barnum’s American Museum—a combination of theater, carnival, lecture, and freak show—became the model for the American freak show institution, where audiences paid one price to see a variety of freak exhibits—hence one of the freak show’s many alternate monikers, the 10-in-1 (Adams 11).

In his zeal to be the most successful and most shocking businessman in entertainment, Barnum and his American Museum developed a reputation and set a precedent for the types of exhibits seen at freak shows. The American Museum saw a larger variety of acts than any other venue of its kind due to Barnum’s diligent searching of the country for “industrious fleas, automatons, jugglers, ventriloquists, living statuary, tableaux, gypsies, albinos, fat boys, giants, dwarfs, rope-dancers, dioramas, panoramas, models of Niagara, Dublin, Paris and Jerusalem...Punch and Judy...fancy glass-blowing, knitting machines...dissolving views, American Indians” and anything else that might bring paying customers off the streets and into the building (Harris qt. Barnum 40–41). He made sure to show his exhibits on a rotating basis in order to keep them novel and exciting. His biggest hits, however, included the mainstays Joice Heth, “George Washington’s nurse”; General Tom Thumb; and the Feejee Mermaid.

Joice Heth, a former slave who claimed to be 161-years-old and the former nurse of George Washington, was one of Barnum’s first real successes. Appealing because of her patriotic story and exoticism, Heth was promoted by Barnum with great extravagance and success. However, after many shows and tours with Heth, her popularity began to wane. This led to one of Barnum’s most infamous stunts: he wrote an animated letter and sent it anonymously to a local newspaper claiming outrage at the fraudulent exhibit. This bit of anti-hype rejuvenated interest in Heth and made Barnum and his oddity even more successful than before (Harris 21–23). Another infamous attraction, Tom Thumb, whose real name was Charles S. Stratton, was a midget who, when Barnum met him, was five-years-old, just over two feet tall, and a mere 15 lb in weight. Adorned with miniature “ponies, uniforms, and carriages,” he was, as Neil Harris describes him, the “perfect man-child,” someone with whom crowds could identify and enjoy (43, 49).

Considered Barnum's "most famous put-on of all," the Feejee Mermaid was an oddity purchased by Barnum that had "the body of a fish and the head and hands of a monkey." A back story was created, claiming that the mermaid was discovered in Fiji by the distinguished "Dr. Griffin," really the man who had been hired to manage the exhibit (Harris 62–63). While many audience members readily believed Barnum's claims about the mermaid, it was actually the torso and head of a baby monkey sewn to the back half of a fish and covered in papier-mâché.

Barnum's great success was born out of his related talents in advertising and deceiving audiences. Harris tells us that from the start of Barnum's career in entertainment, "carting about the fabled Joice Heth," he was completely "aware of his ability to gull others, to make them pay for the opportunity of being fooled" (Harris 57). As Harris implies here, the audiences were perfectly aware of Barnum's early and lasting reputation for "humbuggery" and knew that they might not see what Barnum's advertisements promised. In fact, audiences often delighted at finding that they'd been tricked and enjoyed "the competition between victim and hoaxer" (77). Much of Barnum's success resulted from taking advantage of people's desire for truth; audiences yearned to know whether or not an exhibit was authentic. They even paid Barnum in addition to the attraction price for access to his "ticket-seller's analysis" which would explain how the "humbugs" were successfully achieved. The desire to discover an exhibit's authenticity remains a fascinating truth of current freak bodies and performances.

In many ways, Barnum and exhibits such as these became standards of the American freak show. When the American Museum burned down in 1868, Barnum retired from the industry, but his museum became the prototype for dime museums which were popular from around 1870 to 1900. Dime museums were exactly what they sound like: museums that cost a dime for admission. These were popular throughout the USA, though New York claimed the most museums and best attractions. Freak performers were the featured attractions of these museums although, as Bogdan tells us,

Museum managers, under increased competition not only from other museums but from circus sideshows and other amusement organizations, often promoted the shabbiest of human oddities and gaffed freaks as scientific sensations and singular attractions. Following the lead of earlier freak

promoters, most notably P.T. Barnum, they raised fraud, misrepresentation, and exaggeration—the hard sell—to new heights. (35–37)

To clarify, during this time freak shows were attached to these small dime museums as well as circuses, world's fairs, amusement parks, and carnivals. Although the freak show was attached to larger organizations which were all fairly different, they shared a similar culture and most freak shows were formatted similarly: barkers and spectacular banners and advertisements drew in crowds; spectators often had to look up on a stage or down into a pit to see the freak performers; placards and postcards told exaggerated or fictional narratives about the freaks onstage; and crowds were lured into a final “blow-off” for an extra cost.

Mainstays of the freak show included people with disabilities, deformities, or other physical differences; characters who were physically normal but who were costumed and performed created narratives; and novelty acts. Very tall or short, and very fat and thin people were often paired together or with average-sized people, or dressed in ways to exaggerate their size. Exotic peoples from distant lands were costumed as barbaric wild men and women, or as perfect “Circassian” beauties of fine Caucasian stock. Novelty acts included tattooed people, flame throwers, snake charmers, and sword swallowers (they were also often “exotic” performers). Gender-bending acts such as the half-man/half-woman and the Bearded Lady were very popular freak show staples, but perhaps the most popular exhibits were those with disabilities. People missing limbs, conjoined twins, people with bizarre growths and deformities, and people with peculiar conditions, such as the infamous Dog-Faced Boy who grew hair all over his face, were popular because of their rarity.

From approximately 1840 to 1940, the freak show was a part of American entertainment whose popularity was undeniable. Throughout the nineteenth century, the exhibition of humans in freak shows was appreciated by most walks of life. Doctors and scientists were particularly drawn to human anomalies because of their rarity and usefulness as objects of medical and scientific inquiry (Bogdan 27). Even the upper crust found the freak show to be an acceptable form of entertainment; many even collected freak show souvenir cards, commonly referred to as *cartes de visite*,<sup>2</sup> and displayed them in albums in their homes.

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<sup>2</sup>See note 6.



## THE DECLINE OF THE FREAK SHOW

The turn of the century, however, saw a changing attitude toward freak shows which can be credited to a number of factors. Many would agree with Leslie Fiedler's assertion that the freak show's popularity dropped off steadily at the end of the Victorian age due to "Victorian sentimentality and morality," which suggests that because of the rigid moral views held by many people of the time, the display of anomalous bodies for entertainment purposes would have been deemed to be both in poor taste and immoral (Fiedler 16). Robert Bogdan, however, offers a more matter-of-fact explanation by claiming that it was the freak show's own popularity that was, in large part, its undoing. He tells us that there was such a large demand for freak exhibits and such a shortage of people with strange enough anomalies that promoters went on "freak hunts" to find exhibits for their shows. This "freak shortage" resulted in a surplus of "[n]ovelty acts, non-Western exotics, self-made freaks, and gaffs" to fill in, the result of which was that "bizarre hyperbole dominated" (Bogdan 37). Freak shows became places to be ripped off, rather than to see someone truly spectacular, and most of the crowds stopped showing up, leaving the freak shows to "immigrants and country bumpkins" (38). The lack of interesting exhibits, of course, contributed to the view of the freak show as an undesirable and, frankly, unsuccessful form of entertainment.

Also significant is that, at the turn of the century, Mendel's laws of genetics were rediscovered and applied to human traits. Bogdan writes,

This new perspective was accompanied by the rise of the eugenics movement, a vicious use of social Darwinism which cautioned the nation that because modern societies protected their weak, the principle of survival of the fittest was not working. The weak, the imperfect, the social, mental, and physical misfits, they warned, would, if left unchecked, breed at such a rate as to outnumber the better breeding stock. (62)

Now that "physically and mentally inferior people" were seen as a danger, they were largely separated from society by being placed into asylums and hospitals. Bogdan also cites the continued exploration of other parts of the world as a reason for the freak show's loss of favor in America. This was especially important in terms of displaying non-whites in the freak show. The racial freak, also known as the ethnographic freak,

has a fascinating and tragic history. Rachel Adams provides two excellent examples in her case studies of Ota Benga, an “African Savage” who was displayed in the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in 1906, and Ishi, “The Last Wild Indian,” a freak show performer who was advertised in 1911 as being “the last of his kind” (31–59). Adams’ examples depict individuals with clear ethnographic identities which were used as a point of spectacle. Narratives were created around their identities in order to draw curious and often horrified spectators. Logically, as Americans learned more about the world and the many different types of people in it, they were much more skeptical when being spun a tale about “the myths and legends of lost tribes of giants and pygmies and natives with tails” (Bogdan 63). The more people learned about the world, in other words, the harder it was to offer them a mystical, otherworldly experience at the freak show.

The medical field was learning much more as well: “Like the freak show, physicians had become organized and by 1900 were well on their way to professionalizing” (Bogdan 63). In doing so, they also became authorities on large numbers of human afflictions: “Human differences became medicalized as pathological—as ‘disease’” (63). Following these changes, the scientific community launched an attack on the freak show; they implied that freaks should not be exhibited, but rather should be treated under the care of a doctor, and were “to be viewed on hospital rounds and in private offices, by appointment only” (64). Bogdan cites an article from a 1908 issue of *Scientific Weekly*, “Circus and Museum Freaks, Curiosities of Pathology,” that harshly criticized the exhibition of people whom the author refers to as “humble and unfortunate individuals” to a “gaping and unsympathetic crowd” (64). This article is the first “assault” on the freak show by the medical profession and sent the strong message that the freak bodies fell under the authority of science and therefore should not be viewed and scrutinized by the general public.

By the 1940s, the freak show had lost almost all of its former prominence and popularity. Today, there are few freak shows left and many would argue that contemporary freak shows such as Ken Harck’s Brothers Grim Sideshow, the 999 Eyes Freak Show, The Venice Beach Freak Show, and the various freak shows at Coney Island are curious nostalgia. Since the freak show has moved to the fringes of our society, “artists have attempted to assimilate its meanings to other media: words on the page, images on the screen. Beginning, that is to say, as a form of

naïve or pop art, the freak show has become the subject matter of more self-conscious high art,” and a more socially conscious and self-aware mass art (Fiedler 284). It is this transference of meaning that I will be exploring in much greater depth in the following chapters.

## WHY WE LOOK

At the heart of all freak shows is an indulgence in the human being’s natural impulse to look at things that are interesting and unusual. We live in a highly visual world and, whether we are aware of it or not, what we see often dictates our beliefs, practices, and opinions. We look at the things and people in our lives in an effort to make sense of them and, therefore, the world: “To look is to actively make meaning of that world” (Sturken and Cartwright 10). Although it seems inherent and thus passive, looking *is* active, and to look at or away from something or someone is a choice. Because we choose whether or not to look, and because that choice can be influenced—we can make others look, be made to look, mutually exchange looks—it follows that looking “entails a play of power” (10). This power, of course, becomes more complicated when we examine who is looking, whom or what is being looked at, what the look communicates, and how the look is mediated.

As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson suggests, staring is a physiological response that has histories specific to different cultures. In other words, historical and cultural variables shape the meaning and practice of looking. Our natural urge to look at things that are novel or unexpected has been suppressed and guarded against over time with stories about the evil eye or simply the impulse of a mother telling her child, “don’t stare!” We are not supposed to look at other people for prolonged periods of time because it makes them feel uncomfortable, it is rude, and it is often a way of non-verbally passing judgment. Hence, we are taught in the name of social propriety to suppress our natural desire to look. It makes sense then that freak shows were immensely popular in their time. Both the freak and the freak show institution grant permission to look through the exchange of money and by placing the freak in a performance-centered setting. By indulging the viewer’s desire to look, the freak show eradicated a fissure between the things people wanted to look at and the things we have all been taught not to look at. Viewers paid for the rare opportunity to ignore the motherly voice in their heads reprimanding them from gawking at something or someone unusual,

and instead were given permission to look at the things we have all been taught to look away from.

Since entering into a stare with someone involves an exchange of power, it only makes sense that we would prefer to stare on our own terms rather than being forced into staring by the unexpected presence of someone or something “starable” (Garland-Thomson 3–7). Hence, while we might be uncomfortable seeing a person with a physical disability on the street, we could enjoy looking at that same person in a permissible setting, such as on a stage or a screen. An excellent example of this comes from a very simple line from the movie *The Man Without a Face*, starring Mel Gibson as a man who was severely burned and deformed in a car accident. As a young boy sees him for the first time and gawks, his mother gives the famous line, “Don’t stare” but follows it up with, “We are not at a circus.” The implication is clear; we are not in a venue where it is permissible to stare at a freakish body. It is still a freakish body and we should still stare at it—but it is inappropriate in a space not structured around performance and in which the permission to stare has not been granted through the exchange of money or by the placement of the freak body onto a stage.

Though Garland-Thomson’s *Staring* is an excellent and comprehensive study, additional scholarship on the subject suggests that, more than just a physiological impulse to stare, viewers are in fact simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by the freakish body for many different reasons. Critics disagree about whether the freak show was a space of disassociation or identification for its audiences, though most seem to argue the latter. Leslie Fiedler, among others, reassures us that the freak show was meant to be “therapeutic, cathartic, no matter what initial terror and insecurity it evokes. ‘We are the Freaks,’ the human oddities are supposed to reassure us ... Not you. Not *you!*” (Fiedler 31). Hence, the disassociation the viewer feels when looking at a freak exhibit is a reassurance that the viewer is normal and nothing like the freaks onstage. Taking the opposite stance is Rachel Adams who suggests that while one would assume a detachment on the part of the viewer, as Fiedler does, it is in fact quite the opposite. In the act of staring at a freak, the viewer finds an opportunity to “project her own most hidden and perverse fantasies onto the freak and discovers them mirrored back in the freak’s gaze” (Adams 8). In other words, staring at a freak may make us fear or even realize the freakishness within ourselves. So while there are varying ideas of what exactly propels people to want to look at unfamiliar or freakish

bodies, it is clear that the freak show was successful because it gave people permission to indulge in their curiosities.

Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance novel *Quicksand* provides an excellent example of both identification and disassociation when Helga Crane, the novel's young mulatta protagonist, visits a freak show with her white friends in Copenhagen. When Helga and Axel Olsen, the famous artist who paints Helga's portrait and eventually proposes marriage to her, go to the vaudeville circus, they are witness to the display of two American racial freaks who sing and dance onstage to the great amusement of the audience. While her friends react with laughter and joy at the spectacle, Helga feels only shame and anger: "But she returned again and again to the Circus, always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures, an ironical and silently speculative spectator" (Larsen 83). While the audience is clearly reassured by the separation between the men on stage and their own normality, and are therefore able to enjoy the show, Helga's identification seems to find her own freakishness mirrored back in the freak's gaze.

Helga is the only non-white member of her family and social circle in Copenhagen and thus is in the position to identify with the men at the freak show; she occupies the position of outsider within both her family and social units. When Helga becomes a "big hit" among the elite in Copenhagen, her family is immensely pleased; however, Helga feels as if she is "some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited." She thinks it is "[a]s if I had horns, or three legs," but she does not need to be physically disabled to wear the label of freak; her race freaks her well enough. In an all-white city, she is an oddity whose identity as freak is marked by her blackness: "Some stared [at Helga] surreptitiously, some openly, and some stopped dead in front of her in order more fully to profit by their stares" (73). Helga's friends and family, and the rest of the freak show's audience, however, are the norm, the majority, and so they could not possibly identify with the freaks on the stage.<sup>3</sup>

While individual experience seems to depend on the viewer's own freak/nonfreak status, as *Quicksand* clearly shows us, the mass response to the freak show is more telling of its cultural significance as an

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<sup>3</sup>Parts of this discussion of *Quicksand* are excerpted from a previously published article of mine, "The Racial Freak: In and Out of Harlem" (*Storytelling: A Critical Journal of Popular Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 5–14).

institution. The freak show served a cultural purpose beyond mere entertainment, and in many ways, the mass response to the freak show was more significant than individual reactions because it reflected the serious social and political issues of the time. As in my example from *Quicksand*, Helga's identification, as well as her companions' disassociation with the racial freaks on stage is representative of the power structures and social anxieties in Helga's world. In making Helga a freak, her family is asserting their power over her which is, in this case, an upper-class, white power. Socially, their freaking of Helga is a way to come to terms with their own racial prejudices and fears, and to become comfortable being in the presence of such unfamiliar bodies. Whether they are laughing at the racial freaks on stage, or praising the freakishness of Helga, the power of looking at other bodies, in this case bodies which are anatomically different in an almost all-white Copenhagen, is astounding in that it ascribes those bodies with meaning and context. To look at the freak onstage is to demean and condemn, but to look at and celebrate Helga as a freak is to work toward an understanding of difference.<sup>4</sup>

The spectacle of the racial freak has been popular since they were displayed in cartes de visite<sup>5</sup> as lynching victims and savages. James Allen's *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, is one of many collections that explores these photographs. Many of his images portray crowds of smiling, white spectators who had gathered to witness the lynching as a form of communal entertainment. Thomas Fahy, whose account of ethnographic freaks is as thorough as it is eye-opening, notes that lynchings were often advertised ahead of time and people would make occasions out of them, bringing their families, along with food and drink, to celebrate the event. He describes the atmosphere of many public lynchings as "carnival-like" and says that one could "mistake the [image of the lynching] for a circus, convention, or concert" (21).

Fahy claims that such photographs might help the viewer to assuage their fears about race and immigration because of the "safe context" they provided for talking about non-white bodies; white viewers invited racial bodies into their homes in innocuous ways and retained a safe distance

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<sup>4</sup>One of the key differences between the two is, obviously, that the former is on a stage and the latter a member of the social group who is freaking them.

<sup>5</sup>Small postcards of freaks. These were collector's items often distributed at freak shows. See note 6.

from the black bodies in the photographs. On the other hand, however, he also acknowledges that images of freaks and lynching victims, which often “appear[ed] alongside each other in family albums,” were enjoyed as souvenirs and celebrations and spoke to “white America’s [in]ability to cope with racial difference... and contributed to racial tensions” (20).

The African American body was also displayed in freak shows, a form of exhibition which, like photography, maintained the distance between white viewers and black bodies. The black bodies on display at the freak show were alive, unlike those on display in lynching photographs, but they were made innocuous in other ways. Barnum’s “What Is It?” exhibits, along with displays of “Lost Men” from remote places and even “Wild Men” from Africa, cast African Americans, sometimes with mental retardation or other disabilities, as stupid, childlike, and harmless. Racial spectacles were staged in other interesting ways as well. For example, Barnum arranged for an Arabian and an African American to face off in a boxing ring and highlighted their racial differences in his advertisements (Fahy 28–29).

Race was not the only social issue being explored by the freak show; concerns about gender and sexuality were also in the minds of many Americans. Leslie Fiedler argues that people are drawn to look at freakish bodies in large part because they remind us of our sexuality and that of others. He points to the changing body of the adolescent and the increasing awareness of the young adult’s own sexuality as synonymous in many ways with what one would see at a freak show. During adolescence, there is a constant need to compare one’s body with the bodies of others; it is from these comparisons that adolescents create their definitions of normalcy. Insecurities lead teenagers into feelings of being too much of one thing or not enough of another. In other words, pubescent girls may find themselves too big-breasted or too flat-chested, while boys might compare the size of their penises with others. Adolescents may also find their bodies to be too fat or too thin, and too hairy or not hairy enough. In addition to comparing themselves with members of the same sex, Fiedler notes that each sex tends to define their bodies as freakish in relation to the other; what a man has, the woman lacks, and vice versa. Because of our tendency to define our bodies in relation to the bodies of others, it makes sense that people would want to de-freak themselves by homogenizing their social groups and surrounding themselves with bodies that are similar to their own (31–32).

The freakish body, then, is a reminder of the traits we want to ignore. The fat lady and the human skeleton remind us, for example, that we too are either larger or smaller than others. The bearded woman reminds us of our own hair growth and the desire that comes with it to eliminate that hair with razors and waxes. Other sexual oddities such as hermaphrodites and men and women with malformed genitals call into question our belief in the bipolarity of the sexes. Ultimately, freakish bodies threaten illusions of black/white, male/female, and abled/disabled binaries and force the viewer to rethink common definitions of race, gender, and ability. In destabilizing these binaries, the freak/normal binary is also shaken because the former highlights that both terms are relative and therefore social constructions.

### HOW WE LOOK

The illusion of intimacy and the reality of safe distance, as I will discuss throughout this book, have been essential in viewing the freak body throughout history. The gaze, defined as “not the act of looking itself, but the viewing relationship characteristic of a particular set of social circumstances” (Sturken and Cartwright 76), holds a normalizing power over people’s bodies. Whether the photographic, cinematic, or televisual gaze, the body being looked at is being marked with normative meaning. Images of bodies most often tell viewers what bodies *should* look like, according to common perceptions of what is and isn’t attractive, healthy, and normal. When viewers see images of these types of bodies, they digest the message that they too ought to look like those bodies. On the other hand, when presented with freakish bodies—bodies that tell viewers what they *should not* look like—the message is that these bodies are unhealthy, unnatural, unattractive, and undesirable. Often, the meaning inscribed upon freakish bodies is not quite this plain but is shrouded in ambiguity.

The changing frame of the freak show brings to mind Anne Friedberg’s work on mobile viewing. In *The Virtual Window*, Friedberg says, “We know the world by what we see: through a window, in a frame, on a screen. As we spend more of our time staring into the frames of movies, television, computers, hand-held displays—‘windows’ full of moving images, text, icons, and 3-D graphics—how the world is framed may be as important as what is contained within that frame” (1). The freak show’s frame has changed repeatedly since its inception, and each



of these frames asks us to read the freak show in a different way. Despite the many different frames through which audiences have viewed the freak show, one facet has remained: its ability to keep emotional, temporal, and/or spatial distance between freak and viewer. The success of the freak show can be attributed in large part to its ability to keep this distance and to “simultaneously challenge and reinforce binaries” about bodies (Fahy 4).

However, as I have already noted, eventually (perhaps inevitably) the freak show stopped working as an outlet for confronting social, cultural, and political issues such as race, gender, and disability:

As images of blackness, disability, and sexual ambiguity posed an increasing threat to white middle-class hierarchies and values, the desire to suppress and persecute visible difference intensified. The changes being brought on by modernity were making the boundaries between self and other—white/black, male/female, able/disabled, heterosexual/homosexual—more and more tenuous, and the freak show was no longer a successful outlet for assuaging these social anxieties. Gradually, the crowds stopped coming. (Fahy 132)

The boundaries between freak and norm were collapsing in the wake of social and political progress. In other words, social progression suggested an equality that white, middle-class America was not prepared to accept. When he talks about the “distance” between viewer and object in the freak show, Fahy is talking about a perceived cultural difference, one indicative of power, normalcy, and superiority on the side of the viewer. Physically, viewer and object are rather close to one another, although human oddities “are never displayed at our level—the level of reality and the street outside.” They were most often displayed on platforms above the audience so that viewers would need to look up to see them, or, as was often the case in the final “blow-off,” they were displayed in pits in which case the viewer would need to look down to see them (see Fig. 2.1). (Fiedler 283). Though it is not a tremendous distance physically—freaks and their audiences are within mere feet of one another—the staging of the freak show creates a marked difference in the status of viewer and object.

Ironically, this staging unintentionally promoted exchanges between viewer and object. Freak shows were supposed to be places of restraint: “the customer is expected dutifully to absorb the spieler’s monologue



**Fig. 2.1** A scene from Tod Browning's *Freaks* (Browning 1932) in which the crowd looks down into a freak show pit

while gazing at the prodigious body in awestruck wonder, then [make] a docile exit. However, historical evidence reveals how rarely this theory was realized in practice ... freaks talk back, the experts lose their authority, the audience refuses to take their seats" (Adams 13). It is logical that there should be such rowdy behavior at freak shows; after all, these shows invited conflict between different bodies. The viewer-object dynamic was not a sterile one; there was a tremendous amount of interaction as well as conflict between them.

The relationship between viewer and object, even over great physical and temporal distances, is never passive. Indeed, it is always an active two-way street. The creator of the image and the image itself do not produce meaning in and of themselves. In order to attain meaning, we must understand "how viewers interpret and experience the image" and "the context in which the image is seen" (Sturken and Cartwright 45). While producers of images certainly have an intended meaning in mind, they

do not have full control over how their images are “read” by viewers. It is also significant to note that the gaze establishes relationships of power between viewer and object. The person looking generally has the power, and the object being stared at has little or no power. It follows that the image produced through the lens is a “central tool in establishing difference” (103). In systems of representation throughout history, binary oppositions such as those we have seen in the freak show are used to construct meaning about the other.

The freak show has always been about looking; that its rise in popularity coincided with the development of professional photography may be more than a lucky coincidence. The opportunity for audience members to bring a picture of a freak home with them was a tremendous selling point of early American freak shows. Between the 1860s and the early 1900s especially, freak portrait photographs were a wildly popular form of entertainment for Americans. As Robert Bogdan puts it, “The photo album was the television of Victorian homes” (11). Called *cartes de visite*, small portraits of freaks were popular freak show souvenirs.<sup>6</sup> In addition to displaying the freak’s photo, these cards also provided biographies of their subjects on the back. Of course, these biographies were always exaggerated, if not completely fictional, accounts of the exhibit’s life, written to make them appear more foreign and interesting to their audiences. *Cartes de visite* were immensely popular and allowed freak performers a certain level of celebrity; their images and names became common knowledge. There are countless examples, though one of the most famous is the portrait of Joseph Merrick (see Fig. 2.2), known as the Elephant Man, which displays Merrick in a formal Victorian three-piece suit, wearing a pocket-watch, with his hands in his lap. His portrait is only different from the many *cartes de visite* which passed hands every day because of his severely deformed face and right arm. Even today, a vast majority of people would recognize this specific image, even if they

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<sup>6</sup>*Cartes de visite* do not refer only to portraits of freaks. Derived from the calling cards that were popular in the 1850s, *cartes de visite* became a sort of “social currency.” These small formal portraits were most often of individuals or couples, or sometimes small families. The portraits were mounted on 2-1/2” × 4” sized cards and given to friends and family. This standard format was patented by Parisian photographer André Adolphe Disderi in 1854, who also developed a technique using a sliding plate holder and a camera with four lenses which allowed eight prints to be created with each negative (A Brief History of the Carte de Visite <http://www.photographymuseum.com/histsw.htm>).

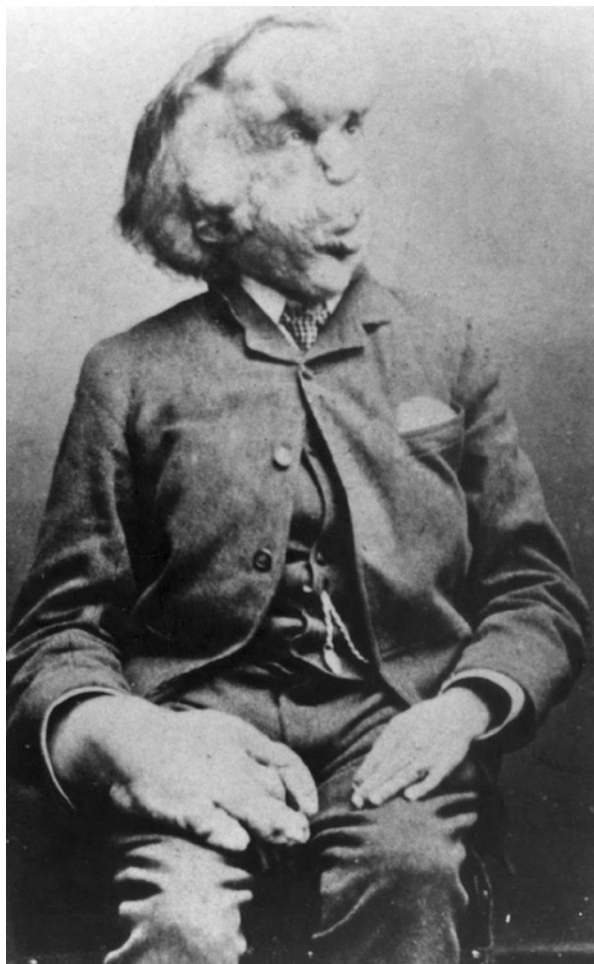


Fig. 2.2 Joseph Merrick, "The Elephant Man" c. 1889

knew little or nothing about the Elephant Man. To be clear, freaks were certainly not considered a part of the middle- and upper-class Victorian community in whose dress and domestic settings they were often displayed, and by whom they were beloved; rather, the freak was "someone who reaffirmed the cultural superiority of the onlooker." As Bogdan

notes, freaks were fascinating, welcome guests in Victorian homes, “as long as they stayed in their albums” (11).

Cinema gave spectators a new way to look at bodies. Christian Metz notes that “[c]inema is more perceptual ... than many other means of expression”; this is why it has sometimes been referred to as “the synthesis of all the arts.” Film “contains within itself the signifiers of other arts”: it embodies music, pictures, sound, and photographs (731). It is interesting that such an encompassing form would succeed the live freak show because the decline of the freak show suggests a desire for disassociation with the freak body and yet, as film theorists have long argued, the cinematic image offers at least the promise of sensorial plentitude.

Though this plentitude is crucial for the medium, it has been understood, since at least Christian Metz, that we identify with a guiding person or protagonist first. Film theorists have argued that the spectator identifies primarily with the camera and secondarily with the protagonist. Mulvey, among others, has noted that in order to “suspend one’s disbelief” and immerse oneself in the narrative of a film, “one must first ‘identify with’ the camera itself as if it were one’s own eyes and thus accept the viewpoint offered” (Chandler). The intimate connection to the image, rather than the spectacle, is then what characterizes film spectatorship. In narrative cinema, the art of looking has been understood in relation to voyeurism. Chandler explains that “a key feature of the gaze is that the object of the gaze is not aware of the current viewer (though they may originally have been aware of being filmed, photographed, painted etc. and may sometimes have been aware that strangers could subsequently gaze at their image)” (Chandler). Voyeurism is implicit in viewing and this, of course, implies a relationship of power, “in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Chandler *qt.* Schroader).

Additional to this power play is the fact that the cinematic image is understood as both absent and present. Many of the ideas considered foundational in apparatus and spectatorship theories are indebted to post-structuralism, namely the theories of Louis Althusser. Jean-Louis Baudry, Raymond Bellour, and Christian Metz, along with Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, all “argued in different ways that the self-awareness of human subjectivity is founded on a central misrecognition by the subject—or self, or ego—that it is somehow central to the processes of knowing the world.” Essentially, they all argue that “the subject’s knowledge of world and self is shaped by discourse ... which produces and reproduces [their own] subjectivity and, often

enough, its constitutive illusions" (Rosen 156–157). The viewer both shapes and is shaped by their position as spectator. This interpellation is significant especially when exploring cultural messages that are sent through media such as film because culturally constructed concepts of beauty, race, gender, and sexuality, for example, are made to seem inherent when they are in fact socially constructed.

While many post-structural film theorists simply invoke Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," in which an infant sees itself in the mirror and recognizes itself as "other" for the first time, Christian Metz complicates and extends this notion by arguing that the film screen is not a mirror because the spectator does not see himself on the screen and cannot really identify with other objects as the self. Therefore, the only thing he identifies with on the screen is the other:

At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am *all-perceiving*. All-perceiving as one says all-powerful ...; All-perceiving, too, because I am entirely on the side of the perceiving instance: absent from the screen, but certainly present in the auditorium, a great eye and ear without which the perceived would have no one to perceive it, the instance, in other words, which *constitutes* the cinema signifier (it is I who make the film)...In the cinema, the subject's knowledge takes a very precise form without which no film would be possible. This knowledge is dual (but unique). I know I am perceiving something imaginary ... and I know it is I who am perceiving it". (734)

The spectator is aware of the fourth wall, the audience around them, the screen, the projector, and the fact that they, the spectator, is the one observing all of it. Thus, the viewing experience is not limited to identification with one's own ego, or the other, but is potentially much more dispersed.

Furthering the idea of a compound spectator experience, Linda Williams has argued for multiple viewing positions afforded to the spectator by narrative cinema. In her revision of Laura Mulvey and the major strain of feminism and psychoanalysis in film, she argues that the spectator no longer only occupies a single position in relation to the bodies on screen but can occupy dual and even contradictory positions. She contends, through a close reading of *Stella Dallas*, that "double vision,"

or the idea that female spectatorship is multiply identified, is a common experience for the female viewer. She explains:

Unlike the male who must constantly differentiate himself from his original object of identification [the mother] in order to take on a male identity, the woman's ability to identify with a variety of different subject positions [because she does not need to differentiate from the mother to form her identity] makes her a very different kind of spectator ... [one who is] in a constant state of juggling all positions at once". ("Something Else..." 19)

The viewer's compound positionality allows us to see that when viewing the freak body, the film spectator, much like the audience member at a freak show, can simultaneously feel horror, fear, and disgust, while still relating to the freak body.

In *Freaks*, which I will further unpack in my next chapter, the viewer initially identifies with Cleopatra who is a norm among freaks. However, when she is revealed as a potential murderer, our identification shifts to that of the freaks—Hans and Frieda, in particular. Finally, the viewer is forced to turn their identification inward when the freak body and the normal body collide in the film's final scenes: are we "one of [them]" or are we normal? The film's notions of good, evil, freakishness, and normality are ambivalent and thus, as a viewer, our identification is split and even at times contradictory.

Though it has similarities to film, television is unique in its availability, intimacy, and possession of other media (television supersedes film as a "synthesis of all the arts": we can watch film, documentary, internet clips, and music videos all on television). Bourdieu believes that television, "by virtue of its reach and exceptional power, ... produces effects which, though not without precedent, are completely original" (Bourdieu 238). Auslander also acknowledges this, saying that "[t]elevision [can be] characterized as a hybrid of existing forms. [It is] radio with sight, movies with a zest of immediacy, theatre (intimate or spectacular) with all seats about six rows back and in the centre [sic], tabloid opera and circus without peanut vendors" (15). Whereas film lies in the "realm of memory, repetition, and displacement in time," television "occurs only in the now" (15). The immediacy of television is significant in that the viewer, through the illusion of close proximity to the event being witnessed, produces the feeling of television's intimacy; thus the

home becomes a kind of “theatre (sic) characterized, paradoxically, by both absolute intimacy and global reach” (16).

Some have argued that due to its casual nature, the viewer has a different relationship to looking at television, stating that television demands a mere “glance,” rather than a “gaze” and that, therefore, “the ‘voyeuristic mode’ cannot be as intense for the television viewer as for the cinema spectator” (Chandler qt. Ellis). However, as I suggest in Chap. 4, voyeurism is implicit in reality television and therefore the viewer’s sense of intimacy and association is amplified, not lessened. The television viewer feels closer to the freak body because that body is inserted into the viewer’s living room, but also because the viewer is allowed access into the freak’s “real” intimate space as well. The reciprocal nature of this relationship suggests that the television viewer is both aware of himself as a producer of the gaze, but can also identify with the object of the gaze. Indeed, the lure of reality television stardom is that it casts “ordinary people” doing extraordinary things or in bizarre circumstances, or extraordinary people doing mundane, everyday things. In either case, the viewer feels a sense of identification with the person who is either living a covetous life or who mirrors the viewer’s own life.

While it is important to individually understand the ways audiences look at and understand the freak body through the frames of photography, film, and television, today’s technology is moving forward at such a rapid pace that the “differences between the media of movies, television, and computers are rapidly diminishing” as new technologies emerge (Friedberg 439). Each successive media has been usurped by its predecessor and while each screen “retain[s] their separate location ... the types of images you see on each of them are losing their medium-based specificity” (439). Audiences can access photographs, movies, videos, music, television shows, and porn—as I will discuss in Chap. 5—literally in the palms of our hands. Smartphones, laptops, and tablets have made entertainment as close, intimate, and safe as ever, and yet these new technologies have also brought down the screens separating us from the formerly untouchable other.



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