

“What a Show it will Be!” Freak Shows and American Society

Élise LANTZ

At a time when “Disability Studies”—a multidisciplinary approach to physical incapacities that blends scholarship and activism—were first establishing themselves, Robert Bogdan protested the reduction of individuals to purely medical definitions. The translation of his book may contribute to overcoming this position, which remains dominant in France.

Reviewed: Robert Bogdan, *La Fabrique des monstres. Les États-Unis et le freak show, 1840-1940*, trans. Myriam Dennehy. Alma Editeur, 2013, 285 p., 29 euros. (Originally published as *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Originally published as *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, this book has been translated into French twenty-five years after it first appeared in 1988. Through a detailed study of the ways in which freak shows functioned, Robert Bogdan traces the development of American society from 1840 to 1940 in terms of its relationship to social norms and difference. During this period, Sunday visits to freak shows were a common practice among all social classes. The 1876 World’s Fair in Philadelphia and its sideshow—an adjacent human menagerie—attracted ten millions visitors seeking emotional thrills over a six month period. The announcement referred to in the book’s introduction is typical of the pitches designed to make spectators thronged at fairground gates shiver before they even entered. Bogdan warns that though his intention is to provide an institutional analysis of the freak show, he will also show the reader the attractions themselves: “Don’t leave! There will be exhibits (and it will be okay to look!).” Thanks to multiple sources, including numerous contemporary documents (posters, banners, prospectuses, advertisements, and autobiographies) and testimonials of freak shows actors (gathered through interviews and letters), readers find themselves drawn into a tour of the most celebrated freak shows. Detailed descriptions, in addition to the many photographs illustrating the book, place the readers, in turn, in the position of spectators of difference.

Cashing in on Suckers’ Emotions

The interest in freak shows is directly proportional to the empathy, fear, and disorientation unleashed by the dramatization and pitches that invariably accompanied them. Costumes, sets, and personal stories played on multiple registers. The conventions and techniques used to fabricate monsters drew on spectators’ own representations of difference. The “empathetic register” sought to amaze spectators, either by displaying a freak’s extraordinary talent, or by showing the freak completing tasks that should be impossible for someone of his or her physical and mental abilities—proving, in short, that disability can be overcome. The “exotic register” reassured spectators of their superior position, emphasizing the gulf between viewers

and the inherently inferior freak. Thus it was the spectators' own cultural identity which shaped the way freaks were presented. This subtle relationship between the individual traits displayed in freak shows and contemporary morals could be readjusted over the course of a freak's career. At the end of the period covered by the book, as it became increasingly difficult, for ethical reason, to continue putting individuals with disabilities on display, "artificial freaks" were created. The display of foreigners, including "savages," "exotic" natives, "Circassian beauties," and tattooed men, who were transformed into freaks by nothing more than promoters' racist words, allowed the business to continue. The major exhibit on "Black Africa" at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933 and 1934 was the occasion for one of the last such exhibitions, which confirmed Americans' pro-slavery and colonialist views. The inferiority and primitiveness of black people, first demonstrated by tetralogy, was appropriated and promoted by fairground showmen.

Freak show promoters proved deft at identifying new trends. Because they lived on society's margins, they were able to analyze social representations and take advantage of them by confirming the prejudices of middle-class "suckers" (their potential spectators, who were removed from the amusement business). At a time when few Americans had any contact with foreign cultures, it was easy to create stereotypes reflecting the nation's foreign policy. While most freaks directed their own performances and promoted their own careers, the profit motive also resulted in the enlistment of non-consenting actors, notably the mentally ill and foreigners. In this way, freak shows were magnifying mirrors of an expanding industrial society, down to its quirkiest traits. They justified confinement for some and legitimated the United States' exploitation of the non-Western world in the late nineteenth century.

Freak Shows: Prisms into the Industrialization of American Society

A careful analysis of the world of the freak show, along the lines of what Becker once did for the art world (Becker, 1982), situates the amusement industry in an historical context that facilitated the institutionalization of previously isolated practices, most famously with the creation in 1840 of Barnum's American Museum. The institutionalization of freak shows was made possible by collaboration between members of several socially influential groups involved in the fabrication of monsters. Thus in the early 1850s, Maximo and Bertola, Central American microcephalics from El Salvador, who were advertised as the "last of the ancient Aztecs," were received by a group of senators and at the White House, before being examined, in 1853, by the Ethnology Society, and received at Buckingham Palace during a European tour. Doctors categorized human differences, politicians invited freaks to official events, and journalists wrote articles about them, while clergymen were asked to guarantee their authenticity and look after their best interests. Bogdan describes the promoters as the "fathers of modern-day advertising." These spectacles could be found in Barnum's American Museum, dime museums, circus sideshows, amusement parks, fairs, and movie theaters. This suggests the wide variety of organizations involved in fabricating monsters, which shared the business, formed alliances, competed with another, and succeeded one another over time.

Fairground artists thus constituted a cohesive community, one that, as prevailing morals gradually excluded it from society, embraced its own marginality. Promoters saw themselves as adventurers who opposed social conventions. The fraudulent practices they employed on fairgrounds earned them the hostility of "suckers." The promoters brazenly deceived the latter, describing them as "sad dupes, slaves to routine and their own narrow outlook" who had to be taken advantage of, lest their spectacles be dubbed "Sunday school shows." Yet while its actors were marginalized, the amusement business nevertheless played a central role.

The improvement of photographic technology in the late 1860s, which made retouching possible, allowed certain dramatic effects to be accentuated: the albino's whiteness, the "Ohio Fat Boy's" corpulence, and the giant's enormous height. The development of printing and photocopying made it possible to distribute these pictures, accompanied by bibliographies. Whereas tattooed men had been considered "artificial freaks," the invention of the tattooing machine in 1891—which rendered tattoos commonplace and almost painless—made tattooed people less rare and thus less well paid. Like most businesses, freak shows were brought to an end by economic factors, as the ways in which they dramatized difference ceased to be lucrative.

The Transformation of the Difference Paradigm

In the early stages of the freak show's institutionalization, scientists and specifically doctors played a significant role. Promoters and freaks exploited medical reports and other scientific literature to generate free publicity, since medical and psychological opinion was cited as authoritative evidence. Through a process of reciprocal legitimation, scientists attended freak shows to expand their knowledge of human difference (medical journals used the term "monster"). It is noteworthy that during the 1876 World's Fair in Philadelphia, Doctor Isaac Kerlin, a specialist in retarded children, organized the convention which resulted in the foundation of the American Association on Mental Deficiency.

Yet scientific progress and the institutionalization of the medical profession ultimately resulted in the freak show's moral bankruptcy. The medicalization of abnormality dispelled the freaks' mystery, which it also promised to eradicate. Promoters, who exploited the medical angle when they found it beneficial to use scientific terms in their pitches, would adapt to this trend. As science developed, descriptions of monsters became increasingly sober, and the medicalization of deficiencies generated a sentiment that could not be exploited financially: pity. Monsters that still defied medical categories were given such labels as "kezako" or "nondescript," which conveyed their scarcity in a way that gave free rein to the imagination. A 1908 article in the *Scientific American Supplement* marked a rupture in the treatment of monsters, which were now seen as deserving compassion. Henceforth described and treated by doctors, they came under the authority of clinicians, who alone were deemed qualified to examine them. Thus freaks, many of whom were more wary of doctors than of promoters, participated against their will in a new, medical form of dramatization. The resulting images and descriptions obeyed rules that were different from the freak show's and relegated to the "supposedly neutral and objective" pages of medical encyclopedias.

A New Perspective on the Medicalization of Difference?

In challenging the only partially accurate view that freak shows exploited and demeaned their freaks, Bogdan seeks more than anything to shed light on the human lives behind the spectacle. While it is true that freak shows exploited difference, they did not always exploit individuals, to whom they offered a purpose, as long as they agreed to assume the role of a freak. The circumstances of fairground life were often better than those that doctors later offered them. Though there were many who condemned freak shows, Bogdan shows that they often did so from the standpoint of a conception of difference dominated by the medical profession. His book, which appeared in the United States at a time when "Disability Studies"—a multidisciplinary approach to physical incapacities blending scholarship and activism—were first establishing themselves, protests the reduction of individuals to their medical definition.

While in France movements challenging medical and charity-based conceptions of disability emerged in the 1980s, they never gave birth to movements such as “Disability Studies.” The French have distanced themselves far more gradually from conceptions that see such individuals as needing to be healed. Due to its emphasis on the limits of the medico-centric perspective, the translation of this work could contribute, twenty-five years later, to overcoming the still dominant medical position and promoting a way of thinking that considers human beings in their totality.

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