The Aesthetics of Deformity and the Construction of the “Freak”

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Abstract
With the inception of the “freak show” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, deformity, physical abnormality and unusual facial features were sensationalized into entertainment spectacle, covertly managed, constructed and displayed for the macabre amusement of sideshow visitors and audience members. Due to the historical manipulation and fabrication of freaks’ bodies by sideshow and Odditorium managers to heighten or diminish their “freakish” qualities, the freak show can be conceptualized as an aesthetic space. By framing these social events as an aesthetic space, it is possible to analyze and deconstruct these bodies in the same way a work of art is appraised and valued. A freak is made, rather than born, and the physical elements that constitute freakishness are entirely dependent on the cultural norms and values of the time. Thus the cultural category of a freak is both historically and socially contingent. Through this aesthetic lens, I examine the visual culture of freak shows in order to interrogate the methods of representation employed by sideshow managers. These methods neither disrupted nor subverted the culturally coded conceptions of normality or deformity but, rather, reinforced them. Managers utilized exoticism or aggrandizement, falsified life-story pamphlets and visual chicanery to deliberately separate the audience from the freaks as objects of amusement and maintain social hierarchy. As the nineteenth century wore on, however, freak shows lost their cultural currency, which can be seen as the result of developing anthropological theory and medicine where spectators began to pathologize the deformed body.

Keywords: Freak, aesthetic bodies, exoticism, deformity

“Representations are formations, but they are also deformations.” – Roland Barthes

Introduction
For carnival goers of the 19th century, their senses were immediately bombarded with the demanding, trumpeting call of the sideshow Talker and promoters, ushering spectators into the Odditorium—the carnivalesque version of an auditorium—promising the most unusual, weird and strange assortment of humans ever exhibited. The Talker’s cajoling was corroborated by the flashy posters of “The Skeleton Man,” “The Missing Link,” or “The Human Caterpillar.” These intriguing titles further enticed a crowd as “true life” pamphlets and portraits featuring the freaks were distributed, daring the audience to enter the menagerie and perceive such aberrant wonders with their own eyes. “Freaks” have been historically treated in a sensational and theatrical way throughout the past three centuries by carnivals, sideshows, fairs, circuses and dime museums that systematically divided and characterized freaks into specific social categories. Through the theoretical lens of aestheticism and artistic
construction, while utilizing historical, textual and photographic analysis, I unpack the ways that freaks’ bodies were presented, styled and altered according to the cultural beliefs and philosophies of the time. The personhood of the sideshow freak was separated from their physical body, so that their display in carnivals was composed like an artistic installation. I analyze the freak show to understand the way that the “deviant” body has been aesthetically treated throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. I also examine the aesthetic composition of the “freakish” body to expose the social convictions that undergirded and determined the specific decisions of carnival managers in the aesthetic presentation of the “freaks.”

The development and historical significance of the freak show serve as a context to examine culturally coded normative structures within Western society and interrogate the notion of what constitutes a body as grotesque, monstrous, deviant, or other. The way that freaks have been constructed and construed is largely dependent upon the social definition and designation of stigma, which necessarily marks particular members of society as deformed pariahs. Erving Goffman remarks in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, “The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (1986:3), highlighting the social contingency of stigma.

In staging the freaks—who existed on the fringes of society due to the societal perception of their bodies—as performers or forms of entertainment, it is possible to see the way carnivals, sideshows and freak shows have managed the aesthetic body in ways that do not challenge the social order. Their difference or otherness was managed and manipulated in juxtaposition to the audience, who believed themselves to be normal and entitled to subject these presumed freaks to their gaze. The careful characterization, discourse and artistic construction employed by sideshow managers othered and exotified freaks, thereby generating a distance between the subject and the audience that maintained the safety of cultural normality, sometimes by embellishing or emphasizing the freaks’ differences or anomalies. On the other hand, the aesthetic presentation of the freak often lent them characteristics that made their bodies more socially acceptable, averting any subversive questions about what should be accepted as other, and thereby maintaining the status quo. Through these conscientious constructions, social hierarchies were reified and the audience was easily able to assimilate the freaks into discrete social spheres demonstrably separate from their own. Examining the freak show from this artistic perspective reveals the aesthetic treatment of the freak’s body, the historical context that dictated the presentation’s construction, and the way that American audiences were meant to negotiate these oddities.

Rather than forcing the audience to reexamine their notions of normality and ethnocentrism and confront the cultural contingency of deformity or disability, I argue that the creative methods of constructing the freak employed by sideshow managers, starting in the mid 1800s and extending into the beginning of the 1900s, maintained the hierarchal social and cultural constructions of normality at the time. The visual and rhetorical techniques used to selectively present and control freakishness changed and transitioned over time in reaction to the transformation of norms and ideologies throughout the 20th century. The managers who tracked down individuals considered freakish and fabricated the performance, body, and narrative of the freaks strove to make the entertainers more socially permissible, if not culturally
appropriate. These freak-artisans used the spectacular context of the circus to manipulate apparel, rhetoric and physical appearance to create abnormal individuals framed within pre-existing social categories and biases. It was only when the rhetoric of otherness turned against primitivism, and spectators began to pathologize the body, rather than render it a spectacle, that freak shows lost their cultural currency. What precipitated in the 1960s and 70s, with the photographic work of Diane Arbus, was instead a more subversive version of the freak that was normalized and challenged the notion of beauty and belonging in Western society.

**Defining Terms and Methods**

By looking at the body from an aesthetic perspective, it is possible to view how in the freak show, the body became like a canvas that could be manipulated and distorted for specific visual experiences and reception by the audience. The freak, to a certain extent, transcended the realm of humanity and became a spectacle and a commodity that could be examined and gawked at. As Goffman suggests, “by definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human […] We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class” (1986:5). Since freaks could represent a threat to the current social order and subvert ascendant cultural and biological beliefs of the time, their bodies had to be carefully controlled and artistically rendered so as to nullify the danger Goffman mentions. Michael Chemers elaborates, “the human monstrosity offended the sensibilities of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers because of its deviance from the ‘natural order,’ which by the mid-nineteenth century had become the ‘normal order’” (2008:69), testifying to the perceived threat and discomfort generated by abnormal bodies throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Therefore, freaks' bodies became objects that were visually consumed by the audience, thereby diminishing their agency and personhood. The aesthetic body, a term Nora Jones explains in her dissertation, also entails ways of seeing, and “refers to the fact that individuals, like institutions, are embedded within specific historical trajectories, and their actions and interpretations reflect this” (2002:3). The bodily evaluation and interpretation of freaks by their audience is conditioned and determined by the culture of the time; for example, social philosophies established and normalized hierarchies often revealed in outward appearance or clothes. I will use the social mores that regulated the freakishness of an individual to illuminate the aesthetic decisions of managers in the presentation of their freaks.

Thus far I have employed the problematic term freak, loaded with complex and condemning connotations, to discuss those individuals often featured in carnival and sideshow attractions. I have opted to use the word freak as the carnival goers and sideshow managers of the time used it; they often objectified and dehumanized the individuals through a linguistic devaluation by labeling men, women and children as oddities, monsters, or savages. The aesthetic analysis of a freak’s body should thus be framed within the historical and objectifying context of their display in sideshows as tableaus and as subjects of the collective societal gaze. While the individuals that performed as freaks in carnivals and sideshows did exercise a certain amount of agency and control over their own presentation and spectacular representation, it is beyond the purview of this paper to examine and unpack the ways that they determined and pushed against the freak show’s process of objectification and
commodification\(^1\). Freaks were not always the passive aesthetic products of the Odditorium managers, and I do not wish to diminish their own authority over their bodies—rather, by applying an aesthetic lens, I aim to focus critical attention on the visual decisions and ideologies that dictated freak shows for almost a century.

Given that I am conducting a historical analysis, my methods include photographic analysis of freak photography taken during the late 1800s and early 1900s for Odditorium exhibitions; and secondary sources that examine the history of these sideshows, including the motivations of the carnival managers and the visual techniques used over the years of development and subsequent collapse of the spectacle. I also survey archives of Diane Arbus’s work and interviews conducted during her lifetime (Adams 2001; Goodwin 2009), while drawing from fieldwork at Philadelphia’s Mütter Museum, with help from Nora L. Jones’s dissertation (2002) on the establishment. I also utilize Robert Bogdan’s terms of “aggrandized” and “exotic” freaks to help categorize and distinguish between the ways freaks were visually constructed and presented for appraisal to an audience; I aim to build upon Bogdan’s research on these “types” of freaks by adding an aesthetic component to his analysis\(^2\).

Popular definitions of a freak basically refer to an individual who deviates from what is considered the cultural norm of a body whole and unblemished. Chemers foregrounds the larger theoretical framework of stigma as “enfreakment,” arguing that, “a ‘freak’ cannot exist in the absence of a preexisting social stigma, and that freakery requires conditioned theatrical conventions that often enter into subversive dialectics with that stigma” (2008: 25). This theatricality is a central component in the construction of the freak in sideshows. The freak show was largely a performance that implemented theatricality through the use of props, backdrops, costumes and fabricated narratives to construct a freak that was visually digestible, spectacular and believable, playing upon stereotypes and the preconceived notions of its spectators. Indeed, as Bogdan explains, “‘freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation” (1988:3). Bogdan also posits that the category of freak is not something that is not naturally endowed to the individual, but one that we ourselves create as participants in the cultural perception of normality by projecting our assumptions and discriminations onto their bodies. There would, essentially, be no freaks if we did not imagine them as such.

Freaks were marked by a specific deformity or stigma that designated them as other, or played off of notions of otherness within the culture at the time to “enfreak” someone who would otherwise be accepted as normal. Clyde Ingalls, manager of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Sideshow in the 1930s and one of the progenitors of the freak show, once said, “Aside from such unusual attractions as the famous three-legged man, and the Siamese


\(^2\) It is important to note that there were a variety of types and sub-categories of freaks within these two categories. There was not a strict dichotomy between exotic and aggrandized freaks. I am drawing upon these terms to illustrate the pervasive aesthetic patterns and techniques used in constructing freakishness to note how the categories themselves were culturally constructed.
twin combinations, freaks are what you make them. Take any peculiar looking person, whose familiarity to those around him makes for acceptance, play up that peculiarity and add a good spiel and you have a great attraction” (Bogdan 1988:95). Freaks were considered as moldable as a lump of clay, marketed as a stylized presentation mindfully constructed so as not to offend and disturb the presumed natural order. Freaks, as interchangeable objects and spectacles, were capable of being sculpted into an aesthetic experience that drew hoards of spectators into the hallowed halls of the sideshow.

The Freak Show

The freak show’s golden era lasted from roughly 1870 to 1920; dime museums, circuses, fairs and carnivals each featured their own collection of oddities and were the primary source of popular entertainment in the United States, particularly rural populations (Bogdan 1988). Freak shows were often included as a specialized section in carnivals and circuses, traveling along with the Ferris wheel and popcorn stands as they toured the country. During this time, Americans believed in the supremacy of “progress,” “modernity,” and Western culture, ethnocentric assumptions carnivals and sideshows utilized to their benefit. The methods used by managers in sideshows are very similar to the manipulation of African art by traders (cf. Steiner 2006). The middlemen and traders alter and participate in “the presentation of objects, the description of objects and the alteration of objects” (Steiner 2006:455) to potential buyers. The presentation includes the context of the “discovery” of the object, with discourse about the supposed authenticity of the piece. The description of the object by the trader is equally manipulative as “what we are told about a work of art conditions what we see” (Steiner 2006:458). Similarly, carnival managers capitalized on the power of narrative by penning the “true life” pamphlets of their freaks that were distributed at the carnivals, a topic I will return to later on in the paper. These true-life pamphlets, as well as the portraits of the freaks customarily sold at shows, allowed visitors to purchase a token of their adventures into deviance and carry a reminder home with them of what was abnormal. Finally, the surface of many African art-objects was altered by dealers to cater to Western expectations, just as the freak’s body was clothed, costumed and contextualized to create the appropriate social persona. Part of the stigma management of freaks involved employing specialized signs or symbols that accompanied a freak’s performance and conveyed social information. These symbols stabilized social contact between freaks and “normals”, helped to establish the freak’s social identity, and were meant to present a type of knowledge about who the freak was. Most often, freaks were associated with stigma symbols, “namely, signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual” (Goffman 1986:43-44). Sometimes the stigma symbols were stereotypical emblems of “savagery” and “primitivism”—such as a necklace of bones or a cape made of exotic animal skin and fur—and at other times a stigma symbol was the deformity itself, accomplished by embellishing and focusing the gaze on the site of physical abnormality.

The carnival itself can be understood as an interstitial, liminal space, one that straddles both fantasy and reality, trafficking in entertainment and spectacle. Drawing on Mikhail Bakthin’s folkloristics of the carnivalesque, the circus freaks often featured in carnivals and sideshows represented the “contradictory and double-faced fullness of life” (1968:62), situating...
the carnival as “the site in which aberration exposes the norm,” such that, “social hierarchies and ordered society are established as a space of conflict” (Santos 2003:65). Circus freaks, in all their constructed or biological aberration, had the capacity to throw naturalized truths and social systems into question. As Michael Chemers notes, “The grotesque body […] is unclassifiable, sportive, unique, and above all, transforming into something else. The grotesque body seems to transcend its own individuality, accessing, in its swellings and protuberances, parts of other bodies, unpredictably morphing into new identities and new shapes. The hierarchy cannot contain or explain this wonder and so is rendered false, ‘suspended,’ by the extraordinary form” (2003:296). The very mutability and strangeness of the grotesque body throws established social categories and castes into flux. Chemers writes of the destabilizing power of the grotesque body, “[A] hierarchy can determine only that which represents stable, immovable, and unchangeable being, not free becoming’ (Bakhtin 1968:364). For this reason hierarchies require normate bodies, which are quantifiable, classifiable, and stagnant. The normate form represents a ‘closed individuality,’ a finished body as restricted in its actions as it is in its shape” (2003:296). The freak’s potential to destabilize the normate hierarchy necessitated the need to substantiate the pre-existing hierarchal structure of society and demonstrate the hierarchy’s continued validity despite the presence of the grotesque body. Established social categories were therefore deployed to reconstitute the freak into salient social identities that maintained the ideologies and hierarchal architecture of American culture, to subsequently render the transgressive potential of the freak’s body inert.

Freaks were divided into categories that spoke most to their physical appearance while maintaining the critical distance throughout the entertainment between the audience and the person of their evaluation, who became fetishized in the intentional performance of abnormality. One of these categories was the exoticized freak or the ethnographic curiosity (Bogdan 1988), which capitalized on the strangeness and foreignness of the individual. The exotic freak accentuated or added culturally “primitive” qualities and geographically distanced the freaks from the audience. These exotic freaks were staged as examples of little known regions across the globe that remained “undeveloped” and “savage.” Some of these ethnographic freaks were actually brought from different regions of the world. Anthropologists were known to explore the globe and bring back specimens of primitive peoples, both for research and for physical examination. Surprisingly, however, exoticized freaks came primarily from within the United States yet were advertised as foreign. These cultural strangers, however false, were very much a product of Charles Darwin’s recent and revolutionary discoveries on evolution, which informed the anthropological beliefs of unilineal evolution the time, posited by anthropologists such as Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). These strange “wild” men and women served as symbols of an earlier stage of cultural evolution juxtaposed against the “modern,” biologically superior West. For many, attending a freak show to see these exotic men and women was not, however, meant to be an educational or edifying experience. As Bogdan notes:

Display of non-Westerners in freak shows was not intended as a cross-cultural experience to provide patrons with real knowledge of the ways of life and thinking of a foreign group of people. Rather, it was a money-making activity that prospered by embellishing exhibits with exaggerated, bogus presentations emphasizing their strange customs and beliefs. Showmen took people who were culturally and ancestrally non-
Western and made them into freaks by casting them as bizarre and exotic: cannibals, savages, and barbarians (1988:177).

To corroborate their claims of exoticism and add to the adventurist allure, stories about the discovery of these ethnographic freaks were manufactured and became an integral part of the sideshow experience. One pamphlet, for example, for P.T. Barnum’s “The Missing Link” read, “Is it a lower order of Man? Or is it a higher development of the Monkey? Or is it both in combination? Nothing of the kind HAS EVER BEEN SEEN BEFORE!” (Springhall 2007:20, emphasis in original). These tales of discovery were often imperialistic, celebrating the moral superiority of the West for “rescuing” these so-called savages and bringing them into civilization. These true-life pamphlets simultaneously reified contemporary social hierarchies and imparted a sense of supremacy to the audience. Bogdan explains, “Americans viewing such displays of non-Western people did not confront their own ethnocentrism. On the contrary, what they saw merely confirmed their old prejudices and beliefs regarding the separateness of the ‘enlightened’ and ‘primitive’ worlds; they left the freak show reassured of their own supremacy by such proofs of others’ inferiority” (1988:197). The discourse and narratives of the true-life pamphlets served to confirm, rather than disturb, notions of cultural superiority at the time.

For example, Hiram and Barney Davis (born in 1825 and 1827 respectively), mentally disabled and dwarfed brothers, were exhibited under the monikers of Waino and Plutano, the “Wild Men of Borneo.” They were purportedly captured by Captain Hammond in the jungle and brought back to civilization. In actuality, Hiram and Barney grew up in the town of Mount Vernon, Ohio. Similarly, Tom and Hettie, microcephalic siblings living in Ohio, were drawn into the freak show as Hoomio and Iola, the “Wild Australian Children.” Bogdan explains of siblings’ contrived narrative: “they were described by showmen as members of a near-extinct cannibal tribe from the interior of Australia who had been captured by the explorer-adventurer Captain Reid. Concocted publicity pamphlets, which were for sale at their appearances [stated that they] belong[ed] to a distinct race hitherto unknown to civilization” (1988:119-120). The two were either attired in “authentic” Australian garb (stigma symbols) to capitalize on exotic stereotypes, or adorned in simple dresses and skirts, that would deemphasize their wildness. Even in mundane Western clothing, their heads were still shaved close to the scalp so as to accentuate the abnormal shape of their skulls and face, creating a contrast that made their freakishness more visible. This normalization process, in lieu of exotification, was furthered by the salon backdrop used in photographs of the two, a refined, domestic and elegant setting that substantiated the social order of Victorian society. Bogdan rationalizes these two categories, saying, “By using imagery and symbols they know the public would respond to, showmen created for the person being exhibited a public identity, a presentation, a front, that would have the widest appeal, attract the most people” (1988:95). The manager’s framing preferences would be determined by the audience and would subsequently dictate the aesthetic schema of the freaks. The two categories of presentation for these ethnographic curiosities, as either Tom and Hettie or their stage names Hoomio and Iola, were aesthetic strategies that either appealed to the ethnocentrism of the audience or their sense of propriety and class, subsequently determining the social sphere in which Tom and Hettie were subsumed.
Exotic freaks, which could include those who were represented as cannibals and primitive foreigners, also emphasized animalistic and bestial qualities. Minnie Woolsey suffered from Virchow-Seckle syndrome, which gave her a light, delicate frame, domed head and pinched face with a protruding nose. Due to her appearance, she was customarily costumed and constructed as “Koo Koo the Bird Girl.” Her shoes were shaped to look like bird feet, similar to duck flippers, and she was swathed in a fabric resembling feathers. Her hair was styled in a fantastic ponytail on the top of her head, not unlike the crest of a male bird. She ostensibly belongs in the wild, the backdrop of her picture full of trees and shrubs that add to the illusion\(^3\). Through this feral representation, Minnie Woolsey was not only objectified and othered, but also promoted as a creature beyond human capacities. This dehumanization not only reinforced her display in a freak show like an animal in a zoo, but also divorced her body from human society and culture. The Victorian social order could not “tame” her, or permit her presence; instead she is represented as something they could tolerate but did not have to fear, innocuous as a songbird and just as separate from civilization.

Ishi, the “Last Wild Indian” of the Yahi tribe, though he was not included in a freak show per se, became a national sensation due to his “authenticity” as a cultural other. He was discovered behind a slaughterhouse in California and taken to live in the University of California Hearst Museum of Anthropology, where he served as a janitor (Adams 2001). Though there were no carnival managers shouting that he was the last Yahi of his kind, Ishi became a spectacle due to anthropological interest. For all intents and purposes, he became an artifact of his race contextualized within a museum in which other objects of material culture were frozen in time to be examined. He drew spectators to the museum too, “for the crowds who greeted him with curiosity and affection he was the last survivor of a dying culture, an anachronistic relic of prehistoric times, and a representative of a more natural and wild America. For the anthropologists he was both a figure of inassimilable difference in need of protection from the contaminating influence of civilization” (Adams 2001:44). Ishi and the museum were constantly solicited by showmen who begged him to join their carnival and tour the country. Alfred Kroeber, who worked with Ishi to decipher his language, attempted, in his own way, to normalize Ishi by dressing him in Western attire and posing for a picture next to him, clearly aware of the exoticizing perspective most took toward him. Rachel Adams critiques this attempt, arguing that: “Ishi is no more ‘normal’ dressed in a suit and tie than he is swathed in caveman’s furs. Efforts to assimilate him often only further emphasized how alien he was in the modern environment. Instead of showing his equivalence with American men, the photograph suggests the limits of his adaptability to the new culture. The image thus inadvertently mirrors a convention of freak photography in which the pairing of showman and native highlights the contrast between savagery and civilization” (2001:51-52). In the picture, Ishi is disheveled, his tie askew and his feet bare, still situated within a natural setting that implies his indelible wildness. Whether a genuine stranger to American culture, or an ethnographic freak invented with a necklace of bones and an organic backdrop—stigma symbols of savagery and otherness—the exotic construction of freaks utilized the rhetoric of

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\(^3\) Like the many other examples I offer, this analysis is based off of images and portraits found on the Internet taken of Minnie Woolsey during her lifetime, which document the outfits typically worn during her freak show performances, as well as her representation in Tod Browning’s 1932 cult-classic film *Freaks*. (http://25.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lyj929ePA41qgbie4o1_1280.jpg).
their time to create fascinating subjects that seemed unusual, alien and strange to polite American society. Yet sideshow managers also distanced the exotic freaks on display enough from the Western world so they did not disturb the audience’s sense of propriety or disrupt their belief in their own superiority.

The aesthetic foil to the exotic freak was the aggrandized freak (Bogdan 1988), a category that endowed the individual with status and prestige and rendered the freak more palatable. These were people presented and artistically constructed as perfect gentlemen and ladies, or sometimes princes and war heroes, who could easily be assimilated into society if not for their “unfortunate condition,” such as gigantism or missing limbs. Managers employed prestige symbols, such as fine Victorian suits and dresses, or emblems that implied noble birth or an elevated social rank. The aggrandized freak subsequently maintained the stability of social order, reinforcing hierarchal notions of class and the social significance of certain members of the population above others. Bogdan notes of the aggrandized freak, “the presentation emphasized how, with the exception of the particular physical, mental, or behavioral condition, the freak was an upstanding, high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature” (1988:108). This aggrandized mode made the freaks less disruptive to the audience’s sense of normality and rendered their bodies more easily recognizable and assimilable into contemporary conceptions of class, body and race. For example, Jean Libbera, or Laloo, had a vestigial twin growing out of his stomach. For his portrait, he was dressed in the finest and most aristocratic garb, with a beautiful curtain draping onto the floor, suggesting wealth and status. The vestigial twin was similarly dressed, the perfectly draped arms held by Jean almost tenderly. Though the image is initially arresting, the viewer is able to latch onto familiar items or clothing pieces that suggest that, despite the potential for his body to subvert the norms of gentility, Jean adheres to the fashion and pose of others of his time. These framing techniques exemplify the ways in which carnivals permitted Americans the perverse pleasure of looking within a tightly controlled and regulated environment that projected judgment while insulating the viewer from self-reflection.

Bearded ladies, too, deferred to the established roles and expectations of 19th and 20th century society. Despite their beards, which blurred the distinctions between genders and often occurred due to a hormonal imbalance or, in more serious cases, a condition called hypertrichosis, they still adopted stereotypically feminine postures and affectations in photography that made their freakishness more palatable. Bogdan notes, “they were typically pictured striking feminine poses in elegant surroundings, wearing fashionable dresses and with their hair done in the latest style” (1988:224). Clementine Delait, despite her flowing facial hair, was pictured as the height of femininity, stylish with her hair perfectly coiffed, staring into the mirror to examine her reflection, still concerned with notions of beauty. Bearded women were also often photographed with their husbands, reinforcing their femininity and embracing the typified role of devoted wife. In these pictures, the women often have their hands (sometimes delicately gloved) crossed on their husband’s shoulder, standing slightly behind him; such a pose acknowledges the implicit stratification of gender rather than challenges it.

The aggrandized construction of the freak involved performativity, as well as costumes that were in keeping with the current styles and denoted a certain regal air. The most felicitous

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example of aggrandized theatricality is General Tom Thumb, born Charles Sherwood Stratton. At a height of two feet, eleven inches, Stratton was picked up at a young age by circus showman P. T. Barnum to become a seminal member of Barnum's freak show. Barnum trained Stratton to adopt the manners of someone regal and refined, priming him to become the stage persona of General Tom Thumb, a famed dwarf knight that served King Arthur in Medieval England. Tom Thumb's stage persona relied upon his acting abilities as well as theatrical assistance: "In his early appearances Tom did imitations of Napoleon Bonaparte, Cupid, and a Revolutionary War soldier, dressing up in appropriate costumes. Mock battles were staged between him, posing as the biblical David, and the museum's giants, representing Goliaths. He marched around stage dressed as a soldier wearing a ten-inch sword and performing military drills" (Bogdan 1988:150). Barnum molded Stratton's status, title and origin in the most efficacious form of aggrandized presentation. Stratton was variously photographed in ways that emphasized both his diminutive stature and his noble demeanor. The two were sometimes conflated—Thumb would literally balance in the palm of a man dressed as a soldier to emphasize his tiny figure, but would be similarly clad in finery emblematic of war, in fact looking down upon the man. Tom Thumb's presentation also exemplifies the ways that a freak's traits could be dramatized or pronounced to add to the illusion.

Apart from the exoticized and aggrandized versions of presentation that made freaks' bodies more palatable, photographs of freaks, particularly in the 19th century, utilized perspectival chicanery to play up the specific aberration that was the locus of their enfreakment. As Bogdan notes of freak photography in the 1800s:

They posed in front of one of various painted backdrops depicting scenes that ranged from jungle terrain to Victorian parlors. Props were selected, costumes worn, and the pose struck—all to reflect the image that the manager and the subject wanted to promote […] Dwarfs were photographed in oversized chairs to appear smaller than life, and giants were shot in scaled-down chairs to appear larger. Fat people's garments were stuffed with rags to add to their size. In addition, negatives were doctored, with for example, additional hair added to exhibits whose abundance of hair was their oddity (1988:13).

Sometimes the negatives of the photographs were even doctored to emphasize the supposed deformity of the subject. These methods of visual trickery could be similarly applied in the sideshows. This stagecraft, apart from amplifying the freakishness of the individual, also demonstrates the extent to which freaks were an aesthetic construction, artistic products that—playing with the right proportions and cultural mores—were manufactured rather than born.

Managers could emphasize the aberrant proportionality of their performers, but freak as a social identity, as well as a theatrical stylization, could be induced or adopted by someone who was not necessarily aberrant. Familiarity and recognition of cultural conceptions of deformity and abnormality bred the possibility for self-made freaks. For example, Naomi Sutherland, as well as her six sisters, toured in the W. W. Coles Colossal shows and Barnum and Bailey's sideshow at the end of the 1800s. They were included because of their long hair, which cascaded down to the floor. Altering their appearance by growing out their hair, the Sutherland Sisters emphasized their femininity in a way that was not necessarily the norm, but rather a conscious, non-threatening display choice that altered their social identity enough to
be included in freak shows. The type of freak identities available to individuals was stratified not only along lines of culture and class, but gender as well. While aggrandized male freaks could be transformed into warriors and heroes, women were still second-class citizens treated as docile objects of desire and submission.

Tattooed men and women were also members of the self-made collective, especially considering that, “naturalists and early anthropologists saw the practice of tattooing as the ultimate sign of primitiveness, revealing a lack of sensitivity to pain and unabashed paganism” (Bogdan 1988:241). These illustrated individuals recognized that the premise of freak shows was a display of the aesthetic body, and subsequently chose to embellish their bodies by making their skin a canvas. They acknowledged their persona had become conflated with their artistic appearance. These men, and sometimes women, were often given stories to augment the spectacle; the counterfeit tales suggested foreign travels and adventures that explained this deviance of the flesh. Their tattoos were also construed in the 19th and early 20th centuries as related to primitivism. Cesare Lomboso, an Italian scientist in the early 20th century explains, “tattooing is, in fact, one of the essential characteristics of primitive man, and of men who still live in the savage state” (Lomboso qtd. in Bogdan 1988:249). Understanding the discourses of aberration, propriety and primitivism of the time, we can more accurately understand the way that freaks, and their reception, was very much a product of historical and cultural conditioning.

The Pathologization of Freaks

As the 20th century progressed, the rhetoric and design underlying the freak show as a medium of entertainment began to crumble. Whereas anthropologists before the turn of the century had believed in a strict dichotomy between the primitive and the modern, combined with a single ladder of human evolution, cultural relativism began to emerge from new anthropological inquiry and theory. Led by the work and research of Franz Boas, oft-cited as the father of modern anthropology, cultural relativism rendered ethnological freaks inappropriate and outdated. Systematizing and scientifically qualifying deviance became the new framework of understanding, so that freaks’ bodies were examined more and more on a medical basis. Biomedicine assumed an increasingly dominant role in cultural conceptions of the body, until it became the hegemonic discourse of the 20th century. This transformation in understandings of the body generated what Michel Foucault (1978) refers to as biopolitics, in which bodies were classed, “cared for, protected, cultivated, and preserved from the many dangers and contacts, to be isolated from others so that it would retain its differential value” (123). Foucault goes on to elaborate of the new biomedical paradigm, “The emphasis on the body should undoubtedly be linked to the process of growth and establishment of bourgeois hegemony […] because of what the ‘cultivation’ of its own body could represent politically, economically and historically for the present and the future of the bourgeoisie” (1978:125). The body, subsequently, became even more of a locus of scrutiny and attention in every-day life, appraised both prescriptively and politically. Freaks, despite the efforts of their managers to render their deviance innocuous, came to be regarded within this biopolitical framework as pathogens, diseased threats to the natural order of society and the physical immunity of spectators. Their very morphology literally marked them as bodies out of order. Performers with scaly skin or extra limbs were newly understood as examples of
afflicted, ailing bodies that needed treatment. The only inoculation was to avoid freak shows altogether.

The abnormal body was no longer a spectacle but rather viewed as diseased, stripped of its entertaining or scandalous contexts in lieu of diagnosis and treatment. Freak show exhibitions quite literally became sick:

As physical disability became the province of medical pathology, bodies once described as wonders of nature were reconceived in terms of disease. As anthropologists developed more specialized methods and the notion of cultural relativism became more pervasive, the exhibition of non-Western people as ethnographic freaks was less tolerable. Freak shows were sleazy arenas of exploitation and bad taste, relegated to small towns and bad neighborhoods where they would be patronized by audiences only slightly less marginal than the carnies themselves (Adams 2001:57).

The modes of presentation previously utilized by sideshow managers became “morally bankrupt” and the bodies of the freaks were more and more difficult to theatrically construct and construe in a way that was socially innocuous and agreeable to an audience that no longer wanted these sickened forms in sight. The bodies of freaks, according to the new pathology paradigm, should be examined privately in doctor’s offices and hospital rooms, rather than traveling circuses. Rhetoric about deformity became prescriptive rather than beguiling. Sideshows continued to exist, but were relegated to the margins of society. Even on the margins, though, freak shows still attracted some ticket-buyers, often in the lower, working class (Bogdan 1988), suggesting that the sideshows still reinforced certain elements of social hierarchy. Those individuals who attended the freak shows could feel a sense of physical and moral superiority, as well as thankfulness that despite their impoverishment or low class status, they were still more acceptable than the subjects of the sideshow. The audience still possesses their sense of normality and wholeness.

The freaks, now enfeebled rather than famed, though still objectified by the medical gaze, fell within the domain of science rather than amusement. This pathologization of the freak’s body persists at present to a certain extent. The Mütter Museum, established in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1858, is a museum dedicated to deformity and medical oddities. The Museum’s exhibitions include wax casts of faces deformed by leprosy, microcephalic fetuses, and the skeleton of Chang and Eng, Siamese twins who were in fact famous in the sideshow circuit. Jones (2002) examined the reception of the museum and considered its contents and exhibitions, which also include skeletons of individuals whose muscles ossified and a reproduction of an enormously distended intestine, all accompanied with pictures of the individuals who suffered from the conditions and stories about their lives. Jones comments that “one young visitor said that she could see how some aspects of the Museum could be perceived as similar to a freak show, because ‘some of that stuff is abnormal and whatever is abnormal in our society we sort of deem as being freakish’. This visitor felt that her experience was geared away from the sensational, however, because she was approaching the Museum from a ‘scientific point of view’” (2002:117). The scientific point of view appears to make the museum a destination of medical curiosity and empathy, rather than spectacle and entertainment. Of Jones’s interviews with museum attendants she writes: “In general, the
visitors I spoke with suggested that they believe that our society is now more educated about medical maladies and their reason for visiting was not, therefore, to ‘behold other’s misfortunes.’ Instead, their comments suggest that today’s population is more eager to learn about disease. The social belief that deformity should be hidden away for fear of a return to the dime museum mentality of taking amusement from misfortune is, however, prevalent and has the potential to affect the Mütter Museum” (2002:121-122). The maladies that afflicted the individuals displayed in the museum, therefore, become tools for understanding when framed by scientific and biomedical rhetoric, a more comprehensive form of learning that was absent during the freak show’s inception.

Jones’ ethnographic research on the Mütter Museum in fact draws parallels between the scientific examination of the deformed body and aesthetic appreciation. She argues that “if the value judgments that adhere to the Western notion of beauty are removed, the concept of aesthetics becomes instead the collective standard by which products and ideas are judged. In this usage then, art and science both have a conception of aesthetics. Art’s aesthetics stem from collective subjective standards for art, while scientific aesthetics come from consensus standards of assumed objectivity” (2002: 165). Using this framework for analysis, we can come to understand the way freaks have been aesthetically constructed to dictate the critical perception of their bodies, predetermining, to a certain extent, the way that the viewer will see the person, if they perceive a person at all. By placing the skeleton of Chang and Eng behind glass, the Mütter Museum attempts to instantiate the purportedly objective standards of scientific inquiry and examination. The heading “Cabinet of Curiosities” above the display, however, belies the sordid past of museums and their origins in the freak show. The inspection of art and science are each based on respective standards of aestheticism, each with their own underlying, inherently subjective prejudices and values.

Destabilizing Stigma: Everyday Freakery

Considering the way the body of the freak has been historically and culturally constructed such that deformity is construed as harmless to the public, until the pathologization of the body diminished the entertainment value of the sideshow, Diane Arbus’s photographic work assumed the job of normalizing the freak. Arbus’s photography of freaks in the 1960s and 70s subverted the social order conscientiously maintained throughout the duration of freak shows by eliminating the visual techniques and trickery of the freak’s design and sideshow setting. Instead, Arbus employed a minimalist, mundane approach to frame her subjects. The intimate, private spaces inhabited by her subjects revealed how truly normal freaks are. Adams points out that in Arbus’ work, “ugliness, asymmetry, awkwardness were no longer associated only with the photography of social marginality, for anyone could look like a freak if the camera were to catch them at the proper angle” (2001:124). Arbus’s photographs stripped away both the theatrical and medical aspects, exposing individuals perfectly content in their freakishness, so comfortable, in fact, that it causes the viewer to reconsider those attributes that designate them as other.

Through her artistic process, Arbus sought to dismantle the physical characteristics and symbols that define or signal deformity. Arbus once commented in an interview, “think of this: That Beauty is itself an aberration, a burden, a mystery, even to itself” (Goodwin 2009:168). Indeed, Arbus went so far as to break down the illusory boundary between the freak and the observer, the audience and the spectacle, by saying that “there’s some sense in which I always
identify with them” (Goodwin 2009:160). The othering that typically occurred in freak shows operated along the premise that the categories of freak construction could sufficiently distance the freaks from typical society, so that the audience would not have to negotiate whether the same physiognomy could have manifested within them. Instead, freakishness, through Arbus’s camera lens, became a universal human trait that could develop internally or externally in any person. Arbus was “reacting against the constraints of social and artistic convention, but she was also creative, generating images that would change the way we understand the relationship between deviance and normality as it has been conveyed through photographic images” (Adams 2001:124). Suddenly, the ethnographic freak was recognized as a neighbor, the aggrandized freak resplendent in their utter normality and simple participation in everyday life. Her work unsettled the boundaries so carefully constructed by sideshow managers in the early 1900s.

Through her photography, Arbus stripped away the theatrical context of the freaks that either diminished or enhanced their oddities, to create portraits in supremely mundane and familiar settings, utilizing space and surroundings to further deconstruct the illusions of exoticism or royalty that had previously framed freak portraiture. Goodwin explains how Arbus often conducted her portrait sessions in familiar locations for her subjects, or in their very homes, so as to “convey the integrity and self-possession of an individual” (2009:157). Freakishness was no longer equated with a performative identity, and the viewer had to face people, who existed as domestic citizens rather than spectacles. For example, “Jewish Giant at Home” (1970) portrays a very tall man, stooped under the low ceiling while his parents peer up at him. He needs no props to accentuate his height and he transcends the category of oddity. Similarly, in “Untitled (1)” (1970-1971), two mentally disabled women link arms and smile delightedly for the camera, wholly joyful. They seem unaware that their condition marks them as strange, which is necessary to the stigmatization of their form. They stroll the streets as blithely as any other person, collapsing the boundaries between the ordinary and the oddity.

Crediting Arbus with these subversive artistic methods is not to say that Arbus’s photographs were not artistically problematic. The subjects of her portraits were primarily anonymous, which, as Sally Price asserts, places “the artist, rather than the object, at center stage” (1989:57). Thus, in the anonymity of her subjects, Arbus risks objectifying the freaks as they were in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and renders the freak interchangeable rather than singular, just as freaks were commodified and fetishized during the golden era. Price problematizes the anonymity of African art, arguing, “Its products are emblems rather than reproductions of reality, symbols rather than copies,” such that Arbus’s photographs may fetishize the individuals while still distancing the audience from their reality (1989:60). Despite these problems, it cannot be disputed that “Arbus contributed significantly in the cultural process of establishing a matter-of-fact place for ‘freaks’ within the visual mainstream” (Goodwin 2009:164). The freak was still aesthetically framed by the camera lens, but became included as a member of society, rather than relegated to the fringes of culture as a spectacle or individual to be diagnosed and treated.

**Blemishes and Beauty: Concluding Thoughts**

To determine that an individual is a freak is to affix upon their bodies a set of aesthetic principles grounded in historical and cultural conceptions of “beauty” and “normality.”
Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, sideshows that heralded freaks as their main attractions used theatrical, stylized and performative techniques to construct socially salient, permissible identities and narratives for the freaks. These creative constructions of freakery maintained the status quo while providing a subjective, though not necessarily culturally deviant, version of freakery for public observation. As Michael Baxandall explains, “the best paintings often express their culture not just directly but complimentarily, because it is by complimenting it that they are best designed to serve public needs: the public does not need what it has already got” (1972:48). The bodies of the freaks are just as much works of art and symbols of culturally coded mores and principles as the paintings Baxandall discusses, and that the figure of the freak becomes “the necessary cultural complement to the acquisitive and capable American who claims the normate position of masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class” (Adams 2001:31). If we are to examine those characteristics that qualify beauty, we must first examine which traits we consider ugly or aberrant. Would we have either category without the other? Men, women and children were sensationalized when they should have been sympathized with, rebuked rather than respected. Freaks were subjected to the cultural and social sensibilities of entertainers as they juggled the paradox of acknowledging the presence of morphological alternatives in human society, while denying a place for them to belong and be accepted among their kin. Instead, the freak was often designed into acceptable cultural categories, rendered as aesthetic bodies to be consumed and marketed, ironically, like works of art.

This text reveals the cultural sensibilities and aesthetic considerations that determined that way a freak’s body was manipulated, marketed and manufactured, subsequently forcing us to interrogate our own contemporary notions of abnormality or deviance. The bodies of freaks were managed to reassure rather than discomfort their audience. As Goffman asserts, “One can therefore suspect that the role of normal and the role of stigmatized are parts of the same complex, cuts from the same standard cloth” (1986:130). The freak show depended on the rigidly controlled illusion that the audience could enter the carnivalesque space, encounter representations of deviance and monstrosity, and then leave, presuming that the so-called freaks would never transcend the liminal boundaries between polite society and spectacle. Freakishness is a perspective and an artistic construction rather than an innate trait or condition, a mode of presentation that reveals as much about class, normality and health as deformity and our own psyche.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my advisor and mentor Professor Lucy Johnson for all her guidance and help, as well as Professor Judith Goldstein for teaching her class on “Anthropology of Art,” which inspired this paper. I also want to express my gratitude for Jessica Hardin’s dedication and sincere patience throughout the editorial process.

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