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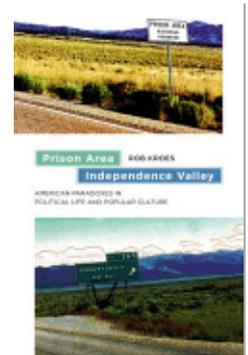
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FREAKS ON DISPLAY: A TALE OF EMPATHY AND OSTRACISM

What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it. . . . We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be. Let this universal and natural reason drive out of us the error and astonishment that novelty brings us.

—Michel de Montaigne, “Of a Monstrous Child” (“Au sujet d’un enfant monstrueux,” *Essais*, Chapitre 30, Livre II, 1580–88)

Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein [When you stare long into an abyss, the abyss stares into you as well].

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Aphorism 146, 1886

Introduction: Freak Shows and the Health of the Social Body

IN HIS 1962 *Freaks*, Leslie Fiedler laments the disappearance of a form of popular entertainment that he fondly remembers from his youth, the freak show. As he sees it, its demise may have had to do with a secular change in the public’s appetites, tastes, and sensitivities. No longer was it seen as acceptable behavior to laugh at other people’s birth defects, or unabashedly to pa-

rade the grotesque variations on the human body before an eager public willing to pay the price of admission.¹

The timing of Fiedler's book was not without irony. While looking back at the history of freak shows, he did not see a wave coming, if not a tidal change, that would wash across the cultural landscape of the 1960s and would redeem the appeal of freaks and everything they stood for in terms of transgression, cultural inversion, and festive rebellion. Freak as a verb (as in "freak out") and a noun came to stand for cultural options that a youthful generation eagerly explored. As a sign of the times a film was re-released that following its first release in 1932 was seen as too shocking and was rapidly withdrawn: Tod Browning's *Freaks*. Once given its second lease on life, it rapidly turned into a cult movie. In the more culturally tolerant and morally permissive atmosphere of the 1960s the film's message was finally received as intended. Using the format of Hollywood's playful genre of the backstage musical, pioneered by Busby Berkeley, *Freaks* can be seen as a backstage freak show. It shows the daily life of circus artists, freaks—or human prodigies—among them, as it unfolds behind the stage of their public performance. The narrative is a variation on the traditional Hollywood romance, given a twist by the fact that this time the one to fall in love is a dwarf, Hans, and the lady of his dreams the trapeze artist and femme fatale Cleopatra. As the melodrama unfolds it turns out that Cleopatra marries Hans for the money he has inherited. Not only does she openly ridicule and denigrate him, she also starts to poison him. That is when the circus community of freaks bands together. If one of them is done harm, all are hurt. In an act of solidarity, restoring the moral order of their community, they take cruel revenge, maiming Cleopatra in ways that forever turn her into a bird woman, a freak that will henceforth be part of the show to titillate the visitors. All is well that ends well: at the end of the film Hans and his devoted fellow-midget Frieda declare everlasting love for each other.

In seeing to it that justice is done and Cleopatra will get her just

desert, the film more readily enticed 1960s publics than publics in the 1930s to empathize with the freaks, and to take their point of view. More important, the 1960s public saw through the act of cruel revenge at the end of the film and took the point that freaks can be *made*, that people can be “enfreaked” or turn themselves into freaks. This is precisely what set the tone and language of much of the cultural revolution in the 1960s, and from there could lead straight to the gradual self-enfreakment of pop stars like David Bowie or Michael Jackson.² Among the many mercurial transformations of his public image is a depiction of Bowie as a 1920s carnival freak in the lurid cover drawing for his 1974 album *Diamond Dogs*. Similarly, for the ongoing construction of his public persona Michael Jackson as well had taken his cues from the world of the freak sideshows, a world of which he had acquired intimate knowledge. Many freak performers had indeed reached stardom and were known across the United States by such grandiloquent names as General Tom Thumb, a famous nineteenth-century Lilliputian, or Prince Randian, in a manner of theatrical self-construction that Robert Bogdan has called the aggrandized mode of freak presentation. That Prince Randian, an armless, legless, writhing body, was also known as “the human worm” illustrates the precarious balance to be kept between public derision and admiration. Yet stardom they had reached, often before they actually starred in Tod Browning’s Hollywood production. And despite the fact that *Freaks* was a financial disaster for MGM and was pulled early in its initial run, the reputation of its “stars” went on undamaged.

There is a 1941 photograph of a freak sideshow at the Vermont State Fair of September 1941. It was taken by Jack Delano, one of the famous documentary photographers who had gone out under government auspices to capture the face of the American nation as it lived, unbroken, through the years of the 1930s Great Depression. Most of the tens of thousands of photographs that came out of this official Farm Security Administration (FSA) project are in black and white. With the Kodachrome revolution

of the late 1930s, though, some FSA photographers took up the new technique and bathed their pictures of a resurgent America in saturated sumptuous color. Delano's photograph captured a touring freak sideshow announcing its attractions on colorful billboards, posted side by side. It culminated in the proud announcement that "Here, in person, are Zip and Pip," a reference to two so-called pinheads, microcephalics, that had appeared in Browning's film. In all likelihood it falsely appropriated a name that had been famous in the sideshow world since the late 1800s. It testified to the star quality that many freaks had acquired among the larger public. Yet at the same time it hid the story of the fate that had befallen many freaks in the preceding years. They had drawn the attention of the medical community and its early views of disabled bodies as somehow subhuman, as genetically degenerate, a biological throwback to earlier stages of development of the human race. Many freaks in the 1930s with mental retardation were no longer seen as proper agents of public entertainment. They were removed from the public gaze and put in mental institutions.

One specific angle in this medicalization of the perception of freaks was the point of view of eugenics, which conceived of them as a threat to the healthy body of the nation. America, in the 1920s and '30s, had moved into an era in which seeing real people with disabilities out in public space was no longer acceptable; it had become an affront to the "moral order of the body" and the curative power of science and medicine. From the late 1860s to the 1970s, so-called ugly laws had been adopted in a number of American cities meant to keep disabled people from public view.³ Freaks should no longer be seen as "celebrities," but as abnormal humans who needed to be hidden in institutions rather than displayed. A strategic role in this reconceptualization of the freak from a eugenics perspective was played by the Eugenics Record Office (ERO), set up in 1910 on Long Island, New York, under the direction of leading eugenicist Charles Davenport. Scientists from the ERO made special trips to the entertain-

ment center on Coney Island, which included amusement parks and human spectacle presentations—that is, freak shows. There they took photographs and collected information on sideshow performers. These performers may have been curious spectacles for the crowds, but the eugenicists saw their disabilities as bad heredity. Davenport began observing freak shows for specimens in his scientific theories. With their reports and photographs, the ERO hoped to eliminate deviant bodies to “normalize” the population of the United States. This ominous project came to an end after the Carnegie Institution withdrew all funding following a review of the office’s work. Their reports and articles have since been discredited, and were no longer considered to present scientific facts.⁴

It is true that American scientists and moralists were tough on the freak show, but their approach to oppression never went beyond disseminating their views and promoting legislation. Sideshows, traveling or stationary, went on to entertain the masses. Freaks went on to inform the public themselves through the production under their own auspices of so-called *cartes de visite*, as they had done since the mid-nineteenth century. Human “prodigies” had carefully posed photographs taken and often ordered thousands of reproductions. They would sometimes write about themselves on the back of the card, bragging about their physical attributes or talents. These *cartes de visite* were widely collected by Americans and made quite a bit of money for the freaks and the owners of freak shows. Freaks, in all such cases, kept a measure of control as the agent of their own public persona.

How different a course their lives had taken in America compared with developments in Europe. How lucky midgets Hans and Frieda could count themselves, both emigres from Germany at the time of World War I. A whiff of Germanness had never left them in their theatrical performance, in tribute to American vaudeville’s stock German characters. Their language is strangely German in idiom and evokes a world of German aristocracy and social manners, a world also of Lilliput towns that had provided

safe havens for midgets to lead their lives as they chose to, yet were open to the public. Like Hans and Frieda themselves, the idea of Lilliput towns had crossed the Atlantic and become a feature of the entertainment on offer at Coney Island, known as Lilliputia, resembling, at half-scale, fifteenth-century Nuremberg, Germany.⁵ But the country that Hans and Frieda had left behind had cruelly changed behind their backs. After the Nazi takeover of power in 1933, the new government issued its “Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases.” People with so-called hereditary illnesses had to be sterilized. In 1937, Germany passed a law making freak shows illegal, decrying them as exploitation, thus making it legal for the Nazis to arrest freak show acts and subject their members to Nazi-style sado-medical experiments. A well-known and poignant case is that of the Transylvanian Jewish Ovitz family, sent to Auschwitz on May 7, 1944. The family members all had dwarfism, an affliction technically known as pseudo-achondroplasia. They had previously traveled as a musical troupe. Nazi doctor Josef Mengele subjected them to his gruesome medical experiments, yet fascinated by their deformity also displayed them, stripped naked, to groups of senior Nazis while lecturing on their inferior genetics. He also created a film for Adolf Hitler’s amusement starring the Ovitz family. If there is an echo here of Nuremberg, it is the Nuremberg of the anti-Jewish race laws aimed at preserving the purity of Germany’s Aryan stock.

Here the lines of my following argument are beginning to fall into place. It is the synchronicity of forms of spectacle as they took place on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s and ’30s that I wish to explore. Public spectacle, its audiences and central actors, are the template underlying the comparisons that I will make. The sideshow as it developed in American public entertainment has all the necessary ingredients: the spectators and the stage that draws their gaze, plus, crucially, the optical regime that draws an invisible line setting spectators apart from the subjects of their attention. It is a line, though, that can be transgressed by

acts of empathy and imaginary identification, making for a community of feeling. On the other hand such a line can set apart and separate, define inclusion versus exclusion. Freaks, for instance, can either be jeered at as human worms, vermin, or seen as princes, worthy of respect and deference. Identities can thus be collectively constructed in intricate exchanges across the line of separation. Freaks can be made, human beings can be turned into freaks. And spectacles, as I conceive of them, are the productive settings for this to unfold.

In this vein I will be looking at spectacles in the United States beyond the traditional freak show, spectacles such as public lynchings, events that turned their victims into freaks, writhing as they were tortured to death, while the public looked on in morbid fascination.

As these witnesses must have seen it, a threat to the social body of their community was being stamped out. Changing context and focus, I will also be looking at the way that in the late 1930s in Germany Jewish citizens were herded together and paraded through the streets in acts of instant enfreakment, of physical othering, exposed to the howls and jeers of an agitated public.

If these are the dark scenarios, leading to exclusion and ostracism, if not physical annihilation, the common element connecting those who do the excluding and ostracizing is the anguished feeling of having suffered a contamination of their collective purity. If there are positive scenarios—and there are, as we will see—they consist in the creative and transgressive affiliation across lines of division as these present themselves. As the voice of the sideshow barker in the film *Freaks* reminds us: “But for the accident of birth, you might even be as they are.”

Freak Shows, Spectacle, and Specularity

Freak shows have always been a form of entertainment. Their history as an organized institution dates back to the opening in New York of P. T. Barnum’s first museum in 1841, yet the ex-

traordinary, or grotesque, or monstrous human body (as it was variously called over time) had a long history of scrutiny and fascinated interpretation. It had always drawn the intrigued, if not bewildered, gaze of those who conformed more closely to the statistically normal. They may in embarrassment have looked askance, or, forming throngs, have hounded the grotesque outcast, throwing stones and abuse in endless, merciless replays of medieval painter Hieronymus Bosch's nightmarish evocations of the defamation of Christ. Such age-old carnivalesque mob scenes have always managed to find the freakish outsider as the necessary Other for the collective affirmation of community and normality. With Barnum, though, the mob was domesticated, transformed into a public contained by an optical regime including spectators as much as it did the freaks on display. The public, at the price of admission, was invited to enjoy the pleasures of human difference, physical or mental, or more precisely to satisfy their morbid fascination with the humanly abnormal, all safely contained within a panopticon setting, separating observers from the observed in a balance of power favoring the observer.⁶ The public display of freaks was at the same time a strategy of containment, creating a distance between freaks and normal humans, and allaying fears that "there but for fortune stand you and I." As in zoos, the spectatorial arrangement created a distance for observation that could also serve as the space for reverie and fantasy, for imaginative exploration of borders and border crossings, for taking the role of the other, be it chimpanzee or freak. If there was the magnetic pull of the abyss on the other side, the optical regime was there to prevent people from succumbing to this spell. But as we may remember from Mikhail Bakhtin's explorations of carnivals and other border-crossing, or *transgressive*, occasions, societies have historically offered a range of options to pursue precisely such empathetic fantasies of exchanging identities.⁷ The borderline between the devious and the straight is never rigid nor given, but subject to social construction and contestation, based on fiction rather than empirical

fact. Due to the extraordinary powers of empathy that fiction holds over its readers, novels may well be the ideal instrument to teach us empathy with the weird and freakish. Thus, in his 2010 novel *The Third Reich*, Roberto Bolaño has a scene on a tourist beach on the Costa Brava in Spain. Two couples on the beach observe a man who rents out pedal boats. As he emerges from the water having launched one of his boats, the onlookers see the burns covering most of his face, neck, and chest, dark and corrugated. They convince themselves that nobody is born like that. The burns weren't recent. "They probably dated back five years, or even more to judge by the attitude of the poor guy . . . , who had clearly grown used to attracting the same interest and stares as monsters and the mutilated, glances of involuntary revulsion, of pity at a great misfortune. To lose an arm or a leg is to lose a part of oneself, but to be burned like that is to be transformed, to become someone else."⁸ As if in Barnum's museum, the onlookers weigh options, interpret what they see, and wonder whether this is a birth defect or the effect of an accident. In this vignette of curiosity, empathy, and fantasy, the typical freak's public is captured beautifully, to the point of its wondering about the aspect of transformation, of "becoming someone else."

There is one element missing in this particular vignette, an element that forms the gripping, if not haunting, quality to so many of these cross-border encounters, the element of eye contact, the exchange of glances. They are often experienced and told in words suggestive of a hint of understanding, a feeling of rapport. Toward the end of William Faulkner's *Light in August*, there is a lynching.⁹ The atrocities are mostly suggested, not explicitly described. Seen through the eyes of members of the lynching pack, the reader is given to understand what the leader of the pack, Grimm, has been doing to the victim. "When they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. 'Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell,' he said." The deed has

been done, a castration has been perpetrated. The victim is left to bleed to death. "The man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes." As the blood rushed out of his loins "like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket," in what is described as a last "black blast" (are we to understand this as a metaphor, an image of a last victorious and retaliatory ejaculation?), "the man seemed to be soaring into their memories forever and ever." If seeds had been planted, they were the seeds of ineradicable memory.

By 1932, when Faulkner published *Light in August*, white Southerners had perpetrated thousands of lynchings. Yet Faulkner, according to his own account, had never witnessed a lynching. He must have read about them, and heard stories told. In his creative reworking of these elements, he reconceptualized them through powers of imagination and empathy that emphasize the present as simply a moment in the long chain of memory. Central to his account of the final transfixed gaze of lynchers witnessing the dying moments of their victim is the instant translation into the long life of memory. This may be characteristic of Faulkner's more general attitude toward the present, seen as only the most recent chink in a longer chain of memory. Yet it may also help us understand the magic transactions taking place in the brief moments of an exchange of glances, moments of transgression, establishing through eye contact rapport and empathy across dividing lines separating insiders from outsiders, the established from those beyond the pale. Whatever the precise dividing line, there is always that no-man's-land on either side of the line that only the human imagination can straddle. It is a liminal space where fantasy is given free rein, as in the case when a child in the zoo taps on the glass to draw the attention of the gorilla behind it, or when King Kong and the woman protagonist in the various film versions of the story exchange glances suggestive of a sentimental bond forming. There is the brief, but unforgettable mo-

ment toward the end of Tod Browning's *Freaks*, when the freaks take terrible revenge on Cleopatra. The revenge posse is led by a freak without arms or legs, Prince Randian, also known as the Human Worm. As he is squirming to move forward through the mud, three seconds into the close-up, Randian breaks the "fourth wall," briefly escaping the narrative as he looks directly into the camera. It is the only time this is allowed to happen in the film. While used to being the object of the gaze of others, Randian now returns the gaze and takes command of its direction, upsetting the conventional balance of power in the world of the freak sideshow.

This reference to *Freaks* may give us pause to reflect on early twentieth-century changes in the public exposure to freaks and everything they represented in terms of the grotesque, the macabre, the shock caused by physical deformities and disfigurement. For one thing, in the wake of World War I human wreckage had washed across public space, with people maimed and mutilated an unavoidable presence. Their gruesome features found reflection in artists' representations, most directly in German painting by Max Beckmann or George Grosz, and more indirectly in the visual horror we may recognize in German cinema of the time, with its expressionist evocations of the macabre and horrendous in films like Robert Wiene's 1920 horror film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Friedrich W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*, or, from the same year, Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler*. Altogether different sources were tapped to cater for this general appetite for the freakish and grotesque as were to be found in the work of French author Victor Hugo, a towering figure in nineteenth-century French cultural and political life. His huge novels, broad allegories of noble impulses toward fairness and freedom doing battle with forces of repression and iniquity, were like tales of ultimate redemption following terrible tribulations. Good may come out victoriously in the end, but often in highly symbolic ways, in a transcendence of the common worldly course of events. Epic tales like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with the haunting figure of Quasimodo, or *Les Misérables*, were

given cinematic renditions; the former was turned into a hugely successful Hollywood film in 1923, while at least ten film versions of the latter came out between 1906 and 1925, four of which were American. Together they had established the mass appeal of Hugo's stories before his last and perhaps greatest novel—*L'homme qui rit* (The Man Who Laughs)—was brought to the screen in 1928. In this film we see the convergence of a number of developments crucially important for the public representation of freakishness. The first and most important is the rise of film itself as a medium turning the traditional traveling freak show into a mass spectacle. Never before had so many been able to indulge their morbid fascinations or, in the dark of movie theaters, to engage in fantasies of identification and empathy with freaks. A second crucial confluence occurring in these years was not only the transatlantic adoption of separate European strands of imagination of the macabre and grotesque but also the fact that a great number of European artists, actors, directors, writers, and composers had converged on Hollywood. Thus, *The Man Who Laughs* had a German director, Paul Leni, who had won acclaim as a leading figure in German expressionist cinema with, for example, *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (The Cabinet of Wax Figures). The lead actor also was German, Conrad Veidt, remembered for his role in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.¹⁰ Now, in *The Man Who Laughs*, he impersonated Hugo's central tragic character of Gwynplaine, son of an English peer of the realm who had incurred the wrath of the English king and was sent into exile. The son, at an early age, was sold to a roving band of kidnapers, the Comprachicos, who cruelly disfigured his face, turning it into a freakish mask with an indelible grimace running from ear to ear. His inner emotional life had been forever sundered from the inane frozen grimace, inviting laughter and hilarity, if not abhorrence, among all those whose eyes beheld him. Yet, in a master stroke of creative genius, Hugo had paired this tragic victim of mutilation to an angelic, almost ethereal, blind girl, Déa, whose power of inner vision allowed her to see Gwynplaine unblemished, in the

full beauty of his inner person. If, at the end of the story, they are bound in eternal union, it is not on this earth but in heaven.

There is a transcendent lesson in Hugo's vision of the human power to look beyond the face of human appearance in search of an inner and deeper humanity, a lesson for all those who are confronted with deformed and disfigured fellow human beings. But there are more lessons to be learned, lessons to do with the power of human agency on this earth rather than the hereafter. At one climactic moment in the story, Gwynplaine, restored to what is rightfully his, the status of a peer of the realm, addresses a full session of the House of Lords. Through a superhuman exertion of will, he manages to control the frozen expression of his mask and to capture the attention of those in attendance. He speaks, as he puts it, on behalf of all those downtrodden masses of mankind, kept down by the tyrannical system of a handful lording it over the rest of society. It is not long, though, before the contagious grimace takes over and the House breaks out in hilarious fracas, rolling about with laughter. Gwynplaine is literally laughed out of court, his message lost to those whom it concerned. This, probably, is the central tragic vignette of the quandary of all those imprisoned behind a mask, a physical exterior, not of their own choosing or making. Yet, if agency, if will power, was thwarted in Gwynplaine's case, it helps us recognize those moments where the struggle ends in victory. I, for one, was reminded of these moving words by James Baldwin, from his last interview. He too had known a struggle to overcome the restraints of a mask; being black, being gay, with a face that was not everyone's idea of male beauty, he bore a visual stigma that the outside world responded to before it took pains to know his inner self. This is what he had to say: "My father taught me . . . what to fight for. At first I was only fighting for safety, or money. Then I fought to make you look at me. Because I was not born to be what someone said I was. I was not born to be defined by someone else, but by myself, and myself only."¹¹

"Then I fought to make you look at me." These words by

James Baldwin take us back to our earlier reflections on the gaze in the interactions between freaks and their observers. Reflections like these may remind us of Alan Trachtenberg's chapter on illustrious Americans in his *Reading American Photographs*.¹² Having introduced the reader to the early ways of exhibiting photographs of leading citizens in the established tradition of the picture gallery, confirming and reasserting social hierarchies, he turns the tables and looks at a collection of slave photographs, giving them the same close and careful attention as he gives the gallery-type pictures. The photographs—daguerreotypes—were made at the behest of celebrated Harvard natural scientist Louis Agassiz by J. T. Zealy, a local daguerreotypist in South Carolina. They were intended as anthropological specimens, to illustrate racial characteristics. The sitters, stripped of their clothes, had been turned into mere objects to the cold scientific gaze. Their humanity taken from them, they were made to represent bodily types in mid-nineteenth century natural science reflections on the possible polygenesis of varieties of humankind. In his passage on these slave photographs, Trachtenberg has this to say: "Without a public mask to mediate their encounter with the lens, the eyes of the enslaved Africans can only reveal the depths of their being—for, as naked slaves, they are permitted no social persona. . . . The Zealy pictures reveal the social convention which ranks blacks as inferior beings, which violates civilized decorum, which strips men and women of the right to cover their genitalia. And yet the pictures shatter that mold by allowing the eyes of [the sitters] to speak directly to ours, in an appeal to a shared humanity. This represents an extraordinary achievement, partly Zealy's (the photographer), partly due to the marvel of photography itself" (p. 56). The daguerreotypes are so compelling because in spite of the coerciveness they represent, they possess a power of communication greater than the likenesses of posturing civic leaders in photography galleries in New York.

This power of photographed people to stare back, to cast a meaningful glance, inviting our attention, is what Marianne

Hirsch, in her *The Familial Gaze*, has called the specularity—from Latin *speculum*, “mirror”—of photographic portraits, looking at us yet mirroring our gaze and making for an mutuality of glances.¹³ She points to the element of exchange between the gaze captured in a photograph and the eye of the observer. Meaning is being read into the expression of the gaze in the photograph. Yet, unlike exchanges in real life, before a photograph our speculations on what is being “said,” are one-sided, producing dialogues in our heads rather than conversations with live people. In the case of people long dead, particularly those we might never have met in real life, like Zealy’s black slaves, we can feel a chasm opening up inside us, an abyss that not even the magic of glances locked in exchange can bridge. Those on the other side of the abyss gaze at you and beckon to you, clamoring for your attention, like the shades of the dead calling to Odysseus during his visit to Hades, or the figures speaking to Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. Yet such urgent declarations of self and calls for recognition leave the living in impotent melancholy.

No single image captures this feeling, this mixture of melancholy and the nostalgia of farewell, quite as well as Edward Curtis’s famous 1904 picture entitled “The Vanishing Race.” All of Curtis’s work in the photography of American Indians can be seen as a tribute to their cultural heritage on the eve of their imminent extinction, inspired by a fatalistic sense of the course of history, if not the course of American empire. The photograph, I may remind the reader, shows five Indians on horseback riding off toward a dark horizon. The fourth in line turns around on the saddle and casts a glance back at the photographer, at us. Captured in that wistful pose, he seems to bid farewell forever. And the photograph’s caption will forever set the reading of the image for the observer whose single response to the Indian’s gaze can only be one of sorrow and nostalgia. If the Indians’ time in history as their own free agents was assumed to be up, they were given a new lease on life as their own simulacrum, “free” to reenact their lives on stage and on screen, as spectacle and en-

tainment to satisfy the modern mass public's appetite for the exotic and extraordinary.

Parades: Festive and Vicious

Two points in time to set the parameters for this section:

1901: The Barnum and Bailey circus comes to the Netherlands. Four trains composed of sixty-seven specialized carriages took the entire caravan from one city to the next. The largest of a total of seventeen tents allowed for two shows a day which twelve thousand visitors could attend. Among the many fabulous items on the program was a display of human freaks. As the description in the program booklet had it: "The rarest of human beings on earth were there for all to see." The text went on to say: "These human specimens have the same sensations and feelings as other humans." The program also makes clear what freaks are, but adds that freaks themselves prefer to be known as prodigies, or human curiosities.

1930s in Europe: Many small people, dwarfs or Liliputteans, under special Nazi eugenicist programs were sterilized and/or killed under euthanasia programs until 1945. The view of freaks of nature here is one that sees them as "Untermenschen," degenerates, unworthy of procreation or even a normal life.

The first view emphasizes the common humanity that human prodigies and normal people share. It is the view expressed in the first motto to this text, a quotation from Montaigne. It invites audiences to empathize, and to translate their curiosity into interaction, starting conversations, buying *cartes de visite* from freaks. P. T. Barnum, as the master impresario of impression management, constantly played games at the borderlines of the optical regimes that traditionally set audiences apart from people put on display. He invited the public as it were to see for themselves and not believe what he told them, to engage in an exchange of meaningful glances between observers and ob-

served. Photographs, such as *cartes de visite*, allowed people to return to those moments of exchange and to continue an inner conversation with people physically different, visibly Other. Thus in the display of freaks, many have been the instances of a mediating gaze, turning otherness and difference into an invitation to empathize with freaks as fellow humans. The gaze may have come directly from the freaks themselves, inviting the public to acknowledge their gaze and respond to it, or through the work of sympathetic intermediaries such as film makers and photographers. The optical regime, of the panopticum as in the freak show, or set by the framing of the cinema screen or the photograph, made for borderlines that invited playful transgression. If borderlines had been drawn, it was to set the playing field for these games of exchange and empathy to be played, and for fantasies of individual identities blurring to be indulged. Diane Arbus may have had this in mind when she gave an account of her work, a body of photography of arresting, absorbing images of dwarfs, twins, giants, nudists, and carnies: "I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them."¹⁴ Together with other artists expanding the boundaries of photography in the 1960s, she altered the way we understand portraiture and thus the way we see people. She was criticized, most notably by Susan Sontag, for providing the cheap thrills of gazing at freaks. She was applauded by others for turning the idea of the outsider into a compelling investigation of the possibilities and limits of representing otherness. Her images stopped us in our tracks and stayed in our minds.

Yet the freedoms of constructionism implied here, of identities being open to revamping and recasting, may sensitize us to two further implications. For one thing, as Robert Bogdan emphasized in his *Freak Show*, and again more recently in his *Picturing Disability*, freaks as a category are a matter of social construction.¹⁵ Freaks were made, manufactured, to fit certain modes of presentation dictated by the amusement world. The defining lines are therefore relatively open and fluid and can change

over time. Thus, in May 1971, at the Mayday demonstrations in Washington, DC, at one of the largest actions of civil disobedience in U.S. history, many of the thousands gathered now called themselves “freaks.” Speaking to their emerging collective power, activist Frank Hammer addressed the crowd, shouting, “Twenty thousand freaks carry the seeds now, and they have been blown to every corner of the land.”¹⁶ Clearly, by the early 1970s, the meaning of “freak” had been reinscribed in American culture. What had once been a pejorative used to single out and mark corporeal difference and delineate the lines of the “normal citizen” was now embraced as a term of choice.

If freak then is a label that one can choose to adopt as a *nom de guerre* in antinomian social movements, at the same time it can make for strategies of ostracism, projecting the label onto groups that people wish to put outside the bounds of shared community. These are the two implications I referred to above, the one implying a festive inclusion in a self-styled community of freaks, breaking the oppressive hold of imposed social categories, the other implying a vicious exclusionary strategy, turning groups into social outcasts, as alien, and unassimilable Others. Again, the film *Freaks* grippingly illustrates this duality. Toward the end of the film, during the banquet in celebration of the wedding between trapeze artist Cleopatra and her midget man Hans, the collected freaks around the table welcome Cleopatra into their midst with a pounding “One of Us, One of Us, We Accept Her, We Accept Her.” In horror and disgust Cleopatra shouts back “Freaks! Freaks! Filthy, slimy FREAKS!” Having rejected her honorary inclusion into the community of freaks, they retaliate by excommunicating her, not only from their midst but also from human society. She can no longer return to normal humanity following the horrific revenge of the freaks. They leave her mutilated and maimed, altered into a chicken woman, the freak that she had refused to become. Excommunication is presented here in the classic freak mode, as spectacle, turning Cleo into a spectacular body ready to be put on display.¹⁷

This is a point that I wish further to elaborate in the final part of my argument. If freaks traditionally have found their place in social and cultural rituals and constructions, these always included the setting and context for their display in front of an audience. Thus, when the circus came to town, there was the parade down Main Street, with the animals, the clowns, and freaks whetting the appetites of the public. The local population walked along with the circus train, in exhilaration and anticipation of the spectacle to come. There was an unspoken stage direction that all involved knew and followed. It contained the forces of carnivalesque joy, keeping them within bounds known to all involved.

Similar conventions applied when the occasion was not one of *welcoming* spectacular Others, but of setting them apart, ostracizing them. The parades in these instances were spectacles of eviction, exorcising forces of evil that had intruded into the social body of the community. If there was an unspoken stage direction here it was one aimed at restoring the healthy life of the community in a public display of the intrusive elements of contagion and corruption. In a masterful study of lynching rituals in the American South, rightly called *Lynching and Spectacle*, Amy Louise Wood analyses the long history of this sad practice.¹⁸ With an uncanny empathy she sets out to understand the collective emotions shared by the lynching mob. Lynching was not simply the extralegal killing of those who had trespassed, who had broken social and legal rules. Sometimes it was just that, a quick settling of scores outside the public view. But more often the social response assumed the form of the gruesome theater of revenge, of a ritual restoring the ruptured texture of communal life, meting out punishment and revenge on the perpetrator of the crime. Crucially the crime was one of sexual transgression, by a black man soiling the purity of white womanhood. The atavistic fears were always of impure blood getting mixed with that of white people, of the gene pool of whites being polluted by beings closer to animals than to humans. In public rituals of what



Large crowd looking at the burned body of Jesse Washington, eighteen-year-old African American, lynched in Waco, Texas, May 15, 1916. *Library of Congress.*

one might call the eugenics of the mob, lynching victims were not only killed in atrocious ways, tortured, hanged, burned. Tellingly, they were often castrated and left to hang as a warning to others. One of the more disturbing features of this theater of revenge were the uses made of the modern invention of photography. All the noises of mob action have gone from the photographs. In many of them the crowd has regrouped in almost solemn witness to the act of vengeful retaliation, as if to bring across the point that justice had been done, and the purity of the “body social” had been defended.¹⁹

The photographs were widely distributed, kept in memory of the spectacle, sent to friends and relatives as postcards. They elicited the morbid fascination with the lynching spectacle, with bodies hanging in strangely contorted poses, or with the charred remains of lynching victims. If the initial response to these photographs was one of reaffirmation of Southern ways of justice,

as they spread across the country and were even beginning to be published in the black press, they became tools in the hands of antilynching activists, of people with different views of the inclusiveness of humanity. Lynching photographs spread as far as countries in Europe and affected European views of America. One early example are the travel reports by a German socialist, Arthur Holitscher, published in separate installments in *Die neue Rundschau* in 1911 and as a book in 1912, entitled *Amerika heute und morgen* (America Today and Tomorrow). He went in depth into the lawless conditions of life of the Negro population in the American South, illustrating his argument with a photograph “Idyll from Oklahama” [*sic*]; it showed two lynched blacks hanging from trees, with a group of white men facing the camera. The cynical tone of the caption will not have escaped the readers, among whom was a budding author, Franz Kafka. In the sketches for his unfinished novel, published as *Amerika*, Kafka gives his white protagonist, Karl Rossman, the nickname “Negro” and sends him to Oklahama (using the misspelling from the photograph’s caption).²⁰

Lynching photographs made Europeans aware of the disheartening idylls that America invented. But it was not long before Europe came up with its own obscene rituals. From the 1930s on, similar uses were made of spectacles and parades as strategies of eviction, branding people as unworthy members of the community. Not only did they affect communities of freaks, defining them on eugenicist grounds as unworthy of procreation and a threat to the healthy life of the “normal” community. Also, following the Nazi takeover of political power, rules of social inclusion or exclusion were overhauled, defining new threats to the purity of the German *Volk*. As in the American South, the rituals of expulsion, of redefinitions of Them versus Us, used the same repertoire of parades and public spectacles to set established sections of the community apart as “freaks of nature,” as people of different genetic heredity. As this campaign gathered force, it culminated in the infamous “Kristallnacht” in 1938, a night of

destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned shops, as well as of regular programs. In a number of German small towns members of the established Jewish bourgeoisie were rounded up and paraded through the streets. What photographs can still show us today is the exhilaration evoked by the act of social ostracizing among the throngs of people walking along with the parade, jeering at those being paraded. One can't help being reminded of so many other episodes of people being paraded before hissing crowds, being turned into inassimilable freaks, in lynching photographs, or in pictures of black students being escorted to school in the late 1950s, surrounded by angry crowds.

One such moment of Jews being paraded, being instantly turned into Others, open to public defamation and abuse, is captured in photographs taken in Oldenburg on the day following "Kristallnacht." Some are reprinted in a book by a descendant of one of the people "on parade."²¹ Dignified in the midst of so much public hysteria, one of the Jewish citizens, a well-dressed bourgeois gentleman looks from the picture into our eyes. He establishes eye contact across the divide of time, but more poignantly across the abyss opening up in Germany at the time. He thus makes the viewer more acutely aware of the human drama unfolding before our eyes.

There were those at the time who pointed to the similarities of what was happening in the American South and in Nazi Germany. Remarkably, a Jewish scholar from Germany, Kurt Baschwitz, who had found refuge in the Netherlands, saw the historical parallels and the logic behind it. In what would become a classic study in mass psychology, published in exile in Amsterdam, the author saw his analysis of processes of mob behavior confirmed in both settings, in an amazing act of creating intellectual distance to current events even as they had such immediate dramatic relevance to his own life.²² Famous film director Fritz Lang, another refugee from Nazi Germany, made much the same point when he was shooting *Fury*, his 1936 Hollywood film on lynching and lynching mobs. In a 1936 interview, for instance, he



Jewish men rounded up and paraded through the town of Oldenburg. *By permission of Arbeitskreis Erinnerungsgang Oldenburg.*



Mass arrest of Jewish men, Oldenburg, November 9, 1938. *Photo, The Wiener Library, London.*



Oldenburg mass arrest of Jewish citizens, 1938. *By permission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.*



Jewish men paraded through Oldenburg, to the merriment of at least some bystanders. *By permission of Bildagentur BPK, Berlin.*

recalled his own encounters with mob mentality growing up in Vienna along the Russian front, fighting in World War I, and, of course, working in Berlin as Hitler came to power.²³

The worst atrocities were yet to come, and photography would be there to document the perpetrators in their acts. One example that I will mention in conclusion is the infamous Strop report, a collection of photographs taken in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. German SS troops were busy quashing the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Jürgen Strop, commanding officer in charge of the operation, had the photographs taken to be collected in a scrapbook, titled “The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw Is No More!” He donated it to his boss, Heinrich Himmler, as testimony to a mission accomplished. The images are properly to be seen as trophy photographs in a construction of the victims, *not* as worthy human opponents, but as vermin to be smoked out (“fumi-gated,” as the caption to one photograph has it) and recast in the photographs as freaks, as grotesque deformities. This of course was fully in line with established modes of Nazi propaganda, which notoriously represented Jews as freakish monsters. One photograph in particular is included, we must assume, to corroborate this reading, a photograph of two naked men: seen from behind, one utterly deformed by scoliosis, his vertebral column twisted into an S-shape. The caption simply says: “Abschaum der Menschheit,” dregs of humanity.²⁴

Some of the other photographs show the way that Jews, emerging from their hiding places, were marched off under the watchful eyes of SS personnel, “paraded,” so to speak, before the camera, on their way to the gathering spot for transportation to the concentration camp. They are unforgettable photographs. Like lynching photographs they were ultimately turned against their makers and used as proof of inhumanity at the Nurnberg trials. They were later on selected by Edward Steichen for *The Family of Man*, a photo show seen by millions all over the Cold War world, in his attempt to embrace all of humanity in a familial gaze, and to re-create a reading of humanity that gave central

emphasis to inclusion, not exclusion. The photographs of Jews being herded on their way to extinction even today allow of vicarious participation. One photograph in particular has acquired an iconic power that turns it into *the* visual representation of the Holocaust. One fragment of the photograph especially has assumed a life of its own, the image of a boy, forlorn and terrified, his hands raised. He calls forth feelings of pity and impotence in the viewer, an effect so strong that even a student of photography such as Barbie Zelizer misremembers the photograph. As she describes it the boy is looking us in the eye.²⁵ This must be wishful thinking on her part. The boy's eyes are bewildered, expressive of fear, but focused on nothing in particular. The boy is forever beyond our fantasy of establishing rapport. The photograph in which he features so prominently has acquired an afterlife of its own, as a document of transgression of the thin line separating humanism from barbarism. It will come back to haunt us in the following chapter.