Victorian Freaks

Tromp, Marlene

Published by The Ohio State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27912

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1146895
This rich and compelling collection is exemplary of what academics do best. The cultural work of scholars is to create new knowledge in the form of an ongoing critical conversation that considers and reconsiders a subject in increasingly fresh and complex ways. During the ten years between the publication of Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, the collection I edited in 1996, and this 2008 publication of Victorian Freaks, edited by Marlene Tromp, the conversation about the display of human beings as curiosities for what Robert Bogdan has called “amusement and profit” has expanded and deepened.

In my view, the emergence of what has come to be called Freaks Studies, a subfield within American Studies and Cultural Studies, begins in 1978 with Leslie Fiedler’s counterculture manifesto, Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self. While Fiedler’s study unearths the history of the freak figure in new ways, it is rooted in the archetypal criticism of the period and a 1970s sensibility that seeks to defend freaks against the establishment. Fiedler aligns the freak figure with the hippie figure, arguing that freaks ought to be valued and allowed to exist in the world because they teach “us” about “ourselves.” Ten years later in 1988, Robert Bogdan’s Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit brings a social constructivist reading to the freak figure that
focuses on the disparity between actual people who took on the role of freaks and the exaggerated performance of the displays. Bogdan’s materialist analysis brings forward for the first time the social category of disability to demonstrate that freak shows are part of the labor history of people with disabilities, often augmented with racialization and gender ambiguity. By moving the freak figure from mythology to materialism, Bogdan begins the critical project of humanizing freaks.

Almost ten years after Bogdan published *Freak Show*, my edited collection, *Freakery*, expanded his constructivist approach by bringing forward the issue of representation more fully, often through literary analysis and historiography. Following Bogdan, *Freakery* and the various book-length studies that began in that volume rigorously grounded their analysis in the social systems of disability, race, gender, class, and sexuality. After Bogdan, freaks were always people who performed roles as freaks. Several very strong cultural studies about freaks, largely by historians and literary critics, emerged from Bogdan’s tradition and *Freakery*. Rachel Adams, James W. Cook, Andrea Dennett, Alice Dreger, and Benjamin Reiss, among others, ranged across American freakery, dominated as it is by Barnum, the canny and outrageous entrepreneur who took us all to the cleaners with his humbugs, even as we delighted in the ride.  

My challenge in writing the foreword to *Freakery*—and in all the scholarly work I do on the representation of disability—is how to find precise language to talk about freaks and their display that unsettles the way we understand freaks as freakish, as on the far edge of human, as not “us.” In other words, how do we talk about freaks without reinscribing the oppressive attitudes we attempt to critique? The most effective way to do this is to keep a steady focus on the materiality of the people who performed as freaks and the particular circumstances of their actual lives. Bogdan’s sociological constructivist approach assures the freak’s humanity by focusing on the social relations of enfreakment.

*Victorian Freaks* advances this project of according full humanity to the people who performed as freaks by shifting from a social constructivist understanding of freakery to a rigorous materialist analysis. This fine collection ranges across a wide spectrum of what might be called freak instances in a particular historical time and place: Victorian Britain. By turning the focus of freaked studies from American matters to concerns that emerge in the British context—while acknowledging the global and transnational implications that remain in play, even when reading from that British context—the authors here look to the alternative
notions of the marketplace and economics in Britain, alongside the intellectual and social industry of medicine, the role of imperialism, and the peculiarly British set of social values presented in the period fiction. Thus, this collection when placed beside much of the other studies of freakery introduces a strong comparative aspect into our inquiry of these pervasive spectacles.

By materialist analysis, I mean not just economic relations of freakery but also how the material aspects of social categories such as race, gender, class, and—in particular—disability play out in the material world. This insistence on the specific materiality of freak performances refuses metaphor and insists on humanity. It expands from the material lives of freaks, their handlers, and their audiences to demonstrate how the shows were dramas that played out cultural anxieties in both the individual and national context. The virtue of this analysis is that the freaks cannot be relegated to metaphorical figures of otherness, but rather they are enfleshed as they are enfreaked, always particular people in particular lives at particular moments in particular places.

**Victorian Freaks** not only makes a splendid contribution to Freak Studies, Disability Studies, and Victorian Studies, it is one of the liveliest collections I have come across. It knows how to talk about freaks, to vivify and humanize the entire cast of characters involved in these marvelous and theatrical social rituals.

**Notes**
