

THE CHANGING SOCIETAL VIEW OF FREAKS: POPULAR CULTURE,
MEDICAL DISCOURSE, AND PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES IN 19TH AND 20TH
CENTURY AMERICA

by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my loving parents Paul and Dawn, and to my siblings William and Charlotte.

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ABSTRACT

THE CHANGING SOCIETAL VIEW OF FREAKS: POPULAR CULTURE, MEDICAL DISCOURSE, AND PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES IN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

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This thesis examines the "freak show" in American history and analyzes how shifts in medical knowledge and the public's perception of that knowledge changed attitudes about people's physical and mental abnormalities. Through a study of popular culture, medical discourse, and the freak show itself, it is possible to uncover how freakishness came to be medicalized and treated as a medical problem. In doing so, it explores the often-racialized view of freaks as well as the birth of notions of disability in the American context. As medical science progressed and revealed the causes behind human abnormalities, curiosity transformed into disability. Resulting in a change in how audiences regarded the freak shows that were once extremely popular.

INTRODUCTION: THE FREAK SHOW AND THE SCIENTIFIC IMAGINATION IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

Freak shows are a cultural phenomenon in the history of entertainment and an obvious way to regard how society viewed those who were physically different. To what extent does entertainment convey information about broader societal norms and aesthetics regarding what is “normal” and “abnormal”, as well as what is suitable or acceptable as entertainment and what happens to that entertainment if the information changes? Freak shows did not only put extreme physical difference on display but also often allowed for some to delve into scientific questions regarding the perceived differences between so-called races. The freak show, as popularly known in American culture, can trace its roots back to approximately 1840 (Bogdan 1988: 11). A "freak show" is defined as a "formal organized exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies for amusement and profit" (Bogdan 1988: 11).

Yet, exhibiting abnormality did not begin in the mid-nineteenth century. Records dating as far back as 2800 B.C. from Assyria and Babylon recount a variety of "human monsters" (Hunter 2005: 10). This thesis shows how notions of monstrosity and abnormality were brought to life in freak shows, and how the shows created a dialogue with the public about who and what were "freaks." The goal is to highlight how medical science started out utilizing the freak show to promote the careers of the medical professionals and confirm already held scientific beliefs to truly delving into what the

scientific causes were behind the anomalies being showcased. Over a span of 100 years, the anomalies in freak shows went from exhibited curiosities to exploitation.

In looking at the cultural spectacle of freak shows, Rosemarie Garland Thomson's collection of essays *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* stated that "history bears ample witness to this profound disquiet stirred in the human soul by bodies that stray from what is typical and predictable" (1996: 1). There is fundamental and very compulsive curiosity found in human nature. An individual that is radically different from the societal norm cannot help but be noticed, at the very least.

At its height, the freak show was a societal spectacle. People from all walks of life could go to a freak show or dime museum to see individuals who were unlike themselves. They were born physically different, and as a result, they were a source of curiosity for audiences and the scientific community. Advancements in the fields of anthropology and medicine brought those with abnormality into a new light as professionals struggled to fit them into a space in society. Since the medical and scientific communities were at the height of education, they represented the place where society looked for answers to the questions regarding how the world functioned and where people fit in. This thesis will explore how the scientific community influenced how audiences viewed those with abnormalities featured in freak shows, and how a combination of advancements in medical science and entertainment changed the way freak shows were considered.

Georges Canguilhem stated that a "practicing physician is very often happy to agree with his patients in defining the normal and abnormal according to their individual norms, except, of course, in the case of the gross ignorance on their part of the minimal

anatomical and physiological conditions of plant or animal life” (Cunguilhem 1966: 121). In regard towards the human abnormality featured in freak shows, medical professionals and audience members were quick to agree in how normal and abnormal was defined. Cunguilhem gives two meanings for defining normal: one is that normal represents how things should be, and the second is that normal represents the average (1966: 125). It is postulated that anomaly became pathological, which instigated scientific study by scientists who saw such anomalies as a statistical divergence (Cunguilhem 1966: 136). Abnormal can only be defined in comparison to what is considered normal such as with audience members and those on exhibition in freak shows. There can be no definition of normal without the abnormal to counter balance. A popular saying states that no two snowflakes look the same, and is often applied to people. If this is the case, then how can there be a universal definition of normal regarding human appearance?

The thesis is presented in four chapters. It must first be established how the freak show itself developed in the United States. Chapter one looks at the starting format in showcasing abnormality, which was one or two individuals traveling around with a manager. When P.T. Barnum opened his American Museum in New York City, he revolutionized the way abnormality was showcased. Barnum's museum is the foundation for what became known as the freak show because it was the first real example of multiple abnormality exhibits in one location. Other showmen realized the potential and sought to copy Barnum's format. Showcasing freaks became so popular that there was a shortage in genuine anomalies, and this gave rise to 'self-made' freaks.

The rise of the evolutionary theory in 1859 was a kick-start in how science viewed humanity and biological variation more broadly. If someone did not fit in with a set category, then clearly, they represented a missing connection in the progress of human evolution. Such individuals showcased during the 19th century reflected the idea of just how far modern man had come. Rather than serving to improve their understanding of science, their explanation for these individuals' differences was intertwined with science of the period.

Chapter two examines some of the abnormalities that were showcased by showmen like Barnum. These include microcephalics, bearded women, hermaphrodites, dwarfs, giants, those with missing limbs, conjoined twins, and those it was decided shared physical traits with animals. Each section describes what these abnormalities involved, how they were showcased, audience perceptions, and how the scientific community of the time approached them. Included also are examples of well-known performers who displayed these abnormalities such as Julia Pastrana who was called 'the ugliest woman in the world' because she was born with hypertrichosis which results in the abnormal growth of body hair and had Neanderthal-like facial features. Science did little to explore why her body behaved in such a way, and instead, science perpetuated the notion that she had excess body hair because she was a human-animal hybrid or an individual that was somehow less than human. Chapter two wraps up with how such exhibits were presented to the public. P.T. Barnum utilized large posters and biographical pamphlets with detailed information about the performers. Information in the pamphlets included where they were from and their life story. These pamphlets were mainly fiction

to make the exhibit seem more exotic. Painted posters would exaggerate the abnormalities to the point where they seemed more fantastic than they were. Audience members likely went into an exhibit with high expectations and came out slightly disappointed with what the reality was.

Freak shows gave the scientific community of the day, especially during the 1870s when the freak show was most popular, access to subjects they would likely not have had access to on a regular basis. However, since the shows became so widespread there was likely one in every major city and of course they traveled around the United States. The public viewed exhibits that had been validated by a medical or scientific professional as legitimate and educational, so this in turn colored how they viewed the individuals on display and their deformity.

With the growth of the freak show format more scientific professionals, mainly curious local doctors and scientists, had the opportunity to visit and study abnormality. As a result, the medical community would write about what they believed to find, and the public would accept it. Thus, public opinion regarding human abnormality was molded. During the height of these exhibitions the scientific community would use anomaly to fit their pre-established worldview that Caucasian western society was the pinnacle and abnormality was a throwback, but there were some who actively sought to understand why the abnormality was happening.

Chapter three looks further into the treatment of those who were physically different and how the medical community treated them. The chapter explores two examples of how a single medical professional viewed and treated human abnormality

along with the influence they had both at the time and later. The first example is Doctor Thomas Mütter, a surgeon from Philadelphia who founded the museum which today houses his extensive collection of human medical abnormalities. Dr. Mütter viewed the patients that came through his office as individuals and not just interesting cases to pad his resume. After learning about plastic surgery in France, a new operation at the time, Dr. Mütter sought to give those with mild deformities the best chance at a healthy life that he could provide. Dr. Mütter also taught at the local medical university and attempted to pass on his point of view to his students, stressing that these patients were people who would hopefully go on to live productive lives and that they deserved that. While Dr. Mütter may not have had influence over the overall view of the public regarding human deformities, he passed on a different way of thinking and seeing patients to the next generation of medical professionals.

The second example is the interactions of Sir Frederick Treves with Joseph Merrick, known as The Elephant Man. There are two accounts which paint different pictures of Merrick and his treatment: that of Sir Treves and Tom Norman, who was one of Merrick's managers. Both reports are conflicting as each attempted to elevate themselves and cast the other in the worst possible light. Each claimed to have been looking out for Merrick's best interests, and as a result, it makes it difficult for a modern reader to ascertain if Merrick was receiving the best possible treatment. Norman did not stress Merrick's deformity or inhumanness to audiences, but rather that he was someone born under unfortunate circumstances and his abnormality was very rare. Sir Treves, while he helped Merrick especially towards the end of his life, seemed to ultimately

pursue the goal of bringing prestige and recognition to his career and Merrick was potentially used as a convenient stepping stool. In any case, whether they intended to or not, a showman and a medical professional worked together to shape public opinion on Merrick and his deformities. People who met him seemed to learn to get past Merrick's appearance to get to know the intelligent individual before them. Around the late 1800s was when the change began to occur regarding the medical community and human abnormality.

The chapter concludes with an examination of the treatment of "freaks" after their death. Often, the remains of "freaks" were sought after for further scientific study that involved autopsies and dissection. After this was complete, some or all the individual's remains would be placed on display. In the case of Joice Heth, who was exhibited along with the claim that she was 160 years old, P.T. Barnum sold tickets to her autopsy to raise more money. Charles Byrne, called the Irish Giant, was afraid of his body being stolen by grave robbers and sold, and despite his best efforts, this is what ended up occurring. Even in the modern day, there is controversy surrounding the display of his skeleton. People wondering if it is still necessary considering that there are people currently living with the same condition who can give valid consent for the study, and if Byrne's remains really must be explored further, is it necessary to keep them on public display in a glass case? Freak shows have fallen out of favor with the public and it is no longer acceptable to show deformity in that way, yet people will still flock to the displayed remains of these individuals. The informative text placed before a display case is more acceptable compared to the shouting of a carnival barker.

The final chapter continues to explore the progression of how society's views regarding human abnormality on display changed. First, I explore how side shows and medicine worked together to change society's opinions relating to the care of premature infants. Incubator baby exhibits opened to showcase that there was a viable way to care for these infants and that it would not detract in any way from the medical professional's practice. There was an ongoing concern by those advocating the incubators between 1900 and 1940 that disreputable showmen would see the popularity of the exhibits and try to replicate them to the detriment of the infants. Visitors were more than likely invested in the care and progress of the infants on display because they still had an average appearance, and would grow to live relatively healthy lives. Regardless, the results were overwhelmingly positive as incubators are now standard in the care of prematurely born infants and are much more technologically advanced.

Around the time incubator babies were on exhibition, cinema was becoming a growing field in entertainment. Aside from medical science being able to explain why deformities were occurring and lessening the frequency of them with better care, cinema provided a new and more imaginative venue for entertainment. Lon Chaney, known as the Man of 1,000 Faces, used theatrical makeup to transform himself into characters with any number of disfigurements. Lon Chaney's skill likely brought attention to how easily a side show attraction could be falsified tying into the trend of those with deformities now being viewed as individuals with medical conditions instead of as curiosities.

In their book *In Our Hearts We Were Giants* Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev relate what happened to a Jewish family of dwarfs when they were taken to Auschwitz

and handed over to Dr. Mengele. *In* May of 1944 The Lilliput Troupe, was taken to Auschwitz (2004: 71). After managing to gather their family together and handing out fan cards to SS Officers, the Ovitz family was told to wait for Dr. Mengele (2004: 73). Josef Mengele was an anthropology and medical student in the University of Munich, where his interest was sparked by the growing fields of heredity and eugenics (2004: 74).

What interested Mengele the most was the genetics of dominant abnormalities, and in 1942 he was placed in charge of concentration-camp medical experiments (2004: 75). Mengele sought to collect various examples of abnormalities for study including: hunchbacks, pinheads, hermaphrodites, giants, dwarfs, the morbidly obese, and anyone else not “created in God’s image” (2004: 77). Because of Mengele’s intense interest in freaks, SS Officers were always on the lookout for new specimens. So, when seven dwarfs, with normal sized siblings, were brought to Auschwitz it was deemed worthy of bringing to Mengele’s attention (2004: 78). After learning about the Ovitz family tree, Mengele declared that he would have work for twenty years (2004: 78).

The Ovitz family soon realized they were receiving different treatment from other inmates for medical purpose to be dictated by Dr. Mengele (2004: 91). On the first visit to Mengele’s clinic, bone marrow was painfully removed from each family member’s spine, and on other visits they would have to fast so blood could be taken in large quantities (2004: 97). During the 1940s it was believed that blood plasma contained traces of illness and genetic traits, as a result German scientists thought blood could show the difference between superior and inferior races (2004: 98). It could be assumed that since Mengele took so much blood to study from the Ovitz family, that he did not have a

clear idea of what he was looking for regarding genetic markers for dwarfism. The Ovitzes were also meticulously measured multiple times, had water of varying temperatures poured in their ears, and had teeth extracted to see if they were different from normal sized teeth (2004: 113). The Ovitz adult female were subjected to such gynecological scrutiny as to leave them pale (2004: 113). While the Ovitzes were still seen as curiosities, under Mengele's gaze they were medical curiosities utilized to perpetuate the idea of a superior race. This was a case of the extreme, and prior to World War Two, medical professionals would at least wait until the individual had passed away before studying their bodies so intently. For example, 80 years prior, the *London Medical Journal* criticized another publication for printing engravings related to a case of human abnormality.

The *Lancet*, a newspaper in 1865, published an article regarding a "double monstrosity" which was about a young man born with a third leg and an extra set of genitalia (Kochanek 1997). Alongside the description of the "monstrosity", the article featured engravings of the extra set of genitalia from a few different perspectives which was decried as pornographic by the *London Medical Journal* (Kochanek 1997). The *Lancet* medicalized abnormality and placed it within the clinical gaze which was different from how abnormal physiology was viewed (Kochanek 1997). Freakishness developed into a tool utilized by the medical profession, something to be examined and placed under glass as an example of abnormal physiology (Kochanek 1997). Curiosities transformed into "cases" and doctors began to view them with a more analytical gaze (Kochanek

1997). Medicine discovered monstrosity, but at the same time it created clinical monstrosity (Kochanek 1997).

In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), Foucault introduces the phrase “medical gaze” and wrote that it was “directed upon that which is visible in the disease” (9). This is what was happening towards the end of the 19th century regarding how medical professionals viewed individuals in freak shows, slowly they moved out of the realm of curiosity and were brought into the analytical medical gaze. One prominent example in the shift of the public's viewpoint can be seen in the 1932 film *Freaks*. Despite portraying circus freaks as the most human characters in the movie, *Freaks* was not well-received and ruined Todd Browning's career as a filmmaker. The display of deformity was not what the public desired any longer.

Together, these chapters will illustrate how advancements in medical science contributed to the change in societal attitudes regarding the abnormalities showcased in freak shows. As the causes of such human abnormalities became better understood by science, the mystery was taken away and so audiences no longer had reason to flock to exhibitions. At the same time, the face of entertainment was being changed by the advent of cinema. It was not only science that removed the freak show from popularity, but a new and more acceptable form of entertainment as well.

CHAPTER ONE: HOW P.T. BARNUM CREATED THE AMERICAN FREAK SHOW FORMAT

How did the freak show, as it is pictured in popular American culture, come into being? It certainly did not appear overnight and was built slowly over time. Showcasing abnormality was not unusual, but was done on a much smaller scale for hundreds of years. Before 1840, it was much more common to see an individual born with a deformity who would travel from place to place with a manager. Scientific research into the causes seems to have been minimal and only for the sake of curiosity. When freak shows became mainstream, then people started paying more attention. The decline in freak shows coincided with growing advancements in both medical and the social sciences, so scientific professionals were chomping at the bit to gain access to those that would give their research more credibility. Since the scientific field was viewed as being a pinnacle of education and knowledge, society would look to these individuals to explain the world including abnormal human variation.

Showcasing Abnormality: Building up to the Freak Show

Fascination with differences in the human body did not begin with the advent of the Freak Show. For thousands of years, humankind has viewed abnormality with immense curiosity. The Renaissance is considered a golden age for human oddities, as the courts in Europe were often filled with dwarfs, pinheads, giants, and others of the like (Hunter 2005: 11). There are records of monarchs throughout this period who were so

obsessed with those who were physically different they kept harems of dwarves or amputees to fulfill niche desires (Hunter 2005: 11). It appears that there has not been a point in time in which those who were physically different were not being commodified in some way. The main difference is the venue in which abnormality was displayed. For hundreds of years, abnormality was viewed as an act of supernatural origins and their birth location determined how that meant those individuals would be seen. In some cases, it was viewed as an act of God which implied one was divinely touched, and in some locations an evil force was held responsible. With the increasing influence of science, abnormality stopped becoming the result of God's intervention and shifted into the Earthier realm of Darwin's theory of evolution. The royal courts throughout Europe where abnormality used to be showcased became replaced by side shows and medical theaters.

The year 1840 can be viewed as pivotal for the exhibition of human abnormalities in the United States. Though such demonstrations did not appear overnight, the change regarding freak shows involved the format in which the abnormalities were displayed. Originally, abnormalities were showcased as a single attraction. They would travel from place to place with managers who would appear to work with them in an equal partnership, but would exploit the individual by treating them as a means to gain profit (Bogdan 1988: 26).

Around the time of the Civil War in the United States, the Anthropological Society of London was formed to create a place for free discussion of current events (Stocking 1987: 247). There is the possibility that James Hunt, who was a founder,

wanted a place where he could have a forum for his racialist views (Stocking 1987: 247). As far as the freak show was concerned, racialist views played a part in how both science and society considered abnormality. Every aspect and variation of humanity had to fit a mold and fit into a chart, but at the same time, ethnocentric notions abounded that Western society was the pinnacle of humanity had to be preserved which ties into ideas regarding social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is defined as social evolution depending on the operation of the law of natural selection (Halliday 1971: 133). Those placed under the definition stayed close to a working idea of how societies evolved, and they had a working understanding of the law of natural selection (Halliday 1971: 134). Social Darwinism seemed to ultimately try to connect the ideas of natural selection with the evolution of society into the present day.

While interest was rising over classifying these human variations, there was little discussion about uncovering a cause behind the abnormalities on display. Rather, any studies done about abnormality were formatted in such a way as to confirm beliefs about humanity held at the time. Robert Bogdan (1988) discussed this when connecting this trend to the publication of Darwin's evolution theory.

Darwin's evolutionary theory examines how organisms progressed over time because of changes in heretical or behavioral traits that would better allow them to survive (Than 2015). Darwin's theory is often referred to as "survival of the fittest", however this is not entirely accurate as this has little to do with physical fitness but rather their ability to survive and reproduce (Than 2015). Darwin speculated early on how a

land mammal could develop into a whale, and even though he could recognize the patterns he did not know about the genetics behind the changes (Than 2015).

After the publication of *Origin of the Species*, those who followed Darwin's ideas furthered the belief that descent was pushed ahead by design or inward force (University of Cambridge 2016). At the same time, contemporaries of Darwin placed limits on natural selection regarding human evolution (University of Cambridge 2016). Researchers who were rooted in physical anthropology disagreed over ideas regarding 'monogenism' or 'polygenism', the superiority of "white races", and the extinction/extermination of other people and cultures (University of Cambridge 2016). In his publication *Descent of Man*, Darwin drew on sources in anthropology, comparative anatomy, surveys of 'primitive culture', and his own observations of human/animal behavior (University of Cambridge 2016). Darwin held the concept of civilization with ranking of people regarding political, material, and technological advancements as an embodiment of their intellectual and moral powers (University of Cambridge 2016). Implications regarding the theory involving progressive, racial, and racist ideas would remain controversial throughout the 19th century and beyond (University of Cambridge 2016).

Individuals who would be classified today as having severe mental handicaps would be displayed as "missing links" or wild people from exotic lands (Bogdan 1988: 119). Missing link exhibits grew around the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution in 1859. It appears as if exhibitors were trying to draw in an audience with claims of living proof that supported the idea of evolution. Exhibitors were very interested in

presenting the idea that they had evidence that modern society, and much of it, was the pinnacle of Darwin's evolutionary ideas. For the sake of presenting something "exotic," these individuals were fraudulently displayed because the medical community did not understand the cause of the condition (Bogdan 1988: 119). This was a practice that would continue from the late 1800s until the freak show's popularity declined (Bogdan 1988: 119). Freak shows appeared to combine notions of the physical other and the cultural other into a single category. Physical and cultural otherness was joined into a single concept as seen with individuals dubbed "wild children" or "missing links." Cultural others were often showcased, as evidenced, not only because they were racially different but physically different as well. Exhibits that were racially different were claimed to be from a lost race such as the 'Aztec Children' or the 'Wild Men of Borneo', any place that was considered wild and exotic. This is a viewpoint that would remain practically unchanged until the further growth and intervention of medical science.

In *Deviant Bodies*, Jacqueline Urla and Jennifer Terry state that in a cultural context, bodies are a source of political struggles over representation and what is considered normal (1995: 6). This point is especially relevant for the people in freak shows since their aim was to showcase the fact that those on display were the opposite of what was considered normal for the time. Urla and Terry go on to discuss how the search for deviance, the singling out of certain people, was part of the deeply rooted societal need to classify (1995: 7). To be sure that people knew what was or was not normal, the source of difference had to be pointed out to them and made discernable. Freak shows became a classifier of abnormality for the public who came to see them, and news of and

from freak shows traveled through multiple public spheres. After a time, abnormality went from one or two individuals one might see at a pub one night, to an expanding venue. This sort of locale shift would draw in more of the public, and more scientific curiosity as well.

During the late 19th century, amateur scientists were opening museums in the major cities around the country to advance scientific knowledge (Bogdan 1988: 29). While human oddities were included regarding the classification of humanity, they were never featured attractions (Bogdan 1988: 29). As more human curiosities became attached to venues such as museums or circuses, the more interested the public became as these venues were bringing like-minded individuals together with interest in maintaining their business. It is possible that managers were beginning to realize that individually, human curiosities were not enough to draw crowds for a significant profit. If there were various oddities in one place than the public would be more inclined to pay for admission.

Thomson (1996: 10) suggests that costuming or staging was a way to distance the audience from the spectacle they were there to see. This distancing, in turn, established the freak show as a cultural standard by which the audience could reaffirm its normalcy by viewing those who were decidedly not normal by societal standards (Thomson 1996: 10). It is akin to how people in the modern age might go to a history museum and feel grateful they were born in an era of high-tech conveniences instead of during the Dark Ages. Audiences seemed to treat the staging of the human oddities to reaffirm that no matter how difficult their lives may be, at least they were born with what was considered

a normal appearance. Thomas Fahy's *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination* can be tied into Bogdan's view that those exhibited in freak shows were not limited to just the deformed, but those of different ethnic origins as well (2006: 24). Ethnological exhibits were meant to take human curiosities that were potentially racially threatening and transform them into "exotic fantasies" (Fahy 2006: 26). Ethnic displays might tie into whatever country was the focus of news at that time. For example, if there were racial tensions with a foreign country, the exoticness of that country would be amplified in a way that would dispel anxiety. The spectacle takes cultural ideas of freakishness and allows the audience to see themselves as something better than whoever is on display. Often cultural identities were pieced together to further distance the spectacle from the public by making them seem more fantastic, so the audience did not feel they were paying to see something common (Fahy 2006: 27). Starting in the 1850s, there was an enormous growth of anomalous data in areas of sociology, religion, and cultural studies. There was so much data it became unclear how it related, which led scholars such as Robert Latham seeking a means of classification (Stocking 1987: 102). It was not uncommon for European travelers to go out and view other cultures through ethnocentric preconception (Stocking 1987: 103). This statement would accurately reflect the views many might have held when seeing the more "exotic" displays in freak shows. Displays were set up in a way that would assure the viewer that they were something more culturally evolved than the subject.

At this point, scientific interest in classification is what primarily led to the growth of freak shows in America. Over a brief period, the freak show would split off

from the scientific museum to become a separate institution. As with any industry suddenly gaining popularity, there were bound to be individuals who would seek to take advantage of the public by putting forth frauds. Certainly, the growing freak show industry was no exception as the competition for customers grew. No one understood the need to appeal to the public quite as well as P.T. Barnum.

The Influence of P.T. Barnum

Phineas Taylor Barnum, better known as P.T. Barnum, gained traction in the exhibition of human oddities (Bogdan 1988: 31). Fraudulent exhibitions became common as the freak show gained momentum, and Barnum was not above lying to the public for his financial gain, as the first oddity he exhibited was an African American woman named Joice Heth, whom he claimed was 161 years old and had been a nurse to George Washington (Bogdan 1988: 31). People would flock to see Heth so they could hear what George Washington was like as a boy and what it was like to help raise him (Reiss 1999: 80). There was a birth certificate and bill of sale to support Heth's supposed age, though Heth's skeletal appearance was enough to convince some; she was skin and bones, was blind, and had no teeth (Reiss 1999: 80). There were some who protested the display of Heth, writing "a more indecent mode of raising money than by the exhibition of an old woman – black or white—we can hardly imagine" (Reiss 1999: 83). Barnum responded to the criticism by posting a piece in the local paper laying out how Heth had been mistreated as a slave, and that her current exhibitors were much more humane (Reiss 1999: 83). Barnum seemed to believe that since she had been treated worse in the past,

this fact justified placing her on display if she was treated better than a slave. Yet, it is more likely that Barnum did not want to lose a lucrative source of income.

Taking ownership of Joice Heth's act was only the beginning for both P.T. Barnum and the freak show. Evidence points to Barnum as the individual responsible for the advent of the freak show in America. Barnum's success is in part due to him taking advantage of the growing scientific interest in classifying the various aspects of humanity on both a physical and racial scale. It is hard to ascertain if the freak show would still have come together if someone other than Barnum had taken the helm. Nevertheless, this mass focus on human abnormality could be directly tied to the future increase of interest from the medical community in exploring the questions "how?" and "why?" Answering these matters would inevitably change the way human abnormality was both viewed and treated by both medical professionals and society.

In 1841, Barnum purchased the American Museum in New York City where he displayed various curiosities (Bogdan 1988: 32). This was a time in which proprietary museums were extremely popular, and each major city had at least one such attraction (Saxon 1989: 133). Barnum was known for his promotional skills and was eventually referred to as the "father of modern day advertising" (Bogdan 1988: 32). It was claimed that the American Museum's collection was of great scientific and cultural value. Though a complete catalog does not exist, it is known that the museum held items such as skeletons, stuffed animals, and Native American artifacts (Saxon 1989: 134). Through his advertising campaign, Barnum would fabricate fantastic and fictive stories explaining the backgrounds of his exhibitions (Bogdan 1988: 32).

With the popularity of the museum continuing to grow, it is apparent that Barnum was not above taking advantage of how much the public was willing to believe. Since museums were viewed as institutions of scientific and cultural knowledge, they took what was presented to them at face value, especially when it came to that which was strange and unusual. Human oddities had been displayed on a small scale before, but the American Museum is what truly launched the commodification of the abnormal body in the United States. Barnum was the leading individual to mold the concept of the freak show into what it is recognized as in the modern day. A physical reminder of Barnum's success was the *Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus*. One hundred forty-six years after Barnum attached his name to the famous Ringling Brothers Circus, the popular show closed business in May of 2017 (Bowman 2017). Modern audiences have become more vocal about the inhumane treatment and conditions of performing animals, and as a result, the circus had already phased out its famous elephant performances (Bowman 2017). Poor ticket sales after losing the elephant acts, coupled with the continually rising costs, made it difficult to keep the business going (Bowman 2017). The decline of the world-famous circus mirrors what eventually happened to the freak show as an institution. *Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey* fell out of public favor after awareness grew about the treatment of animals in a performance environment. As medical science progressed, the mystery behind human abnormality was stripped away. Once audiences were made aware of these conditions they began to realize that it was not in good taste to put them on display.

In response to Charles Darwin's publication of *Origin of the Species* (1859), which sold out quickly, Barnum opened exhibits under the title of "What Is It?" (Saxon 1989: 136). These displays were intended to showcase living "missing links" though every single case was a fraud. Most of the missing link exhibits were men and women who were born with often-severe mental disabilities. George Templeton Strong, an avid reader of Darwin's work, went to see one of Barnum's exhibits for himself and conceded that the keeper's story was far from the truth, though he still appeared to believe that the features of the individual were a good case for Darwin's ideas (Saxon 1989: 137). Supporters of Darwin's ideas continued to pursue the primordial separation of human races and racial types even though Darwin had written in a letter in 1833 demonstrating that he possibly did not share those ideas:

"I have watched how steadily the general feeling, as shown at elections, has been rising against Slavery.— What a proud thing for England, if she is the first European nation which utterly abolishes it.— I was told before leaving England, that after living in Slave countries: all my opinions would be altered; the only alteration I am aware of is forming a much higher estimate of the Negro's character.— it is impossible to see a negro & not feel kindly towards him" (University of Cambridge 2016).

Another inclusion to the "What Is It" exhibit was African Americans with albinism or vitiligo which exhibitors claimed that while the one exhibit showcased the missing link from ape to modern human, these presentations showcased the missing link in the change from black to white (Reiss 1999: 85). Freak shows fell out of favor when medical science showed the public exactly why the abnormalities on display happened. The public view shifted from curiosity to pity once the mystery was stripped away. For some reason, this was not the result earlier when Darwin's new scientific theory of

evolution was used to explain where certain abnormalities came from. Instead, this resulted in making these exhibits more popular and a larger source of curiosity than before.

Aside from the "What Is It" exhibits, there was a wide variety of human abnormalities to be seen at the American Museum such as giants (with exaggerated heights), living skeletons, little people, an armless man who could play cello with his toes, and individuals with either abnormal or no pigmentation (Saxon 1989: 137). Though the museum was highly successful, for various reasons, it would not be destined to last. The American Museum burned down in 1868. It never to reopened and would see Barnum retire from the museum business (Bogdan 1988:35). During the 23 years the museum was open, 38 million tickets of admission were sold (Saxon 1989: 138). As a point of comparison, that is more tickets sold than Disney Land during its first 23 years of business (Saxon 1989: 138). The number of tickets for the American Museum is quite impressive for the time as it meant people were certainly visiting the Museum multiple times. The goal of bringing together various curiosities in one place for larger profit was an enormous success and one that venues for years after would try to replicate.

What made the American Museum so popular was the fact that it did not cater only to one class of people. Barnum certainly knew how to play on the public's curiosity for the unusual. When museums started to become more scientific in nature, Barnum recognized that he could draw that interest regarding variety in the human form towards sideshows in circuses. In the early 19th century, displays of traveling curiosities were popular and around the 1830s, displays of the grotesque were becoming carnivalesque

and viewed as offensive by some (Reiss 1999: 82). The attitude was that such exhibits were not suitable for those of higher, more genteel tastes, and were more appropriate for lower classes. It was less about whether the exhibition of abnormality was appropriate but whether the audience attending was adequate.

Changing format – Development of Modern Science

Over time, attitudes regarding race began to change, and this shift was evident in the way human oddities were exhibited. The idea of freakishness in the human body was, at times, used as a factor in the argument regarding racial (or racist) science – as in the exhibition of Joice Heth. Around the time that Heth was autopsied, science became the main way to interpret the body of a freak (Reiss 1999: 85). Newspapers focused not only on the perceived freakishness of her age but also on the value she could hold for science (Reiss 1999: 85). During Barnum's time, science was beginning to be used to explore the subject of freakishness but not to understand the medical causes. Rather, they were being used to put credence to what was already believed as scientific fact.

Laws of nature stated that each race had an appropriate “place” in the world, and science could now be used to interpret the evidence of those laws in the human body (Reiss 199: 86). Popular exhibitors, including Barnum, would have scientists come around to authenticate their exhibits (Reiss 1999: 91). A modern comparison would be seeing a film that is based on a true story. Unless one is familiar with the event the film is based on, it can be difficult to tell where actual history ends and where Hollywood embellishment begins. Since access to information was not as widespread, when someone

who was supposed to be well-versed in a field backed an exhibit, that would give it validation for the audience in what they were seeing was genuine.

One example of science being used to validate prior claims is that of Joice Heth's autopsy. Barnum opened Heth's autopsy to the public, and even though he charged fifty cents per person, nearly 1,500 crowded in to watch (Reiss 1999: 93). Barnum's goal must have been to scientifically prove that Heth was as old as she was claimed to have been. If this was a claim backed up by a medical professional, then there could be no more arguments or speculation. Unfortunately for Barnum, the surgeon concluded that Heth could not have been more than eighty years old when she died (Reiss 1999: 94). In response, Barnum visited the editor of the *New York Herald* two days later and told him that the body which had been dissected did not even belong to Heth, but a woman called Aunt Nelly (Reiss 1999: 94). Despite scientific evidence working against him, Barnum tried to protect his claim to a scientific curiosity by continuing to stretch the public's perception.

The Victorian age was a unique time for the scientific fields. After the Industrial Revolution and Age of Enlightenment, growth was occurring in many different areas such as surgery, transportation, and electricity. Due to how many discoveries and advancements were being made at the time, it is no wonder that people were willing to accept and believe a lot. Germ theory would not come around until the late 19th century, so there were a lot of different ideas floating around (Souter 2012: 10). Until 1856, medical science was inexact and unregulated (Souter 2012: 10). If people were willing to believe in the remedies that medical meddlers and snake oil salesmen were pushing, then

it is no surprise that they were also willing to believe the stories touted alongside freak shows. During the Victorian age the world was more mysterious, and not even science had all the answers regarding how the world functioned. If an idea was in balance with known science and accepted understanding than it was more plausible. There was no understanding of genetics during the Victorian Age, so when Darwin's *Origin of the Species* brought fairly new ideas to the science of human evolution needed to fit individuals like "pinheads" and "ape men" into science they accepted as true.

Even after the American Museum closed, Barnum's effect on the sideshow industry continued to spread. Dime museums, which were gaining popularity around the country, borrowed heavily from Barnum's format in exhibiting many curiosities in one place. This brought human abnormality into the center of attention more than ever with venues being more widespread.

Dime Museums and the Circus

Dime museums were reaching the height of popularity around the 1870s, and the main attraction was usually the freak show in which the average display featured freaks being touted as scientific sensations and as one-of-a-kind specimens (Bogdan 1988: 37). Promoters of this time took a page from the book of Barnum and employed methods of fraud, as well as a mass exaggeration to draw crowds (Bogdan 1988: 37). Individual attractions made significant amounts of money for the locations in which they were exhibited. Jo-Jo the "dog-faced boy" drew so many people to the New York museum he was stationed at that the manager tried to fit upwards of twenty-three shows into a single day (Bogdan 1988: 37). It is hard to assess whether those that attended these exhibitions

came to see a performance or to confront that which was unusual to them – maybe it was both. What should be noted is that Barnum often went to great lengths not to sway audience opinion, and would instead keep quiet during the controversy surrounding an exhibit, frequently inviting the audience to decide for themselves (Cook 1996: 139). As a publicity move by Barnum, this was brilliant. Merely having oddities as exhibits, Barnum knew, would not be enough to draw in the large crowds. However, by inviting the audience to draw their conclusions and engage in a pseudo-scientific debate was exactly the key to grabbing their curiosity regarding the questions of "how?" and "why?"

Finding new exhibits involved freak hunting, when agents would travel around to find potential feature attractions. This grew into a full-time occupation in which people would locate and secure attractions (Bogdan 1988: 38). When the demand for freaks was on the rise, there were more "self-made" freaks to be found amongst those who were natural born oddities. Self-made freaks include anyone who was not born physically different such as tattooed exhibits or sword swallowers. This could also be about individuals who tried to pass themselves off as genuine "freaks" but were merely acting.

Around the 1930s, dime museums became almost entirely traveling establishments that were dominated by freak shows (Bogdan 1988: 38). So far, the freak show has been very adept at formatting itself towards whatever entertainment venue was becoming popular at the time. It falls out of favor when understanding of the human body and genetics grows in medical science. Curiously, the new science of Darwin did little to diminish interest in where the abnormality was coming from despite having an "explanation." Quite the opposite result was seen in that such exhibits increased in

popularity. The answer is that with new medical science came new technology and methods that left even less room for argument.

Showcasing cultural and physical otherness ties into what Foucault wrote in *Power/Knowledge*, "I believe the great fantasy is the idea of a social body constituted by the University of wills. Now the phenomenon of the social body is the effect not of a consensus but the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals" (1980: 55). Displaying a human body to showcase the differences from a "normal" one, in a way, makes it a social body as the audience does not usually see the person as an individual. The materiality of power can be found in the financial gain the owners of freak shows saw because of their exhibitions. Displaying abnormalities became so popular that freak show owners began buying potential "attractions" from families or in some cases outright kidnapping them. As previously stated, the freak show was quite adept at changing with the times regarding what entertainment venue was popular. So, when the popularity of the circus began to rise, those who ran freak shows saw an opportunity.

Human oddities were a component of various other acts to make up the sideshow part of the circus. Starting around 1870, a clear majority of circuses had a freak show which was the primary source for viewing abnormalities (Bogdan 1988: 46). Even as a side to the main performance, the sideshow was a large source of income for the circus as people could view the oddities before the big-top opened for the main show (Bogdan 1988: 47). Apart from the circus, carnivals also made use of having a wide variety of oddities to draw in an audience. During the 1920s and 1930s, the largest part of the fair

was the freak show, and the largest ones could be found at the state fairs in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ohio (Bogdan 1988: 60).

Due to the of the growth in the freak show industry, thanks mainly to Barnum, children who used to be kept locked up because of deformities were suddenly commodities for parents who would rent them out to sideshows, or even sell them to shows (Hunter 2005: 22). This is something that would, naturally, be viewed as abhorrent in the modern day. It is difficult to see how people of P.T. Barnum's day saw such displays when scientific knowledge about the human body and genetics was limited. The world was not as well traveled as it has become, especially with the advent of faster modes of transportation, communication, and how the public accesses information. Many regions of the world were still viewed as mysterious and exotic locations whose people practiced unfamiliar cultures. Early modern science was a new microscope under which everything and everyone had to be examined and classified, especially those who were different in appearance.

CHAPTER TWO: FREAKISHNESS ON DISPLAY, THE SHOWCASING OF DISABILITY

Since science was attempting to categorize variations in humanity, the gathering of so many oddities in one place must have been a treasure trove of opportunity for those in the field. Across the broad spectrum of human abnormality, there seemed to be specific examples which would be found in nearly every side show or dime museum that could be visited during this period. For the sake of presenting something "exotic," these individuals were fraudulently displayed because the medical community did not understand the cause of their condition (Bogdan 1988: 119). Cultural others were often showcased not only because they were racially different but due to their physical differences as well. Scientists and medical practitioners never referred to freak shows as being in bad taste, instead, exhibits would be utilized in their academic writings and subject to speculation (Bogdan 1988: 121).

Freak shows made the audience aware of its body as well as the bodies of those on display. It is not hard to be aware of the human body, yet it is often taken for granted as a fundamental component to the establishment of social life (Howson 2013: 1-2). It could be stated that certain aspects of social life favor particular bodies, for example, if one is a model than society expects that individual to have a specific body type and appearance, even amidst the modern movement to accept bodies in all shapes and sizes. What would that mean for those who did not fit the societal body standards at a time

when science was trying to classify all aspects of humanity? Since society could not easily think of any other avenue for those seen as deformed, society created a space where the audience was mostly free to draw their conclusions based on the information exhibitions tried to convey.

The Attractions: What Audiences Came to See

Barnum referred to his exhibits of nondescript individuals as "What is It?" and would invite the audience to draw their conclusions. Often, these were people who suffered from microcephaly, but sometimes they were actors who appeared slightly different. Barnum deliberately titled his exhibit the way he did so the audience was free to make its judgments as to how these individuals ought to be classified regarding Darwin as well as classifications of race and humanity. In and of itself, the term "What is It" subtly draws the audience to one conclusion: that the subject they are viewing is less than human which was implied by the subject being referred to as "it" and not "he" or "she." This effectively shows the audience that they are more evolved and civilized than whatever they are observing, and it is perfectly alright for the individual to be on display because, as stated, the subject is not entirely human or else is a lower order of human based on Darwin's theory.

As can be inferred from the previous statement, disability is largely a social construct, so the idea of a "normal" body has already been defined; so, if a normal body is someone who has a proportional body rather than someone who is missing limbs or is disproportional must be abnormal and is therefore disabled (DeMello 2014: 29). In this sense, being disabled defines these individuals, it becomes their identity and plays a

significant role in how they are viewed in society. This growing sense of identity is reflected in how individuals exhibited in freak shows were seen largely by the entertainment-seeking public or those who thought they were getting answers into the way the world was organized. Performers built their identity on their body and how society responded to them. When it came to those displayed in freak shows, their identity was whatever the exhibitor decided it would be.

Microcephalics: “Pinheads” and “Wild Children”

"Pinheads," as those who were microcephalic were called, had 'owners' instead of 'managers' and were commonly exhibited as asexual, wearing dresses, with their hair in a topknot tied with a ribbon (Hunter 2005: 40). The Mayo Clinic defines microcephaly as a "rare neurological condition in which an infant's head is significantly smaller than the heads of other children of the same age and sex" (Staff 2017). There is no treatment for microcephaly, but early intervention can improve both the child's development and quality of life (Staff 2017). Microcephaly is the cause of abnormal brain development, either congenital or during infancy and it can be genetic (Staff 2017).

There are a few notable examples of individuals with microcephaly being displayed as something exotic and of scientific curiosity. In the 1840s, a Spanish trader purchased two young microcephalic children, Maximo and Bartola, and later sold them to an American (Hartzman 2005: 11). The early childhoods and exact details regarding Maximo and Bartola are unknown since showman at the time were extremely secretive, the same applies to most exotic exhibitions (Bogdan 1988: 127). Regarding their intelligence, they were described as "little better than idiots" (Gould and Pyle 1896).

They were put on display as remnants of Aztec society and reportedly baffled local scientists, as it was claimed that Maximo and Bartola were taken from a newly discovered society that venerated the children in "Pagan ceremony" (Hartzman 2005: 11). After beginning their career with Barnum in 1850, the two were married in 1867 as a massive publicity stunt (Hartzman 2005: 11). The assumption can only be that Barnum and fellow exhibitors were hoping the two would create more Aztec children so they would have a whole family to tour around the country. The marriage must have been solely a way to gain more business, as the pair were fading from popularity. Odds were high that the pairs were brother and sister, though since they were supposedly from the pre-Hispanic Aztec culture, incestuous marriage would have been acceptable for them as marrying relatives was said to be a rule (Bogdan 1988: 131). The issue becomes whether they were viewed as individuals or merely a means to gain profit from scientific curiosity. The latter is more likely, especially considering a wedding ceremony was held when it does not appear Maximo or Bartola were capable of fully understanding the events around them.

Schlitzie, who appeared in the movie *Freaks*, was perhaps the most famous sideshow performer of his time during the 1930s. Schlitzie was mainly showcased as a girl because he wore muumuus and this was due to two different reasons: female attractions usually drew more of an audience, and Schlitzie had to wear diapers that were easier to change when he wore muumuus (Hartzman 2005: 211). Schlitzie was unable to carry a conversation, and could only parrot what he heard other people say (Hartzman 2005: 211). When Schlitzie's manager passed away in the 1960s, Schlitzie was taken to

an institution, but an evaluation concluded he would not live more than six months there because he required affection and adoration, so he was granted a guardian who had previously worked in sideshows and was head of the institution at that time (Hartzman 2005: 211).

The question becomes what was different between the Aztec children and individuals with microcephaly during Barnum's time and Schlitzie's time? The biggest difference can be attributed to medical understanding of their condition. Around 1931, reports can be found in the *British Medical Journal* discussing topics regarding other conditions that could be associated with microcephaly and how to recognize them. Amongst all others with mental disabilities, why were those with microcephaly the popular choice for exhibition? Their appearance contributed much to this since their uniquely shaped heads helped contribute substantially to the stories that they were exotic (Bogdan 1988: 144). After Maximo and Bartola, such exhibits became part of the standard which audiences expected to see when they attended the show. Their identity was not one that they created themselves based on their body; rather it was purely society that created and handed the "Wild Children" and the "Pinheads" their sense of self. The condition they were born with was not understood by society at the time, so something that people could understand was given to them. Since medical science could not explain their appearance, then the survival of a race thought long gone would satisfy the public particularly as it could be made to fit the new popular scientific theory.

It was commonly believed that those with mental disabilities were throwbacks to early humans and were often referred to as *Aztec-like* as late as the 1930s (Bogdan 1988:

145). After the 1930s, individuals with medical disabilities such as microcephaly were becoming better understood in the medical community. Due to this fact, people began to view them with more pity than curiosity, and so they were taken off the stage (Bogdan 1988: 146). At the start, exhibitors claimed that they were saving these individuals from winding up in an institution. However, after they could not perform any longer, this is where many of them went (Bogdan 1988: 146).

While 'missing link' exhibits were meant to showcase those who supposedly bridged the scientific divide between the past and the present there were also those who straddled the line between what was considered "male" and "female" during the late 1800s.

Gender-normativity: Man, or Woman?

Gender differences being showcased in freak shows were no doubt meant to remind the audience that heterosexuality was the social norm. Hermaphrodites, commonly known as "half-and-halves" were a staple of most freak shows (Hunter 2005: 91). Usually, they were displayed as being divided in half with one side distinctly male and the other distinctly female (Hunter 2005: 91). Half-and-halves were always presented laterally with the right side being male and the left side female, and most of the time they were falsified (Mannix 1976). The closest to being considered a true hermaphrodite are males with Klinefelter's Syndrome, in which they show small female breasts and small genitals or females with Turner's Syndrome, which means they are dwarfed and flat chested (Hunter 2005: 93).

While hermaphrodites were largely ambiguous regarding gender, bearded women always reflected respectable womanhood. The women would usually wear elegant dresses with hair done in the most current style, would pose very elegantly, and if one was married, then she posed with her husband since being married at that time was the defining nature of womanhood (Bogdan 1988: 224). On occasion, there was disagreement about whether the individual was a woman. Some believed she was a man in disguise (Bogdan 1988: 224). In these instances, a doctor and other experts were brought in to prove for the audience that the individual was genuine. This is another case where medical science was utilized to give traction to the exhibit instead of being used to uncover the how or why of the person's condition.

Aside from hermaphrodites and bearded women, giantesses also challenged conventional gender roles. During the Victorian era, women were expected to maintain a feminine appearance. Being nearly three feet taller than most men at the time was hardly seen as feminine. A notable example is Anna Swan, who was exhibited by P.T. Barnum in 1860. She was just short of being eight feet tall (Davies 2015: 94). Anna married another giant by the name of Martin Van Buren Bates, and together they tried to settle down to raise a family though their daughter was stillborn and their son barely lived half a day (Davies 2015: 94). It is uncertain if the reason for the difficulty in achieving a healthy birth was in line with infant life expectancy for the period or if individuals with Anna's condition are unable to bear children without the aid of modern medical assistance. It is likely the fetuses had a combination of inherited genetic errors which were incompatible with life. While Anna was performing, her biographical pamphlet

struggled to put forth her personality as a purely feminine one despite her large size (Davies 2015: 94). Pamphlets would also try to showcase stories from childhood to emphasize the vulnerability expected of women despite what the audience's eyes might seek to tell them (Davies 2015: 94).

In his book *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination*, Thomas Fahy argued that despite being sexually ambiguous, freaks such as bearded ladies or hermaphrodites did not challenge perceived gender roles for the time (Fahy 2006: 106). Fahy's reasoning was that difference was visible and so ambiguity was not easily hidden. He then connects freak ambiguity with latent same-sex desire, at least regarding half-and-halves and bearded ladies. If this was the case, then it is unclear why exhibitors like those for Anna Swan or bearded women would go to such great lengths to draw attention to the feminine attributes of the individuals.

In the early stages of the freak show, there did not appear to be much interest in scientifically explanations of hermaphrodites, bearded women, or gigantism. Meanwhile, the scientific community was quick to mold microcephalics to fit Darwin's theory of evolution. Another group that was molded to fit the ideas of Darwin were those were considered animalistic in appearance.

Zoomorphism: Man, or Beast?

Individuals who were born with zoomorphism were another popular draw for freak shows. These are the exhibits commonly billed as "dog-men" "ape-women" "bird-heads" or any other deformity that gave what appeared to be an animalistic quality (Hunter 2005: 31-50). The most famous example of zoomorphism is Joseph Merrick, or

as he was more commonly known "The Elephant Man." Merrick's case will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter. Individuals known as "dog-men" or "ape-women" were those born with hypertrichosis or an abundance of hair on their face and body (Hunter 2005: 31-50). As with pinheads, these individuals were often deemed to be from a long-lost race somewhere tied to Darwin's theory of natural selection. They were viewed as human, indeed, but as a lower form of human and medical science was being utilized to perpetuate that viewpoint amongst society.

Of all the examples of individuals with hypertrichosis, it is the story of Julia Pastrana that will never fail to elicit a deep feeling of sympathy. Pastrana was a Mexican Indian woman who was covered in excessive body hair and had overdeveloped jaws (Bondeson 1997: 217). During her tour in New York in the 1850s, many scientific professionals examined Pastrana, and she was called an extraordinary example of a human-orangutan hybrid (Bondeson 1997: 219). Darwin gave Pastrana a brief reference in his book *The Variation of Plants and Animals Under Domestication* (1868) long enough to give reference to her gorilla-like facial appearance. A separate doctor in Cleveland studied her hair under a microscope and claimed to find no evidence of "Negro blood" and determined that she was a "distinct species" (Bondeson 1997: 219). During Pastrana's time in the freak show she became quite famous and was therefore worth a great deal of money. This was something her manager Theodore Lent did not fail to exploit, and he decided to marry Julia (Hunter 2005: 33). On her deathbed after giving birth, Pastrana expressed happiness that she was loved for herself, this would indicate that she never suspected her manager/husband had ulterior motives for seeking the union

(Hunter 2005: 33). After Pastrana's death, Lent attempted to continue drawing income from his wife's fame and had the corpses of both Pastrana and her infant, who passed away after birth along with Pastrana, embalmed so they could be taken on tour (Hunter 2005: 33).

The story of Julia Pastrana is one of the saddest, as Lent was so determined to keep a hold on his largest source of income that he tied her down with marriage so she would not move on to another venue. As a result, the individual known as 'the ugliest woman in the world' was manipulated to believe that she had found someone who saw past that unfortunate title. It is unclear whether Lent was only in it for the profit, or if he truly came to love Julia as an individual. At that time, it is certain that scientists and medical professionals were determined to find a scientific category to place Pastrana. Since Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) had not yet been published, Pastrana was not a missing link but instead a hybrid of human and ape, and so she is an excellent example of one who bridged the divide between human and the animal. So, what divide would giants and dwarves cover?

Giants and Dwarfs: The Large and Small of It

The most common attractions at freak shows were possibly dwarves and giants. It was the midget Tom Thumb who launched P.T. Barnum's career exhibiting abnormality and likely kick-started the freak show in America (Hunter 2005: 76). The most common form of dwarfism is achondroplasia, which is associated mostly with truncation of bone development of the appendicular skeleton (Hunter 2005: 76). The term "midget" applied to those who had more "harmonious frames" (Hunter 2005: 76). Charles Stratton, who

was later billed by Barnum as 'General Tom Thumb,' was just over three feet in height when he stopped growing (Davies 2015: 122). When Barnum encountered Stratton for the first time, Stratton was five years old, but Barnum billed him as being eleven years old. If he did not do this, no one would believe that he was a genuine dwarf (Davies 2015: 126). Stratton was married to Lavinia Warren in 1863 in a high-profile ceremony (Davies 2015: 122). The Strattons were not untouched by Barnum's use of fiction for the audience. The couple was frequently exhibited with an infant that was claimed to be their baby, but this was not the case as the couple was unable to have their children (Davies 2015: 122). Dwarfs also bridged a line between childhood and adulthood. Children were viewed as innocent and in need of protection (Davies 2015: 122). Stratton's biographical pamphlet described him as "hyper-sexualized" and prone to being a foolish figure (Davies 2015: 123). Lavinia was viewed as childlike but was sexualized at the same time in her biographical pamphlet, pamphlets were a common way to promote exhibits (Davies 2015: 123).

With the Victorian view of childhood and innocence, it appears as if freak shows used little people to commodify the concept of cuteness. For example, the wedding of Tom Thumb was referred to as the "fairy wedding" (Thomson 1996). A more recent example from the 1930s is a family of little people who was referred to as the Doll Family (Hartzman 2005: 138). Daisy and Harry, two of the siblings, appeared in the 1932 film *Freaks*, while all four of the siblings appeared in the 1939 *Wizard of Oz* as Munchkins (Hartzman 2005: 138). With one extreme there is always another, so freak shows would usually have someone of great height to compliment those who were

viewed as lacking height. Dwarfs, due to size and appearance, could have been regarded as bridging the divide between childhood innocence and adulthood.

Giants are often the result of a pituitary deficiency that makes them normal mobility challenging, which leads to the perception of being “slow” and clumsy (Hunter 2005: 77). Pituitary gigantism causes an excess of growth hormones, and if this excess begins at an early age, then the individual will grow well beyond the range of human variation (Bondeson 2000: 234). In most cases, a pituitary tumor is benign but can often cause compression on the optic nerves (Bondeson 2000: 234). Due to poor circulation, Giants rarely saw what could be considered old age (Hunter 2005: 77). The question to ask is whether these individuals were aware of their medical condition, though it does not seem likely they were.

One example of a giant from 1740 was Daniel Cajanus, otherwise known as the Swedish Giant, who stood at seven feet ten inches (Bondeson 2000: 221). After passing away from illness in his home involving an unknown cause, Cajanus' remains were taken from his vault and pieces became available for viewing at various anatomy museums (Bondeson 2000: 232). During his life, Cajanus showed little interest in the opposite sex, and it was entirely possible that this was due to hypogonadism following the hypopituitarism (Bondeson 2000: 234). Towards the end of his life, there are reports that Cajanus seemed to shrink, though this may have been due to exaggerations regarding his height (Bondeson 2000: 234).

Studies have shown that Cajanus' skeleton displayed the outer condyles of his femora as badly destroyed, and his knee joints were in very poor condition to the point it

was impressive that he could walk at all by the end of his life (Bondeson 2000: 234). Dr. Carl Langer, who utilized anthropometric techniques, estimated based on Cajanus' femur length that he was roughly seven feet three inches in height but his deformity made it hard to determine for certain (Bondeson 2000: 234). If Giants bridged a divide, it would most likely be the one between man and myth. Giants made frequent appearances in fairy tales, mythology, and biblical stories such as David and Goliath. When the average height of the time was under six feet, it is no wonder that those who towered above were a source of marvel. There is also no doubt that audiences viewed giants and dwarfs with preconceived notions regarding what they could or could not accomplish. Unlike those with microcephaly, there seemed to be little interest in the scientific community to find an explanation for dwarfs or giants. This was also true regarding those who were missing some or all their limbs.

The Incomplete: Limbless Individuals

There was a societal expectation that those missing arms or legs would be unable to perform everyday tasks, and this is where exhibitors drew the crowds (Bogdan 1988: 212). A common draw with these individuals was highlighting the fact that they could overcome their abnormality in an exotic way and complete mundane tasks that most took for granted (Bogdan 1988: 212). This is the rare example where the exhibition of the deformity could be empowering for the individuals even though attention was still being drawn to the fact that they were not "normal" and people were paying to see them. At the same time, exhibiting their abilities challenged the expectations that the audience had of

their potential. However, such advertising could be condescending and play off stereotypes that the public held regarding the exhibits.

Those missing legs were popular, but it was individuals who were born without arms that drew in the large crowds. While it was impressive to observe the upper body strength needed for someone missing legs to get around, it was much more impressive to observe someone born without arms complete everyday tasks with their feet. Even more impressive still must have been those who were born with neither arms nor legs and were known as "living torsos." One such individual was known as Prince Randian, who appears in the 1932 film *Freaks* as the Caterpillar Man. Typically, Randian wore a one-piece garment that was like a potato sack and his act featured his ability to roll a cigarette with his mouth and then light it; he even built the box he kept his smoking materials in (Hartzman 2005: 204). On the opposite end of the spectrum from those missing limbs were those who were born with what could be considered too many limbs.

Double Act: Conjoined Twins

In the case of conjoined twins, there has been a long-recorded interest in surgical attempts to separate them (Hunter 2005: 56). There is an early record from Kent in 1100 A.D. of a pair of conjoined twins named Mary and Eliza Chulhurst, both of whom lived to the age of 34 (Warkany 1977). When one died, separation was suggested to the surviving sister who declined and was recorded having said "As we came together we will also go together" and she died six hours later (Warkany 1977). No attempt to separate conjoined twins was successful until 1952, and now the practice is much safer

than in the past (Hunter 2005: 56). These individuals were still showcased in freak shows, and if they did not survive then, their preserved remains were showcased.

Chang and Eng Bunker are considered the "original" Siamese Twins (Davies 2015: 61). The brothers were xiphopagous, which means they were joined at the sternum by a piece of cartilage (Davies 2015: 61). A British merchant paid their mother to allow him to exhibit the brothers, and after several years they would break away to become their managers (Davies 2015: 61). The pair is the best-recorded case of conjoined survival; as safe surgical separation was not possible, it was relatively rare for conjoined twins to have a long natural life (Warkany 1977). In 1874, Chang passed away in his sleep, and Eng passed several hours later after discovering his brother was dead (Davies 2015: 61). It was concluded that Eng died of fright, and there was no discernable cause of death listed for Chang (Davies 2015: 71). It is possible that Chang passed away as a result of shared body-wide organ failure following the death of his twin.

In their book, *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*, Gould and Pyle classified Chang and Eng as a Class II terata, being the "union of two distinct fetuses by a connecting band" (1896: 125). Gould and Pyle discuss how, at one point, the twins sought separation when they were older though this was never explored before the pair passed away (1896: 127). The autopsy of Chang and Eng was of great interest to medical professionals, and it was a committee at the Physicians College of Philadelphia who performed it (Gould and Pyle 1896: 127). The autopsy revealed that the twins' arteries had undergone calcareous degeneration, a hepatic connection through the band, intervascular communication between their livers, and that their intestines and peritoneal

cavities remained separate (Gould and Pyle 1896: 127). As illustrated here, it was around the 19th and early 20th centuries when conjoined twins aroused the interest of pathologists, who would provide increasingly detailed descriptions of conjoined anatomy (Warkany 1977).

Gould and Pyle proceed to write on similar cases in conjoined twins and how their anatomies connected one to the other. *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* would qualify as one of the medical texts released during the period when the medical community was shifting focus regarding abnormalities. It is at this point that they begin to focus less on finding evidence to support previously held ideas and focus more on what was happening medically. This shift in the medical community would eventually lead to a change in how the rest of society viewed abnormality. This progress would best be seen in a 1962 textbook on pediatric surgery that contained a section regarding conjoined twins (Warkany 1977). Five years later, a symposium was published on conjoined twins in which obstetrical and clinical management, cardiovascular evaluation, surgical separation, and many other medical questions of diploteratology were discussed (Warkany 1977).

It was at this point that conjoined twins joined the classification of medical birth defect and yet is has not moved completely out of the realm of curiosity. For example, a program on TLC featured conjoined sisters who sought to become teachers. The biographical pamphlets, which were available for purchase included a great deal of information about the performer's life. However, these pamphlets were largely fictional

and were responsible for spreading a vast amount of misinformation both scientific and cultural.

How Exhibits Were Presented

Real life story pamphlets about performers were readily available for purchase at freak shows during the 19th century and contained amazing stories of the subjects' early life and what they had accomplished (Davies 2015: 95). Often these fantastic stories were complete works of fiction to make the visual spectacle in front of the audience even more amazing. It could be argued that if these pamphlets are filled with so much false information that they could not possibly be useful in the contemporary study of freak shows. Davies argues the opposite stating that such pamphlets can give insight into inconsistencies along with social anxieties and tensions (2015: 96). Through such pamphlets, a glimpse is given into how the public viewed these exhibits based on the information presented to them, and general feelings about certain areas of the world can be assessed. An example that reflects the entertainment world showing an interest in the exotic can be found around the time the tomb of King Tutankhamen was uncovered in Egypt the 1920s. There was a surge of interest in ancient Egyptian culture that was reflected in art deco and Hollywood. It is due in large part to the mass interest that the 1932 film *The Mummy* was made, making an exotic land more accessible to those who could not see it for themselves.

One example of an informative pamphlet was the booklet audiences could purchase to read about Hiram and Barney, the two "wild men of Borneo." They were given by their mother in exchange for a "wash pan filled with money" and exhibited as

exotic specimens as they traveled around the United States (Bogdan 1988: 122). Aside from learning about the claimed capture of the wild twins and their strength, audiences were told they could also learn a great deal about Borneo and the inhabitants.

Surprisingly, the pamphlet contained accurate information regarding the climate, geography, and wildlife though details regarding the native peoples were extremely exaggerated and embellished in claiming that they were a lost race (Bogdan 1988: 123). It is interesting that the natural science in the pamphlet was accurate while the information regarding the people themselves was largely falsified.

Similarly, the pamphlet regarding Maximo and Bartola contained sketches of Maya civilization including altars embellished with carved elongated heads resembling theirs (Bogdan 1988: 123). The fictionalized story included in the pamphlet was the tale of how the two were found in an ancient Aztec temple where only one of three adventurers could escape with the pair (Bogdan 1988: 129). The appearance is given that society was much more willing to accept new scientific information regarding the natural world around them, and yet studying human abnormality was not used to further scientific discovery but rather molded to fit current beliefs.

Banner art depicting exhibits was another method used to draw the attention of the crowds. A standard feature on these banners was the word "ALIVE" to ensure to the audience that what they were paying to see was genuine (Bosker and Hammer 1996: 10). When banner art was starting out in the early 1800s, they were more detailed than those that came later, but those in the 1920s were more stylized (Bosker and Hammer 1996: 13). Just like the true-to-life pamphlets, banners rarely sought to depict reality. Painters

would greatly exaggerate the anomalies since the objective was to sell tickets (Bosker and Hammer 1996: 20). Performers were advertised aggressively, and their appearance exaggerated, which meant audiences went in with high expectations and were often disappointed (Bosker and Hammer 1996: 21).

Presentation, whether factual or not, was crucial in drawing audiences into the show. Making the individual's anomaly more fantastic and exotic was what drove interest. Pamphlets would claim to educate about where the individuals came from and sometimes attempt to provide an explanation for their appearance whether it was maternal impression or a remnant of a long-lost race. After considering what audiences paid to see, the question of consent must be explored. Was it pure exploitation or did the individuals involved have a say in how their bodies were commodified? It is simple to assume, looking at the past through standards of the modern era, that the freak shows are the ones who were at fault when it came to the treatment of the performers. The question becomes whether this was, in fact, the case, and look at how medical and scientific professionals treated those exhibited versus how the venues managed them.

CHAPTER THREE: "I AM A MAN!": THE TREATMENT OF "MONSTERS"

Human "monsters" have been a source of curiosity throughout recorded time. Diderot concerned himself with "the nature of monsters, as philosopher with their place in nature and, as a theorist of the arts (both verbal and plastic), with the implications for aesthetics of all that was exceptional in form, whether by accident or design" (Laidlaw 1963: 109). Denis Diderot was a French philosopher who lived 1713 to 1784, and like many who came after him, was primarily concerned with how "monsters" fit into the natural order of the world. During the 18th century, accident or design referred to whether these anomalies were intended by God or just a fluke of nature. Teratology, the study of monsters, began as a literary term. In 1678, the English meaning was "a discourse or narrative concerning prodigies; a marvelous tale or a collection of such tales" (Laidlaw 1963: 109). Two hundred years later, teratology became the "scientific neologism for the study of monsters as a division of natural history" (Laidlaw 1963: 109). Over time, human anomalies were viewed regarding pathology, and those considered to be monstrosities shifted into the realm of the medical theater (Thomson 1996: 2). As previously stated, even when human anomalies were beginning to be examined by medical and scientific professionals. In other words science was being used as a vehicle to confirm what people already believed to be true, such as certain groups belonging to a more primitive species of humanity.

It could be considered that *On Monsters and Marvels* was one of the earliest attempts to take a scientific and rationalized approach as to why birth defects happened. There was no record of any scientific professional calling freak shows distasteful even though doctors would often visit and give commentary on exhibits, using them in their writing for speculation regarding branches of humanity (Bogdan 1988: 121). *On Monsters and Marvels* was written by Ambroise Paré in 1575. Paré rose to serve as chief surgeon to Charles IX, and he later wrote a treatise on “monsters” (Pallister 1982: xv). Paré’s classified causes of abnormality by listing thirteen etiologic principles including the glory of God, Satan, and maternal impression which was how the fetus was perceived to be impacted by stressors experienced by the mother (Wilson 1977). Paré’s work can be used as a base point for when the medical community began to question the true origins of human abnormality. As a result, this brought a sense of humanity to these individuals who became less curiosity and more of a patient for both medical professionals and society.

Paré and his contemporaries sought to find out how abnormalities developed, during the 19th century, it appears that scientific professionals were more concerned with finding something to write about to increase their prestige. This was not the case with all them, and at times even those with their ends in mind were those who helped sway attitudes the most by bringing attention to the issue. Classifying the various aspects of humanity and within the rise of anthropology, was pushing forward the questions as to why and how as typologies began (slowly) to recede. Two different medical professionals from the mid-19th century will be examined to gain insight into how each of them

approached various examples of human abnormality in their careers. How these doctors treated people, who were physically different affected how other people saw them, whether this is the audience or colleagues. Treatment by the medical community also leads into questions of consent regarding the bodies of the performers both during their career and after their death. One invariably influenced the other, and it is necessary to examine what the general attitudes were to better understand why the change occurred and whether it was for the better.

Dr. Mütter's Treatment of Deformities

In 1831, 251 years after *On Monsters and Marvels* was written, Thomas Mütter graduated from the medical college of University of Pennsylvania (Aptowicz 2014). As Aptowicz (2014) narrates in his book *Dr. Mutter's Marvels* while studying in Paris, Mütter was introduced to a new form of surgery - one often sought out by those who were labeled as "monsters,"- called *fewer operations plastiques* (plastic operations). During regular surgical lectures, normal patients rarely knew the trouble they were in or what they were in store for. Those considered monsters were very much aware of how they were viewed from day to day, some hiding their faces when walking in public. The surgeries meant to correct facial deformities were not always successful, though death was a risk they were willing to accept if there was any chance they could lead anything resembling a normal life. During his career as a surgeon, Mütter also fought for the use of anesthesia to become more widely accepted to limit the unnecessary suffering of patients during procedures. Mütter was unique in his time because of how he taught his medical students to treat patients:

He taught them that the patients who flocked to the clinic for care were not to be defined by their diseases, or their injuries, or their deformities. They were not mysteries to be solved, or cases to add to the docket. They were people, humans. They had names and families, and—maybe if the doctors did their jobs right—they would each have a future too. (Aptowicz 2014: 266)

Mütter and his views on patients with deformities represent the beginning in the shift of how such individuals were regarded. The change began with how medical professionals viewed and treated them as patients and how these patients would eventually move into society. If there were any other doctors who had similar views to Mütter before this, then their opinions were not widely publicized. Mütter was in a unique position due to his work teaching at a medical university. In this setting, Mütter could teach his point of view to the next generation of medical professionals, and since he was a charismatic and popular teacher based on description, it is no wonder that his viewpoint spread throughout the medical community. Mütter taught the next generation of doctors that these patients were people with lives, or who had the promise of a meaningful life after receiving proper medical help.

Aptowicz continues to narrate that after his resignation from the Jefferson Medical College, Mütter began searching for a place to house his collection of unusual specimens. Mütter knew that medical oddities were a great source of curiosity to the public, but it seemed ironic to him that people who were isolated in life often had human dignity taken away when their remains were displayed in sideshows. Mütter often had a hard time gaining some of the specimens from owners who wanted to keep them not for

emotional reasons but the potential profit. After his death, Mütter's collection became what is known today as the Mütter Museum, and much like Mütter did during his lifetime, the museum in its present form challenges visitors to see the humanity in the remains on display.

Dr. Mütter was a renowned medical professional, who at the height of the popularity of freak shows, taught his students to see the humanity in their patients no matter background or appearance. It is this kind of attitude in the medical profession that would eventually change how society itself would view the abnormalities in freak shows when medicine started trying to understand the causes better. There was no debate over how Dr. Mütter treated his patients or what his motives were. This was not the case with Sir Frederick Treves, who gained attention after his acquaintance with Joseph Merrick, better known as The Elephant Man.

Sir Frederick Treves and the Elephant Man

Sir Frederick Treves was a young surgeon in 1884 when he first encountered the Elephant Man where he was being displayed (Ford and Howell 2010). Despite what Sir Treves may have seen in his career as a surgeon, his initial impression speaks volumes as to why Merrick was being displayed at all: "At no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed" (Treves 1923). The way Sir Treves describes Merrick is very dramatic and objectifying. Sir Treves' initial impression was that Merrick was not entirely human, as he was referred to as a "version" of a human. This is much like the views regarding those who were claimed to be missing links or members of a long dead race; they were not entirely human but rather a sub-

species. On the biographical pamphlet that was available on Merrick's life, the reasoning for Merrick's condition was that his mother had been knocked over and frightened by a runaway elephant from a traveling show, but Sir Treves was not interested in the folk-belief, and instead wanted to examine Merrick to determine what was scientifically causing his abnormalities (Ford and Howell 2010). There was even speculation that Merrick's condition was hereditary, but no one else in the family had similar deformities (Ford and Howell 2010).

It was during the late 1800s that some medical professionals, along with the public, were beginning to question the morality of displaying individuals like Merrick due to their deformities. Though it would be close to 60 years before this questioning became a wider spread. Once medical science began to seek more answers regarding how human abnormalities were happening, then the attitude towards freak shows would change drastically.

What was it about Merrick's appearance that warranted making a spectacle out of it? Sir Treves (1923) described that Merrick's head was large and misshapen, covered in bony lumps and skin growths, it was overall the same size around as a man's waist, one size bulging so much that it nearly covered one eye completely. Merrick's right cheek was swollen, lips were forced back into inverted folds, and growths hung from the back of his head. Growths of skin also hung from his chest and back, his right arm was swollen and nearly shapeless, both feet were as shapeless in appearance as the right arm, but surprisingly the left arm was completely normal. Merrick's skeleton was not spared, and many of his bones were deformed and enlarged (Ford and Howell 2010). Merrick, like

many others, was subject to the gaze of the curious public due to the circumstances of his birth. For a time, no one was interested in seeking any further answers because they believed those answers were already available.

There was little interest expressed by the Pathological Society of London, who instead felt that Sir Treves himself was being a bit too theatrical regarding his choice of case study (Ford and Howell 2010). No one from the Society offered any ideas related to a diagnosis, and Merrick generated little response aside from general surprise when he was first brought out (Ford and Howell 2010). It is quite surprising to read that Merrick received such a lackluster response from the Society, a group of intellectuals who were supposed to be dedicated to studying anything medically related. There is no clear reason why there was such disinterest in exploring a diagnosis unless it was attributed to being a variant of skin condition. When Sir Treves tried again four months later, one of the doctors present said Merrick's condition must have been a rare case of both *dermatolysis*, being a loosened condition of the skin, and *pachydermatocoele*, where an overgrowth of skin causes tumors to form (Ford and Howell 2010). Such cases may have been seen before, and as far as the Society was concerned that was all the exploration that was needed, so there was no reason to probe further.

At this point, the exhibition of freaks was becoming unpopular, and society seemed more comfortable keeping them out of sight and out of mind. Those who remained for the shows argued that it was better for these individuals to be traveling said shows so they could earn a living instead of being shut away in an institution (Ford and Howell 2010). Merrick's showcasing was deemed an offense to public decency, and so

the authorities shut down the location where Sir Treves first met him (Ford and Howell 2010). What was Merrick doing before Sir Treves 'discovered' him and who exactly was the "Elephant Man"? This question needs to be explored to compare the attitudes regarding Merrick by the freak shows, the public, and Sir Treves.

Joseph Merrick's Career

Merrick, before Sir Treves knew of him, spent a good deal of time in the poor conditions of a workhouse as he could not afford to support himself, and once he was out Merrick was quite firm on never returning (Ford and Howell 2010). As difficult as it might be for readers of the modern day to imagine, the offer from Messrs. Torr and Ellis to be exhibited under the name "Elephant Man" was a means of getting out of poverty and gaining a chance at financial independence. Modest accommodations were set up for Merrick in the room Sir Treves would later find him in, and a curtain was hung around his sleeping area for privacy (Ford and Howell 2010).

Tom Norman was not fond of the crude posters that were hung outside the building to advertise Merrick's presence, but it was the only way they could gather interest (Ford and Howell 2010). What is interesting is the language that Norman used to introduce Merrick to audiences, he did not appear to play on Merrick's "monstrous" features. Norman informed audiences that Merrick was there not to frighten them, but to enlighten them regarding the pedagogic possibilities of the human form and that Merrick himself was quite a remarkable man. When audiences reacted in shock after the curtain was pulled back on Merrick, Norman presented an argument for Merrick's humanity:

I ask you please not to despise or condemn this man on account of his unusual appearance. Remember we do not make ourselves, and were you to prick or cut Joseph he would bleed, and that bleed or blood would be red, the same as yours or mine. (Ford and Howell 2010)

Norman also drew attention to the fact that he never treated Merrick as anything less than a man as it was not the sort of person he was, and it would have been against his interests to do so as after the shock wore off the audience would view Merrick with sympathy (Ford and Howell 2010). One morning Norman noticed that Merrick would sleep sitting up with his chin propped on his knees. When asked about this Merrick replied that he always slept like that or he might risk breaking his neck (Ford & Howell 2010). Norman tried to rig up an apparatus to make sleeping more comfortable for Merrick but was never successful (Ford and Howell 2010). Norman, as illustrated, treated Merrick as someone to learn from because of his uniqueness. This contrasts with Sir Treves who described Merrick as a degraded figure and questioned his intelligence. It is easy to assume these attitudes would be reversed. After all, surely science would be more progressive in attitude than a traveling showman.

Merrick started to gain popularity, and as a result, medical students would visit to get a glimpse. This was when Sir Frederick Treves arrived to see Merrick for himself, and the meeting is told very differently by Norman than Treves. Both attempt to portray themselves as the one with Merrick's best interests at heart and each portrays the other as only being out for themselves. Sir Treves gives the impression that Norman was a drunk and was only out to make money while Norman accuses Treves of looking out only for

his career. Even though the conflicting accounts make it difficult to judge if either of them was the better person, it is important to point out that each of them was individually working towards changing the attitude of society towards individuals like Merrick.

When Sir Treves requested that Merrick be brought over to the hospital both Merrick and Norman agreed with the hopes that Merrick might finally receive some good medical advice (Ford and Howell 2010). After three visits to Sir Treves at the hospital, Merrick would refuse to return because of the treatment he was subjected to. Merrick said he did not mind being displayed decently when he was being paid, but at the hospital, he was "stripped naked and felt like an animal in a cattle market" (Ford and Howell 2010). Merrick walked away with no answers as to what caused his condition, and even in the modern day, it is still uncertain what defects or disease was at the root of his medical problems. When a traveling fair that Merrick had later joined was starting to fail, audiences were starting to react negatively to Merrick, so Merrick was sent on a tour of Europe (Ford & Howell 2010). The European tour was a failure, and it resulted in an untrustworthy manager stealing Merrick's money and abandoning him in Brussels (Ford and Howell Ford 2010). When Merrick finally made it back home, the only card the police could find on his person belonged to Sir Treves who was asked to come and help (Treves 1923). Sir Treves rushed to Merrick's aid and brought him to a place where he could have his room to rest, wash, and have something to eat (Treves 1923). Naturally, Sir Treves blamed any bitterness that Merrick may have harbored towards him on Norman.

It is necessary to draw attention to immediate differences in how Norman and Sir Treves approached Merrick. Norman presented Merrick as an individual to learn from, someone who was remarkable and unique. Most importantly, he was someone who could not help the circumstances of his birth. Norman had urged Merrick to go to the hospital because he genuinely believed that Merrick might finally get some answers. Though it is apparent that all Merrick gained from the visits was humiliation. Sir Treves, on the other hand, described Merrick as a degraded figure and sincerely hoped he was mentally retarded. Why is it that Sir Treves is raised on a pedestal today as being the only one who saw Merrick as a person and befriended him, when it is the freak shows portrayed as those who treated Merrick poorly and as less than human?

The published memoir by Sir Treves titled *The Elephant Man, and Other Reminiscences* (1923) recounts the acquaintance that was shared with Merrick, and how Sir Treves brought attention to his case. This is the account that was later picked up by the director David Lynch and depicted in his film *The Elephant Man* (1980). At only one time in his account does Sir Treves refer to Merrick by a given name, and it is not even the correct one. Sir Treves refers to Merrick by the name John when his real name was Joseph; it is unclear if he misheard the name due to Merrick's difficulty speaking (Ford and Howell 2010). This could not be the case because when a copy of Sir Treves' reminiscences came up for auction in the 1980s, it was observed that Sir Treves had written Joseph but intentionally crossed it out and replaced it with John (Ford and Howell 2010).

Despite what Sir Treves wrote, Merrick's time performing was not filled with hardship, and he did, in fact, have friends. When Merrick was traveling with a fair starting in 1885, a couple of men by the names of Bertram and Harry would frequently look out for him, and one even chased off a group that was harassing him (Ford and Howell 2010). While Merrick was hospitalized, he even formed friendships with the staff, expressing gratitude for everything they did (Ford and Howell 2010).

It is possible that Sir Treves wrote the memoir much later in life, and as such his account was heavily romanticized. Sir Treves portrays himself as the man who rescued Merrick from harsh conditions on the road and sought to help him, especially after "discovering" that Merrick was not mentally deficient as previously believed. Since Sir Treves was early in his career when he came across Merrick, this was no doubt a chance for him to make a name for himself. What was the cost?

There have been notable effects from Sir Treves' error in that nearly everything published afterward referred to Merrick as 'John' because it was unbelievable that a man of Sir Treves' caliber would get a minute detail incorrect (Ford and Howell 2010). It should be noted that Sir Treves did not recognize any intelligence on the part of Merrick and recorded his hope that the individual he saw was mentally retarded. For some reason, Sir Treves could not stand the thought that Merrick was intelligent enough to be aware of his condition and appearance.

Later it appears as if his attitude changed, and Sir Treves sought to help Merrick when he was in trouble. A rough friendship may have developed with Sir Treves visited Merrick in the hospital (Ford and Howell 2010). Merrick would never go into great

lengths about his time in the freak shows to Sir Treves, but he would never say anything negative about them, much to Sir Treves' frustration (Ford and Howell 2010). Merrick idolized women and admitted that his favorite stories to read were about romance. When Sir Treves noticed that Merrick was lonely, he asked a young widow friend to visit Merrick only to smile and shake his hand without showing any sign of shock (Treves 1923). When Leila entered, and did her part, Merrick was so moved as to begin sobbing and Sir Treves determined it was the first time a woman had smiled at him (Treves 1923). Sir Treves theorized that Merrick began to harbor a dream of moving to a home for the blind so that he might meet a woman who would not judge him based on appearance (Ford and Howell 2010). Today, while Merrick would have had advanced medicine on his side to help, and possibly reconstructive surgery could be an option for his condition, there is nothing to indicate that he would be any less of curiosity. Human beings are naturally curious and usually cautious about anyone whose appearance is outside the norm.

It was theorized by detractors that Sir Treves was unprofessional in seeking out publicity and utilized his acquaintance with Merrick for self-advancement. Sir Treves was just as much a showman as the sideshow operators, but he garnered more attention most likely due to his prestigious position as a medical professional. From a modern standpoint, it is easy to believe that doctors never had anything but the best interests of patients in mind and it was the exhibitioners who were forcing those with abnormalities to showcase and exploit themselves. As can be seen in the case of Dr. Mutter, this is right as he persuaded his students and colleagues to see the humanity in their patients no

matter who they were or how they appeared. Joseph Merrick is a different case where he felt that Sir Treves took advantage of him due to his elevated status as a doctor, and it was, in fact, performing in freak shows where he felt valued as a human being. While Dr. Mutter was focused on the patients, Sir Treves remained one of the many doctors of the day who would use unique cases to bring attention to his career. While changes in medical science aided in changing the overall views regarding human abnormalities, those practicing in the medical and scientific fields also had to change. How both society and scientific professionals treated human abnormality leads into the question of whether these individuals consented to what they were doing.

There never appears to be any debate regarding whether Joseph Merrick consented to be exhibited. Sources go out of the way to mention the fact that Merrick chose to showcase himself to leave the grim reality of the workhouse. It was not just during their lives that medical science used their position to influence how society viewed human abnormality. The influence reached out even after the lives of exhibits ended.

Freak Show Performers & Display Before and After Death

A human abnormality did not cease to be viewed as one after they passed away. In fact, after death, they became even more of curiosity because medical science had a reason to dissect the individual to seek out the hows and whys. During life, human abnormality was a commodity, and during the height of popularity, it was in high demand to the point where it would be falsified to draw the crowds.

There are a few instances where parents sold children to exhibitors to make ends meet. Such was the case with William Henry Johnson, whom according to a woman claiming to be his sister, was sold by their parents at the age of four (Cook 1996: 144). Johnson was with P.T. Barnum until his death in 1926, which meant he was performing for sixty years (Cook 1996: 144). Due to Johnson being African-American, he had fewer legal protections, and it seems he may have suffered from microcephaly, which would mean he had little control over his stage presence (Cook 1996: 144). It is reported that during the last ten years of his life, Johnson would have been likely forced to get on stage which is consistent with Barnum's recorded inhumane treatment of performers (Cook 1996: 144). This information would make it seem as if, due to his condition, Johnson had no control over what he did. Though there are a couple of contradicting stories that challenge this perspective and question how much control Johnson had.

There is a story that Johnson was paid a dollar per day by Barnum to stay quiet and never speak to guests (Hartzman 2005: 49). This story heavily implies that Johnson was able to communicate. Therefore, if he was microcephalic, it was not a severe form of the condition like with Maximo and Bartola. A story from Johnson's deathbed also paints a very different picture if it is credible. When he was dying, it is claimed that Johnson said to his sister "Well, we fooled 'em for a long time" (Hartzman 2005: 50). If that is the case, then Johnson may have been entirely aware of how Barnum wished the audience to interpret Johnson, in this case, as a scientific and cultural curiosity.

While it is likely that Johnson knew what he was doing, it is unlikely that the "Aztec children" or Schlitzie were aware of the reasons they were getting so much

attention. Outside of those with severe mental disabilities, it is possible to assume that many individuals in freak shows were there because they wanted to be there. Chances are that they viewed displaying themselves as the best possible way for them to earn money or they genuinely enjoyed what they did. For Johnson, consent ties into how he was treated and viewed because if he understood his part, then he played a role in how the public viewed him as a curiosity. The "Aztec Children," however, had no control over how they were publically perceived and so they were showcased as living oddities from a lost race.

Another example is that of Sarah Baartman whose stage name was 'the Hottentot Venus' (Davies 2015: 22). She was first placed on display in Piccadilly in 1810 wearing a tight-fitting suit to put emphasis on her enlarged buttocks (Davies 2015: 22). Later that year abolitionists sought legal investigation into the well-being of Sarah, who it was believed objected to what she was being made to do (Davies 2015: 22). It was determined in court that Sarah was performing of her free will (Davies 2015: 22). Someone who observed Sarah and wrote about her conditions claimed that she seemed sullen during the time they were there (Davies 2015: 31). There is more conflict in the story later when, after another investigative visit into potential enslavement, Sarah does not speak largely when given a chance and does not appear to understand her contract completely (Davies 2015: 32). Much of the public perceived that Sarah was consenting regarding her presence on stage and that shaped their view and how they treated her. Since she agreed to perform, some of them took that to mean they could also poke and prod her to see if her enlarged buttocks were real.

It is difficult to judge the actions and motivations of these individuals based on the moral standards of today. What about the case of those like the Aztec Children and Schlitzie? There is not enough to determine how the Aztec Children were treated behind the scenes. Since Schlitzie appeared in shows and films towards the end of the freak show's popularity, there is more known. He was well cared for and genuinely seemed happy being in front of an audience for the attention. It also cannot be assumed what the mindset of these and other individuals were. They were either acutely aware of all the options ahead of them, or lack thereof, or they simply did not care. Meaning, they did not feel the urge to explore whether there even were other options. One possibility was that based on the period in which most were performing there simply were no other options open to them where they could earn enough to support themselves. At this point, museums and freak shows attracted a variety of audience members. As stated previously, it was even more of a draw if a scientific professional validated the exhibit, and it was not uncommon for such attractions to attract members of that community. For most, it was likely the best way to study and observe such subjects.

The medical and scientific community did not cease to make use of human abnormality after death, rather they took full advantage of what else they could potentially learn via dissection. Sarah Baartman's body was taken for examination and study, and later certain aspects of her anatomy were placed on display (Davies 2015: 40). As seen with Barnum's "What is It?" exhibit, there is another example of someone utilizing otherness to make a perceived connection between humans and apes about Darwin's hypothesis. George Cuvier was a French naturalist who would dissect Sarah's

body and display her remains at the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle to connect Sarah's people to a more primitive species (Davies: 2015: 39). In Sarah's case, her treatment after death most likely stemmed from the view in the scientific field that she was less than fully human since she was regarded as a missing link between human and primates. If the scientific community authenticated her as less than human, then that is how the public viewed her because the scientific community was educated and trusted. If Sarah was equated to a primitive, then it was entirely acceptable to dissect her after her death for more intricate study to prove that she was a different variety of human than everyone else.

After the medical professionals had gleaned what they could from dissection, it is often that individual remains were preserved to be displayed in a museum, and to this day there is debate regarding the display of the remains of the man known as the Irish Giant. The skeleton of Charles Byrne, known as the Irish Giant, is on display in the London Museum as part of a collection put in place by Dr. John Hunter in the late 18th century (Greenfieldboyce 2017). What wound up happening upon his death is exactly what young Byrne feared. Before he died at the age of 22, Byrne had a profound fear that if he were buried in the ground, his remains would be taken by resurrectionists (Greenfieldboyce 2017). Resurrectionists were grave robbers who would take corpses from graveyards and sell them to medical professionals. At over seven feet in height, the remains of Charles Byrne provide a good profit (Greenfieldboyce 2017). Byrne's final request was to be placed in a lead coffin and buried at sea to prevent his remains from being plundered, though this failed since Dr. Hunter had an undertaker secretly switch Byrne's body with

dead weight (Greenfieldboyce 2017). Dr. Hunter kept it secret that he was in possession of Byrne's remains until a few years later when they were the main attraction in the collection (Greenfieldboyce 2017).

As of the present day, the Royal College of Surgeons' Hunterian Museum has resisted repeated calls to give Byrne the burial at sea he initially requested (Greenfieldboyce 2017). Thomas Munizer, a lawyer, has written various journal articles calling for the wishes of Byrne to be heard and for his remains to be treated with appropriate dignity. Munizer asks the question "Do we want to live in a world where people die; they're gone, who cares about what they wanted in life regarding remains or regarding their burial? Or do we want to live in a world where we respect people's wishes after they've passed away?" (Greenfieldboyce 2017). Byrne was very clear about what his wishes were after his death, but the Royal College of Surgeons insisted that the scientific value that Byrnes' remains pose are far more significant than fulfilling his wishes, especially since there was no written will left behind (Greenfieldboyce 2017). It has been argued that studies could be conducted on individuals still living who can give their consent, or at least take Byrnes' skeleton off public display (Greenfieldboyce 2017).

Such is the case with the remains of those individuals who compose the famous *Body Worlds* exhibit. Their remains were plasticized and prepped in a way to display certain aspects of human anatomy. The main difference here is that body donors made informed consent while they were still living to the procedures their bodies would undergo when they passed away; where the debate lies regarding the exhibit is in the plastination of fetuses (Howson 2013). *Bodies...The Exhibition*, which was a similar

exhibit of preserved human anatomy, had the overall intent of the exhibit educating audiences about the human body, and in some instances, showcase the effects of activities such as smoking on lungs (Benedetti 2006). Critics claimed that the exhibit's display of anatomy was profiting off the desecration of human bodies and that not all the bodies came from consenting individuals (Benedetti 2006).

Even to this day, the remains of those who were considered a curiosity are being treated as such. In the case of the preserved bodies exhibits, even the normal human body is being turned into a curiosity. Like the case of Charles Byrne, there must be a better way to educate the public about how their body works in place of turning preserved remains into a spectacle. It is almost as if one freak show is being replaced with one that the modern audience has deemed more acceptable. If the modern age is supposed to be more enlightened regarding those who were born physically different, then why are their bodies still being treated as public curiosities and how is this format any different than the format they were a part of while alive? It cycles back to the very reason freak shows fell out of favor in the first place: the advancement of understanding in medical science. It was not only society that had to change regarding how abnormality was viewed. As illustrated in the case of Sir Treves and his treatment of Joseph Merrick, the scientific community also had to change their opinion, so abnormality was not viewed to bring attention to their careers.

A large draw to those in freak shows was the mystery surrounding their appearance. Once medicine started uncovering reasons why such abnormalities were occurring along with how to prevent them, that is when the exhibits began to lose their

mysterious appeal. The difference is that in the modern age, the remains of abnormality still on display are being used to draw attention to how varied the human body is and that no one is normal. Instead of using the remains of human abnormality after death to prove already held ideas such as a missing link, remains are utilized to show how much science still must learn about anatomy. As medical science uncovered why such abnormalities occurred in the human body, individuals with these abnormalities went from mysterious to embarrassing back to almost being a curiosity today. The difference is the overall perception since today, even though the average people will catch themselves staring at an individual with dwarfism it is also immediately recognized that they are a person.

CONCLUSION: FREAKS AND THE CULTURAL SHIFT

Though Michel Foucault writes about the connections between medicine and disease in *The Birth of the Clinic*, his ideas may also be applied to the way medicine viewed human abnormality. Indeed, "the perception involved is no longer essential and ordinal, as in the medicine of species, but quantitative and cardinal. The basis of this perception is not a specific type, but a nucleus of circumstances" (Foucault 1973). Medicine would soon start moving beyond the perception of the physically deformed that were curiosities in the entertainment world. The curiosity of the public was drawn to human abnormality due to specific circumstances: colorful displays would catch the passing eye, exhibitors would spin tales of what sights awaited inside and the pull of the mysterious. The question becomes whether the public or the medical community would have paid the same kind of attention to the abnormalities if they had not been exhibited for financial gain? They more than likely would have, but it might have taken longer for the abnormalities to gain the attention from medical professionals that they eventually got.

Freak shows relied on the commodification of the abnormalities that presented themselves and was key in helping society of the time reaffirm their normalcy. Medical professionals were used for quite some time to validate attractions, but at some point, near the end of the 19th century, some medical professionals began viewing these

abnormalities in a different light. Less focus was on the abnormality, and more of their focus turned towards helping the individual being affected or uncovering why these anomalies were taking place. When science had stripped away the mystery behind the human abnormalities, Freak Shows became less desirable forms of entertainment and instead of viewing the performers with curiosity, audiences would view them with pity or even disgust. It became less acceptable to showcase what was now a known disability and exploit it for profit. With the emergence of a medical cause, audiences no longer wanted deformities paraded in front of them and would rather they be out of sight and out of mind.

Incubator Babies and Changing Public Attitudes

In less than one hundred years, freak shows began to see a drop in popularity.

Advancements in medical science were not the only entity affecting how society viewed abnormality, though it was a major factor. One way that medical science and the side show combined and worked together was in the remarkable case of incubator babies. The example of the incubator babies is a compelling way to showcase how medical science utilized the side show to change the public's attitude regarding the care of premature infants. A series of articles from the 1905 *St. Louis Courier of Medicine* by John Zahorsky, who oversaw medical management of the incubator installation at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, detailed when the baby incubators began to go on display and detailed how the infants were cared for, their vitals, how the incubators worked, and how this information could be used to help premature babies anywhere.

The idea was that by showcasing the baby incubators, the public could be shown how useful they were and how they functioned, and eventually, they would be readily available for public use. Possibly doctors also had to be shown this was a worthwhile investment that would aid them in their practice rather than take away from it. Some claimed that the incubators were so well put together that they did not require expert attention, and this concerned Zahorsky as he seemed quite familiar with the fact that maintaining a certain a temperature was hardly the most difficult part of caring for a premature infant (Zahorsky 1905). Zahorsky describes the set-up of the exhibit as containing three compartments where the public would find sleeping accommodations for the nurses, the nursery for the infants, and a central room where the public was admitted. Along with the nurses, two physicians were in attendance along with Coney and Schenkein (Zahorsky 1905). Zahorsky expressed concerned about the rising popularity of the exhibitions and how some showman would only see the profit that could be gleaned.

Coney and Schenkein published a letter in 1897 arguing that it was:

Their duty to warn members of the medical profession, also nurses, parents and public institutions not to entrust their children to any applicant whatsoever without first taking the precaution to assure themselves that they will not be made the victims of showmen, as well of inexperienced or irresponsible persons who seek to trade upon the established reputation of an invention that has been recognized by both the medical and lay press (Zahorsky 1905).

One case of a showman seeking to replicate the financial success of the incubator babies resulted in the death of a baby girl as the man did not have medical staff who were

properly trained (Prentice 2016). Coney, to combat those seeking to copy, stressed to the audience that his medical staff was well trained and highly qualified to care for the infants (Prentice 2016). It was difficult for the incubator to gain traction in America because it was believed the best care for a premature infant was its mother, and placing it in a steel box was inhumane (Prentice 2016).

This was a starkly different attitude from the 1860s and 1870s when freak shows were at their height. During this time, there were reports of families selling abnormal children to freak hunters, and in this instance, parents are being warned to be extremely cautious about who they accept offers from to showcase their child in an incubator. There were genuine concerns that parents would be taken advantage of by showmen who were only out to make a profit based on the latest craze. Barnum & Bailey, according to Zahorsky, also had an incubator exhibit, which was criticized by a newspaper wondering what the connection could be between saving a human life and the bearded woman or other circus attractions. While visitors in the late 1800s flocked multiple times to places like Barnum's American Museum, audiences also flocked to see the "miracle babies," but for different reasons. It was not uncommon for visitors to pinpoint a favorite infant and return multiple times to see how the infant was faring (Prentice 2016). Was it because the exhibition was about infants that people not only viewed the incubator babies with curiosity but with genuine concern for their welfare? While in the early stages many of these premature infants looked to be on death's door since they were skeletally thin, it was hoped that at least they would grow up with a normal appearance if they survived.

Martin Couney, who was quoted previously, ran an Infant Incubator at Coney Island from 1903-1943 (Prentice 2016). In that time, Couney welcomed infants regardless of class or race, and the cost of medical care was covered by entry sales, so families of the infants paid no money (Prentice 2016). The example of the incubator babies is a great way to showcase how medical science utilized the side show to change the public's attitude regarding the care of premature infants. Couney is estimated to have saved over 6,000 infants with the use of the incubators and the provided medical care, which is impressive considering many of his contemporaries did not believe premature infants were worth saving (Prentice 2016).

Questions were also raised about why institutions like Barnum & Bailey simply reported that things were good, but the physicians in charge never released data on age, weight, and death rate (Zahorsky 1905). Concern was also raised that the showmen did not “have the proper sentiment towards these little ones and may sacrifice proper requirements of care for show purposes; on the other hand, we feel it degrading to human sentiment to make an exhibition of human misfortunes, especially in the shape of tiny infants” (Zahorsky 1905). If there was so much concern over parents and infants being taken advantage of, then why choose such a venue for the incubators? The reasoning possibly comes down to the same reason showmen were taking advantage of the popularity of incubator babies in the first place: money. No doubt, incubators were particularly expensive to both manufacture and maintain. The best way to offset the cost and to gain traction in the market was to start with a venue that was most likely to draw in the needed money and public support.

Zahorsky stated that such institutions no doubt had great educational value as well as increasing the public sentiment that premature infants were worth saving. Furthermore, the institutions served as a location where scientific studies could be carried out to advance knowledge regarding improving methods of helping the infants thrive (Zahorsky 1905). Though at the time, Zahorsky lamented that nothing was being done with the knowledge gained, and that is why he chose to publish the statistics from the Louisiana Purchase Exposition over a span of three months.

Not long after cinema began rising in popularity is also when the freak show started to decline. Society's ideas on what was considered respectable entertainment were changing.

The Rise of Cinema

During the rise of P.T Barnum and the Freak Show, cinema was in its formative stages. At this point, Georges Méliès, a pioneer in the early days of film, made a choice to move away from the documentary format to explore the possibilities the media held to explore illusion and magic (Hunter 2005: 98). Méliès utilized trick photography to distort the human body and got his start showcasing his films in a sideshow booth (Hunter 2005: 98). It is quite fascinating that the entertainment venue that would grow to surpass the sideshow stemmed, in part, from the sideshow itself. Even though the two venues had something of a common origin and one would fuel the other, only one of them could continue strong into the present day. Freak Shows were not quite so prolific, and even if they linger the shows are still viewed with skepticism and controversy.

While the first films were showcased in side shows, the first film considered a classic was itself set in a fair (Hunter 2005: 100). *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) featured a traveling man, Caligari, who showcased a somnambulist, Cesare, who was claimed to see the future while he slept. It would not be long after when the renowned Lon Chaney would enter the scene. Lon Chaney is best known by the nickname "the man of a thousand faces." Chaney could use makeup to portray characters who were ugly or had a physical impairment (Hunter 2005: 100). Two of his best-known roles are perhaps Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and the Phantom in *Phantom of the Opera* (1925). Perhaps it was actors such as Chaney and his astounding use of stage makeup who showed the audience that the "horrors" that once drew them into the sideshow tents could easily be fabricated. While medical science explained how certain deformities were caused by genetics, film stars like Chaney showed audiences how curiosities could be created. Indeed, why go to a tent to see someone with a permanent disability when audiences could sit in a comfortable movie theater and watch an actor whom they knew could "magically" return to normal when the film was over?

The growth of cinema was proportionally linked to the declining interest in sideshows (Hunter 2005: 101). Cinema allowed for the creation of yet stranger illusions directly from the imagination of the creators, while medical science was reducing the number of freakish births and the public had a growing disdain for the self-made freaks and fakes (Hunter 2005: 101). At least when someone went to the cinema, they knew what they were paying for while with the sideshows it was difficult to ascertain if they were throwing their money away on something falsified for profit. Since the falsification

in cinema was known about, it was accepted and lauded. Freak shows that utilized falsification was hidden and most tried to pass it off as genuine, so this was unacceptable. There is one film that can be used to perfectly illustrate just how much society's attitudes had shifted regarding the display of human abnormality, and that is the 1932 film *Freaks*.

Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932)

Tod Browning was a director who was well known for making films detailing characters who bore resentment against wealthy elites, and this was a theme he sought to continue to explore in *Freaks* (1932) (Adams 2001: 62). While filming was underway for *Freaks*, the "freaks" who were part of the cast were made to eat meals at a designated space outside the MGM commissary because many could not stomach the idea of sharing space with them (Adams 2001: 62). One account tells how F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was working as a screenwriter at that time, sat down in the commissary and overheard conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, who were starring in the film, order lunch (Adams 2001: 62). After hearing one of the twins ask the other what she wanted for lunch, this simple question that proved to be too much for Fitzgerald and the writer had to rush out to vomit (Adams 2001: 62). A short documentary on *Freaks* filmed in 2004 discussed the making of the film and the impact it had and this story is discussed but whether it is true cannot be verified (Skal 2004).

Such a supposed reaction and the broader treatment by the staff at MGM would prove to be a preview of how audiences would react to *Freaks* when it was released in cinemas. One reviewer described *Freaks* as "a catalog of horrors, ticketed and labeled, dragged out into the sunlight before the camera to be photographed against whatever

background happens to be handy" (Adams 2001: 62). The outcry against the film was so great that *Freaks* was taken out of circulation in cinemas, which hurt MGM financially and ruined Browning's career (Adams 2001: 62).

The plot of *Freaks* (1932) involves a circus midget by the name of Hans who admires the beautiful trapeze artist Cleopatra. Hans had been loaning Cleopatra small sums of money, and later, included expensive gifts. Hercules, the strong man, is scheming with Cleopatra about how to get more money out of Hans. Unfortunately for Browning, he chose to showcase this plot at the wrong time. During the 1930s, sideshows were falling out of favor with the general audience as medical advancements were bringing better understanding to disability, and ideas were changing about what was "respectable entertainment" (Adams 2001: 63). In a special message that appears at the start of the film, it is acknowledged that the story portrayed in the film is a unique one and that "never again will such a story be filmed, as modern science and teratology are rapidly eliminating such blunders of nature from the world" (Browning 1932).

While *Freaks* may largely have been about Hans, Frieda, Cleopatra, and Hercules, there was key subtext being portrayed in the movie. Tod Browning seemed to take a unique approach to how he showcased abnormality in the film. In this instance, Browning was bringing to light the humanity of freaks. In other words, he portrayed those who would be considered normal, Cleopatra and Hercules, as the monsters of the film. Neither of them took Hans seriously because of his size, and would frequently talk to him with disdain. In some instances, Cleopatra speaks to Hans as one might speak to a toddler. The side show freaks were shown as the most human characters of the film. Browning shows

audiences that just because the side show freaks look different, it does not make them any less human. This was a bold statement at the time, and the changing face of Hollywood and cinema was most likely a key factor in how audiences viewed entertainment during the 1930s. It is probable that the sideshow cast of *Freaks* was made to eat outside, separate from everyone else because they did not fit the new glamorous image that entertainment wished to portray.

Freaks and Modern Pop Culture

By the year 1950, due to the better medical understandings of human anomalies and their cause, growth in the concern for minority rights, and the advent of alternative forms of entertainment like films and television, the popularity of the freak show was on the decline (Gerber 1996: 32). By the 1980s there would only be an estimated five freak shows operating in the classical sense of the show (Gerber 1996: 32). The twentieth century ultimately saw the freak show disappear and abnormalities became purely medical (Wilson 1977). Despite advancements in medicine and care, abnormal births are still popularized in the media and an investigated phenomenon. Even though displaying abnormality in freak shows is no longer acceptable, just like displaying remains in museums is acceptable it is also acceptable to ogle these abnormal births through photographs on the internet.

Within popular culture, freaks and the freak show have taken on a new life. In March of 1995, the television series *X-Files* aired a show titled “Humbug” which centered around a community of former circus sideshow performers (Morgan 1995). Guest stars for this episode included two real-life sideshow performers: Jim Rose, who

runs a modern-day sideshow, and a man known as The Enigma who underwent extensive body modification including ear modification, horn implants, and jigsaw puzzle tattoos covering his entire body. The episode centered around mysterious attacks occurring within the town of Gibsonton, Florida (Morgan 1995). Gibsonton itself was an actual town settled in the 1950s by circus performers during the winter months. Fox Mulder, portrayed by David Duchovny, believed the attacks to be the work of the “Fiji mermaid” (Morgan 1995). His FBI partner Dana Scully, portrayed by Gillian Anderson, was more skeptical and believed it to be a hoax (Morgan 1995). At the close of the episode a performer known as The Conundrum, portrayed by The Enigma, stated that since science was eliminating genetic abnormalities it was up to self-made freaks like himself to remind others that “nature abhors normality” (Morgan 1995).

This episode of *X-Files*, much like *Freaks* (1932), challenged the audience’s views regarding physical differences and society’s assumptions regarding them. What audiences might assume to be a monster in the opening of the episode turned out to be just a father enjoying time with his children. When Mulder and Scully were quick to assume that the sideshow performers were behind the attacks, one of the self-made freaks confronted them regarding their prejudice. The episode also played around with the concept of “otherness”, as the sideshow performers are viewed as the “others” by the audience as well as Mulder and Scully. However, the sideshow performers see Mulder and Scully as the “others” during their investigation.

Nineteen years later, season 5 of the television show *American Horror Story* (Katnik 2014) would focus on a freak show in the town of Jupiter, Florida. The town of

Jupiter is used as a stand-in for the Florida town of Gibsonton, where the *X-Files* episode “Humbug” was set and where carnies spent time while not traveling. Set in 1952, the show is failing as this was the period in which freak shows were declining in popularity. As previously described the height of the freak show was between the years 1870 and 1920.

The side show is titled *Elsa’s Cabinet of Curiosities*, possibly a reference to the 1920 silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and the performers found within are based on historical figures from freak shows past, and seem to draw inspiration from the film *Freaks* (1932). Conjoined twins Dot and Bette were based on Daisy and Violet Hilton who performed during the 1930s. Ethel Darling, portrayed by Kathy Bates, was a bearded woman which was a common sight in freak shows. Ethel’s son Jimmy was dubbed “the Lobster boy” and was inspired by Grady Stiles Jr. who went by the same stage name and lived in Gibsonton for a time. The character of Minnie likely draws inspiration from “Koo Koo the Bird Girl” who was a feature in *Freaks* (1932). Pepper represents the “missing link” attractions which were popular during the mid-1800s, and may have been influenced by Schlitzie, who also appeared in *Freaks* (1932). This modern depiction of the freak show challenges the audience to examine what they consider horrifying, question cultural perceptions of normalcy, and consider the meaning of monstrosity.

Where freak shows during the height of their popularity attempted to showcase deformity to conform to scientific knowledge of the day, the modern rendition seen in *American Horror Story* also showcases deformity though in a way that challenges the audience to reconsider the societal definition of normal. While audiences may be shocked

at first, they are later challenged to consider why they were shocked or horrified in the first place. Was the character truly horrifying or was the audience simply reacting based on what society deems acceptable in terms of appearance?

In modern day America, there are few surviving freak shows remaining. One can be found at Coney Island in New York. The show refers to itself as “the last traditional 10-in 1 continuous sideshow performing in a circus or amusement context” (Coney Island Circus Sideshow). The freak show is one of their oldest programs and contain scripted dialogue going back half a century (Coney Island Circus Sideshow). The show’s website states that over the summer of 2017 they will welcome a group of “born different” performers (Coney Island Circus Sideshow).

While the *Coney Island Circus Sideshow* is enjoying ongoing success, a freak show across the country in California has not been so fortunate. The *Venice Beach Freakshow* had to close and leave their boardwalk location, and the freaks featured in the show blame Snapchat (Mansour 2017). The show shared building space with Snapchat Inc. and the owner of the show believed that Snapchat’s presence is what drove the landlord to force the freak show out (Mansour 2017). Snapchat has stated it has no plans to take over the space occupied by the freak show and had no part in getting them evicted (Mansour 2017). Included on the invitation to the farewell show for the *Venice Beach Freakshow* was “the Freakshow seems to be another casualty of ‘Silicon Beach’ and the greed of developers” (Mansour 2017). Supporters of the show wanted Snapchat evicted and the show’s owner Todd Ray claimed that Snapchat did not care about the culture of Venice (Mansour 2017). The *Coney Island Circus Sideshow* is fortunate to have stayed in

business for so long, likely because it has been able to adapt. Modern audiences are fine watching representations of the freak show on the screen as seen with *X-Files* or *American Horror Story* but seem to have little interest in visiting the genuine article.

To trace how advancements in medical science influenced the freak show, it was first necessary to explore how the freak show began in America in its popular format. P.T. Barnum introduced the format of utilizing multiple curiosities in a singular venue and made the educational museum more welcoming across all the social classes. The popularity of showcasing anomalies became more scientifically popular after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in 1859. After the theory of evolution began to spread around the scientific and social community, many of those exhibited were examined by scientific and medical professionals who aimed to categorize them within preexisting typologies. Many were examined through the lens of the evolutionary theory and were deemed missing-links.

Often, exhibitors would seek the opinion of medical professionals because it gave their exhibition validation meaning it was proof to the audience that they were viewing the real thing. Branching off how the scientific community molded the opinion of the audience, the cases of Dr. Mütter and Sir Frederick Treves are highlighted. Dr. Mütter represents a change that was beginning to take place among the medical community as Mütter taught his medical students to view all their patients as individuals and not just information on a chart. Sir Treves brought more attention to Joseph Merrick, known as the Elephant Man, and delved into the scientific reasons behind Merrick's deformities. This was when medical science began to look for answers instead of simply trying to

insert information into an existing mold. This culminates in the exhibition of incubator babies when medical science utilized the freak show to demonstrate to the public that premature babies could, and should, be helped. During the rise of cinema, medical science progressively provided more answers as to what was genetically causing human anomalies. As a result, the mystery was stripped away and individuals with anomalies were being exploited by side shows and were to be pitied.

Final Conclusion

The goal of this work was to examine how advancing medical science between 1840 and 1940 changed the opinion of society regarding human abnormalities, and this was laid out throughout this thesis. Advancements in medical science affected how society viewed abnormalities, and the effects amongst society are still present. In the modern day, very few classical freak shows are present and the shows of the past are looked at with skepticism through modern moral lenses. What this means is individuals who read about the classical freak show question how anyone could allow themselves to be subjected to such degradation when it may have been the only career option open to them. As seen in the case of Charles Byrne, society has begun to question why the remains of such individuals are still on display when this clearly goes against his expressed wishes. This generates new questions including what other differences between then and now exists?

A large difference is that modern day “freaks” have reclaimed the title for themselves and are fine using it on their own terms. Unlike in the past, there is a greater sense of independence in how they are presented, though there are always those who

think they know best when it comes to the interests and well-being of those with abnormalities. While human abnormalities are better understood in the medical sense, where society is concerned, there is still much growth that is needed regarding understanding. Society went from flocking around abnormality as a curiosity and a source of entertainment to the modern day where those with abnormalities must be sheltered. If they are on display in the modern day, then it is exploitation, even if the individual is performing by choice. It cannot be denied that the advancements in the scientific community that began around the time of P.T. Barnum influenced how human abnormality was addressed and that it has done much good in how society views those individuals. However, society must continue to grow to accept that these individuals are the masters of their lives and are fully capable of making their own decisions. An unusual statement in an era that promotes the statement "my body, my choice." The subtext is "your body, your choice...unless it disagrees with *our* choice".

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