

Freaks, Freak Orlando, Orlando

The freak leaves us bereft, forcing a little
Mutilation somewhere to set things right
To wreak penance
To set the freak flags flying.
—Cynthia Macdonald, "Celebrating the Freak"¹

But I'm going to wave my freak flag high, high.
—Jimi Hendrix, "If 6 Was 9"²

WHAT IS NOW CALLED "IDENTITY POLITICS" may be traced to the 1960's identification of and with the "freak." Radically democratic and open to the most individualistic self-appropriations of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, "freakiness" is a distinctly U.S. style of dissent. Although the tradition of the freak as monster—literally, the *de-monstrater* of the marvelous power of the divine—has a long history in European culture, the demonstrations of the sixties in the United States were characterized by a new articulation of heterogeneous social groups, and by a mixing of external and internal demands for dramatic visibility. Being a freak was, and remains, an individual choice for some and an oppressive assignment for others, as in Jimi Hendrix's famous "If 6 Was 9": the "white plastic finger" pointed at Black men like Hendrix, but other, self-designated freaks, pointed at themselves. Strikingly, no particular quality seemed to exclude one definitively from the imaginary community of freaks. For even the "white-collared conservative flashing down the street"

or his suburban wife could, and did, "freak out," and the narratives of their rage and mental illnesses were often allegories of conversion to new, better families or communities. The freak ethos required an identification with otherness within the secret self. It also demanded a certain openness to recruits and volunteers. Anyone could march in some guise under the freak flag.

The appropriation of the term "freak" in the 1960s in rock music and street culture as a marker of life-style and identity parallels the powerful, historic detours of words like "black," or more recently "queer," away from their stigmatizing function in the hands of dominant culture, a trajectory that is often described as moving from shame to pride. Only the smallest space is left in these "meaning maps" for ambivalence. "Real Freaks" or "freaks of nature," as the sideshow "curiosities" (Barnum's term) were called, had alternately rejected the term in reaction to the intense ostracism and display of human anomalies as scientific spectacle, and reclaimed it as properly theirs in the face of market extinction as the popular entertainment venues which had featured their bodies as exhibitions began to die out.³ Threatened with invisibility, the professional freak would often prefer the risk and blame associated with an intensely marked body and identity to the disregard and neglect which had always characterized one particularly hypocritical aspect of bourgeois Anglo-American culture which admonished its children, "Don't stare." In Stalinist Russia and in Nazi Germany, freak shows were banned by the state, displacing the containment of the freak within fairs and circuses to encampments for socially designated anomalies. In the United States, an individualistic culture tended increasingly to ignore "real freaks" and to steal the magic of their spectacularity.

There are many fictional and historical anecdotes which figure freaks as either resisting or taking up the names and stereotypes of dominant culture. In "La patente" (The License), a short story by Luigi Pirandello typifying the Sicilian grotesque, a hunchback with the "evil eye" demands a license to certify his status as a dangerous presence so that he can be paid for avoiding certain public and commercial areas in the village. More recently, in Katherine Dunn's novel, *Geek Love*, a woman

who has begun her career as a geek biting off the heads of chickens (though she had a secret wish to be in an aerial act) is persuaded to breed freak children through the ingestion of drugs and insecticides in order to save the family carnival.⁴ In other contexts, lines were drawn by communities and subcultures reclaiming the representations of their bodily identities as their own. Towards the end of her life, Diane Arbus, whose photographs of freaks and urban subculture made her a cult figure in her own right, was devastated to receive a letter from the organizers of a convention of midgets in Florida who wrote: "We have our own little person to photograph us."⁵

Leslie Fiedler wrote his important work on this topic, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, in the wake of the counterculture in 1978.⁶ At once a deeply personal and expansive study of freaks and freak culture, Fiedler's chronicle narrates the popular history of freaks from carnivals, circuses and fairs into science fiction and film. Fiedler dedicates his book to "my brother who has no brother" and to "all my brothers who have no brothers," suggesting the alienation and community (or at least fraternity) of freakdom for him. He also acknowledges, preliminarily, that the adoption of the word "freak" by technical non-freaks and the injunction to "join the United Mutations" (Mothers of Invention) implies "as radical an alteration of consciousness as underlies the politics of black power or neofeminism or gay liberation" (Fiedler, 14-15). Fiedler, in other words, acknowledges here and sporadically throughout his book the shadow presence of those social movements whose programs included a politics of style and counterproduction.

Fiedler's book was written as a "belated tribute" to the director Tod Browning whose film, *Freaks* (1932) was almost as inspirational as Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention in advancing the mythology of contemporary freaks. Arbus' biographer, Patricia Bosworth, for instance, reports that the photographer attended repeated showings of the film, often stoned, and "was enthralled because the freaks in the film were not imaginary monsters, but real" (Bosworth, 189). Like Arbus and many others who flocked to the revival of the cult which had been banned and then ignored in its own time, Fiedler

found the film most remarkable in its use of well-known sideshow performers like Harry Earles and his sister Daisy, who play the dwarfs whose romance is ruined by a "normal" female aerial performer called Cleopatra, and Daisy and Violet Hilton, famous Siamese twins who were making their film debut after a legal fight to win their freedom from the family that bought them as infants. There are very different levels of performance in the film. As Fiedler notes, Harry Earles had other roles in cinema, and here plays a melodramatic role as a rich and betrayed husband. Other performers like Joseph/Josephine (the Half-Man, Half-Woman), Slitzie (the Pin-Head), and Olga Roderick (the Bearded Lady) seemed indistinguishable in their film roles from their "real" parts in sideshows. This documentary aspect of Browning's project has been seen variously as daring, exploitative, and authentic. The conflation of the authentic with the unconventional in the bodies of the freaks in a prevalent (and in my view greatly romanticized) reception of the film tends to ignore the meaning of the film's most spectacularized image: the apparently mutilated body of the "normal woman," Cleopatra, after she has been literally cut down to size for violating the code of the freaks.

Before elaborating on this point, some clarification of the relationship between the freak and the grotesque is necessary. If we follow Bakhtin on this point, the distinction is clear. The grotesque body of carnival festivity was not distanced or objectified in relation to an audience. Audiences and performers were the interchangeable parts of an incomplete but imaginable wholeness. The grotesque body was exuberantly and democratically open and inclusive of all possibilities. Boundaries between individuals and society, between genders, between species, and between classes were blurred or brought into crisis in the inversions and hyperbole of carnivalesque representation. Grotesque realism presented a dynamic, materialist, and unflinching view of human bodies in all stages and contours of growth, degeneration, anomaly, excess, loss, and prosthesis. The grotesque body had nothing to do with "modern canons" of the body, drawn from science, bourgeois psychology, or nineteenth and twentieth century fictional

realism: "The fact is that the new concept of realism has a different way of drawing the boundaries between bodies and objects."⁷

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade (RW, 320).

For Bakhtin, the new bodily canon extends to codes of speech: "There is a sharp line of division between familiar speech and 'correct' language" (RW, 320).

The freak and the grotesque overlap as bodily categories. Susan Stewart, in her wonderful study of culture and scale, has pointed out that "the physiological freak represents the problems of the boundary between self and other (Siamese twins), between male and female (the hermaphrodite), between the body and the world outside the body (the *monstre par excès*), and between the animal and the human (feral and wild men)." Of course, the "physiological freak," like the grotesque, is produced through discursive formations including, but not restricted to, empiricism. "Often referred to as a 'freak of nature,' the freak, it must be emphasized, is a freak of culture."⁸ As a cultural representation in the late nineteenth century, the freak belongs to the increasingly codified world of spectacle, appearing in culturally varied venues. Within the confines of spectacle, the freak appears only as a particular image which may appear, reproduce, or simulate the earlier carnivalesque body described and idealized by Bakhtin, but also and more importantly as a bodily construct produced within different social relations. More than merely an image or collection of images, the spectacle is a way of looking, "a world vision which has become objectified."⁹

A spectacle, by definition, requires sight lines and distance. Audiences do not meet up face to face or mask to mask with the spectacle of freaks. Freaks are, by definition, apart, as beings to be viewed. In the

traditional sideshow, they are often caged and most often they are silent while a barker narrates their exotic lives. Also, given the history of freaks in the nineteenth and twentieth century (as medical discoveries and exhibitions defined the limits of the normal), it must be remembered that it was the discourse of biology which constituted their status as performers of the objective bodily "truth." Modern biology and empirical social science constituted them as "real." This biological "realness," of course, separates the freak from an earlier, archaic history which viewed them as divine monsters who mediated the natural and cosmic world. This is not to say that freaks are born freaks, only that they are made to seem like "real, living breathing monsters" in the intersection between their presentation in freak shows, photography, cinema, the discourses of biology, and, increasingly, eugenics, all of which supported this illusionism.

Stewart makes an important historical distinction between the grotesque body in earlier times as described by Bakhtin and the grotesque spectacle of the freak show in pointing out that the freak is doubly marked as object and other within the world of spectacle:

We find the freak inextricably tied to the cultural other—the Little Black Man, the Turkish horse, the Siamese twins (Chang and Eng were, however, the children of Chinese parents living in Siam), the Irish giants . . . The body of the cultural other is by means of this metaphor both naturalized and domesticated in a process we might consider to be characteristic of colonization in general. For all colonization involves the tanning of the beast by bestial methods and hence the conversion and projection of the animal and human, difference and identity. On display, the freak represents the naming of the frontier and the assurance that the wilderness, the outside, is now territory (Stewart, 109–110).

Produced historically in the same field of vision, freaks shared the same distancing, scrutiny, classification and exchange value as other colonial and domestic booty as the discourses of medicine, criminology, tourism, advertising, and entertainment converged. In the twentieth century, the discourses of medicine (particularly eugenics)

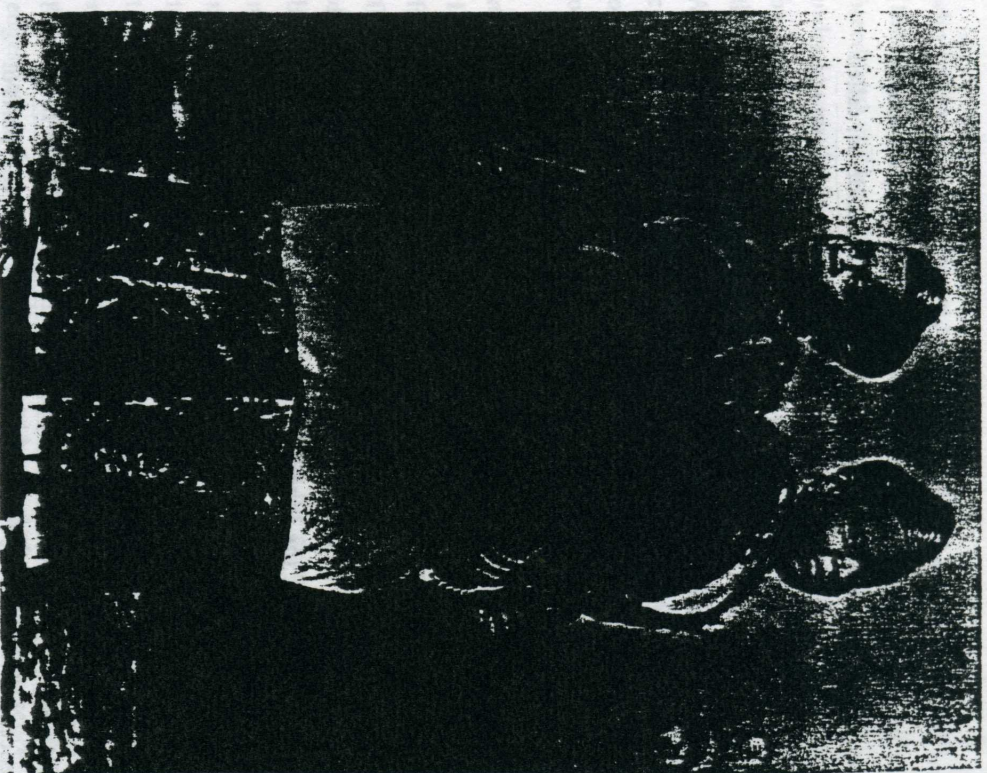


Fig. 14 Millie and Christine, Siamese Twins. Born into slavery in 1851, the North Carolina twins were taken to England where they were displayed as the United African Twins. Courtesy of The Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

contributed increasingly to the ways in which freaks were presented. Robert Bogdan, in a study of the social history of freak shows, distinguishes between the "exotic" and the "aggrandizing" modes of presenting freaks, the difference, in his example, between presenting the same giant as a Zulu and as a military figure.¹⁰ The most famous instance of

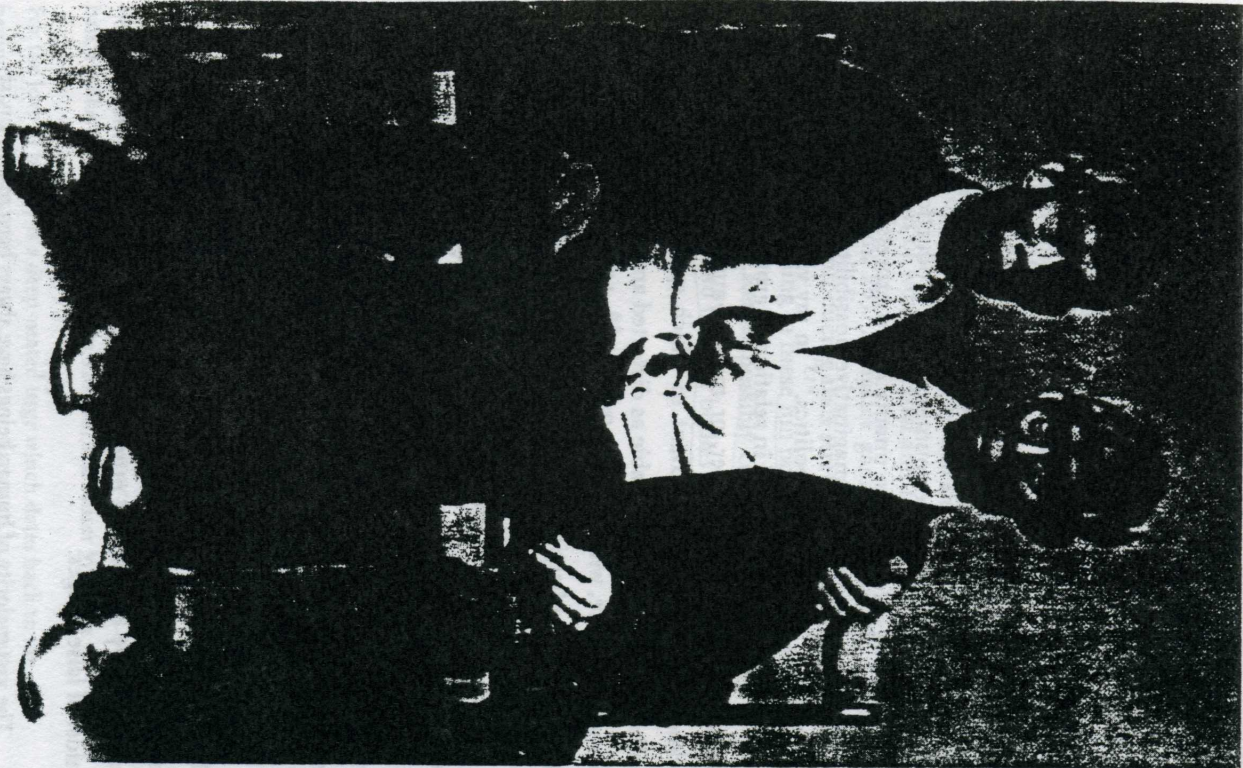


Fig. 15 Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins. Courtesy of the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

the aggrandized model was the aristocratic General Tom Thumb, born Charles Stratton. In Bogdan's chronology of freak shows, he charts an increasing tendency to medicalize the freak so that "by the early twentieth century the audience was learning to view freaks as people who were sick—who had various genetic and endocrine disorders—and the exotic hype lost its appeal."¹¹ As his own study indicates, however, the hype around freaks never entirely lost its appeal, and exoticism exists in even in the continuing lore of "aliens" and extraterrestrials as monsters to be conquered or adopted.¹² The freak show has always been something of a hybrid production, existing in proximity to other acts in carnival and circus contexts, and within various visual media.

Outside "show business," the role of the freak converged with the social roles available to the racially marked and underclasses—despite the aristocratic and exotic pretensions of their acts. Sometimes the freak was literally a slave. The "North Carolina Twins," Millie and Christine, were born into slavery in 1851, kidnapped, and taken to England where they became "The United African Twins," visiting and delighting, as did so many freaks of the period, Queen Victoria. Later, they returned to the United States through the efforts of their original owner, who reunited them with their family. Eng and Chang, the original Siamese twins, were "discovered" by a Scottish merchant and brought to America by his trading partner. Chang and Eng enjoyed relative prosperity and supported twenty-two children when they retired to the rural South. In an unusual turn, the Siamese twins, like other North Carolina farmers, were said to rely on slave labor themselves.

Violet and Daisy Hilton, who appear in Browning's film, while not literally slaves, were sold by their mother to Mary Hilton, whose family and associates exploited them until they obtained legal representation at twenty-three years of age. Like Millie and Christine, they were multi-talented performers and worked in various entertainment venues, joining the ranks of not quite respectable popular performers who lived very modest, if not impoverished, lives after they dropped out of sight.

Although Bakhtin's model of carnival was surely nostalgic and utopian in its portrayal of the social relations of carnival, it more

importantly did not consider the complexities of twentieth century popular entertainments, advertising, and media. He provides, as Stewart shows, a very useful model of contrast for considering freaks in the nineteenth and twentieth century-as-grotesque spectacles. The question is not whether or not these modern grotesques are produced in very different conditions of visibility, but whether, on the one hand, there is still a model of community available to them which internally produced that "reciprocal democracy" imagined by Bakhtin, or, on the other hand, whether that spectacularity embodied by the freak can be reworked or counterproduced as distinctly twentieth century grotesque representations, available not only as the post-Freudian "creature features" of the individual psyche gone underground, but as a means of connection to existing social groups and to new socialities.

Any critical viewer of these materials intent upon keeping things in their place might simply see the freak as "ruined" by spectacle and commodification. Fiedler, writing in the seventies, saw in the new reception of the movie *Freaks* a latter-day tribute, if not worship, of lost "sacred" monsters by the enchanted youth of the counterculture. Comparing his own generation with theirs, he writes:

We all firmly believed in those days that "science" which had failed to deliver us from poverty but was already providing us with weapons for the next Great War, had desecralized human monsters forever. Three decades later, however, Browning's *Freaks* was to be revived for a new audience capable of recognizing in the Bearded Lady, the Human Caterpillar, and the Dancing Pinhead, Siltzie, the last creatures capable of providing the thrill our forebears felt in the presence of an equivocal and sacred unity we have since learned to secularize and divide (Fiedler, 19).

Fielder's comment here, and his book generally, is as nostalgic and idealizing in its way as are aspects of Bakhtin's writings on carnival in early modern Europe, although it reads much more autobiographically. The sense of a Romantic belatedness and lost unity in relation to the sacred world of earlier monsters is prefaced by Fielder's recollections of his lost youth: "... his movie has played and replayed in my

troubled head so often that merely recalling it, I call up again not only its images, but the response of my then fifteen-year-old self" (Fiedler, 18-19). The thrills and wonderment of seeing "actual" freaks, or imagining oneself as, or in solidarity with, the freaks, is a function, in part, of the recollection of the fantasies of youth. It is an instance, if you will, of the Freudian sublime in renewed proximity to the primitive and the archaic as stand-ins for "the presence of an equivocal and sacred unity we have since learned to secularize and divide."

It could be said that the countercultural production of the freak to which Fiedler refers was an unanticipated expression of the carnivalesque as an historic and imaginative possibility, what Wini Breines has called a "prefigurative politics."¹³ In my view, however, this attitude can only be understood in relation to grotesque spectacle, not as the ruination of a lost, truer, or more complete world, but in full acknowledgement of the extent to which spectacle, the body, and politics are by now inseparable as distorted and hyperbolized aspects of media culture, which is to say the world we have now. Freak bodies appear not as collections of weird images assembled somewhere else, but as events and experiences, as is said of news events, "blown out of proportion." The freak embodies the most capacious aspects of media culture, taking in and consolidating otherwise lost or fragile identities. The freak can be read as a trope not only of the "secret self," but of the most externalized, "out there," hypervisible, and exposed aspects of contemporary culture and of the phantasmatic experience of that culture by social subjects.

Social movements in the United States in the last thirty years have all been acutely aware of the importance of producing and controlling images. Sheila Rowbotham has described what has become the dominant allegory of political progress as a coming into visibility in the midst of false images:

The vast majority of human beings have always been mainly invisible to themselves while a tiny minority have exhausted themselves in the isolation of observing their own reflections. Every mass political movement of the oppressed necessarily brings its own vision of itself

into sight . . . In order to create an alternative an oppressed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history.¹⁴

She compares the media to a "prism which refracts reality" and a "hall of mirrors" which "turns itself into a fun house." Much effort has gone into straightening out the grotesque images of the fun house variety and in establishing "real" histories and normalizing and neutralizing representations of women, sexual and racial minorities, and the disabled (Rowbotham, 29). A riskier gambit by far lies in the strange mimesis of counterproducing such stretched and stunted caricatures, of posing and parading in these fun house mirrors, of surrendering one's identity as no longer possibly correct, recognizable, or selfsame, but inevitably bound to other bodies and strange selves.

Browning's Freaks: Marginalia

Browning's film opens with a fundamental dilemma for film audiences: "*Believe it or Not*" is scrolled onto the screen, followed by a long pseudo-historical and pseudo-scientific preamble calculated to tease the viewer:

Believe it or not . . .

Strange as it seems . . .

In ancient times, anything that deviated from the normal was considered an omen of ill-luck or representative of Evil. Gods of misfortune and adversity were invariably cast in the form of monstrosities, and deeds of injustice and hardship have been attributed to the many crippled and deformed tyrants of Europe and Asia . . . misshapen misfits who have altered the world's course: Goliath, Caliban, Frankenstein, Gloucester, Tom Thumb, and Kaiser Wilhelm.

For the love of beauty is a deep-seated urge which dates back to the beginning of civilization. The revulsion with which we view the abnormal, the malformed and the mutilated is the result of long conditioning by forefathers.

The majority of freaks . . . are endowed with normal emotions

. . . a code of ethics to protect them from the barbs of normal people. The joy of one is the joy of all, the hurt of one is the hurt of all.

As the text scrolls down, a set of images on the margins depicts a collection of freak performers: a fat lady, a living skeleton, Siamese twins, the Half-Man, Half-woman. This classic positioning of the freak as an illustrative detail and as a pictorial object requiring narration by a Barker, or in other contexts, a clinician, eventually gives way to a far more complex view of these performers. This first set of words and images is immediately displaced and exposed as a *trompe l'oeil*, as the screen appears to be torn through and discarded by a "real" Barker who in turn leads the spectator into another exhibition: "We told you . . . living, breathing monstrosities, accidents of birth, they did not ask to be born."

The camera leads us, with a crowd of spectators, to the top of a deep pen, and the Barker continues: "She was the most beautiful woman in the world." The audience gathers round in anticipation and the camera closes in to reveal: nothing. Cut to a long shot from below of a large, blond woman on a trapeze. A point of view shot then directs our attention to a blond midget (Harry Earles, called "Hans" in the film) in a tuxedo, looking upward. He confides to his fiance Frieda: "She is the most beautiful *big* woman I have ever seen."

This classificatory comment and the camera work emphasize the inversion of visual politics as the scale of the midget body becomes a norm for viewing the "big" woman in space. Temporarily powerful in his gaze upwards at the female body abjected from everyday spatial relations, Hans becomes increasingly impatient and dismissive of Frieda, the "little woman" he has asked to become his wife. Frieda is first portrayed in a tutu as if she were a little girl or doll astride a circus pony; later, she is seen nagging him for smoking big cigars, and at the clothesline, like a petit-bourgeois housewife, complaining to a friend about the aerialist who is taking away her man. As Hans aspires upward, Frieda is symbolically put down. As the movie progresses, and Hans comes into an inheritance and marries Cleopatra, Hans leaves Frieda behind, as an upwardly mobile young man might leave behind a

woman associated with his own social class in life or in novels.

Browning's film is very interesting in its representation of class in relation to the body. In literal terms, Hans stands in for the upper classes. He is identified early on as having money, which, of course, is the reason that Cleopatra schemes with her lover Hercules to marry and eventually kill him. Even within the circus he is dressed formally; in the final scene, he is portrayed as a wealthy gentleman in stately retirement in a grand, panelled room with books, fireplace, and other accoutrements of his station, including a servant to keep visitors away. His privacy above all distinguishes him from his community of freaks. In the final scene, it is clear that Hans is personally shocked and devastated by the violent revenge enacted upon Hercules and Cleopatra, who are killed or mutilated by his fellow performers.

The actual mutilations of the "big" people are not shown, but the filming of the chase with the camera at "ground" level, as the freaks advance through the rain and mud, is terrifying and inspired. Each performer, no matter how "handicapped" or reduced in relation to the size and putative completeness of Hercules and Cleopatra, reveals a power and virtuosity unimaginable in their portrayals earlier as children or novelty acts. Most strikingly, the scene suggests a shocking, almost unrepresentable collective violence. Using their mouths, torsos, sizes, and most of all their keen powers of observation to track and overcome the oppressors, the procession of freaks suggests a violent and revolutionary underclass as they move deliberately through the darkness. The film is so dark at certain points that the viewer can barely make out their forms as they emerge from all points and advance together.

The Wedding Feast

Ancient humanity, an essentially public and visual world, unable to conceive of happiness without spectacles and feasts, was full of tender regard for the "spectator." And, as we have said before, punishment too has its festive features.

—Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*¹⁵

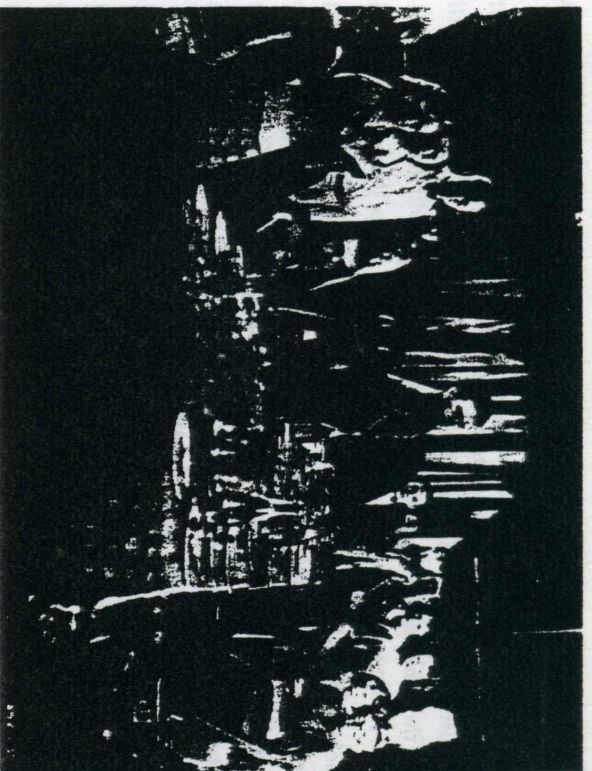


Fig. 16 The Wedding Feast from Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932). Courtesy of MOMA Film Stills Archive.

This is not the first portrayal of the freak community as grotesque. A formlessness and heterogeneity also characterized this social body at the wedding feast for Hans and Cleopatra.

Browning subtitled "the wedding feast" in the film, setting it off as a freestanding sequence. The performance of the wedding ceremony is not shown, but the physical asymmetries of the bride and groom, and the fact that Hercules, Cleopatra's lover, sits on her right, at the head of the table, indicates that this is not a regular wedding. The presence of Hercules in the frames of the "couple" emphasizes Hans' diminutive stature, and the threesome suggests a configuration of child and parents. Neither is this a "Tom Thumb" wedding, that popular miniaturized ceremony Susan Stewart has convincingly described as "an exaggeration of an ideal of the wedding." The scene seems much closer to a carnival grotesque exaggeration in the film. Many aspects of the scene recall the charavari in early modern Europe, which accompanied the marriages of unsuitable couples.

A noisy impromptu band, featuring the Siamese twins on clarinets, accompanies a "chicken" dancing on the table. Eating and drinking are carried out unconventionally with hands and sometimes feet. The most outrageous ingestive styles are exhibited by the "sword-swallower" and by the "fire-eater" as the feast becomes more hilarious and parodic in its play of equivalences. Substitution of body parts (foot for hand), prosthetic extensions and costumes, laughter, and jokes at the feast bring together the various freak performances which Browning has respectfully gathered as vignettes of everyday life at the carnival. Each performer is given individual space in the film to show how they could smoke or drink without arms, move without legs, or, in the case of Slitzie and the other "pinheads," how a ribbon or the promise of a Parisian hat could extend (and feminize) their characteristic bodily performance as novelty heads. A brilliant touch is the running joke of the stuttering husband who marries Siamese twins: he seems to mimic their bodily redundancies by his own compulsive repetitions. His recurring line when his wife has to leave with her sister, is that it is her "a-a-ilibi," her other place (her elsewhere/*alius ibi*). As the wedding feast recalls the earlier film segments, a sense of solidarity and community emerges from the participants' collective differences. Even Cleopatra's mocking of her jealous husband as a "little green-eyed monster" might be part of the fun, except that it reveals her contempt for the entire group; Cleopatra's speech suggests literal and secretive meanings far from the extroversions of the group. In fact, she panics at the moment when the freaks approach her with their offer of acceptance.

In the extraordinary sequence which ends the wedding feast, the freak community approaches Cleopatra, chanting: "We accept you, one of us/Gooble, gobble, gobble, gobble/we accept you, one of us." As the chant builds in a crescendo, an oversized loving cup is passed from mouth to mouth, carried by a midget who marches down the table towards the couple. Their noisy, mirthful offer of acceptance is repugnant and frightening to Cleopatra who screams derisively, "Freaks, Freaks, Freaks . . ." and orders them to get out. She then turns to her new husband and asks, "Are you a man or a baby?"

This question, and the scene which prompts it, reveal two incompatible, internal models of the social body.¹⁶ The first, offered performatively by the freaks on their own behalf, is characterized by a great internal tolerance for extremely differentiated bodily techniques and a corresponding openness to "freaks" from the outside. Admittance to the group is offered on the basis of difference rather than sameness. The heterogeneity of the freaks as a social group corresponds closely to the active image of the freak body in the film.¹⁷ Their speech code within the travelling freak show is similarly multivocal, open to linguistic anomaly and diversions in the form of puns, stutters, jokes, name-calling, and nonsense. The second model, signalled by Cleopatra's refusal to drink and, hence, be contaminated by freak identity, insists on sameness as a basis for exclusion. Within this social group, which is represented in the scene only by Cleopatra and Hercules, there is very little differentiation: only the horizontal axis of gender and the vertical axis of size.¹⁸ The question "are you a man or a baby?" works on both axes simultaneously.

Internally, the freak community offers a model of tolerance which viewers of the film are certainly meant to value as good. The freak community is shown, initially at least, as better than the two representatives of the normal. But Browning reminds us in the film titles (directed to an external audience) that, as a group, the freaks have their own code for dealing with hostile outsiders. This identification of the freak body *against* other social bodies is, of course, a function of that play of forces which have constituted the realm of the political: us against them.

The totemic representation of the freaks—the visible, external sign of freakness—is the chicken. Internally, all manner of hybrid identities are suggested in the film, but the speech (gobble, gobble), gestures (chicken dance), and image of the chicken body (chicken woman dancer/Cleopatra as "chick") stands, for the group, as a mediation of the inside/out. The "chicken" represents the boundary condition of the freak. It is not surprising, then, that the violence resulting from the encounter of separate and oppositional bodies would transform



Fig. 17 Cleopatra's mutilated body as a chick-woman on display.

the body of the beautiful aerialist into a baby chick, head and face mutilated and feathered, hands redesigned prosthetically as claws, and finally exhibited as a freak. In the symbolic economy of the narrative, her body, which was first exhibited in the air as an idealization of womanhood, is cut down to size to fit the sacrificial requirements of freak justice—two kinds of abjection.

Her downfall is staged in the same spectatorial terms as her debut in the film: She is a female attraction who becomes a sideshow distraction because of her relationship to men. Looking down at the disfigured exhibit in the crib below, the Barker claims that a famous prince shot himself because of her. Hard to believe, but, in the realist terms of the film, it is impossible for her to be read as a carnivalesque or cinematic hoax. This residual piece of flesh is insisted upon as a *real woman*. The bottom line here is that she has—as is said of and to women who undergo mastectomies and are immediately presented with all manner of prosthetic and cosmetic accoutrements—"man-

aged to keep her femininity." Femininity is here inert, hypervisible, and sadistically contained as the greatest horror on earth.¹⁹

The culminating image of the film remarginalizes the sideshow freaks as commercial oddities who, perhaps, should not be blamed for their inhuman behavior. The freak female trophy completes the normalizing narrative of heterosexual relations which tend to over-ride, in my view, all of the radical and compassionate details of this extraordinary film.

In the most widely circulating cut of the film, there is an epilogue. It shows a reclusive and melancholy Hans (Harry Earles) ensconced in a stately townhouse, dressed to the nines, with a servant. He has come into his patrimony and has definitively distanced himself from the freaks whose violence on his behalf he now claims to abhor. He is the very model of the tragic gentleman. Frieda, the blond midget who resembles him, arrives to offer her comfort. In the vertical logic of things, they are a normal couple—a short, heterosexual dyad. Presumably, this is the prelude to another Tom Thumb wedding, a ritual which idealizes class as well as gender in an adorable miniaturization.

Safely domesticated now that the excessive body of Cleopatra as monster of monsters (bad woman and bad freak) is "cut out," the rich Hans finally has room for Frieda, a good (normalized) freak and a good (littl) woman.

Freak Orlando: A Genealogy of the Female Grotesque

Writers on the grotesque often begin by pointing out the difficulties of tracing a history of the concept, since its past is as tortuous and unorthodox as its present meaning and uses. Foucault's notion of a genealogy, with its emphasis on rupture, boundary crises, discontinuities, accretions, distensions, and discursive formations, resembles the shapes of the grotesque. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the particularly modern forms of power which simultaneously produced sexuality as a discursive field of force and lo-