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P. T. Barnum, the Freak Show, and the (Re)presentation of the Anomalous Body

Abstract

This article addresses the characteristics of the nineteenth-century American museum of curiosities created by Phineas Taylor Barnum in its historical perspective with a particular focus on the stage shows known as freak shows. Considered the founder of American entertainment, Barnum specialized in presenting human oddities—people either physically deformed or with various appearance-related anomalies, including people with dwarfism or gigantism, bearded women, Siamese twins, and many others. The author's aim is to encourage a discussion on Barnum's persistent control over the presentation of non-normative bodies that emerge in his museum due to human curiosities employed there—a presentation based on fictitious stories. Aiming to fulfill Barnum's guiding principle, which can be summarized as “it doesn't matter how, it matters that they talk,” the micro-story-embedded text

simultaneously addresses the problem of the rhetoric of advertising based on an imagined narrative, evoking characters such as Joyce Heth, General Tom Thumb, and William Henry Johnson.

Keywords

P. T. Barnum, museum of curiosities, freak show, body, anomalous, advertising, disability, humbug

Abstrakt

P. T. Barnum, freak show i (re)prezentacje ciała anomalnego

Artykuł podejmuje temat charakterystyki dziewiętnastowiecznego amerykańskiego muzeum osobliwości stworzonego przez Phineasa Taylora Barnuma w ujęciu historycznym ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem popisów scenicznych określanych mianem freak shows. Uznawany za twórcę amerykańskiej rozrywki Barnum specjalizował się w prezentowaniu ludzkiej odmienności – osób bądź to zdeformowanych fizycznie, bądź z różnego rodzaju anomaliami związanymi z wyglądem, w tym ludzi z karłowatością i gigantyzmem, kobiety z brodą, bliźniąt syjamskich i wielu innych. Autorka zaprasza do dyskusji nie tylko na temat charakterystyki samych freak shows, ale także konsekwentnie sprawowanej przez Barnuma kontroli nad prezentowaniem nienormalnych ciał występujących w jego muzeum w oparciu o historie zmyślane, odrealnione. Jednocześnie, przywołując takich bohaterów jak Joyce Heth, Tomcio Paluch czy William Henry Johnson, osadzony w mikro-historiach tekst porusza zagadnienie retoryki reklamy bazującej na wymyślonej narracji, której celem było wypełnienie, przyświecającego Barnumowi założenia, „nie ważne jak, ważne by mówili”.

Słowa kluczowe

P. T. Barnum, muzeum osobliwości, freak show, ciało, anormalny, reklama, niepełnosprawność, oszustwo

Introduction

Disabled people have variously been objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter, or fascination but they have always been stared at.¹

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

Hoax, humbug, puffery: these are the words that best describe the work of Phineas Taylor Barnum, considered “America’s leading pioneer of popular entertainment,”² “the architect of the modern culture industry,”³ and “the great showman.”⁴ What Robert Wilson finds to be central to Barnum’s philosophy is his relationship to the “audience that he developed during his decades as a showman.”⁵ For that, the key word is “humbug” which Barnum himself described as not pure cheating but “putting on glittering appearances—outside show-novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the public eye and ear.”⁶ He openly admitted that his entire career was based on such practices and that he actually built his public image around it as well.

At the same time, he established himself as a leader of American freak shows and the entertainment industry by understanding the value of advertising. He recognized the strength of publicity, which can be defined as unpaid promotion through the press, penny press, and word of mouth. As Ann Tompert stated, “Barnum was the first one to use advertising and publicity campaigns to stir people’s imaginations and interests in his business projects.”⁷ In most cases, he based it all on catchy slogans, intriguing headlines, and attention-grabbing graphics. It was important to reach the potential audience, to make them curious. Throughout his career, Barnum consistently developed and perfected specific “technologies” for representing anomalous bodies in the public sphere. As I demonstrate in this text, he did so through advertising based on their semiotic rewriting, which resulted in a kind of extension of the promoted performance itself.

¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. S. L. Snyder, B. J. Brueggeman, and R. Garland-Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 56, https://thowe.pbworks.com/f/politics_of_staring.pdf.

² LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830* (Lexington: University Press Kentucky, 2006), 27.

³ James W. Cook, ed., *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 1.

⁴ See Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997).

⁵ Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 5.

⁶ Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader*, 95.

⁷ Ann Tompert, *The Greatest Showman on Earth: A Biography of P. T. Barnum* (Minneapolis: Dillon Press INC., 1987), 21.

Recognizing Demand

Born in 1810 in Bethel, Connecticut, Phineas Taylor Barnum was the author of several books, including his autobiography *Life of P. T. Barnum* (1855), *The Humbugs of the World* (1865), *Struggles and Triumphs* (1869), *Forest and Jungle, or, Thrilling Adventures in All Quarters of the Globe*, and *The Art of Money-Getting* (1880). Before he entered history as one of the most popular American impresarios, circus entrepreneur, and creator of the Barnum & Bailey Circus, he had undertaken various professions. Barnum's story begins long before his famous circus was created. His principal occupations before that were, for instance, owning a shop, a book-auctioning trade, and a statewide lottery network. In 1829 he even launched a weekly newspaper called *The Herald of Freedom* where he published his politically engaged texts. However, selling lottery tickets would turn out to be crucial for his later professional activity. During this period, he became convinced that people are inherently naive, and that this fact has a huge financial potential—a potential which he decided to use in many ways. Some time later, he became known for “running the American Museum and being the impresario behind the witty and talented dwarf Tom Thumb, the angelic Swedish soprano Jenny Lind—who created a sensation in America in the early 1850's—and dozens of other acts and travelling shows.”⁸

My purpose here is not to analyze all of Barnum's activities, either from his early active years or the later times when he was to cooperate with James Anthony Bailey in creating the Barnum & Bailey Circus, which came about only in the last years of his life. Indeed, my main interest is the issue of his freak-show practices and their consistent control over a non-normative body representation dependant on spectacular mystification—and, therefore, based not only on the creation of imaginary stories, the rhetoric derived from puffery, but also on a specific aesthetic rhetoric of an advertised disabled body.

In the middle of the nineteenth century Phineas Taylor Barnum was just meeting a need. He initially capitalized on society's obsession with the unusual, the mysterious, and the unexplainable by showcasing human curiosities. He achieved a lot in these endeavors because his exhibits were honestly appealing to the broad population. At that time America was experiencing fast growth and industrial expansion, during which daily life was undergoing numerous changes, including in leisure activities. As Rieke Jordan acknowledges,

⁸ Wilson, *Barnum*, 4.

during the nineteenth century, commercialized leisure venues such as beer gardens, sport games, arcades and parlors, and theaters offered a variety of new experiences, including new sensations of space and time, to visitors. Likewise, activities like shopping and traveling, vacationing and going to a phonograph parlor afforded new ways to move, to explore, to lounge, to be seen, and to connect to each other and disconnect from the self.⁹

As a consequence of a flourishing economy, industrialization and greater opportunities for mobility and movement, people were enjoying better living conditions. Machines were altering the way people were working by making jobs faster and more efficient. Along with expanding career opportunities, more money and more free time, the middle class were seeking affordable amusement, while prior to this only the wealthy had been able to afford to attend plays, concerts, and art exhibitions. “The leisure industries of the nineteenth century sought to provide entertainment to Americans of all classes.”¹⁰

Moreover, “the advent of mechanized reproduction led to an emergence of increased visual experience in the way of advertisements, department store displays, newspapers and magazines.”¹¹ In parallel with the development of a culture of spectacle during this period in American history, one of the most popular forms of spending free time was performing arts. Next to drama theatre, burlesques, vaudeville, or blackface minstrelsy, people could find commercial amusements such as: sideshows, “minor show[s] offered in addition to a main exhibition (as of a circus);”¹² dime museums, designed as places of amusement and moral teaching offering entertainment for everyone under a small fee; and freak show exhibitions of people with abnormally developed bodies, extraordinary diseases or conditions, as well as various acts that were supposed to shock. Freaks “belong to the days before cinema and the radio, when a magic lantern could create a stir and urchins lurked at street corners to ambush anybody who was even slightly out of the ordinary.”¹³

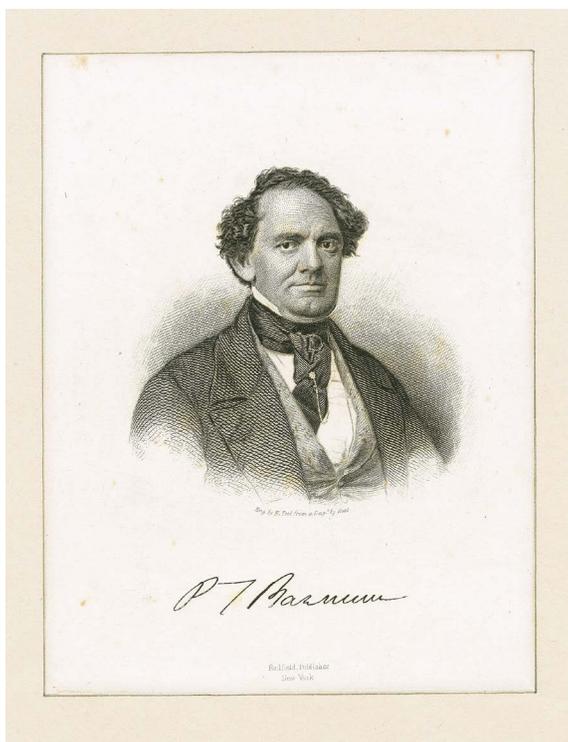
⁹ Rieke Jordan, “Spending Time in the Nineteenth Century,” *New American Studies: A Forum* 71 (2021): 13, <https://doi.org/10.18422/71-01>.

¹⁰ Alexandra Kindell and Elizabeth S. Demer, eds. *Encyclopedia of Populism in America: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 397.

¹¹ William R. Feeney, “Manifestations of the Maimed: The Perception of Wounded Soldiers in the Civil War North” (master’s thesis, West Virginia University, 2015), 134, <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/5583>.

¹² „Sideshow,” in Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed December 10, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sideshow>.

¹³ M. Wilson Disher, *Fairs, Circuses and Music Halls* (London: William Collins, 1942), 19.



P. T. Barnum

Freak shows developed gradually over time and became a formalized type of popular American entertainment around the middle of the 1800s. The discourse of the abnormal or different body became prevalent in Victorian culture for a variety of reasons, for certainly it didn't appear overnight. It resulted directly from the social and cultural shifts manifesting themselves among discourses of the body steeped in knowledge and the convergence of interest in medical and health issues resulting from modernization.¹⁴ These were circumstances which

¹⁴ It should be emphasized with full conviction that P. T. Barnum did not operate in a vacuum; he was neither a reformer nor an inventor. Long before him, audiences had been drawn to what they perceived as the unique, uncommon, different, unusual, or unrecognized. In the first half of the nineteenth century, traveling entertainment and itinerant showpeople were a major source of amusement for Americans, as were wax museums, which combined education with a touch of macabre, anatomical museums, where a broadly understood fascination with the human body found an outlet, or the exoticism presented in ethnic villages, which not only piqued Americans' interest and taught them about other cultures, but also assisted them in defining their own identities through self-comparison. Barnum exploited this history on a never-before-seen scale, developing a business model that virtually industrialized the demand for sensation, science, and curiosity.

created this phenomenon “that focused on disabled people, leading directly to disability being at the center of popular culture.”¹⁵

The practice was broadly acceptable, and it joined a burgeoning popular amusement industry seeing no impropriety in exhibiting humans. Indeed, as Brigham Fordham claims

the expanding marketplace of the mid-nineteenth century, in combination with a new fascination with science and travel, caused freak shows to flourish as never before. People came to see the shows, from Henry James and the Prince of Wales to the humblest families.¹⁶

This statement is confirmed by a prominent expert and researcher of the subject, Robert Bogdan, who unequivocally states that

“freak shows”, the formally organized exhibition of people with alleged physical, mental, or behavioral differences at circuses, fairs, carnivals, and other amusement venues, was once an accepted, popular, and lucrative practice in the United States. There is no record of these shows being attacked as offensive until well into the twentieth century. Today, they are on the fringe of society, seen by many as crude, rude, and exploitive.¹⁷

Before Barnum established the freak show practice extensively, though, along with the vast array of specimens and samples in his collection of wonders, he had made a serious foray into theatrics, in 1835 showing his first “exhibit”—a black elderly woman named Joice Heth. It was the beginning of his career as “the Prince of Humbugs”—as he called himself over the years.

Joyce was a black lady with a disability who was enslaved and bought by Barnum for what he said was a \$1,000 investment. However, according to some reports, he officially rented her, and therefore wasn’t her slave owner.

She was blind and partly paralyzed but she could talk and move one arm. Barnum fabricated a sensational story of her being the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington. He advertised her as “The Greatest Natural and

¹⁵ Mary O’Callaghan, “From Marginalization to National Sensation: The Phenomenon of Disability in Victorian Popular Culture”, *Undergraduate Library Research Awards*, 2 (2024), accessed July 13, 2024, <https://digital-commons.lmu.edu/ulra/awards/2024/2>.

¹⁶ Brigham A. Fordham, “Dangerous Bodies: Freak Shows, Expression, and Exploitation”, *UCLA Entertainment Law Review* 14, no. 207 (2007): 3, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1604168>.

¹⁷ Robert Bogdan, “The Social Construction of Freaks”, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 23.

National Curiosity in The World,”¹⁸ continuing to create a fictional story about her life, which he described as follows:

She was the slave of Augustine Washington (the father of George Washington) and was the first person who put clothes on the unconscious infant, who was destined in after days to lead our heroic fathers to glory, to victory, to freedom. To use her own language when speaking of her young master George Washington—“she raised him.”¹⁹

Heth captivated audiences with stories and anecdotes which received a lot of interest. To create controversy around her and draw in more business, Barnum would even send anonymous letters to publications criticizing her reliability. It was often the case that she was watched and touched when people came to see her. The woman was treated as a freak and a relic of history, exploited not only in that she was made to work in her old age, but as Benjamin Reiss notes, “although Barnum would later deny it, in early autobiographical writing he boasted about extracting her teeth to make her look older.”²⁰ As the public’s interest in her diminished, Barnum reignited it with a new rumor:

Not only did he actually invite speculation as to whether Heth really was Washington’s nurse, he also introduced the possibility that she might not even be a real person at all but rather a cleverly constructed automaton, a stage magician’s machine designed to create a fabulous illusion. To arrive at the central secret of who Joice Heth was required penetrating multiple walls of the fortress of trickery Barnum built around her.²¹

After that, people returned to see if she was an automaton or a real person and at this point Barnum had masterfully spun the making of profit and humbuggery into a new dimension. Advertising, publicity, embellishment (mostly fanciful) of biographical narratives, and the use of astounding language are all components of a strategy that he perfected over time—transforming subjectivity into spectacle.

¹⁸ Irving Wallace, *The Fabulous Showman: The Life and Times of P. T. Barnum* (New York: Knoph, 1959), 4.

¹⁹ Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader*, 31.

²⁰ Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.

²¹ Taylor Hagood, *Secrecy, Magic, the One-Act Plays of Harlem Renaissance Women Writers* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 2, <https://kb.osu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/b951f8ad-0ee8-5e49-b206-4d107782d233/content>.

It even got to the point that he permitted a public autopsy to be conducted on Joyce's body after her death in 1836, ostensibly to confirm her age. For this he rented an amphitheatre on Broadway and sold hundreds of tickets. Even though it was established that she was around eighty years old when she passed away, this was the first time that Barnum discovered the market's hunger for morbid experience on a large scale.

The case of Joyce Heth confirms what Mary Crossley calls a symbol of "a tendency to objectify difference"²² manifesting itself by a juxtaposition of African Americans and people with distinctive physical impairments presented alongside one another.

"The cardinal principle of enfreakement" according to humanities and disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is "that the body envelops and obliterates the freak's potential humanity" in a "social process of making cultural otherness from raw materials of human physical variation." Obliterating the humanity of Black people or disabled people smooths the paths for the political, social and economic decisions that produce disadvantage.²³

Gaining Momentum

In the following years, P. T. Barnum continued to travel around the United States, expanding his repertoire of curiosities. When he had finally made it to New York, in 1841, having earned a lot of money from the Joyce Heth humbug, he was able to purchase Scudder's American Museum on Broadway, a dilapidated building which he swiftly turned into a charming establishment. It was a combination of various types of institutions—starting with Natural History Museum, through theatre, ending with circus. Above all, however, it gained prominence and is documented in American entertainment history as a venue for massive exhibitions and gatherings of human curiosities. From the 1840s up until the 1860s Barnum hosted there a "rotating 'roster of freaks: albinos, midgets, giants, exotic animals' and anyone else who piqued the curiosities of the public."²⁴ Soon it became an exemplary implementation of his famous idea: "I believe hugely in advertising and blowing my own trumpet. . . . beating the gongs, drums, etc.,

²² Mary Crossley, *Embodied Injustice: Race, Disability, and Health* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh School of Law, 2022), 56.

²³ Crossley, *Embodied Injustice*, 56.

²⁴ Zachary Crockett, "The Rise and Fall of Circus Freakshows," accessed December 4, 2024, <https://priceconomics.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-circus-freakshows/>.



John Reuben Chapin, Samuel Putnam Avery, *Barnum's American Museum*, New York, 1853

to attract attention to a show.”²⁵ This attention, oriented towards spectatorship, leads to reflection on Barnum’s overall concept of what we would today call a marketing model and promotional strategy. As entertainment acceptable to all social classes his museum was extremely popular. It was open all day, from early morning until late evening, to make it long accessible for visitors who came not only from New York City, but also from other parts of the United States. Admission was about 25 cents, a small expense that many could easily afford.

The building was boldly decorated to promote. Barnum included banners, flags, images in the windows, and big letters on the outside of it. He lit the whole thing with gas lights and rebuilt the roof in such a way that it gave the impression of a large garden, from where balloon flights were organized. There were also fireworks and a brass band that played raucously on the balcony.

²⁵ Quoted by John Springhall, *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840 to 1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 28.

Moreover, visitors could buy a variety of souvenirs, such as *carte de visites* of human curiosities or glass-blown figures. All of the above evolved into a well controlled program that enabled Barnum to continuously broaden his influence and elevate the depiction of oddity.

One of the first novelties in Barnum's American Museum was the Feejee Mermaid, which was not a living creature. The impresario spread the story of how some sailors in the South Sea had discovered this very gorgeous being. Thus, he made the audience want to see her. When visitors arrived and paid for a ticket, they were met by a terrifying and hideous manufactured wonder with a monkey's head and torso attached to a fish tail. His advertising was utterly fake, yet it nevertheless attracted clients and the money he sought.

Barnum's "collection of curiosities" was soon enlarged by Charles Stratton, an American boy with dwarfism. He hired him as a human oddity when he was four years old, publicly claiming that he was eleven. Charlie learned to dance and sing. The showman also taught him how to play a variety of roles and how to mimic certain well-known individuals. Stratton "performed imitations of Napoleon Bonaparte and Revolutionary War soldiers and marched around the stage dressed as a soldier waving a ten-inch sword and performing military drills."²⁶ He was given the stage name Tom Thumb in honor of the fictional character. Soon Barnum added the term General to make it seem even better in comparison with Stratton's height, while at the same time Tom Thumb added an imaginative aspect that made it harder to distinguish between fact and fantasy. This in turn contributed to the creation of the boy as a pure spectacle.

Charlie was first only displayed in Barnum's museum. The impresario wanted everyone to realize how little the boy was, so they would go on stage together. At the age of five Charlie embarked on his first American tour and later, in 1844, he was so popular that Barnum took him to England for a three-year European tour. It was during this time that the boy performed in front of Queen Victoria. Following several performances in the royal court, a run of shows in London's West End began. This is what Barnum himself wrote about it in one of his letters of 1844:

General Tom Thumb has now been exhibited at the west end of London for four successive months, with a continued and unabated procession of crowded houses. In fact, no exhibition in London was ever before so absolutely popular and successful as the General's has proved. And what is still more gratifying is, that much the largest class of visitors have been persons of the highest

²⁶ Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," in *Freakery*, 191.

rank and refinement. He has been petted by, and received presents from, ladies and gentlemen of the highest distinction, from the queen down. I have now a trunk full of letters from persons of influence in all parts of England, Ireland and Scotland, inviting us to visit them, and offering large pecuniary inducements for doing so.²⁷

In 1863 Charlie Stratton married Lavinia Warren, who was also a little person. Their wedding became front-page news. Thousands of people attended it even though Barnum was selling tickets for seventy-five dollars, which was a significant sum of money at the time. “As celebrities, as curiosities, they performed the role of husband and wife for commercial gain from the moment of their engagement.”²⁸ In this regard it is interesting to notice how much joy the audience experienced from this wedding, especially considering the Civil War era and the fact that two disabled persons would have been discouraged from getting married and starting a family at that time. In addition to aspects of disability, the marriage of two performers with dwarfism sparked debate about the intimate relationship between them. Sometime later Barnum “capitalized on prurient curiosity about the sexual habits of dwarfs and often posed Mr. and Mrs. Stratton with a borrowed baby, proclaiming it to be their child.”²⁹

During the height of political unrest surrounding slavery in the United States and soon after *On the Origin of Species* was released by Charles Darwin, Barnum put on one of his most famous shows, “What Is It?” with an African American performer, William Henry Johnson, presented as a possible missing link between man and monkey. After giving him the stage name Zip the Pinhead, Barnum dressed the man up in a fake jungle suit and claimed to feed him with raw meat and nuts, freaks frequently being presented as hybrids to give their viewers a chance to practice their skill at defining reality. The truth was that William, a son of former slaves, most probably suffered from microcephaly, a condition that causes an abnormally small skull that tapers back at the forehead. He was described as “having a head like the slim end of an egg and a long broad nose and a prognathous jaw.”³⁰

In many available and reprinted lithographs Zip the Pinhead is presented through the depiction of physical difference. He is typically leaning forward and

²⁷ Quoted in Cook, *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader*, 73.

²⁸ Lynne Valloen, *Big and Small: A Cultural History of Extraordinary Bodies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 116.

²⁹ Valloen, *Big and Small*, 116.

³⁰ Mark Moran and Mark Sceruman, *Weird N. J.: Your Travel Guide to New Jersey's Local Legends and Best Kept Secrets* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc, 2005), 118.

holding himself up with a stick, while people watching, who are probably museum visitors, are standing upright. As Rosemarie Thompson writes, the nineteenth century “freakshow was a cultural ritual that dramatized the era’s physical and social hierarchy by spotlighting bodily stigmata that could be choreographed as an absolute contrast to ‘normal.’”³¹

The name of the exhibit “What Is It?”—implying that he was neither a human being nor a monkey, but somewhere in between—should be seen as Barnum’s most manipulative use of advertising rhetoric.

“WHAT IS IT?” Is it a lower order of MAN? Or is it a higher order of MONKEY! None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both. It is beyond dispute THE MOST MARVELOUS CREATURE LIVING. It was captured in a savage state in Central Africa, is probably about 20 years old, 4 feet high, intelligent, docile, active, sportive, and PLAYFUL AS A KITTEN. IT has a skull, limbs and general anatomy of an ORANGUTAN and the COUNTENANCE OF A HUMAN BEING, TO BE SEEN AT ALL HOURS AT BARNUM’S MUSEUM.³²

From a modern perspective, one finds these words deeply disturbing. However, in the nineteenth century it caused widespread interest among both ordinary visitors and New York journalists looking for sensation. *The New York Herald* declared that those “who are fond of looking at the freaks nature frequently indulges in, should step in and form for themselves an opinion as to ‘What is it?’”³³ *The New York Tribune* added “the brightness of his eye and its intelligent responses to the words and motions of the person in charge at once relieve it from the imputation of imbecility.”³⁴

In the Meanders of the System

Phineas Taylor Barnum did things his way, attaining success by a unique blend of daring innovation, aggressive promotion, and knowledge of human nature. Robert Wilson says that

³¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 63.

³² Quoted in Bernth Lindfors, *Early African Entertainments Abroad: From the Hottentot Venus to Africa’s First Olympians* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 167.

³³ “WHAT IS IT? Advertisement, New York Tribune, March 1, 1860,” The Lost Museum Archive, accessed November 11, 2024, <https://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/what-is-it-advertisement-new-york-tribune>.

³⁴ “WHAT IS IT? Advertisement, New York Tribune, March 1, 1860.”

He created a sort of scale of humbuggery. On one end of the scale was what we would call outright fraud, but Barnum felt that what he did, what was his definition of a humbug, was a sort of mild exaggeration meant to bring people into either his museum or later into the circus.³⁵

The interaction between the humbugged individual and the humbugger seemed crucial.

A genuine humbug consists in making a man feel that he has got the worth of his money—that he has seen wonders such as could not be found elsewhere on the face of the earth—that those wonders must have cost the “enterprising & liberal proprietor” many sleepless nights & oceans of gold—and that in fact and in truth the beholder of the humbug is much indebted to the owner thereof for having kindly permitted him (by paying for it) to behold this precious sight, whatever it may be.³⁶

P. T. Barnum knew the intrigue of the unexpected and bizarre, had a deep understanding of social psychology, took risks, and shamelessly advertised and promoted everything he did being aware of the importance for the staged event to garner media attention and make sure that his outcomes were widely known. As Rachel Adams points, he “was responsible for transforming the freak show into a coordinated business venture enhanced by advertising, promotional materials, and celebrity appearances.”³⁷ Therefore, Barnum did what many of today’s public relations practitioners do.

I thoroughly understood the art of advertising, not merely by means of printers’ ink, which I have always used freely, and to which I confess myself so much indebted for my success, but by turning every possible circumstance to my account. It was my monomania to make the Museum the town wonder and town talk. I often seized upon an opportunity by instinct, even before

³⁵ Robert Wilson, “Barnum—Master Showman or Master of Humbug?” interview by Phillip Adams, *ABC Radio National*, January 18, 2021, audio: 20:25, <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/barnum---master-showman-or-master-of-humbug/12985440>.

³⁶ “P. T. Barnum Letters (#9): Barnum on ‘Humbugging & Puffing,’” accessed December 4, 2024, <https://barnum-museum.org/humbugging-and-puffing/>.

³⁷ Quoted by Jessica L. Williams, *Media, Performative Identity, and the New American Freak Show* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 18.

I had a very definite conception as to how it should be used, and it seemed, somehow, to mature itself and serve my purpose.³⁸

Nowadays, the practices described here occur as shameful and unacceptable, and therefore Barnum's artistic and entertainment activities should be considered in a multidimensional way, not only in terms of pure advertising but also in terms of measuring and defining the "normal" versus "abnormal." Freak shows "are not about isolated individuals, either on platforms or in an audience. They are about organizations and patterned relationships between them and us."³⁹ In other words, as Bogdan states, the freak is "something we created: a perspective, a set of practices—a social construction."⁴⁰ By defining and exhibiting the anomalous, these practices "challenged audiences not only to classify and explain what they saw, but to relate the performance to themselves, to American individual and collective identity."⁴¹

Therefore, in my opinion it is necessary to outline two important issues that from a modern perspective may raise doubts. First is a question of ethical principles. Undoubtedly, Barnum made huge profits from presenting human misfortune, which involved disability, congenital defects, deformities, etc. Thus, we may ask whether it was a pure entertainment business or a deplorable exploitation of these people. This seems to be a difficult dispute to resolve categorically. If we look at it in the context of social life in nineteenth-century America, the active participation of people affected by physical differences in social life offered a chance for them to simply come out of the shade. For a person whose appearance differed from the generally accepted norm, for a person perceived as a creature, participation in the so-called freak shows gave the opportunity not only to leave the social margins in favor of popularity but also to become the center of attention. Additionally, we should not forget that all curiosities presented in Barnum's Museum (and not only there) received fair pay for showing off their otherhood. It happened that these were dazzling sums of money which today we would compare to the earnings of the biggest show-business stars. Just to mention Charles Stratton and William Henry Johnson, they both, thanks to Barnum, made huge fortunes.

³⁸ Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Barnum's Own Story: The Autobiography of P. T. Barnum* (New York: Dover, 1961), 102.

³⁹ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), x.

⁴⁰ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, xi.

⁴¹ Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 58.

Secondly, in my opinion, what lies at the basis of the phenomenon discussed here is what I would call, following Nadia Durbach's thought, "the spectacle of deformation."⁴² The anomalous body is always associated with the production of strong emotions in the viewer. Everything that goes against the acknowledged principles of nature produces cognitive and aesthetic dissonance. Barnum's depictions of crippled and distorted bodies gave insight into disruption that was diametrically opposed to the social and cultural order. Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla recognize this type of destruction as the "representational vicissitudes of the body"⁴³ creating a space of struggle regarding the set standards. The body, as both the individual and social self representation, conquered by advertising and promotion, outlines how deeply the tendency of classification has been rooted in socio-cultural discourse. It becomes a classifier of non-normativity understanding that vanishes inside the confines of reality, exposing human imagination.⁴⁴



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⁴² See Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁴³ Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline L. Urla, *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3.

⁴⁴ See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

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