To See Is To Know: Human Anatomy Exhibitions and the Barnum Freak Show,
A Critical Study

Abstract

The following essay will explore an important historical influence on the human anatomy exhibition phenomenon: the freak show, which was designed by P.T. Barnum in the mid-nineteenth century. Tracing the development of the freak show model—including its contemporaneous relationships with natural history, zoological, and world’s fair exhibitions—will reveal the techniques used to popularize these controversial displays of the extraordinary body. The discussion will identify issues of ownership, authenticity, and ethics relevant to both displays.
"This is not a freak show," Dr. Roy Glover—medical advisor & spokesman for Premier Exhibitions—told the New York Times. 1 The non-freak show that he refers to is “Bodies…The Exhibition,” which opened in New York’s South Street Seaport on November 19, 2005. While part of the last decade’s growing trend of “displaying the dead for profit”—similar exhibitions include “Body Worlds,” “Body Worlds 2,” “Body Exploration,” “The Universe Within,” and “Bodies Revealed”—these human anatomy exhibitions are not without roots in the very format that Dr. Glover so quickly dismisses. In fact, the freak show, as described by Sideshow USA author Rachel Adams, can be enlightening, mapping “the anxieties and fantasies that undergrid collective responses to contemporary events.”2 Rosemarie Garland Thomson expands this point:

The nineteenth century freak show 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" American embodiment and authenticated corporeal truth.3 Reactions to the bodies displayed in these exhibitions are indicative of the viewing audience’s shared values and cultural moment. For Barnum, the body of a freak could arouse public curiosity because "it was precisely in opposition to the [freak’s] liminal self that the new middle-class urbanites initially defined their own social status, character, and virtue."4

A controversial yet historically appropriate term, the word ‘freak’ is used in this essay to refer to a person whose identity finds meaning through its theatrical packaging and promotion.

The two types of freaks showcased by Barnum were tribal people—previously undiscovered new

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3 Thomson, 63.
and unknown races—and lusus naturae—people born with demonstrable differences. Neither category was considered ‘normal’; the freak’s identity stood in binary opposition to its audience. According to Marina Warner, the world of a freak was wild, barbaric, and ultimately for public consumption:

Within the dream of innocence, lies the imaginary state of wildness…like the child, this place can hold up an image of paradise lost, or of an unruly and dangerous territory which must be ordered, tamed, even consumed…Wild things have offered a standard by which human identity and exploits can be measured…[they] aren’t monsters…they’re barbaric rather than alien.”

This essay will explore our public consumption of freaks, examining the historical background and structure of the Barnum-era freak show to consider if today’s human anatomy exhibitions follow this original freak show model. The analysis will be based on a variety of scholarly material, with particular emphasis on Timothy Mitchell’s concept of the “world-as-exhibition,” which was originally applied to the world’s fairs of the nineteenth century. Considering the ease with which contemporary cultural critics apply the ‘freak show’ label and our readiness to consume these freakish displays, this research hopes to have applications for various forms of popular entertainment, from reality television to video games.

The exhibition styles found in P.T. Barnum’s traveling freak shows developed during the mid-nineteenth century, in response to new trends in mass entertainment and scientific investigation. The growing city population began to spend their leisure time outside of the home, which caused a rise in the development of concert halls, theatres, restaurants, dime museums,

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5 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 6. In many cases, a freak could fit in both categories, such as Zip the Pinhead, who will be discussed later.
7 Warner, 68.
and freak shows. With increasing competition, P. T. Barnum devised his strategy: "at the outset of my career I saw that everything depended upon getting people to think, and talk, and become curious and excited over and about ‘rare spectacle.’"\(^8\) The excitement came in 1859 with the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, which outlined his controversial theory of evolution. At this time, Barnum’s freak shows already included exhibits of corpses and fetuses; his acquisition of the Charles Willson Peale collection in 1850 included the preserved remains of The Bearded Lady and The Leopard-Skinned Boy. In addition to these displays of the dead, Barnum’s had a ‘traditional’ cast of performers—"automatons, jugglers, ventriloquists, living statuary, tableaux, gypsies, Albinoes, fat boys, giants, dwarfs, rope-dancers"\(^9\)—some of whom became individual celebrities, such as the conjoined twins Chang & Eng.

To further capitalize on the evolution controversy, Barnum created a visual investigation entitled “What Is It?,” which became one of the longest running displays at Barnum’s American Museum in New York City.\(^10\) William Henry Johnson, known to audiences as Zip the Pinhead, was originally sold into show business by his family. This mentally disabled African American man went on to participate in “What Is It?” for 40 years. In his act, Zip ran and grunted around the stage while wearing a fur suit.\(^11\) The exhibit’s promotional materials used suggestive language and questions—"is it a man or is it an animal?"—to imply that Zip might be the “missing link.” Or, as James W. Cook describes, a quasi-man:

Whereas [Dred] Scott's lawyers described their client as "quasi-citizen," born a slave but seemingly emancipated by his temporary residence in two free states, Barnum offered "What Is It?" as the world's first quasi-man, born a "brute" in the African jungle, but now

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\(^9\) Harris, 120-121.
\(^10\) In 1841, Barnum opened a permanent exhibition space in New York City, called the American Museum, which a fire destroyed in 1865. The American Museum quickly reopened at a new location, but it closed after a second fire in 1868, after which Barnum devoted his energies to his traveling circus and their freak shows.
\(^11\) See Figure 2 for a photograph of Zip wearing the fur suit.
beginning to take on various "human" more "civilized" features during his stay in New York.12

Given the active public debate, museum patrons attended in droves to solve the mystery for themselves, attempting to answer the "What Is It?" question. The exhibition proved to be quite financially lucrative; Zip owned a house in Connecticut that was a gift from Barnum.13

This exotic presentation of a circus freak became so successful that, as Rachel Adams explains, many of "the nation’s grand civilizing institutions unwittingly engaged with the sensational, profit-driven mode of the freak show" by the turn-of-the-century.14 Such institutions include: the Bronx Zoo, which exhibited Ota Benga, a Batwa Pygmy, in 1906, where he lived in their Monkey House with an orangutan; the Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, which exhibited Ishi, a Yahi Indian, in 1911 as "the last Stone Age man"15; or possibly most disturbing, the American Museum of Natural History, which housed an Inuit father and son, Qisuk and Minik, in their basement in 1897. After Qisuk died of tuberculosis, the museum staff prepared his skeleton for the museum’s collection, unbeknownst to his son, who was told his father was sent home for burial. Minik later found his father’s skeleton in a display case.16

Additionally, the American freak show was influenced by the burgeoning crop of ethnographic exhibitions in the European world’s fair, which strove to showcase the successes of nineteenth century colonial expansion. The three main qualities of Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said—essentialism, otherness, and absence—defined the understanding of the

12 Cook, 151. The Dred Scott trial was in 1857, three years before “What Is It?” opened at the American Museum.
13 Due to the conflicting evidence that I encountered, I was reticent to generalize what freaks thought about their role in the shows in this paper, although that is an important question to ask, ideally in a longer paper. There was even less information regarding the audience’s perspective, unless someone got so offended during a performance that they stormed the stage, which illustrated the extreme reactions, not the norm. An interesting sociological study could be done by interviewing performers and audience members who performed/attended the same performance.
14 Adams, 25.
15 Adams, 25. Due to its continued popularity, the museum staff has yet to de-install the Ishi exhibit.
16 Asma, 3.
nineteenth century other, the Eastern freak, as essentially different, inferior, and feminized. This Orientalist belief system legitimized the authority and control of the Western colonial master and ultimately affected Western representations of the East in their exhibitions. Timothy Mitchell’s description of the design of a world’s fair can equally apply to the design of a freak show: “this world-as-exhibition was a place where the artificial, the model, and the plan were employed to generate an unprecedented effect of order and certainty.” Europeans satiated their curiosity of exotic foreign cultures by creating the appropriate stage on which the Orient could be viewed and understood. These physical environments correspond to the mythological origins, costumes, and advertisements that Barnum constructed for every freak; both the stage and the myth attempt to quell the Western audience’s fear of a strange, unknown person by explaining that difference came from an individual’s primitive living conditions or upbringing. With the prevalence of these false constructions, these artificial stages on which meanings are born, reality becomes harder to discern:

…everything [in Europe] seemed to be set up before one as though it was a model or the picture of something. Everything was arranged before the observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere ‘signifier of’ something further.

The ubiquitousness of these displays meant that Europeans were constantly serving as spectators to what they understood to be imperial truths about their ‘new’ cultures.

The “world-as-exhibition” model contained and presented freaks in an accessible environment, in which patrons could safely positioned themselves and their bodies in opposition to the freaks. Unlike the European expectation of world’s fairs, Americans did not need the freak show to convey a certainty or a truth about the subject. As in the “What Is It?” exhibition, many questions remained unanswered. As Neil Harris explains,

17 Mitchell, 455.
18 Mitchell, 460.
Barnum's audiences found the encounter with potential frauds exciting. It was a form of intellectual exercise, stimulating even when literal truth could not be determined\textsuperscript{19}… Barnum understood that people enjoyed the opportunity to debate the issue of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, and was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself.\textsuperscript{20}

Barnum recognized that an effective show left his audience wanting more. To foster this desire, he created a balanced mix of humbugs—visually titillating fakes—and living curiosities. James W. Cook explains how Barnum’s exhibition model produced two different types of viewing experiences:

The [Feejee] Mermaid’s viewers focused on the act of representation itself (how might this monkey-fish concoction have been manufactured?), as well as on its moral and legal legitimacy (is this representational act worthy of the admission price?). Viewers of the living curiosity exhibitions, by contrast, focused on the content of Barnum’s representations (how does the General [Tom Thumb] look and behave, dance and sing, dress and talk?), as well as the representation’s larger social implications (what sort of public persona is being articulated through this remarkable man-child?).\textsuperscript{21}

Visitors bought tickets for freak shows while knowing that a large percentage of what they saw were illusions. Yet they stayed amused, even while they were consciously being deceived. Since all the displays included degrees of caricatured realism, much of the entertainment value derived from seeing for yourself and participating in the public debate.\textsuperscript{22} Even Barnum’s authentic, living curiosities, such as midgets and giants, were transformed once given a fantastic story, “fictional identities worn by an inanimate object…or a human actor.” Performers with the most viscerally shocking medical deformities could stand for some embellishment in Barnum’s eyes; their stories and advertising frequently emphasized similarities with animals.\textsuperscript{23} These performers accepted these doctored stories of their mythic beginnings, because exciting shows made more

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\textsuperscript{19} Harris, 125.  \\
\textsuperscript{20} Harris, 75.  \\
\textsuperscript{21} Cook, 120.  \\
\textsuperscript{22} Cook, 19.  \\
\textsuperscript{23} Cook, 120.
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money. Marina Warner, whose research on the role of myth in today’s world was significantly influenced by Roland Barthes, discusses how such myths appear to be ingrained in our culture:

...Myths are not eternal verities, but historical compounds, which successfully conceal their own contingency and changes and transitoriness so that the story they tell looks as if it cannot be told otherwise, that things always were like that and always shall be. ‘Myth,’ [Barthes] writes, ‘transforms history into nature.’

Therefore, while authenticity was not paramount in the freak show, selling the product was, for both the dead and the living.

Today, displaying the human body continues to create controversy in America, even when the display is purported to be educational, which is what the organizers of “Bodies…The Exhibition” claim. The exhibition uses real human remains and arranges them more like art objects than science specimens, in darkened rooms with artistic lighting. Like the freak show, public attendance is high (even record-breaking), yet some contemporary critics have intensely negative opinions. One German critic labeled “Bodies” as, “a gross violation not only of bodily decorum but of human dignity itself.” A British anatomist protested that the “merely spectacle” might deter families from donating bodies to medical science. These specimens, who look like three-dimensional illustrations on break from an anatomy textbook, achieve a level of authenticity from a new preparation technique called polymer preservation. In this process, also called plastination or plasticization, scientists skin the bodies and body parts and then replace body water and fats with liquid silicone rubber. The resulting bodies are eternally preserved and can be sliced, separated, and posed in the midst of everyday human activity, like playing football.

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24 Warner, xx.
25 See Figure 5.
26 An extended version of this paper could include a discussion of the history of medical museums, like The Mutter in Philadelphia, as well as the past and current legal restrictions on these corpses and where they can come from.
or chess. For the exhibition, specimens were grouped into displays that focused on five different systems — muscular, skeletal, circulatory, reproductive, and respiratory. The exhibition also featured comparisons of diseased organs and their healthy counterparts, including: a smoker’s carbon-colored lungs; dark spots of a stroke victim’s brain; and extreme cases of cancer. Another display—which was prefaced with a warning for exhibit-goers and a disclaimer that the specimens were obtained through natural deaths—shows preserved fetuses in various stages of development, as well as one in utero and another of conjoined twins.

In the New York press release for “Bodies…The Exhibition,” spokesman Dr. Ray Glover continually praises the educational goals of the exhibition. Strangely, given his earlier assertion that “Bodies” is not a freak show, his language is quite similar to that of a nineteenth century freak show ‘talker,’ carnival slang for the salesman who entices a passerby to step inside:

For centuries, this world has been off-limits to the public – open only to doctors and medical professionals. Now, for the first time, we are pulling back the curtain and allowing the public to see it for themselves, up-close and personal. Have you ever wondered what’s underneath your skin? After the seeing this exhibition, you will finally know. The body doesn’t lie.

Like a talker, Dr. Glover’s description of “Bodies” excites potential ticket buyers to imagine the wonders that have been behind that curtain (or in this case, underneath the skin) all this time. In these human anatomy shows, the dead have become the freaks, as donors have forgone a traditional death ritual to display internal secrets in the external world. Our death practices are like a theatrical final bow; we expect to see a deceased person arranged by a funeral director in a particular way. Most Americans do not want to know or see what happens back stage at a funeral parlor; “Bodies…The Exhibition” shatters that boundary. Therefore, the specimens in this

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27 See Figures 3 and 4.
28 “Exploitation, art or science? Popular ‘corpse exhibits' cause controversy.”
exhibition are freakish in part by challenging society’s associations with death. If the popularity of the human anatomy exhibitions continues to increase, will the identities of the specimens remain anonymous? Eventually, body donation could become a socially accepted death practice, a chance for the participant to attain eternal celebrity status thanks to a new sort of tombstone: their exhibition wall text.

In Glover’s closing line—“the body doesn’t lie”—the reader is supposed to assume that the specimens they will see in the exhibition are entirely authentic, only because they were once living human beings. This line echoes an important technique for selling the Barnum-era freak show: by emphasizing the freaks as living. Freak show advertising typically included the exclamation ‘Alive!’ prominently on each banner. However, the accuracy of this blanket claim was questionable; it mattered only to freak show organizers that these freaks have lived somewhere, at some point in time. Visitor expectations for living spectacles were frequently met by taxidermy, even wooden, models. One of Barnum’s most famous (and popular) humbugs, the FeeJee Mermaid, was a preserved monkey torso attached to a fish tail. The assertive, yet ambiguous, rhetoric used in Barnum's advertising—similar to the “Bodies” press release—not only encouraged a discourse within the general public, who attempted to arrive at their own explanations for the curiosities, but also functioned as a semiotic device, "which further differentiated and created the distance between the normative body and the extraordinary body." In the case of “Bodies,” the extraordinary body is our inner self, just behind the curtain.

“Bodies…the Exhibition” has an additional layer of shock and faces some macabre questions: in today’s society, which body is more of a freak: the one voluntarily donated for such a display or taken unknowingly from a morgue? All of Premier’s human specimens—22 corpses

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[30] For an example of this style of banner art, see Figure 6. The “Penguin Boy” banner also illustrates how these promotional materials emphasized the visual similarities between human deformities and animal characteristics.

and 260 other remains—came from China, a country whose “poor human rights record and the medical establishment’s practice of recycling organs of executed prisoners” has caused many to wonder if these corpses were obtained legally.\footnote{Jacobs.} Premier never received copies of the documentation that proves the corpses’ legal origins. The Dalian Medical University of Plastination Laboratories in China, Premier Exhibition’s supplier, has faced previous accusations of providing executed prisoners to companies for commercial purposes; Dalian also supplied bodies to Gunter von Hagens, the German entrepreneur who organized the first traveling show of the dead in 1996, "Body Worlds."\footnote{“Exploitation, art or science? Popular 'corpse exhibits' cause controversy,”\textit{Associated Press}, 9 May 2005, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7723133/> (21 November 2005).} However, prosecutors did not have enough evidence to prove von Hagen’s alleged use of executed Chinese prisoners. To offset this controversy, “Body Worlds” and “Body Worlds 2” now promote a specimen donor program on their website and in the exhibition, which is currently thanking 6000 living and 300 deceased body donors. Meanwhile, Premier maintains that all their specimens belonged to “the poor, the unclaimed, or the unidentified,” people whose bodies were never claimed from city morgues. Arthur Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, is very uncomfortable with this use of unclaimed bodies, questioning the, “fine line between education and exploitation in these kinds of exhibits…you only want people to be displayed if you have their consent, not the consent of a third party.”

While many of these corpses are displayed in galleries without the informed consent of the deceased or a family member, attempts to fight the arrival of these exhibits from medical organizations have yet to succeed, due to their overwhelming popularity and commercial success. For example, in August 2005, when “Bodies…The Exhibition” was scheduled to open in Tampa, the Florida Anatomical Board voted four to two against the exhibition opening.
because of this lack of informed consent. Ultimately, the Florida Anatomical Board could not stop the opening; the board only has regulatory power over the transportation of human corpses and body parts into and out of the state for medical education and research purposes. Legally, it is unclear whether their authority extends to museum exhibitions, despite this exhibition’s billing as educational. The Tampa show opened to more than 12,000 visitors in the first four days, breaking the museum’s record set in 2003 by a Titanic exhibition, which coincidentally, was also organized by Premier Exhibitions.\(^3\) “Bodies” had 21,000-plus visitors by the end of the first week. Backed by these overwhelming attendance records, Dr. Glover prefers to leave the judgment of these exhibitions to the visitors, not the critics: "Many people consider the human body itself a work of art. Of course, art, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. We leave it to the public to form their own opinions.”\(^3\)

Joshua Gamson’s study of television talk shows discusses issues of visibility that are relevant for the freaks of today and yesterday:

…where…redrawing of key social boundaries meet up, are the *paradoxes of visibility* that talk shows dramatize with such fury: democratization through exploitation, truth wrapped in lies, normalization through freak show. There is in fact no choice here between manipulative spectacle and democratic forum, only the puzzle of a situation in which one cannot exist without the other.\(^3\)

Public interest in the classic Barnum style freak shows began to wane in the 1930s and 1940s as the public became more knowledgeable about ‘exotic’ cultures and the exhibited freaks were seen within the context of their medical conditions and not their inherent ‘otherness.’ Yet, we

\(^{34}\) It would be interesting to study one of these blockbuster exhibition machines, like Premier Exhibition, to learn how they are administered, how they raise their money, particularly for marketing, and see if there are any lessons that could be applied to smaller museums and arts organizations.

\(^{35}\) “Exploitation, art or science? Popular 'corpse exhibits' cause controversy.”

continue to be a society fascinated by spectacle, in which we can fashion our own ‘spectacular’ self, even in death. The "Barnumization" of American culture permeates today's society, and our cultural critics are quick to label America’s guilty pleasures as freak shows: from chair-throwing talk shows to surgery-based reality television to violence-laden video games. Yet the freak show label is typically bestowed on a cultural product at the height of its popularity, because it has found some new, exciting edge of decency to push and challenge. Our contemporary definitions of freaks are widening as well; Marina Warner poses the question: “How exactly do poverty and lack of education, sex and gender non-conformity, and race come to be lumped together and condemned as monstrosities?” The current cultural climate is ripe with freakish displays of the body, even as scientific advances mediate natural occurrences of human deformity. In fact, deformities once displayed in Barnum’s freak shows are easily fixed by today’s surgeons. Science maintains this fight of disease and defect in the pursuit of human perfection: longer, healthier, wrinkle-free lives. In the future, when such deformities are erased completely, people will likely create new, visually freakish differences with piercing, tattoos, elective surgeries, or, as this current crop of exhibitions indicate, with death. In the case of “Bodies…The Exhibition,” Dr. Glover denies any affiliation with such deviancy. However, Dr. Glover is obviously a smart businessman and the Barnum sales pitch serves as a foundation for modern marketing techniques, in which the main goal is to keep the public guessing and wanting more. Given our continued obsession with spectacle, indirectly associating “Bodies” with freak shows and accusations of stolen bodies might be a calculated way to get big attendance numbers.

If so, the strategy is working. Like Barnum freak show visitors, today’s audiences want to see it for themselves, to participate in the public debate, and like the actual experience of seeing

37 Warner, 13.
Barnum’s freaks, to recognize themselves in something that is different, but somewhat familiar. The co-curators of “Bodies…The Exhibition,” John Zeller and Judy Geller, wanted to give the bodies a more approachable appearance with their poses. While technically a room full of corpses, “there’s a lot of life in the room,” said Zeller, “you're seeing this mirror image of yourself…to see is to know.”
Bibliography


Browning, Tod. "Freaks." 64 minutes. USA: MGM, 1932.


Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 5.

Figure 6.