

On Freaks, Freakery and Policing the Centre

What Robert Priseman demonstrates in this project are historical processes and practices around representations of disability, for make no mistake, the ‘freaks’ represented here would be identified as disabled in modern parlance. Freaks and freakery have an ambiguous history, simultaneously regarded as fascinating and abhorrent. Elizabeth Grosz, in an essay titled ‘intolerable ambiguity: freaks as/at the limit’ⁱ describes how the idea of the freak appeals directly to “our most fundamental categories of self-definition and boundaries dividing self from otherness”. Similarly, Michel Foucault talks about the idea of ‘otherness’, highlighting how it operates as a binary logic, dividing society into two groups;

“...them and us, the unjust and the just, the masters and those who must obey them, the rich and the poor, the mighty and those who have to work in order to live, those who invade lands and those who tremble before them, the despots and the groaning people, the men of today’s law and those of the homeland of the future.”ⁱⁱ

These ideas of difference between two groups are central to the social, cultural and political processes around freaks and freakery. Grosz argues that the freak fulfils a role for the viewer in confirming them as “bounded, belonging to a “proper” social category. The viewer’s horror lies in the recognition that this monstrous being is at the heart of his or her own identity, for it is all that must be ejected or abjected from self-image to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible.” When viewed in this context, the freak functions to assert categories of membership which people seem to be either excluded from or included in – a society wide split between an in-group and an out-group. It is this aspect of freaks and freakery that I want to discuss in this essay.

In order to do this I want to look at the role that freaks and freakery have played, and indeed continue to play, in defining not the margins, but the centre – the bounded belonging, category-obeying centre – and how this tells us much more about the social, cultural and political values and norms of that ‘centre’ than it does about those excluded to the periphery.

In terms of contrasting the centre to the periphery, and what this might reveal, consider the othering of disability inherent in the global rise of eugenics and in particular the development of eugenic state policies in Nazi Germany. Robert Priseman’s previous project ‘Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History’ detailed the rise of the T4 Killing Centres, as precursors to the horrors of the concentration camps. The development of these T4 Killing Centres was predicated upon social processes that identified the sick and disabled as a burden upon the broader population. In 1933 the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring (the so-called sterilisation law) was passed, which effectively split German society into the

‘sick’ (and burdensome) and the ‘healthy’, with the state able to forcibly sterilise those deemed burdensome, such that their progeny could not effect a similar burden on the state. From this precedent, in 1939, the national euthanasia programme was initiated, whereby physicians inspecting children deemed to be ‘genetically unhealthy’ were empowered to grant the child euthanasia. Within a year, the Committee for the Scientific Treatment of Severe, Genetically Determined Illnesses required all health professionals delivering a child with congenital deformities such as “idiocy or Mongolism, microcephaly or hydrocephaly, deformities of any kind, malformation of the head or spina bifida, or crippling deformities such as spastics to register that child with the local health authorities – to clarify certain scientific questions in areas of congenital deformity and mental retardation”ⁱⁱⁱ. More than 5000 children were killed as part of this programme. And the scope of the legislation extended beyond children. By August 1941, 70,000 patients from more than 100 German hospitals had been killed. Three scientific/medical organisations were created to plan for the extermination of all of Germany’s mental patients and handicapped children. Of the 283,000 people identified as possible ‘mercy killings’, approximately 75,000 were marked to die. The euthanasia programmes, which ‘othered’ whole swathes of the population, created the conditions of possibility for the final solution. The social norms established around the ‘othering’ of disabled groups led to the ‘othering’ of other non-medically defined groups such as Jews, communists, homosexuals, Gypsies, Slavs, and prisoners of war.

Many of these state policies were underpinned by notions of eugenics, and not just in Nazi Germany. In the late 1800s and early 1900s eugenics was a respected science. Francis Galton, the British founder of the eugenics movement was the nephew of Charles Darwin. It was predicated on a general principle that human progress could only be ensured through national breeding programmes designed to increase the number of children born to the educated, intelligent, and accomplished upper classes. Eugenicists also felt it was necessary to discourage the birth of children among poor and handicapped lower classes, arguing that it was science, not religion nor philosophy that would direct humanity toward a biological, social and moral utopia. The utility of the Victorian freak is plain to see in terms of the role that this category of human being could play in helping to define both the centre and the margins of this burgeoning new (pseudo) science.

Just what were the margins that these freaks were intended to identify, what were the social, political and cultural limits they were used to convey? In understanding these processes of othering Robert Bogdan argues “we have to look at those in charge – whether self appointed or officially – of telling us who deviants are and what they are like. Their versions of reality are presentations, people filtered through stories and world views...Presentations are artefacts of changing social institutions, organisational formations and world views.”^{iv} The time of the Victorian freakshow was a time of huge scientific discovery. With the rise of Darwinism, freakery was perhaps being used to establish biological normativity, to delimit what did and

did not count as 'human'. Certainly this historical period was one when eugenics enjoyed a high international profile, with supporters on the political left and right arguing for organized control of the human gene pool, enforced sterilization of the feeble-minded and so forth. But in a sense, it doesn't matter. What we are talking about in these social processes is the assertion of 'acceptable' norms, i.e. what does and does not count as normal. Whether it's a life in the travelling show, being gawked and pointed at, or a life on television, being gawked and pointed at, the social political and cultural construction of what and what is not normatively acceptable is something that has been with us since before Victorian times.

I mention television to move the discussion away from a historical consideration of Victorian freak shows and eugenics, for there is a danger we get trapped in a historical abstraction and think in a self-congratulatory way that that was then, and that things have improved since those terrible times. And in part this is true. That processes of abjection and discrimination towards those deemed to be freaks happened is beyond doubt. But we have moved a long way from labelling people in these ways (in public discourse at least). Legislation or changing social attitudes have ensured (somewhat) that discrimination and attendant levels of stigma are deemed legally and socially unacceptable. Rightly, it is no longer possible to use a language of abnormality or imbecility when talking about physical disability or mental illness (indeed 'mental illness' has itself become a fraught term). But changing social mores and instituting legal frameworks has not functioned to rid contemporary society of the notion of the 'freak'. This is because the practices and processes of 'othering' remain largely unabated.

Take for example the ways in which mainstream media have represented issues of poverty and welfare, particularly how they have constructed the idea of 'poverty porn'. These programmes offer up a window on the 'freakshow' of life on welfare. Issues of deviance and stigma are bound up to a voyeuristic affirmation that for us, viewers in the mainstream, 'our lives' are not like those lives we see represented on the screen. In this way, poverty porn is used to define and delimit cultural expectations about work and welfare. It functions to communicate a message that a life on welfare is not somewhere that people want to go; the abjection of the poor is used as a timely reminder to make sure that we, viewers in the mainstream, keep on working, keep on striving, pay the mortgage, toe the line, for fear of being sacked and ending up on 'benefits street'. Tracy Jansen and Imogen Tyler demonstrate how these types of programmes develop a society-wide form of 'anti-welfare commonsense' where it becomes unproblematic to differentiate between a deserving and undeserving poor.^v That is to say, it facilitates the 'othering' of some groups of people, as establishing social processes that identify certain categories of people in society as less deserving of welfare than others.

Processes around the labelling of freaks and freakery are not about identifying the strange and the arcane (or even the profane). They are about setting the limits for what is 'acceptable', and 'normal' and for what people are expected to be (and not be). In modern times this means

freaks and freakery are used to instil and install a normative need for the job, the car, the house and mortgage, the children, whilst continually buying more and more stuff that we don't really need in an endless cycle of consumption. What we really need are more 'freaks' – and lots of them.

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ⁱ Grosz, Elizabeth (1996) Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the limit, in Rosemarie Garland Thomas (eds.) (1996) *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, London: New York University Press.

ⁱⁱ Foucault, Michel (2003) *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey. New York: Picador.

ⁱⁱⁱ Proctor, Robert (1988) *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*, London: Harvard University Press.

^{iv} Bogdan, Robert (1996) The Social Construction of Freaks, in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996) *Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, (eds.), London: New York University Press.

^v Jansen, Tracy and Tyler, Imogen (2015) 'Benefits broods': The cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare commonsense, *Critical Social Policy*, 35(4), 1-22.