



SIBESHOW

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SCREENED SPACE AND THE SPECTACLE OF REVEAL

A sideshow is a space apart. It is an attendant structure to the main event: the big top, the circus tent, the main attraction. It is a temporary exhibition site that serves as an amuse-bouche to the choreographed performance of the circus proper. The sideshow is designed to pique curiosity and satiate a desire for shock and awe.

As an outlier — a fringe, a periphery — the sideshow possesses its own complex spatial logic. A context for exhibition display, it is both a frame and a stage. Here, the object on display is a human body. This body addresses the audience as both a performer and a mute artefact. It retains theatricality but is relegated to the status of pure spectacle. In this performance there is no narrative: no cause and effect, no character arc. Just the body on a podium in a tent.

As a makeshift structure that delineates the division between inside and out, the sideshow tent amplifies (and exploits) the tension between concealment and revelation. The tent cocoons the body, shielding it from view and anticipating its exposure. The tent teases the audience and dramatizes the seductive pull of the exotic and the other. In peeling back the panel of fabric and entering the tent's darkened interior the punter is invited into the reveal.

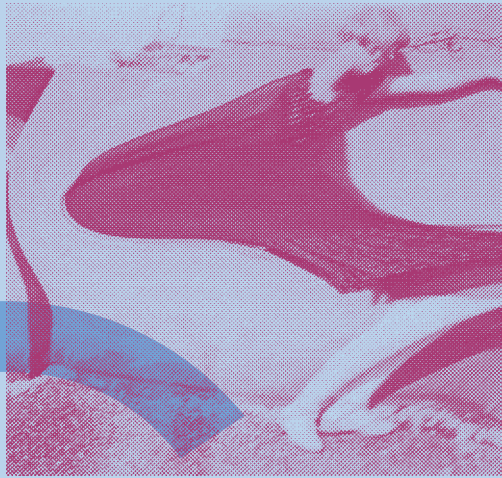
This reveal — this exposure — valorizes the grotesque body: aberrant, abnormal and above all 'unexpected'.¹ Biological oddities, ethnographic case studies and novelty acts are placed on pedestals and paraded as a discrete and distanced 'other'. These bodies become agents of provocation, recruited to cultivate fear and fascination.

They are cordoned off — sequestered, screened and veiled.

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Yet what provoked and enabled this mode of display? In what context did the sideshow attain popularity? What kind of world did it infect?

Maintaining cultural currency from the 1840s until the 1940s, the sideshow industry

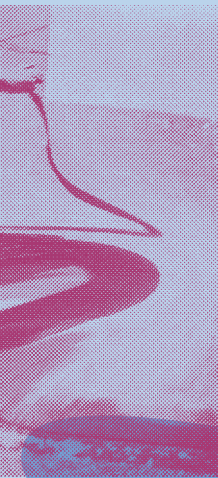


evolved alongside the development of technological modernity. It was fueled by the expansion of mechanized rail systems and advancements in photography and print technology that enabled the mass dissemination of images and text. As peripatetic exhibition spaces, sideshows relied on the circulation of posters, photographs and pamphlets to promote their wares and garner cult-like status for their cast of performers.

In the nineteenth century the increased industrialization of the manufacturing industry produced a work force whose gestures and body rhythms were attuned to the standardization of metric time. Production lines choreographed the crowd. The factory and the conveyor belt synchronized gesture, temporal rhythms were strictly delineated because more people had clocks and clothes were mass-produced not home made. The principles of Taylorism filtered into the workplace to maximize productivity and workers became the pawns of mechanized uniformity. Labour was economized, bodies moved together. The heaving, faceless mass in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) became the metaphorical doppelgänger of society at large.

Siegfried Kracauer, a critical theorist associated with the Frankfurt School in Weimar Germany, addressed the regimentation of the body at the behest

of the modern era. According to Kracauer, the standardized body of the workforce constituted a mode of mass ornamentation that found allegorical resonance in the body of the vaudeville performer.² In the Tiller Girls, a vaudeville troupe that toured Germany during the Weimar era, Kracauer saw the 'machinelike' quality of modern life and the 'fusion of people and things' translated into dance. With legs kicking in unison and bodies moving in time, 'the living approximates the mechanical, and the mechanical behaves like the living'.³ According to Kracauer, 'what they accomplish is an unprecedented labor of precision, a delightful Taylorism of the arms and legs, mechanized charm... a flirt by the stopwatch'.⁴ We need only revisit Busby



Berkeley's kaleidoscopic musical numbers or the slapstick routine Charlie Chaplin performs within the bowels of a conveyor belt in *Modern Times* (1936) to witness this phenomenon in action.

The sideshow contributed to the mechanistic apparatus of this entertainment milieu. It galvanized the mass synchronicity of the crowd. By situating case studies of abnormal or exotic bodies within the context of exhibition display, the sideshow created a 'uniform abstract citizenry'⁵ in which the 'institutionalized social process of enfreakment united and validated the disparate throng positioned as viewers'.⁶ The audience was homogenized by their apparent 'normalcy'.

Helping to shape the very social fabric of the uniform crowd, the sideshow cultivated a democratized public space that superseded the boundaries of the class system. In the early nineteenth century, cabinets of curiosity or *Wunderkammers*—

encyclopedic personal museums of natural history and ethnographic specimens cultivated by European aristocracy — were commercialized. Commandeering the notion of 'curiosity' as the foundational premise of exhibition display, popular museums like PT Barnum's American Museum, established in Times Square, New York in 1841, brought the *Wunderkammer* into the public sphere. In the 1870s, Barnum founded *The Barnum & Bailey Circus* that featured a mobile version of the American Museum. This circus, one of the most famous to tour the USA, is credited with promoting and popularizing the sideshow.⁷

Transcending the stratification of the class system, the sideshow pitched itself to the broader public. Unlike the *Wunderkammer*, segregated within the home of the educated and wealthy (male) collector, the sideshow was a 'democratizing institution' where the working class could rub shoulders with the Prince of Wales or Henry James.⁸ In the sideshow, 'the exhibition of freaks exploded into a public ritual that bonded a sundering polity together in the collective act of looking'.⁹

The democratizing force of the sideshow only reverberated amongst its audience members. It did not touch the performers themselves. As objectified spectacles, sideshow performers were consigned to the ranks of the sub-human.

A mode of entertainment predicated on the exposure and display of the abnormal body, this cultural phenomenon matured alongside rapid advancements in medical science. Throughout history, abnormal, grotesque or 'unexpected' bodies have populated mythological and religious narratives. They feature as symbolic proxies who impart moral imperatives and deliver enchantment. Yet as technological modernity took hold, the abnormal body was stripped of its allegorical potential and was codified and catalogued by the discourse of pathology. No longer an agent of wonderment, the abnormal body became a patient and the experimental guinea

pig for enhanced curative procedures. The abnormal body could be remedied and repatriated.

Medical anomalies were not simply left 'as is' but provoked 'genetic reconstruction, surgical normalization, therapeutic elimination or relegation to pathological specimen'.¹⁰ Prosthesis, surgery and pharmaceuticals allowed the body to be regulated and standardized. Those bodies that resisted could always be interred in the asylum. A growth industry in the nineteenth century, psychiatric institutions enabled the systematic concealment of the deviant and dysfunctional.

Literary theorists Allon White and Peter Sallaby draw a direct parallel between the clinical prognosis and treatment of hysteria in the nineteenth century and the social status of the grotesque body. White and Sallaby apply Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque to an analysis of Freud's early case studies of female hysterics. Examining the work of the Renaissance humanist and scholar François Rabelais', Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque as a literary mode predicated on deviance and degradation. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque is tethered to the presence and mannerisms of the grotesque body. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body is a narrative trope that possesses comic potential and can be used as an agent of social self-awareness.

Commandeering Bakhtin's research, White and Sallaby trace the implications of repressing and rejecting the grotesque. Prior to the nineteenth century, the ritual of the carnival was integrated into public life. The year would be structured around short bursts of debauched celebration. In these quasi-Bacchic rituals, entrenched in European cultural life from the middle ages, the population momentarily suspended their cordiality and indulged in epic feasts, licentious behavior, costumed disguises and pantomimic performances that celebrated debased humour (much of which centred on bodily functions and sex). A celebration

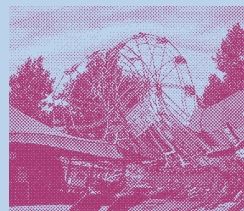
of the visceral, the carnival 'flaunt(ed) the material body as a pleasurable grotesquerie – protuberant, fat, disproportionate, open at its orifices'.¹¹ It allowed participants to exorcise their degenerate (and repulsive) fantasies, revel in the absurd and abandon themselves in unadulterated pleasure. As the conservatism of the nineteenth century set in, these grotesque rituals were disavowed.

The body was buttoned up and its visceral reality was denied an opportunity to express itself publicly. This shift coincided with the discovery and diagnosis of psychological neuroses. Jean-Martin Charcot, a French neurologist working at the Salpêtrière institution in Paris from 1862 onwards, revised the classification of hysteria from a physiological disorder to a psychological malaise. Hysteria (as Charcot categorized it) is no longer recognized as a medical disorder yet during the nineteenth century it was a commonly diagnosed condition thought to primarily affect women. Symptoms included insomnia, anxiety, muscle spasms and seizures and were (supposedly) triggered by psychological trauma, the repression of desire, or emotional excess. It was Charcot's work on hysteria that shaped Freud's concept of the unconscious and his awareness of the perils of its repression. Freud was a student of Charcot's and his early research focused on hysteria.

Reviewing Freud's early case studies, White and Sallaby describe the carnivalesque as a psychological tripwire.

Many of the images and symbols which were once the focus of various pleasures in European carnival have become transformed into the morbid symptoms of private terror. Again and again these patients suffer acute attacks of disgust, literally vomiting out horrors and obsessions which look surprisingly like the rotted residue of traditional carnival practices.¹²

Unable to participate in the abreactive ritual of the carnival, these women internalized



their fear of the grotesque. The acceptance and embrace of the grotesque body within the carnival offered participants a cathartic release. They could laugh at the body in all its resplendent visceral glory. Excluded from the carnival with the incursion of middle class propriety, bourgeois women were left with no means of exorcising their fears and phobias. By repressing the grotesque these women were not able to address the physicality of their bodies.

As Freud acknowledged, hysteric fits could be triggered by an inability to process a confrontation with the grotesque. Yet while they were precipitated by repulsion, the fits also reenacted the mannerisms of the carnivalesque. This consonance between cause and effect was played out in the 'clowning' stage of the hysteric fit wherein victims would collapse into a discordant approximation of a slapstick routine. These hysteric fits become microcosmic displays of the pantomimic gestures that the carnival spawns.

The patients seem to be reaching out, in their highly stylized gestures and discourses, towards a repertoire of carnival material as both expression and support. They attempt to mediate their terrors by enacting private, made-up carnivals. In the absence of social forms they attempt to produce their own by pastiche and parody.¹³

The public carnival becomes a private performance.

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The circus sideshow accelerated this tidal shift. The carnival dissolved but did not disappear altogether. It merely transformed from a mode of participatory and public performance into a voyeuristic spectacle. Where the audience would have once partaken in the debauched festivities, they began to hang back on the sidelines. In places like the circus, the freakshow, the vaudeville performance or the pantomime, the audience could vicariously

participate in the carnival through performative proxies. They became observers.

This transposition from participant to detached observer constituted a 'gradual reconstruction of the idea of carnival as a culture of the Other'.¹⁴ Engagement became spectatorial, a fact that only bolstered the homogenization of the normalized crowd. Those in the crowd did not possess the grotesque body — they merely *stared* at it.

For these spectators, the visceral body was screened and repressed. While the sideshow performer's grotesque corporeality was exposed each time the door of the tent was pulled back, the audience had to wait until the curtain of their own neurosis fluttered to reveal the image of their private grotesquerie.

Elizabeth Grosz unpacks the spectator's ambivalent relationship to the image of otherness that the 'freak' presents. The sideshow turned our fascination with (and attraction to) the grotesque into capital. It relied on a currency of seductive repulsion. The desire to look vs. the compulsion to look away. The subject of this attention — the sideshow performer — 'is not an object of *simple* admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening'.¹⁵

As Grosz asserts, this ability to both repel and allure is dependent on the 'freak's' status as

an *ambiguous* being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life. Freaks are those human beings who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition.¹⁶





Within the context of the sideshow, the persona and presence of the 'freak' challenged the conformist principles that demarcated social order; the distinction between human and animal, male and female, or one body from its Siamese twin.

It is with a 'narcissistic delight'¹⁷ that the spectator regards these bodies. They are fascinated with the proposition of otherness because it tests 'the limits of (their) own identities as they are witnessed from the outside'.¹⁸ But the definition of normalcy that freakery is positioned against is a mere façade. The crowd has been duped. Binary oppositions and the strict delineation between conflicting terms don't hold fast. The homogenized crowd is not unified against a distinct and different 'other' — it is bound by a false sense of security. The masses think they have something to hold on to.

Fascination with the monstrous is testimony to our tenuous hold on the image of perfection... What is at stake in the subject's dual reaction to the freakish or bizarre individual is its own narcissism, the pleasures and boundaries of its own identity, and the integrity of its received images of self.

The crowd looks towards the 'freak' for a sense of self-certification. But this comes undone. The crowd is a farce. Their uniform gestures — that 'mass ornament' — is a fabricated pantomime; their collective image is scaffolded by nothing more than a makeshift façade. A tent.

The crowd as a tent — veiled and disguised. Screened.

The screened image

The circus sideshow was a space in which images were manufactured. The public personas of each performer were carefully and strategically constructed. Their

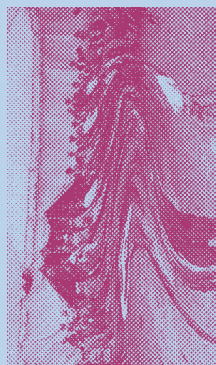
biographies were often fabricated and their physical abnormalities were exaggerated (or even simply invented).¹⁹ Outside the tents, orators would spruik the show in an attempt to lure audiences. Overly embellished narratives about the performers would appear in local newspapers or were printed in pamphlets and distributed at the show. Staged photographs of each act were also available. Collectible cartes de visite and cabinet cards, popular in the late nineteenth century, allowed these manufactured images to circulate.

Yet, as we know, it was not only the performers who had their images cultivated and their mythologies spun. The spectator did too. It seems fitting, then, that the fairground housed the first iteration of the cinema.

Prior to the establishment of permanent, site-specific and dedicated cinemas, early films were exhibited in traveling fairs alongside the sideshow. The Bioscope (or Cinematograph) transformed the mechanics of the moving image into a spectacle.

Affiliated with magic theatre and illusionistic performance acts, the cinematic apparatus was promoted as an attraction that could confound and thrill. In its infancy, film tapped the same audience as the sideshow and appropriated its mode of display. Early films were exhibited in makeshift picture houses — often tents — and would be promoted by an orator or showman. Just like the sideshow, the traveling Cinematograph industry cultivated and exploited curiosity. These proto-cinematic spaces embedded in the fairground began to imitate and echo the strategies of the sideshow act.

The context of early film distribution shaped the content and aesthetics of



the medium. As film theorist Tom Gunning has argued, early film was not tethered to narrative or the principles of cause and effect. The short films that were produced to demonstrate the technology of the cinematograph are episodic and hinge on discrete, fragmentary scenes in which events erupt but never unravel.

Gunning categorizes early film as a 'cinema of attractions'.²⁰ Clarifying his use of the term 'attraction', Gunning acknowledges that 'by its reference to the curiosity-arousing devices of the fairground, the term denoted early cinema's fascination with novelty and its foregrounding of the act of display'.²¹ The cinema of attractions is 'founded on the moment of revelation' and 'offers a jolt of pure presence, soliciting surprise, astonishment, or pure curiosity instead of following the enigmas on which narrative depends'.²² With its slapstick gags and irruptive action, the cinema of attractions was tailor made for an audience accustomed to the spectacle of the sideshow. As Gunning asserts, 'contemplative absorption is impossible here. The viewer's curiosity is aroused and fulfilled through a marked encounter, a direct stimulus, a succession of shocks'.²³ For those who frequented the proto-cinema of the fairground, the experience of witnessing a projected still image slide into motion was akin to a confrontation with the bearded lady or the illusionist. These early film spectators were seduced by the prospect of the thrill.

Bound to the site of the proto-cinema in an allegiance that sees the partition/screen of the tent collapse into the literal screen of the cinema, the sideshow's status as an image space is bolstered through allegory. And in search of a metaphoric proxy to make sense of this union we turn to a cinematic case study.

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In Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) the murderous somnambulist Cesare kidnaps the protagonist's fiancé. It is the

film's villain, Dr Caligari, who masterminds this plot. He is the puppet master and Cesare is his hypnotized pawn. This power dynamic is established from the outset. Cesare first appears as a sideshow act in a town fair with Caligari as his showman. Trapped in a perpetual slumber, Cesare is a clairvoyant. His 'act' is the ability to foresee the future. The crowd is hustled into the sideshow tent and look on as the sleeping Cesare is woken from his slumber. The moment of Cesare's awakening is punctuated by a close-up shot that tightly frames his face. We watch as his eyes slowly begin to open.

The close-up shot is a vignette. The black circular frame on the image encases Cesare's face. This is an enclosed image – a tented image.

As Cesare's eyes open his dormant form springs to life. His limp body becomes animated, his performance begins.

In the close-cropped vignette we find an image of an awakening and the eruption of performance. That this image is enclosed / encircled – that it is 'tented' – draws it into direct metaphoric contact with the spatial logic of the sideshow. The tented and enclosed spaces of the sideshow are also stages. They are performance spaces. Demarcated, consecrated and animated. They are voids and vacant lots that have been delineated by walls of fabric and transformed by the action and acts they contain. Once the performer steps into the ring the empty space becomes performative. It is pulled from an inanimate state into an animate one. Like Cesare, the space is awakened.

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What else is awakened in the sideshow? The performers; the audience; the images. Sure. But the protagonist here is the body – the visceral, grotesque, exposed, physical body. The partitioned body, the screened body. The body as a performative agent, an image and an object. The body on display.

NOTES

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- 21 Gunning 1996. Op.cit p. 73
- 22 Ibid p. 81
- 23 Gunning 1989. Op.cit p. 38

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