The bus runs on used cooking oil that has to be scavenged from restaurant dumpsters. It keeps breaking down, until finally it dies completely. There is garbage everywhere and arguments erupt over who should clean up. The giant tries to talk and people keep interrupting him. The Elephant Man has been left behind. The clown has lost his dog, who is also his best friend. The Human tripod has a vicious hangover and spends all day lying on the couch. The giant gets fed up and catches a plane back to Oregon. Lobster Girl pulls a black hair from her chin and worries that she’s getting fat. These scenes from a film called The Last American Freak Show illustrate how far we’ve come from the romantic ideal of running away to join the circus. It is six, and the performers in The Nine Eyes of Endless Dream have missed the heyday of the freak show by about one hundred years (fig. 17.1).

For six weeks, filmmaker Richard Butchins accompanied this traveling freak show as it drove from Oregon to Austin, stopping to perform at bars, nightclubs, parties, and a wedding along the way. His documentary The Last American Freak Show is a road narrative in the vein of Jack Kerouac’s On the Road or Ken Kesey’s The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test in that it details the allure and the disillusionment of vehicular travel across the American continent. Like these precursors, it recognizes the road as a place where rebels and outcasts seek escape from the pressures of mainstream society. It appreciates the impulse toward nonconformity, while also recognizing the loneliness and discomfort that come with self-imposed marginality. What distinguishes Butchins’s story is that the majority of his travelers have significant congenital disabilities. They are “freaks” not only in their rejection of social norms but because of their deviance from bodily norms. As in Katherine Dunn’s 1995 road novel Geek Love, the performers in The Nine Eyes make a living by exhibiting themselves, flaunting their differences rather than attempting to hide or normalize them. But this isn’t fiction; it’s real.
black woman named Joice Heth, whom he advertised as the 161-year-old mummy of George Washington (fig. 17.2). Heth was not congenitally disabled, but her body was bent and twisted with age and decades of hard work. Under Barnum’s management, this unremarkable old woman became a sensation. When public interest in Heth waned, he rekindled it by spreading the rumor that she was not a living person, but an automaton. Barnum exhibited Heth until the day she died, when he garnered further publicity by arranging for a public autopsy to verify her age. Over the course of his career, Barnum was responsible for introducing some of the most famous human curiosities of his time: the conjoined twins Chang and Eng, the diminutive Tom Thumb, Lavinia Warren, and Commodore Nutt; William Henry Johnson, the “What Is It?”, the giants Anna Swan and Colonel Routh Geshen; Maxim and Bartola, the Aztec children; and Charles Tripp, the no-armed boy (fig. 17.3). These performers’ unusual bodies provided the raw material for the creation of freaks. Barnum’s genius lay in understanding how to use narrative and props to turn bodily impairment into a spectacle people would pay to see. He soon had many imitators, and the freak show became a regular feature of the American circus.

Sometimes human oddities were incorporated into the circus ring, but more commonly they were part of a sideshow (fig. 17.4). Located in its own tent and requiring an extra fee for admission, the sideshow was among the most popular and profitable attractions at the circus. Freaks were defined by bodily features spectacular enough to make audiences want to stare, however the sideshow always contained an element of performance. Costumes, props, the showcasing of unique abilities and talents, and extensive advertising turned people with disabilities into freaks. Not every freak was disabled. Sideshow also included people with extremely long hair or nails, tattoos, and women in pants, as well as non-Western people, and those with unusual talents like sword swallowing, fire eating, and contorting. Sideshow acts could also be inspired by current events. “I am speaking of America—the land of real humor, of ingenuity, or resource,” reported journalist William Fitzgerald in 1897. “When some important political or other event agitates that great country, topical sideshows spring up with amazing promptness.” Thus, at various points in the nineteenth century, suffragettes, Filipinos, Native American chiefs, and Africans were exhibited as freaks.
Born freaks—those with congenital disabilities—were the aristocrats of the sideshow world. The more unusual their bodies, the better chance they had to control their salaries and working conditions. Chang and Eng Bunker, the famous conjoined twins, set their own terms when they toured with P. T. Barnum. They made enough money to settle in North Carolina, where they married sisters and fathered twenty-one children. Few freaks were this fortunate. The conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton never achieved the enduring success of their precursors. After a lonely and abusive childhood, they seemed poised to embark on a glamorous career as film and vaudeville stars (fig. 17.5). But they were exploited by managers and agents, who abandoned them once their public appeal declined. They ended their lives in obscurity, working at a grocery store and dying alone in their small apartment.1 Joseph Merrick, who was exhibited as The Elephant Man in the late nineteenth century, fared no better. After touring Europe, he was robbed and abandoned by his manager. So severe were his disabilities that it was dangerous for him to appear in public alone (fig. 17.6). He finally made his way to London, where he was rescued by Dr. Frederick Treves. He spent the rest of his life in Treves’s London hospital, where he died of asphyxia while sleeping.2 The life of Julia Pastrana, The Bearded and Hairy Lady, was also filled with hardship and betrayal (fig. 17.7). Her parents sold her to a showman who taught her to dance and play music, and eventually married her. She gave birth to a baby with features much like her own, who lived for only two days. Pastrana died soon after from complications of childbirth. But that was not the end of her career. After having both wife and baby mum-mified, Pastrana’s husband continued to exhibit them in a glass case.3 In the era before the welfare state, many people with severe disabilities turned to freak shows for economic support. Some parents sold children born with disabilities to showmen, having no other means to care for them. American cities passed “ugly laws” banning persons with “unsightly or disgusting” disabilities from appearing in public.4 These ordinances made the possibility of gainful employment, or even begging, more difficult. A souvenir carte-de-visite sold at a freak show makes the case for a man whose hands were disabled after being struck by lightning at age six: “He would gladly undertake any labor that would furnish him a livelihood, but how can he? Yielding, therefore, to the suggestions of friends he offered for sale his photograph, hoping that the small profit derived therefrom will contribute to his maintenance and support.”5 His plea represents exhibitionism as a form of work that allows a man who has no other means of income to earn a living. It allows spectators to conceive of staring as a charitable act. Any squeamishness they might feel about gawking can be assuaged by buying a photo.

Freak shows could provide a livelihood for people with disabilities, but they were also a source of community, a place where their differences were accepted and even affirmed. While the show was on the road, the circus or carnival was a total environment where work and life ran seamlessly into one another. When not performing, circus folk were eating, sleeping, and spending their spare time together, creating a subculture insulated from the outside world with its own vocabulary, customs, and values. Onstage, freak shows exploited the continuity between life and performance by having people with disabilities perform everyday tasks: a person with no arms and legs lighting a cigarette; conjoined twins dancing, singing, and turning cartwheels; Lobster Boy tying knots. A familiar spectacle was the wedding of two unlikely performers, such as a midget...
The American Circus started as a form of entertainment that often included people with disabilities. The freak show, which had never been a completely respectable form of entertainment, eventually turned away from the exploitation of trained animals and the incurable to exhibit themselves for paying customers to gawk at. Rather, it was believed that they should receive medical knowledge and treatment, and the incurable should be concealed from view in hospitals and institutions. In later decades, similar complaints would be leveled about the exploitation of trained animals. As a result, many of today's circuses—such as Cirque du Soleil, The Jim Rose Circus, The Bindlestiff Family Circus, Circus Smirkus, The Flying High Circus, and Circus Chamera—consist entirely of able-bodied performers, featuring no animals or people with disabilities. Although changing times sent freak shows into decline, they never disappeared entirely. Instead, they moved to the social margins, where they continued to court less prosperous and respectable clientele. By the mid-twentieth century, freak shows were no longer part of the circus, surviving instead at county fairs, traveling carnivals, and New York's Times Square and Coney Island. However, in the last twenty years live freak shows have seen something of a revival among young hipsters and bohemians, who have brought them back under the aegis of circus performance. In Freaks and Fire, J. Dee Hill claims that the contemporary circus functions along the lines of a tribe, attracting the same populations as alternative cultural gatherings like the Burning Man festival and Rainbow Family. Participants tend to be young and white, with backgrounds in dance, theater, music, and fine arts. Whereas once the families of circus folk passed their acts from one generation to the next, few participants in the contemporary sideshow are connected to earlier generations of circus performers.

Most of what passes as a freak show today is vaudeville-style performance involving musicians, artists, and people with unusual abilities such as acrobatics and contortion, fire eating, sword swallowing, pounding nails into various parts of the body, walking on glass or burning coals, and escaping. It is rare to find people with congenital disabilities in troupes such as The Jim Rose Circus, The Bindlestiff Family Circus, Circus Contraption, and Yard Dogs Road Show, where often the performers are extremely fit and able-bodied. When people with disabilities are included, there is less of a divide between the born and the made, since they are also performing. For example, Jennifer Miller is a woman with a beard who has worked with the Bindlestiffs, at Coney Island, and her own troupe, Circus Amok. Some venues showcase her beard more than others, however she is also a skilled acrobat who dances, chews light bulbs, and delivers monologues that combine comedy and social criticism.

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Fig. 17(a) (AC-15) Violet and David Hilton, upon their return from performing in England, October 6, 1953. Photograph © Bettmann/CORBIS.
Fig. 17(b) (AC-17) Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, illustrating the deformities caused by neurofibromatosis, ca. 1880. Photograph © Corbis.

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Fig. 177 [AC-108] Miss Julia Pastrana. Lithograph with text in French, English, and German. Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
almost entirely on working acts, and performers with sensational talents, skills, or bodily adornments such as piercing, dreadlocks, and tattoos.

What makes The 999 Eyes of Endless Dream stand out among contemporary freak shows is that so many of its performers are disabled, and disability is at the forefront of their acts: a dwarf chews on light bulbs and walks on crushed glass; a woman with no legs turns cartwheels and sings; the Lobster Girl ties knots with her unusual hands. Lobster Boy does magic; and all of them tell stories, both funny and sad, about living with a disability in America (fig. 17.12).

In The Last American Freak Show filmmaker Richard Butchins explores how The 999 Eyes recalls and re-investigate the traditional place of disability within the freak show. He asks what it means for a contemporary person with a disability to exhibit herself as a freak, and what he, as a person who is himself disabled, learns from his encounter with the freak show.

Performing Disability

Early in The Last American Freak Show, Butchins describes the genre as “a truly American art form.” In making this claim, he alludes to the fact that, although circuses and freak shows have a long history in Europe and other parts of the world, it was the American P. T. Barnum who first recognized their potential as a mode of commercialized mass entertainment, developing them into a form that has become known throughout the world. Given that the freak show came into its own in the United States, it makes sense that Butchins would travel there to investigate how it is faring in the new millennium. As the British Butchins observes the troupe, he participates in a long-standing European fascination with America that can be traced back to the writings of Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Dickens, and many others. During their tour, these include H. E. A. Burns, The Lobster Girl, Ken, The Elephant Man, a dwarf named Dierdre (aka Dame Demure, The Dancing Dwarf), Jackie, The Human Tripod, Erik, The Gentle Giant; and Jason Black, The Lobster Boy. On their website, the group defines a freak as “a human oddity that has chosen to share, celebrate and exploit his/her own genetic anomaly through performance.”

Here they uphold the carries’ traditional reverence for born freaks, while adding a modern recognition of genetics as the cause of some of their disabilities.

The 999 Eyes drive from Oregon to Texas, stopping to perform in small cities and towns along the west coast and southwestern U.S. As he films the troupe, Butchins also documents the American landscape. Like his characters, his establishing shots also tend to capture places that are unsightly and marginal: highways, roadsides, parking lots and rest stops, motels, diners, dumpsters, and bars.

Promoting itself as “the last genuine traveling freak show in the United States,” The 999 Eyes claims to be bringing the freak show back from the past, re-packaged for the twenty-first century. Much as it recalls its precursors, this freak show is also decidedly modern (fig. 17.13). When we first meet them, many of the performers travel in a 1988 International Bluebird school bus owned by Laurent Martin, aka Lowrent the clown. The motor has been converted to run on used vegetable oil scavenged from the back of restaurants and anywhere else it can be found. Butchins uses infrared lights to film several late-night scenes in which the performers—still dressed from the evening’s show—search dumpsters for fuel. In his blog, he describes oil as an abundant national resource “which in the USA is everywhere because they fry everything they eat.”

Whereas Barnum was the first to transport his circus by train, The 999 Eyes are pioneers in the technology of envoiofuel. Taking advantage of others’ waste, the converted bus also provides a modern twist on the classic circus caravan, reflecting a contemporary awareness about the environmental impact of burning fossil fuel. In terms of personal style, the freaks are modern as well, adorned with dreadlocks, multicolored hair, piercings, tattoos, and heavy makeup. While technology is not a significant aspect of their performances, where a low-budget homemade aesthetic prevails, it is central to life offstage, where the troupe members communicate by email, quarrel over cell phone minutes, fly in by plane, shop at the mall, and watch CNN in their motel rooms.

While The 999 Eyes enjoy the conveniences of the modern world, the troupe also calls itself “the last” of its kind, a phrase that gestures backward to a waning tradition. It may be closer to its nineteenth-century forerunners than any other contemporary sideshow in that it privileges the “born freak” over all other performers. Indeed, its claim to distinction is that it includes more born freaks than its competitors.

During the 2006 tour, these include H. E. A. Burns, The Lobster Girl, Ken, The Elephant Man, a dwarf named Dierdre (aka Damer Demure, The Dancing Dwarf), Jackie, The Human Tripod, Erik, The Gentle Giant; and Jason Black, The Lobster Boy. On their website, the group defines a freak as “a human oddity that has chosen to share, celebrate and exploit his/her own genetic anomaly through performance.” Here they uphold the carries’ traditional reverence for born freaks, while adding a modern recognition of genetics as the cause of some of their disabilities.
The performers’ online biographies are filled with exaggeration and pure humbug, knowingly evoking the rhetorical tradition of sideshow pamphlets. For example, it presents the story of Ken (aka Pegleg) as “an inspirational triumph over adversity”:

Born in 1895, inflicted with the genetic disorder NF to the point of having one leg removed, Pegleg traveled the freakshow circuit. He stayed on until 1935 when scientists, whose goal it was to kill the freakshow for social control, stole him from the midway to experiment on and study him to prove that his condition was that of a sick human and not of a Fabulous Freak, and medicalized understandings of disability (a sick human). Show people have long been disdainful of the scientists’ cultural prestige at the same time that they sought to appropriate it by seeking experts who could validate the freak’s authenticity, and by calling themselves doctors, professors, and scientists. The 999 Eyes website expresses a similar ambivalence toward medical professionals in that it denigrates the treatment of people with disabilities as specimens to be studied and classified while at the same time giving Ken’s condition a medical name and providing a link to the Wikipedia article on neurofibromatosis.

As was true of previous generations, the performers in The Last American Freak Show see The 999 Eyes as a source of community and affirmative self-expression. Butchins explains that the freak show gives them the means to come “out of the institution and the welfare office,” where people with disabilities have been relegated for generations. In the wake of the Americans with Disabilities Act, opportunities for inclusion in schools and the work-force have increased. But it is still true that most people with disabilities are poor and have difficulty finding employment. They continue to face social prejudice, challenges of transportation and access, and discrimination in hiring.

The performers in Butchins’s film resist becoming part of the disability underclass by seizing control of their own representation. A disabled body is a hypervisible body, one that cannot escape being laden with an excess of meaning. In his classic study of stigma, Erving Goffman described how the stigmatized person must constantly manage his or her identity to avoid causing discomfort to others. The performers in 999 Eyes are all too familiar with the burden of other people’s pity, condescension, and disgust. They see the freak show as an opportunity to showcase their talents rather than their limitations, rescripting the identities available for people with disabilities.

Much as The Last American Freak Show emphasizes The 999 Eyes’ confrontational and explicit presentation of disability, it also makes considerable effort to show that freaks are just like everyone else. In this, it recalls Tod Browning’s 1932 film Freaks, which featured some of the best-known congenitally disabled circus performers of its time. Many of the scenes in the first half of Freaks show the disabled actors engaged in ordinary activities like doing housework, socializing, rolling a cigarette, or getting dressed. These scenes aimed to normalize the characters by demonstrating that in spite of their unusual bodies, they are much like everybody else. The problem with Freaks was that as the story developed it turned into a horror film, trafficking in more clichéd associations between disability and malfeasance. Like Browning, Butchins expends a certain amount of footage to show his disabled characters engaged in everyday life tasks that normalize their disabilities. All the while, they talk about their feelings, showing their very human capacities for loneliness, pain, friendship, and humor. We see them lounging on a motel bed watching CNN, quarelling over who has to clean up, shopping at the mall, and nursing hangovers. Butchins interviews HEA Lobster Girl in a kitchen where she is cleaning up and preparing a drink. We watch Ken washing dishes and getting lost on the highway. Dierdre takes out the garbage, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. At the same time, the film constantly reminds us of the
freaks’ differences from ordinary people, pointing out the ways they are denied opportunities for full social integration.

While nobody is getting rich, the members of The 999 Eyes have chosen bohemian scarcity as an alternative to the poverty and social marginality endured by many people with deforming disabilities. When asked if she is worried about being exploited, Jackie, who is a musician and songwriter, claims that all forms of entertainment involve some degree of exploitation. “I love performing,” she remarks decisively, explaining that because of her disability, “there is no other arena for me to do what I want to do.” Deirdre is more ambivalent about her persona, the Dancing Dwarf. Her act includes dancing, walking on glass, eating light bulbs, and making references from ordinary people, pointing out the ways they are denied opportunities for full social integration.

The American Circus
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That the freaks willingly flirt with self-exploitation is evident in an episode where they perform as extras in a self-financed horror film by Andrew Getty, grandson of billionaire John Paul Getty. The troupe takes a break from the tour to work with Getty, who explains that he has hired them to add an aura of menacing strangeness to the mis-en-scène. “I’m trying to show this town full of strangers,” he tells them. “I was thinking the only way to do that is to make them physically abnormal. . . . That’s the only way an audience will get it.” Butchins, who frequently uses voiceover to reflect on the meaning of the events he’s filmed, has little to say during this scene. Perhaps he believes that it would be more powerful if Getty’s ridiculous comments simply spoke for themselves. The film rarely ventures beyond the intimate circle that the spectators acknowledge their disgust, but also their desire to look. Jackie sings about being half a woman. Erik the giant claims that during tangles with the law he has avoided arrest because of his great height.

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impairment than a social problem, having to do with an unaccommodating and prejudicial environment. On the one hand, in saying “we are all freaks,” he asks his audience to think about the extent to which normalcy depends on context. But on the other, his suggestion that they “spend a week in a wheelchair” suggests the difficulties of grasping the realities of life with a disability. This is a reminder that people with disabilities are not the same as freaks, that “freak” is not an unshakeable essence but an identity adopted for the purpose of performance. The 999 Eyes invite spectators to explore their own freakishness without allowing them to forget that people with disabilities face exceptional challenges.

As he gains understanding about the troupe, Butchins also acquires insight about his own disability. “Making this film put me in touch with my disability in a way I hadn’t been before,” he said in one film review. “I felt looked-at, whereas I’d always been mended. The group, but he seems to have nowhere else to go. When Butchins returns to the U.S., he discovers that his audience to think about the extent to which normalcy depends on context. But on the other, his suggestion that they “spend a week in a wheelchair” suggests the difficulties of grasping the realities of life with a disability. This is a reminder that people with disabilities are not the same as freaks, that “freak” is not an unshakeable essence but an identity adopted for the purpose of performance. The 999 Eyes invite spectators to explore their own freakishness without allowing them to forget that people with disabilities face exceptional challenges.

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Butchins argues that the freaks’ achievement is admirable, even if—or perhaps because—it sometimes makes us squirm. The fact that the viewer feels uncomfortable should not be a reason to reject the film, but rather to further probe her own attitudes toward disability.

The Last American Freak Show raises timely questions about disability, popular culture, and history in contemporary America. Most of these performers came of age after the ADA, which guaranteed the civil rights of people with disabilities. The decades since its passage have seen significant advancement toward accommodation in schools, the workplace, public space and transportation. However, the freaks’ stories point to a lingering social intolerance. As children, all of them endured the cruelty of their peers. All continue to face prejudice and lack of access to the full opportunities for work and pleasure enjoyed by their non-disabled counterparts. They perform in a freak show because they believe there is no other venue to showcase their talents. They are fully aware that freak shows of the past often exploited people with disabilities. But they have appropriated the form for the present, turning it into a medium for edgy, alternative self-expression. Performing as freaks gives them an opportunity to talk about their experiences and to show off what they can do, emphasizing ability and accomplishment rather than limitation. In these shows the freaks confront, and then explicitly reject, able-bodied assumptions about how people with disabilities should behave, with the goal of forcing spectators to interrogate their own preconceptions (fig. 17.16). They do so while surrounded by a tolerant and accepting community. The tour and the group home enable the same kind of continuity between life and work that has always been an aspect of circus culture. It is not simply about doing your act and going home, but a kind of total environment in which life and art are mutually reinforcing.

To put all of this on film is to give it a somewhat different meaning. To approve of what the freaks are doing onstage is not necessarily to like watching them in The Last American Freak Show. Unlike a freak show, film enables the viewer to appease her desire to stare without concern that her gaze will be returned. There is an element of voyeurism about The Last American Freak Show. Its intimate documentary style allows viewers to look without consequences and in some cases—like the revelation of Ken’s stump or Jason’s tears—to show things that the performers, no matter how confessional, would never reveal onstage. The story is constructed to create a parallel between Butchins’s growing appreciation of the freaks’ project, and deepening insight about his own disability. He repeats this message several times over the course of the narrative, without ever speaking openly about the nature of his disability or showing it on film. It is true that within his own logic, there should be a place for privacy as well as disclosure of one’s disabilities. But it allows for an uncomfortable dynamic in which the filmmaker remains invisible as a disabled person while his subjects are exposed.

In prompting reflection on the disparity between film and live performance, The Last American Freak Show further underscores the significance of The 999 Eyes’ project. Part of what makes freak shows work is the fact that they are live, relying on a direct confrontation between spectator and performer. The thrill of the freak show is in its promise of a close and unmediated encounter with otherness. Live performance also gives the freak the possibility of agency. However much she is objectified, the freak maintains her capacity to look back, challenging the audience to recognize her humanity and to be mindful of the impulse behind the urge to stare. These conditions cannot be replicated in electronically reproduced forms of media. It is easy to congratulate ourselves on the fact that we no longer tolerate the exploitation of people and animals that once was a routine aspect of circuses past. However, many of the spectacles that were once found at the circus can now be seen on television and the internet, where we can watch them over and over again, from multiple angles and in close-up, with no obligation to acknowledge the fact that we are staring. Without leaving home, we can see a person too fat to get out of bed, a family of little people, a plastic surgery gone horribly wrong, unchecked by anxiety that our gaze may be returned. Like other alternative circuses, The 999 Eyes restores the sideshow tradition of live performance and the elements of reciprocity, spontaneity, and unpredictability it entailed. However, it is unique in putting disability at the center of its performances. In challenging the audience to confront their own prejudices, it turns the encounter between freak and normal into something quite different than it was for earlier generations. This is a freak show that asks spectators to think about why they are looking. Here they are invited to confront the contradictions between a culture that claims to accept and include people with disabilities, while it continues to treat the disabled body as pathological, loathsome, and sensational. Living with bodies that cannot escape notice, the participants in The 999 Eyes expose themselves, attempting to seize control over how they will be viewed by others. When we flinch at what they’re doing, we must ask ourselves whether our dismay might be better directed at a society where integration of people with disabilities is still far more an ideal than a reality (fig. 17.17).


8 Ibid, 206–73.


13 Alive on the Inside features interviews with Jeanie and Percilla, both widowed, who talk at length about married life.