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THE AMERICAN CIRCUS



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17 DISABILITY AND THE CIRCUS

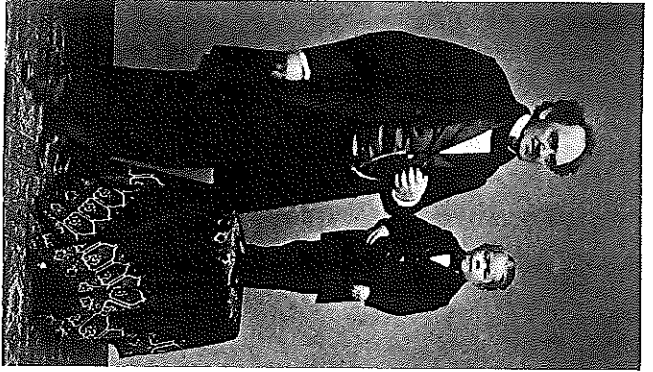
RACHEL ADAMS

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 punts 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's 2006, and the performers in *The 999 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 1986 road novel *Geek Love*, the performers in *The 999 Eyes* make a living by exhibiting themselves—flaunting their differences rather than attempting to hide or normalize them. But this isn't

Detail of fig. 17.1. Edward J. Kelly. *Congress of Freaks at Flamingo Show*, and Benjamin B. Bailey. *Combined Circus*, 1924. Photograph. The Collection of the John and Madeleine Steingard Museum of Art. Photo: Collection, h0004824.



(Fig. 176). 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.⁹ The life of Julia Pastrana, "The Bearded and Hairy Lady," was also allied with hardship and betrayal (Fig. 177). 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 murdered, Pastrana's husband continued to exhibit them in a glass case.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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 offers for sale his photograph, hoping that the small profit derived therefrom will contribute to his maintenance and support."¹² 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 starting 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 midge and a giant or a fat lady and a human skeleton, who then could be advertised as "The World's Strangest

Couple."¹³ Many of these weddings were simple publicity stunts, however, some disabled performers—such as Jeanie The Half-Girl and the giant Al Tomah and Percella The Monkey Girl and Emmitt Bejano, The Alligator-Stained Man—also found enduring love backstage at the sideshow, where unusual bodies were the norm (Figs. 178, 179).¹⁴ Both of these couples met while touring with the freak show, eventually retiring and remaining together to the end of their lives. Those who did not find romance often appreciated the friendship and camaraderie of circus life. Beginning in the 1890s, many circus performers spent their winters in Gibsonton, Florida (aka Showtown USA), where the fire chief was a giant, the sheriff a dwarf, and unique zoning laws allowed them to keep elephants and carnival rides on their front lawns.¹⁵

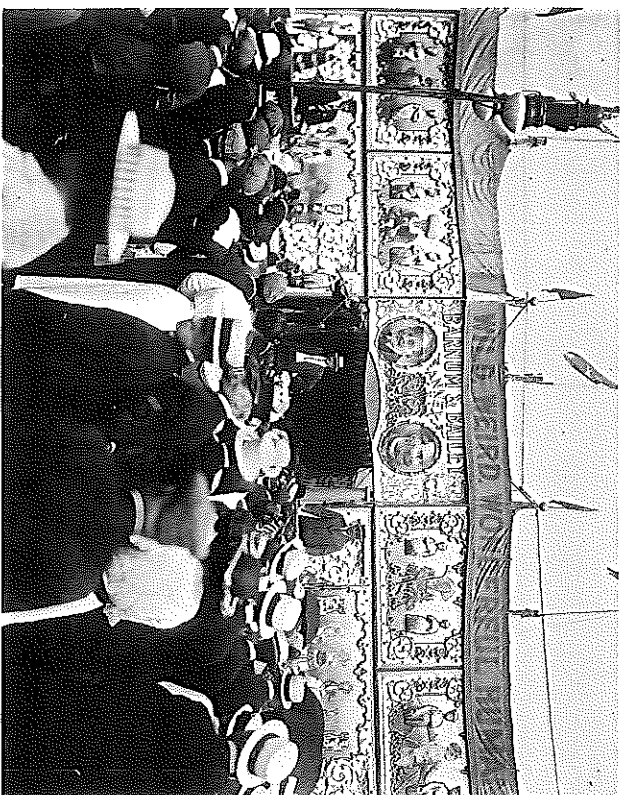


Fig. 173. P. T. Barnum and General Tom Thumb (Charles S. Schmitz), ca. 1860. Photograph © Barnum/Cornell.

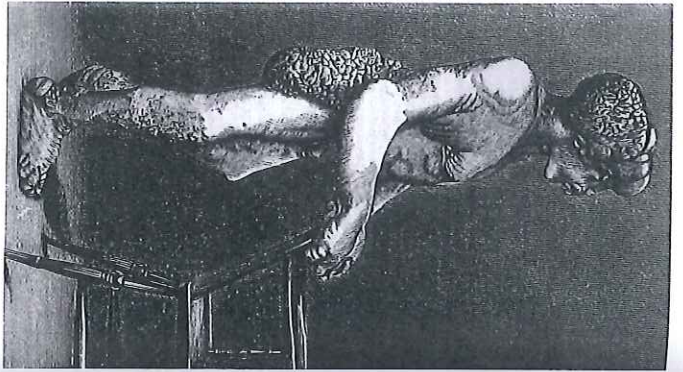
Fig. 174. Frederick Wilhelm Glaser, Sideshow, Warner and Annexe, 21a, the Palace (William Henry Johnson), playing violin at evening, 1906. Photographs, The Collection of the John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art, Glaser Glass Print Reproductive Collection, 0033.

With the rise of scientific understandings of disability, freak shows became less socially acceptable. Advances in medical knowledge and treatment made it possible to cure some conditions that once would have led to disabilities. Doctors began to provide scientific reasons for disabling conditions, framing them as pathology rather than sources of wonder. Increasingly public sentiment turned away from the freak show, which had never been a completely respectable form of entertainment in the first place. It was no longer tolerable for people with disabilities to exhibit themselves for paying customers to gawk at. Rather, it was believed that they should receive 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.⁶ As a result, many of today's circuses—such as Cirque du Soleil, the Jim Rose Circus, the Blindstiff Family Circus, Circus Smirkus, The Flying High Circus, and Circus Chimera—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.⁷ 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



Fig. 1725. Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, illustrating the deformities caused by neurofibromatosis, 1886. Engraving from *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1334, 1188. © Corbis



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.⁸ 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 vaunderville-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 escapes. It is rare to find people with congenital disabilities in troupes such as The Jim Rose Circus, The Blindstiff Family Circus, Circus Contraption, and Yard Dogs Road Show, where often the performers are extremely fit and able-bodied (fig. 1710). 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 Blindstiffs, at Coney Island, and her own troupe, Circus Amok. Some venues showcase her heard more than others, however she is also a skilled acrobat who dances, chews light bulbs, and delivers monologues that combine comedy and social criticism (fig. 1711). Tony Torres was a dwarf who exhibited himself at Coney Island's Sideshows by the Seashore. But he did so in the guise of Koko the Killer Clown, an act that involved wearing heavy makeup, dancing, cracking jokes, and making balloon animals. Born freaks are thus no longer the sideshow's elite, nor are they considered necessary to its success since the contemporary circus relies almost entirely on working acts, and performers with sensational talents, skills, or bodily adornments such as piercings, 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 tees 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. 1712). In *The Last American Freak Show*, filmmaker Richard Butchins explores how *The 999 Eyes* recalls and re-scribes 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 his-

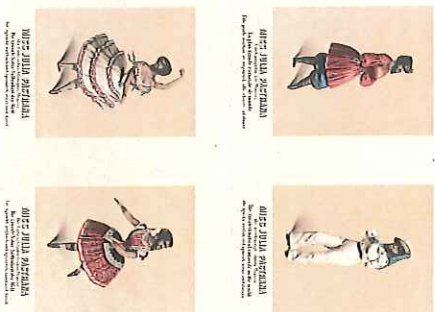
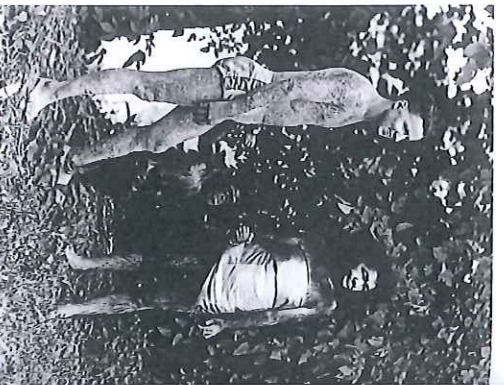


Fig. 1727. Mrs. Julia Berthia, lithograph with text in French, English, and German, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University



tory 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 here 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, 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, repackaged for the twenty-first century. Much as it recalls its precursors, this freak show is also decidedly modern (Fig. 1723). When we first meet them, many of the performers travel in a 1988 International Bluebird school bus owned by Laurent Martin, aka Laurent 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 U.S.A. is everywhere because they fry everything they eat.”²⁸ Whereas Barnum was the first to transport his circus by train, The 999 Eyes are pioneers in the technology of enviofuel. Taking advantage of others’ waste, the converted bus also provides a modern twist on the classic circus caravan, reflect-

ing 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 enjoys 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, aka The Lobster Girl; Ken, The Elephant Man, a dwarf named Dierdre (aka Dame Denure, 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.”²⁹ Here they uphold the carnies’ 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 hubbub, knowingly evoking the rhetorical tradition of sideshow pamphlets. For example, it presents the story of Ken (aka the Elephant Man or Pegleg) as “an inspirational triumph over adversity”:

Born in 1895, afflicted 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... because funding for the project was cut they decided to freeze him until more funds could be obtained. The funding never came and Poor Pegleg was forgotten.

Until one day a kindly showman snuck into the basement of a medical anomalies laboratory. Her initial goal was to obtain a two-headed baby for her show, but it was there that she then discovered the man frozen. After defrosting Pegleg she set out to help him in his mission of revenge on the scientists who are still trying to destroy the freakshow Museum of Mutantstrosities by institutionalizing, exploiting and abusing freaks for medical answers and experimentation.³⁰



Fig. 1725. Benjoni “Tommy” Smith and Al Tremont, ca. 1950–55. Photograph, Circus World Museum, CWF-2298.

Fig. 1726. Benjoni Bagman and Powell Romm, ca. 1940s. Photograph, Circus World Museum, CWF-2287.

Fig. 1726. Roy Volkman, Bluebird of Circus Magic: The Troupe, 2007. Photograph, @BluebirdFamilyCircus.

acting the part of sinister strangers. But even without comment, it is hard to believe they do not enjoy profiting from Getty's foolishness. As in *The 999 Eyes* performances, these self-styled freaks are unconcerned with promoting the respectable, uplifting images of people with disabilities favored by the able-bodied. They are quite willing to entertain stereotypes as long as they feel that they have something to gain from the situation.

In deciding to film this troupe, Butchins was aware that he would need to confront his own assumptions about how people with disabilities can best negotiate the cultural meanings of stigma. He represents *The Last American Freak Show* as a journey from skepticism to insight. His initial impressions of the troupe are not entirely positive. Their performances seem chaotic and amateurish, and he worries that the show is little more than self-exploitation. As time goes on, he comes to appreciate what the troupe is accomplishing, finding an inspiring sense of purpose beneath their raucous and lighthearted performances that resonates with his own understanding as a person with a disability.

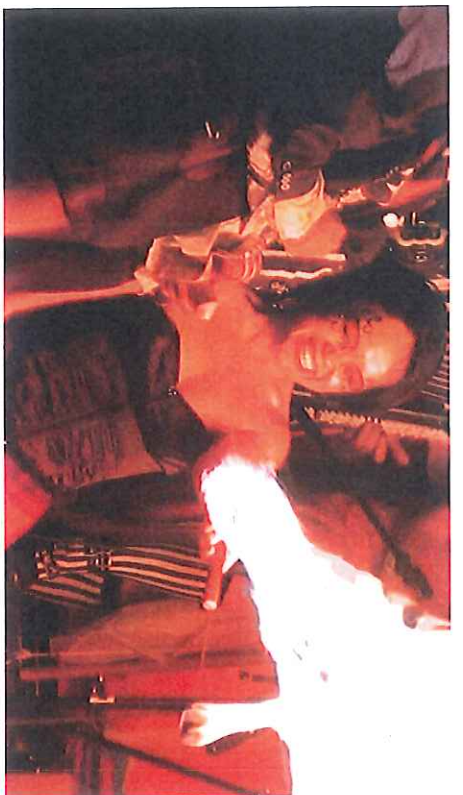
At every turn, *The 999 Eyes* reject polite, socially acceptable approaches to their differences. Butchins comes to understand their show as a refusal of able-bodied ideas about how the disabled should behave. Against critics who charge that *The 999 Eyes*, and his film, present negative stereotypes of disability, he affirms their commitment to self-expression, however crude and confrontational. "Go figure," he writes sarcastically on his blog.

A bunch of freaks decide to celebrate diversity in a way of their own choosing, why that will never do. It would seem that they are only allowed to act in ways deemed appropriate by the able bodied, surprisingly, I and the members of the freak show would seek to disagree. It's largely the only time that some members of the troupe get any kind of positive reaction from people. . . . It's not the disability that stops them functioning successfully in society but the barriers and prejudices that society places in front of them that causes the problems. Don't blame the freaks for being freaks, look at yourselves and realise we are all freaks. Perhaps this freak show and my film about them, will give people an opportunity to examine their attitudes to the disabled. That would be good. So, why don't you go and spend a week in a wheelchair, see how it feels.²⁴

Butchins's anger is palpable as he decries efforts by the able-bodied to set the terms for how people with disabilities should comport themselves. He presents disability less as a problem of bodily 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



Fig. 17.23. Cast members from *The Last American Freak Show*, top: Bitch the Gentle Giant; H. E. A. Burma, aka The Lobster Girl; Jason the Lobster Boy; Ken the Elephant Man; bottom: Dorethe the Dancing Dwarf; Indie the Half Girl. Still from *The Last American Freak Show*, 2008.



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 unshakable 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 taken great pains to hide my disability."²⁵ Butchins claims that seeing how this unusual group of people treat their disabilities made him more comfortable about identifying himself as disabled. And, in confronting the resistance of the cinematic establishment to screening his film, he became more outspoken about the right of people with disabilities to represent themselves, even when those representa-

tions conflict with able-bodied assumptions about how disability should be seen.

Although he concludes his film on a positive note, Butchins does not shy away from depicting the suffering endured by the disabled members of *The 999 Eyes*. Some of their discomfort comes from the predictable challenges of life on the road. They often travel in uncomfortable, squalid conditions. The bus is dirty and decrepit. After it breaks down, they exchange it for an RV that is even dirtier. They spend the nights camping in tents, sleeping on borrowed floors or in cheap motel rooms. They take drugs, drink too much, and don't get enough sleep. But Butchins also emphasizes that the disabled performers' experiences differ from those of their able-bodied compatriots. Most of them confess to having been haunted as children. Erik says that, as a child, people "thought I was retarded" because his height made him look twice his age. H. E. A. The Lobster Girl admits that she was ashamed of her disability, particularly during high school. In one scene, Jason speaks candidly with Butchins. His surroundings are depressing: a room with paint peeling from the walls, dirt in the corners, cluttered with cheap bric-a-brac.

Fig. 17.24. Dorethe the Dancing Dwarf. Still from *The Last American Freak Show*, 2008.

He explains that before joining the freak show, he had avoided people with disabilities. He would try to hide by putting his hands in his pockets. Then he bursts into tears. When Butchins asks Jason why he is crying, he responds: "I just really love my life. And I love my dog, pathetic as that sounds. When you're alone, she's been my best friend." Watching this scene, one can't help but feel that these are not just tears of happiness. Becoming a part of this troupe has clearly caused Jason to think more deeply about the consequences of his disability and, perhaps, about the inadequacy of the social support he has waiting for him at home.

The most disturbing figure is Ken, who is the oldest member of the troupe and the one whose disability most evidently causes persistent suffering. One of his legs has been amputated, he has a speech impediment, and tumors cover his body. Billing himself as Peg Leg or The Elephant Man, Ken exposes himself from the waist up, while explaining what it is like to live in a body that evokes fear and loathing in other people (fig. 1715). When he removes his prosthetic, the camera repeatedly zooms in on a stump that is reddened, scarred, and covered in tumors. If his performance is designed to give people a chance to stare at his body in a way that would otherwise be impolite, the camera takes this voyeurism one step further, allowing the film viewer an even more intimate and unsparing look at his disability. At one point, Ken's stump becomes inflamed, a recurring problem Laurent attributes to a crude amputation that left it vulnerable to infection. In another scene, the camera follows Ken into a mall where shoppers and clerks stare at him in open disgust, one man visibly finishing and turning away. As the tour nears its end, the film focuses on the bickering and dissension that breaks out among the performers. One night, Butchins finds Ken limping alone through darkened streets, looking

for the performance venue, after having been left behind by the rest of the group. In the next scene, he argues with Sam, who has borrowed his cell phone. She shouts that she is fed up, and throws it at him. Afterward, Ken tells Butchins that he often considers leaving the group, but he seems to have nowhere else to go. By devoting a significant amount of screen time to Ken, the film thus complicates its more affirmative message about the empowering self-expression enabled by the freak show. For Ken in particular, that opportunity comes at a cost, forcing him to endure the animosity of fellow performers and to further expose his body to the stares of other people.

The Last American Freak Show ends six months after the troupe arrives in Austin, Texas. When Butchins returns to the U.S., he discovers that strained friendships and hurt feelings seem to have been mended. The group is preparing for a new round of performances. Many of them live together in a big house, presided over by one of their two managers, the strong and temperamental Samantha X. As he reflects back on his experience, Butchins claims that his initial doubts about *The 999 Eyes* have given way to appreciation. "These performers are trying to bring an awareness of their 'normality' to people [sic] attention through entertainment (it is, after all a show"), and that's a valid and worthwhile, if sometimes challenging thing to watch," he writes on his blog. "They deserve support not denigration for what they are doing. This film documents this and as a result is funny, entertaining and sometimes difficult, it makes you feel uncomfortable on occasion and encourages you to examine your preconceptions about disability and that's the point."²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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 limita-

tion. 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. 1716). 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

Fig. 1715 Ken, The Elephant Man, Still from *The Last American Freak Show*, 2008





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.

Fig. 17.16 H. R. A. The Lobster Girl. Still from *The Last American Freak Show*, 2008

Fig. 17.17 Still from *The Last American Freak Show*, 2008

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 disapproval 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).

- 1 While Butchins employs this aspect of the performer lives in the film, see Jack Ruby Murray, "999 Eyes," for an account of the challenges of traveling with a troupe of people with disabilities, in *Bizarre USA*, Aug. 2006, <http://www.bizarreusa.com/world-news/bizarre-usa/9999-eyes.html> (accessed July 14, 2010).
- 2 James Macintyre, "A Very Nice Handback over withdrawal of disability film," *The Independent*, Feb. 8, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/anti-film-handback-over-withdrawal-of-disability-film-779884.html> (accessed July 20, 2010).
- 3 John Collins, *The American Circus: An Illustrated History* (New York: F&T, 1990).
- 4 Benjamin Sachs, *The Showmen and the State: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 5 Daniel Adams, *A Paradise Showman: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); P. T. Sherman, *Struggles and Triumphs, or Twenty Years' Recollections of P. T. Sherman* (New York: Putnam, 1881); A. H. Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).
- 6 Quoted in Daniel Adams, *Showman USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 11.
- 7 Robert Bogdan, *Freak Shows: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 200–203.
- 8 Ibid., 166–73.
- 9 Ashley Moulton, *Biggest Mean: A Study in Human Dignity* (New York: Outchidge and Dunsire, 1971); Peter W. Gendron and Fritz H. Oshkubler, *Articulating the Elephant Man: Joseph Merrick and His Interpreters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- 10 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 70–77.
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