

## ◆ **Afterword**

### **Powers of the Freak**

*David Castillo and William Egginton*

In May 2017, Jonathan Lee Iverson, ringmaster of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, put on his gaudy red top hat and walked into the center ring for the very last time. “Ironically enough, I will be the very last voice in the 146-year history of this show, so I will be the last person you hear to speak of ‘The Greatest Show on Earth’—which is a wild little paradox, to be a first and a last at the same time. I don’t know too many people who can say that, in any industry,” Iverson told NPR (Deahl). While this prototype of modern circuses earned its moniker by self-nomination, in much the way Baltimore’s city benches trumpet it as The Greatest City in America, there can be little doubt about its singularity as an institution and the historic nature of its closing after a century and a half. The Ringling Bros. circus stood at a kind of cultural and historical crossroads between high industrial modernity and postindustrial postmodernity; the very same sites of excessive exposure and celebration that made it succeed in the former became blights in the latter.

Just look, by way of comparison, at the institutions that have flourished as the circus slowly turned into the loud, decrepit uncle who drinks too much at Thanksgiving dinner every year and starts blurting out political slogans from the Paleolithic period. While Ringling Bros. faded into irrelevance in the face of incessant charges of animal cruelty, Quebec’s Cirque du Soleil soared to spectacular new heights in every sense, from the abilities of its performers to the scale of its choreography to its price of admission. Against this sleek foreign import, the three-ring circus of yore seemed to appeal to a certain kind of America, the America that was slowly being left behind; the America that was the nostalgic reference of Sarah Palin’s invocations of the “real” America; the America that in 2016 voted in its forty-fifth president.

Cirque du Soleil is entertainment for the cosmopolitan elite, its perfectly coordinated, colorfully themed shows flowing from one spectacular act to the next, showcasing almost impossibly toned talents and physiques. While

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Ringling Bros. also featured enormously talented individual performers, its essence was something else, something from a different age: the freak. At the center of the Ringling Bros. experience were the carnival sideshow stars, the wild animals, those who could exhibit and do things with their bodies that would elicit cries of astonishment from the real America, the average, the *normal* America. It is not a coincidence that the very age that has seen the greatest ever increases in social acceptance of the differently bodied would simultaneously question the institution whose survival depended most on framing those bodies and hence on maintaining the unquestionability of the normal, the unframed. The almost surprising new ubiquity of same-sex marriage, the rise of disability studies, and the emergent focus on transgender rights all dovetail with this sea change—as do the rush to legislate bathroom use, the ascent of internet-enabled alt-right communities, and the success of a campaign claiming to make American great again.

It is into this strange brew that the present impressive collection steps. As the editors point out, the collection itself is marked by a fascinating paradox. It is a volume devoted to a concept that doesn't exist in the very cultural and linguistic contexts of the contributors' collected expertise. For the sake of this afterword it is hence perhaps worth recalling, somewhat at length, the purpose sketched out in the opening pages above:

So, why are we interested in using the word *freak*, an untranslatable term with huge shock value for the reader? Our main aim is to expand the notions of the marginal beyond the established categories of otherness, thereby extending the umbrella of alterity to include other types of marginal subjectivities. We aim to examine the profusion of instances of the freak in the Hispanic world in all its connotations and manifestations: the grotesque, the deformed, the disabled, the visually/morally/socially excluded, the prostitute, the terrorist, the antihero, and the homosexual, among other types. We are interested in expanding this term to also include physiologically “normal” bodies that are dissident from normativity in other ways. In sum, our freak is everything that lies outside the “norm”—and therefore might be perceived as deviant—according to the official and legitimized discourse in a particular historical moment and in a specific cultural, social, and geopolitical context. (8)

The freak, in other words, provides a critical heuristic, a lens somewhat like the glasses in John Carpenter's *They Live* that reveal aliens around us that are framed out of existence by our accustomed and acculturated gaze. What the English term allows us to do in the Hispanic context is bring to the surface a set of structuring relationships that were always there but now can be isolated in a new and potentially galvanizing conceptual setting. As one of us can recall, it was only upon learning English that he realized there was a unifying term for the family of fruits he couldn't or wouldn't eat: berries. The berry category, like the word *freak*, doesn't exist in Spanish, but that doesn't stop it from putting a name to a real issue.

Thus, as the editors announce, the pieces gathered together here use the term in reference to "not just the physical oddity but also the morally and socially deviant . . . 'criminals, the poor, and people with disabilities.'" The freak becomes a new frame for combining and probing for commonalities in how these marginal subjectivities were generated and classified in the Hispanic world. The payoff of this approach is immediately evident. It allows the volume to put side by side the case of a historical freak, the nineteenth-century Mexican Julia Pastrana, who was shown around the States and Europe as a monstrous cross between a woman and a gorilla, and the twentieth-century performance artist La Congelada de Uva. As Roger Bartra documents in his scathing history of the abuses suffered by Pastrana, the multiple conditions that placed her outside the norms of femininity cross-fertilized with her indigenous ethnicity and Mexico's own hybrid status to situate her as a symptom of an emergent regime of modern, Western normality that was undergirded by an unarticulated framework of marginalizations and oppressions. In Josefina Alcázar's treatment of La Congelada, Julia Pastrana's imposed marginalization is implicitly superimposed on the performance artist's explicit, in all senses of the word, cooptation of *machista* culture's stratification of women's bodies. La Congelada revels in revealing and reversing precisely those parts of female anatomy and ways of inhabiting female sexuality that are framed by the dominant culture in support of male dominance.

The voyeuristic gaze that objectifies female bodies is similarly targeted in Carlos Jáuregui and Paola Uparela Reyes's examination of "gineco-scopic monsters," including Candice Lin's "vagina eye," exhibited as part of "Cannibalia" (Paris, February 2015), which performs a literal reversal of the dominant scopic regime. Lin's freak sculpture serves here as a springboard for a wider discussion of anthropophagy and the libidinal economy of colonialism. The contribution authored by Arturo Arias helps provide a historical context for this wide-ranging discussion. His examination of sixteenth-century chronicles underscores the Eurocentric construction of the New World as monstrous nature inhabited by freakish bodies. Arias sees these racialized descriptions of

indigenous peoples as part of a Eurocentric tradition of discursive practices that naturalize and reinforce negative images of Latin America. His critical treatment of the colonial gaze finds continuity in Antonio Córdoba's interpretation of the work of Roberto Bolaño, particularly in his reading of the link between disability, freakishness, and racial otherness in *La Estrella distante* and *El Tercer Reich*.

Other contributors, including Julia Chang and Ricardo de la Fuente, focus their critical attention on the blurring of gender and sexual difference in monstrous bodies that defy normativity. Chang focuses on literary representations of masculine women. She pays special attention to the characterization of Mauricia la Dura in *Fortunata y Jacinta*. For his part, De la Fuente examines images of feminized men, including potential lines of continuity between the dandy and the freak, both of whom are defined by multidimensional excess and eccentricity.

Each of these essays is startlingly revealing on its own; as part of the same conversation, they rise to a new level. Just as today's opening toward the suffering and identities of transgendered people coincides with efforts to reinforce their marginalization and exclusion, visibility and the discourse of monstrosity have a dialectical relationship. This was in many ways the import of Michel Foucault's work in *The History of Sexuality*, and it is also at the heart of Noël Valis's contribution to this collection, in which she places a detailed analysis of the novels of Álvaro Retana in the context of the history of transgender and queer bodies in the European and specifically Spanish imagination.

This focus on history is pushed even further by Luis Avilés, who notes that the earliest appearances of the term *freak* in the English language are psychological in character, a discovery that permits him to turn to the pages of Cervantes as a guide to the freakish in early modern Spanish letters. What Avilés notes there is strangely congruent with Valis's exposition of the dialectical valences of eccentric sexualities: Cervantes's treatment of the psychologically freakish in such influential characters as Tomás Rodaja and Don Quixote also highlights the dialectical interplay of insanity and insight. It is precisely their marginalization and eccentricity that permits these characters to interact with their social environments in a way that reveals hidden aspects of the conventions that permit and prescribe normality in the first place. This is the special power of the freak *avant la lettre*.

As part of the Cervantine collection of *Exemplary Novels*, "El licenciado vidriera" may offer one of the best literary examples of the revealing power of the freak. Here, discerning readers are invited to examine the common prejudices of Cervantes's time, and by extension those of their own, through the lens of the madman—literally through the glass body of Vidriera. As one

of us has argued in a different context (Castillo, “Clarividencia tangencial”), this Cervantine freak show exposes the crowd’s libidinal investment in the stigmatizing spectacle while revealing the distant hand of Vidriera’s courtly sponsor—an authorial presence in its own right, at least according to the theatrical terminology of the time (*autor*).

As long as we are on the historical track, we may also recall that Cervantes’s time, and the early modern period in general, has rightfully been called “an age of monsters” (Elena del Río Parra). Human monsters and other deviations from the natural norm were feared and often condemned in the political circles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The defiance of the law that’s embodied in the monster could even rise to the level of *lèse-majesté*. Yet monsters were also celebrated in the booming early modern culture of curiosities. They were, after all, living proof of the creative powers of Mother Nature, the delightful fruits of her playful imagination (see Castillo, *Baroque Horrors*). Thus, at least since the dawn of modernity, monsters and curiosities have been at the center of political, cultural, and moral debates involving natural and human norms as well as aesthetic value. It is not accidental that the seeming excesses of baroque aesthetics are often described as monstrous. Early modern monsters and curiosity collections and exhibits stand at the meeting place between apprehension and fascination and between attraction and revulsion, not unlike the freak shows of the nineteenth century or even those of our own time. We need only recall Gunter von Hagens’s traveling exhibits of plastinated cadavers known as Body Worlds, which are thinly veiled as scientific exhibitions. We are also thinking of Damien Hirst’s award-winning artistic displays of dissected animals preserved in formaldehyde.

Human bodies that deviated from the natural norm (human monsters) were “read” as divine messages and signs of things to come, often impending catastrophes, in the early modern period, yet they could also be exhibited as freaks or human curiosities. The present volume includes several essays that examine representations of the disabled and the freak in today’s mass spectacles, from TV fundraisers such as the notorious Mexican Teletón, exquisitely dissected by Susan Antebi, to canonical films such as Marco Ferreri’s *El cochecito*, which Benjamin Fraser reinterprets through the lens of disability studies, to theatrical adaptations of iconic fairy tales featuring innocent girls and freakish monsters. Alberto Sandoval shows how the “beauty and the beast” Anglo-American master narrative of monstrosity is reworked from a critical perspective in the theatrical experiments of Nuyorican playwrights Migdalia Cruz and Eddie Sánchez.

Angel Loureiro’s examination of the “moral freak” in *Hable con ella* and other films directed by Pedro Almodóvar is of particular interest here in that it brings us back to the daringly expansive definition of the freak proposed by

the volume editors. If traditional freak shows exploited physical deviations from the natural norm, Loureiro opens the door to an interpretation of Almodóvar's films as *morality freak shows* that force spectators to confront behavioral deviations from the moral norm. As he writes, "Almodóvar specializes in inducing in the spectator an attraction for human beings with apparently questionable behaviors, and frequently does so by exploiting the voyeurism consubstantial to both cinema and the freak shows" (291). In support of his thesis, Loureiro points to Benigno, the strange protagonist of *Hable con ella*, as the paradigmatic example of Almodóvar's trademark freak. But we could just as well think of other Almodóvar characters that seemingly embody both physical and moral deviancy. A case in point is the transgender prostitute known as La Agrado, who thinks of her implants as physical signs of her most intimate authenticity. Who can forget her hilarious on-stage monologue in *Todo sobre mi madre*?

They call me La Agrado because all of my life I have only tried to make people's lives more pleasant. Aside from being agreeable, I am very authentic. Look at this body. All custom made. Almond-set eyes, 80,000. Nose-job, 200. . . . Tits—two, because I'm no monster—70 each, a great investment. Silicone in my lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and ass. . . . Well, as I was telling you, it costs a lot to be authentic, ma'am, and a person cannot be stingy with these things, because you are more authentic the more you resemble what you've dreamed for yourself. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBh2PGBDn1Q>)

Benigno and La Agrado are among the many Almodóvar characters who turn the tables on the spectator. As Loureiro writes: "In his films the spectators do not set the rules as did the visitors to freak exhibits in the nineteenth century. As a result, viewers of Almodóvar's films end up wavering on their moral judgements, unable to render a condemnation that a priori would seem straightforward. Filmic freaks shift the balance of power, deposing the spectators from their governing position" (291).

As in the case of Cervantes's fiction, the eccentricity of the freak characters of Almodóvar's films spills into the narrative frame. Hence, *Don Quixote*, "El licenciado Vidriera," *Hable con ella*, and *Todo sobre mi madre*—among many other works by both Cervantes and Almodóvar—are not only stories of eccentric characters but eccentric stories in their own right, aesthetic constructs that reposition their readers/spectators on the moral and social mar-

gins, from which they can look back at the principles and norms that structure their lives from oblique perspectives.

The eccentricity of the freak and the monster (including in its etymological sense, *ex-centric*) and their fluidity can serve to closely examine and, in the words of the volume editors, “denounce, question, and in many cases resolve symbolically the normative demands imposed by disciplinary societies” (14). This explains why the figure of the freak/monster has claimed a position of centrality in cultural products dealing with terrorism and state violence in places such as Mexico, Chile, Argentina, and Spain. With regard to Spain, the present volume includes two essays dealing with cultural products that reexamine state violence and the terrorism of ETA through the lens of the monster/freak. Txetxu Aguado focuses on the links between monstrosity, terrorism, and state violence in Spanish film productions, especially *Lasa y Zavala* (2014), directed by Pablo Malo, and the documentary *1980* (2013), directed by Iñaki Arteta. For his part, Gonzalo Martín de Marcos studies the evolution of the terrorist as freak in such novels as *Una belleza convulsa* (2001), written by José Manuel Fajardo, and *Ojos que no ven* (2010) by J. A. González Sainz. Finally, Daniel Link examines the freak in foundational fictions that anchor the symbolic construct of the nation. He focuses on the Argentinian context, relying on the multidimensional work of Copi to reclaim the monster as a site of political disturbance.

All in all, we hope to have conveyed in this afterword a sense of the extraordinary range and richness of this thoroughly original essay collection. Hispanists everywhere and specialists and students of teratology studies, disability studies, feminist studies, queer studies, and generally speaking ideological and cultural studies, will no doubt welcome this luminary volume with open arms.

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