**Neo-Sideshow and the Other: The Limits of Freaktopia**  
Circus and Its Others II: Prague 2018

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Popular culture loves to make use of the circus as a metaphor for diversity. The 2017 Hugh Jackman musical *The Greatest Showman* is perhaps the most egregious example at the moment, but it is by no means the only one. Just look at *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, the Tim Burton film *Big Fish*, or the novel *Water for Elephants*. As venues in which acrobats, equestrians, clowns, aerialists, jugglers, magicians, freaks, animals and more coexist, circuses simultaneously unite extreme feats of human ability with the presentation of disability. Further, as the traditional opening salvo of the circus suggests, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, and children of all ages are united in their desire to view the circus. In its ‘come one, come all’ mentality, the circus holds extreme individualism (in valuing the feats of its performers) and diverse plurality in tension. Circuses therefore reflect a certain pluralist imagining, consistent with neoliberal multiculturalism, which has been widely critiqued because the ‘melting pot’ ideology at its core fails to recognize structural inequities. As Robyn Weigman writes in *Object Lessons*, ‘multiculturalism upended differences by making them all the same’ (Weigman 36). When circuses are evoked as multicultural metaphors, perhaps through phrases like “we are all one under the big top of humanity,” they serve a similar rhetorical function as the melting pot, offering a canopy under which all who enter it can reside as one, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability – at least for the duration of the show.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque has been taken up in circus studies (and performance studies) to articulate the lasting power of the circus and its related forms as a reconfiguration of public space. Bakhtin's carnivalesque ‘does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators […] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people’ (Bakhtin 7). Bakhtin qualifies this erasure of spatial and social boundaries as the carnivalesque’s ‘utopian character,’ signifying liberatory potential in the ‘temporary suspension’ of hierarchies of everyday life (Bakhtin 33, 10). Though Richard Dyer argues that popular entertainments only offer ‘what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized,’ Bakhtin’s utopian carnivalesque is also bound up in the fiction of ‘we are all one under the big top of humanity,’ formulating the circus and its protective big top as a liminal space for liberation (Dyer 373).

But the presence of freak shows and sideshows trouble the utopian reading of the circus. The performance of embodied difference onstage effectively assures the masses of their own unremarkable qualities, enabling any differences among them to congeal into perceived equality, secure in the knowledge that they are not freaks themselves. In his book *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show*, Michael M. Chemers ponders the limits of the “freaktopia,” a term he coins to describe the freak show as a utopic space. Citing Utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch’s readings of early freak shows as spaces that provided opportunity for *vor-schein* (anticipatory illumination) in their audiences, Chemers considers the freak show as a space in which diverse bodies can coalesce in relative equality, therefore showing so-called “norm” audiences what a more inclusive world could look like (138). But because the genre of the freak show functions by separating “norm” audiences from “freak” performers, the utopic possibilities of the freak show seem difficult to realize, both in historical and contemporary contexts. Nancy Bombaci argues that early 20th century freak shows allowed normate bodies to positively identify with the differences they saw onstage, inviting a worldview that forms the basis for what we might now term neoliberalism. But the application of the sideshow as a neoliberal dream space of infinite diversity seems to be troubled in the neo-sideshow movement of the 1990s and beyond, where the position of the “freak” is generally taken up by white, cisgender, masculine, and able-bodied performers.

Leslie Fiedler’s analysis of the countercultural appropriation of ‘freak’ in the 1960s and 1970s is germane to this discussion. Quoting from sociologist Daniel Foss’s study *Freak Culture*, Fielder defines these countercultural freaks as ‘visibly members of middle-class youth subcultures […] in complete discontinuity with the conventional reality. Freaks are walking counter-environments who […] assert the right to total control over their physical appearance and outward behavior’ (Fiedler 303). In his reading of underground comics featuring musician Frank Zappa, Fiedler suggests that the guitarist’s use of the phrase ‘freak out’ as a banner signaling his chosen lifestyle makes one point clear: ‘if he can do it, anyone can […] since freakishness is not a fate, a condition to which one is born, as the old-time Freak show seemed to assure us, but a goal, a state which one can attain with the aid of drugs and/or music’ (313). The notion that one can readily change state from freak to non-freak/norm configures ‘freak’ not just as a social practice (as Bogdan’s argues in his genre analysis of the freak show), but an ideological state. What Dunn’s sly critique leverages, and what Fiedler fails to acknowledge, is that understanding freakishness is a ‘state which one can attain’ through drugs and/or music is problematic because of the counterculture’s key demographic: white, able-bodied, cisgender men.

J. Dee Hill’s *Freaks & Fire: The Underground Reinvention of the Circus* suggests that the continued countercultural use of ‘freak’ as a self-descriptor ‘implies both a larger community in which the individual is shunned, or at least regarded with vague suspicions, for his or her peculiarities, and a smaller community, in which those peculiarities are embraced’ (Hill xi). Hill’s account of the neo-circus and sideshow movement contextualizes its rise alongside music festivals as an appeal to a tribal past, and a deliberate (if temporary) rejection of modernity. These countercultural freaks are interested in ‘making their own fun, creating their own entertainment rather than consuming it’ (Hill xi). This ‘anti-consumer ethic’ calls upon the residual aesthetics and practices of pre-modern tribal cultures as an alternative to late capitalism. Yet, the ‘anti-consumer ethics’ Hill documents seem fundamentally out of sorts with the genre itself, which is inextricably tied to modes of capitalist production. Given Raymond Williams warning that the dominant culture (late capital) ‘cannot allow too much residual experience and practice outside itself,’ neo-sideshow can be understood as the dominant culture’s drive to protect itself from losing consumers (Williams 123). Indeed, the business of neo-sideshow is incorporated into the structures of capitalist production. Neo-sideshow certainly stages the freak show in opposition to banal normativity, but this antimony is also fraught. To resurrect the sideshow is to call forth a mode of capitalist production that, to paraphrase David Harvey, makes use of the other in highly structured ways.

It is therefore difficult to read neo-sideshow’s anti-consumer ethos as subversive given the genre’s inherent ties to capital, but this positioning is even more troubling considering the decidedly anti-normative identity politics of the neo-sideshow movement. In the largely white world of neo-sideshow, those closest to the normate position get to play at otherness by performing it and capitalizing on it. Counterculture itself assumes a project of public formation that reasserts the value of individualism over conformity to middle-class standards – a project readily achieved through drugs and music as Fiedler outlines. By borrowing the aesthetic weirdness, infinite bodily diversity, and radical individuality of the freak show, counterculture movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond, effectively appropriate a utopic vision of the freak show in their quest to become something other than middle-class conformists.

To illustrate this point, I’d like to look at the demographics and marketing materials of 4 contemporary neo-sideshow outlets in the US: The Jim Rose Circus, Freak Show Deluxe, Coney Island Sideshow by the Seashore, and Carnival Diablo.

**Slide 1:** The Jim Rose Circus (all working acts/made freaks – mostly white men, some white women as “pretty girls”) – Rose’s memoir is titled Freak Like Me, drawing on Black Like Me

**Slide 2:** Freak Show Deluxe (all working acts/made freaks – even gender split, but also all white, with exception of Joey DynOmite and her current partner and former member Werevered Vincent Wolf)

**Slide 3:** Coney Island Sideshow by the Seashore (all working acts, but includes some performers with disabilities eg Xander Lovecraft, Mat Fraser, Koko the Killer Klown, and a few performers of color)

**Slide 4:** Wreckless Freeks (all working acts, only “born freak” Bearded Lady Little Bear was forced out of the troupe)

What I see when I look at these contemporary sideshows is a very narrow subset of humanity, dominated largely by white, cisgender, able-bodied men. Even when the gender dynamics are more even, as in Freak Show Deluxe, the performing companies are almost entirely white and able-bodied. Only Sideshow by the Seashore, which is an arm of an actual historical organization, regularly employs persons with disabilities. Certainly, the politics of representation have changed since side shows first rose to popularity. I am not advocating for a return to these antiquated modes of representation that display people of color through the lens of faulty race science and the colonial imagination, or present persons with disabilities as curiosities rather than people. Rather, I am asking what it means to resurrect the sideshow or the freak show now. My research suggests that sideshows trade on what I term “voluntary enfreakment” in an attempt to create anti-capitalist utopias – freaktopias, perhaps – which, though they pay lip service to the rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism, diversity, and progressive values, actually enforce the very values they claim to escape: capital, patriarchy, and whiteness. By clinging to a genre that is so tied to white patriarchal capital, neo-sideshow only reinvents and reinforces its problems, limiting the potential work of freaktopias.

Even neo-sideshow legend Jim Rose expresses doubts about the work of sideshows. In *Freak Like Me*, he states, ‘We’d helped to bring back a part of Americana to a Lost Generation, whose only exposure to sideshows had been through books,’ but adds a warning about neo-sideshow’s future: ‘I was seeing history repeat itself […] because so many popped up, they were no longer unique’ (Rose 164). Though genre historians and cultural critics have largely cited a cultural shift in moral understandings of disability as the death knell for the sideshow, Rose’s analysis offers a reading that is colored both by the anti-consumer ethos of the counterculture, and by capital itself. His sentiments bemoan the loss of uniqueness in an oversaturated market of Jim Rose clones, longing again for the exceptionalism the freak show initially provided. As Dyer notes in ‘Entertainment and Utopia,’ ‘The ideals of entertainment imply wants that capitalism itself promises to meet […] At our worst sense of it, entertainment provides alternatives to capitalism which will be provided by capitalism’ (Dyer 377).

José Esteban Muñoz has poetically called utopia ‘a time and a place that is not yet here,’ embedded with Bloch’s ‘principle of hope’ (Muñoz 2009: 99). Muñoz’s utopia resists capitalism, in which hope and the indeterminacy of what should be ‘stand against capitalism’s ever expanding and exhausting force field of how things ‘are and will be’’ (Muñoz 2009: 99). Yet, sideshows and freak shows are, even in their current incarnations, mired in capitalist practices, and beholden to thinking about preserving the past, rather than imagining a future. The economic structure of the genre itself embodies David Harvey’s observation: ‘Capitalism did not invent ‘the other’ but it certainly made use of and promoted it in highly structured ways’ (Harvey 104). It seems, then, that the utopic potential of the freak show as a space of ultimate plurality is always in tension with the genre’s preference for exceptionalism, and it is this secondary drive toward extreme individuality that overrides the possibilities for a freaktopia where ‘we are all one under the big top of humanity.’

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