



Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture

Nadja Durbach

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In 1847, during the great age of the freak show, the British periodical *Punch* bemoaned the public's "prevailing taste for deformity." This vividly detailed work argues that far from being purely exploitative, displays of anomalous bodies served a deeper social purpose as they generated popular and scientific debates over the meanings attached to bodily difference. Nadja Durbach examines freaks both well-known and obscure including the Elephant Man; "Laloo, the Double-Bodied Hindoo Boy," a set of conjoined twins advertised as half male, half female; Krao, a seven-year-old hairy Laotian girl who was marketed as Darwin's "missing link"; the "Last of the Mysterious Aztecs" and African "Cannibal Kings," who were often merely Irishmen in blackface. Upending our tendency to read late twentieth-century conceptions of disability onto the bodies of freak show performers, Durbach shows that these spectacles helped to articulate the cultural meanings invested in otherness--and thus clarified what it meant to be British—at a key moment in the making of modern and imperial ideologies and identities.

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