

Memoria Cultural Selectiva y el Cuerpo Discapacitado: Descubriendo Narrativas en el Performance de Circo¹

Selective Cultural Memory and the Disabled Body: Uncovering Narratives in Circus Performance // Memória Cultural Seletiva e o Corpo Deficiente: Descobrendo narrativas na performance por Circus

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Fecha de recepción: 31 de agosto de 2024
Fecha de aceptación: 8 de septiembre de 2024

Como citar: Metsikkö, K (2025) Selective Cultural Memory and the Disabled Body: Uncovering Narratives in Circus Performance, *Corpo Gráfiás Estudios críticos de y desde los cuerpos*, 12(12), pp. 90-105
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14483/25909398.22664>



¹ **Research Article.** This article examines the representation of disabled bodies in circus performances, with a central question focused on how historical and contemporary narratives shape societal perceptions of disability. Utilizing a theoretical framework rooted in disability studies and visual activism, the analysis draws on historical contexts, particularly freak shows, and critiques contemporary media portrayals, such as *The Greatest Showman*. Methodologically, the paper employs a critical literature review and a case study, including the performance "World at Our Feet" by LEGacy Circus. The main findings highlight the persistence of ableist narratives and the potential of disabled circus artists to challenge and redefine these narratives through innovative performances. Conclusions emphasize the need for a critical reassessment of how disability is remembered and represented, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of circus arts. Future research directions include exploring the impact of visual activism on public perceptions of disability and further case studies of disabled performers.

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Resumen

Este artículo explora las complejas narrativas que rodean los cuerpos discapacitados en el contexto de las actuaciones de circo, enfatizando la interacción entre las representaciones históricas y las prácticas contemporáneas. Al examinar narrativas ficticias y su impacto en la escena circense actual, el artículo revela cómo estas historias influyen en las percepciones sociales y en las dinámicas de poder entre personas con y sin discapacidad. Se discute la naturaleza selectiva de la memoria cultural al recordar y olvidar eventos y figuras históricas, lo que puede mantener o desafiar supuestos normativos sobre la discapacidad. Se profundiza en la historia de los espectáculos de fenómenos, destacando su papel en la perpetuación de estereotipos y en la marginación de los cuerpos discapacitados con fines de entretenimiento. Un análisis crítico de la película *The Greatest Showman* ilustra cómo la cultura popular a menudo sanitiza los aspectos explotadores de los espectáculos de fenómenos históricos, moldeando así las comprensiones contemporáneas de la discapacidad y la normalidad a través de la memoria selectiva. Esta película sirve como un estudio de caso para examinar cómo el recordar y olvidar culturalmente refuerza las ideologías capacitistas. Se investiga además el concepto de la mirada y sus implicaciones para el activismo visual. Basándose en el trabajo de teóricos de los estudios de discapacidad, incluidos Rosemarie Garland-Thomson y David Bolt, se examina cómo el acto de mirar a los cuerpos discapacitados está impregnado de dinámicas de poder que sostienen jerarquías sociales. El activismo visual, practicado por artistas como Erin Ball y Vanessa Furlong en su actuación *World at Our Feet*, busca recuperar visibilidad y desafiar narrativas estigmatizantes al celebrar la diferencia y exigir un cambio en la percepción. En última instancia, este artículo llama a una reevaluación de cómo se recuerda y representa la discapacidad en contextos históricos y contemporáneos. Al deconstruir narrativas capacitistas y abrazar las diversas contribuciones de los

artistas discapacitados, el artículo aboga por una comprensión más inclusiva y equitativa de las artes circenses y del panorama cultural más amplio.

Palabras clave

Representación de la Discapacidad, Historia del Circo, Activismo Visual

Abstract

This article explores the intricate narratives surrounding disabled bodies in circus performance, emphasizing the interplay between historical representations and contemporary practices. By examining fictive narratives and their impact on the contemporary circus scene, the article reveals how these stories influence societal perceptions and power dynamics between able-bodied and disabled individuals. It discusses the selective nature of cultural memory in remembering and forgetting historical events and figures, which can maintain or challenge normative assumptions about disability. The article delves into the history of freak shows, highlighting their role in perpetuating stereotypes and marginalizing disabled bodies for entertainment. A critical analysis of the film *The Greatest Showman* illustrates how popular culture often sanitizes exploitative aspects of historical freak shows, thereby shaping contemporary understandings of disability and normality through selective memory. This film serves as a case study for examining how cultural remembering and forgetting reinforce ableist ideologies. The article further investigates the concept of the gaze and its implications for visual activism. Drawing on the work of disability studies theorists including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and David Bolt, it examines how the act of looking at disabled bodies is imbued with power dynamics that sustain social hierarchies. Visual activism, as practiced by artists like Erin Ball and Vanessa Furlong in their performance *World at Our Feet*, seeks to reclaim visibility and challenge stigmatizing narratives by celebrating

difference and demanding a shift in perception. Ultimately, this article calls for a reassessment of how disability is remembered and represented in both historical and contemporary contexts. By deconstructing ableist narratives and embracing the diverse contributions of disabled artists, the article advocates for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of circus arts and the broader cultural landscape.

Keywords

Disability Representation, Circus History, Visual Activism

Resumo

Este artigo explora as narrativas complexas que cercam corpos deficientes no contexto de performances circo, enfatizando a interação entre as apresentações práticas históricas e contemporâneas. Ao examinar narrativas ficcionais e seu impacto na cena circo atual, o artigo revela como essas histórias influenciam nas percepções sociais e na dinâmica de poder entre pessoas com e sem deficiência. É discutido a natureza seletiva da memória cultural ao lembrar e esquecer eventos e figuras históricas, que podem manter ou desafiar suposições normativas sobre deficiência. Ele investiga a história dos shows fenômenos, destacando seu papel na perpetuação de estereótipos e a marginalização dos corpos com deficiência para fins de entretenimento. Uma análise crítica de O filme *The Greatest Showman* ilustra como a cultura popular muitas vezes higieniza os aspectos exploradores de os espetáculos dos fenômenos históricos, moldando assim compreensão contemporânea da deficiência e normalidade através da memória seletiva. este filme serve como um estudo de caso para examinar como lembrar e esquecer culturalmente reforça ideologias capacitistas. O conceito de olhar e suas implicações também são investigados. para o ativismo visual. Baseado no trabalho de teóricos dos estudos da deficiência, incluindo Rosemarie Garland-Thom-

son e David Bolt são examinados como é o ato de olhar para corpos com deficiência impregnado de dinâmicas de poder que sustentam hierarquias sociais. Ativismo visual, praticado por artistas como Erin Ball e Vanessa Furlong em sua apresentação mundial *at Our Feet*, busca recuperar visibilidade e desafiar narrativas estigmatizantes ao celebrar a diferença e exigir uma mudança na percepção. Em última análise, este artigo exige uma reavaliação de como é lembrado e representado a deficiência em contextos históricos e contemporâneos. Ao desconstruir narrativas capacitistas e abraçar as diversas contribuições de artistas com deficiência, O artigo defende uma compreensão mais inclusiva e representação equitativa das artes circenses e do panorama cultural mais amplo.

Palavras-chave

Representação da Deficiência, História do Circo, Ativismo Visual

Introduction

The disabled body has long been a subject of fictive narratives, shaping perceptions and representations within various cultural contexts. In this article, I examine how these narratives are being selectively remembered and forgotten, influencing the contemporary circus scene and the roles of disabled circus artists. Through a theoretical and philosophical lens, I will analyze storytelling and authorship, constructing a framework that highlights storytelling as a complex web of texts and cultural practices, rather than merely the act of an individual imagination.

Central to my argument is the notion that remembering and forgetting narratives about disabled bodies serve to preserve the power dynamic between the able-bodied majority and the disabled minority. This dynamic is rooted in the underlying assumption that disability is inherently abnormal and that the categories of normality

and abnormality are essential and fixed in the world. By examining fictive narratives surrounding disabled bodies, particularly in the context of circus performances, I aim to uncover how these stories reinforce or challenge societal norms and power structures.

The history of freak circuses and the narratives they propagated is a crucial component of this analysis. Freak shows, which displayed disabled bodies for profit and public entertainment, were both repugnant and compelling. Although these shows are largely rejected in modern times, their legacy persists in contemporary representations of disability. Critically examining these historical spectacles plays a central part in uncovering the ongoing challenges faced by disabled individuals in society.

In examining the phenomenon of selective remembering and forgetting in culture, I will analyze *The Greatest Showman* (2017). This film exemplifies how popular culture sanitizes and romanticizes the history of freak shows, glossing over the exploitation and dehumanization that characterized them. By critically engaging with such representations, I aim to highlight how selective memory shapes contemporary understandings of disability and normality.

An important aspect of this article is the exploration of the gaze and visual activism. Staring, as a social and political phenomenon, is inherently tied to power dynamics and the construction of normality and abnormality. Disability studies theorists such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) have extensively examined the implications of the gaze in the context of disability. Garland-Thomson argues that the act of looking at disabled bodies is never neutral; it is a way of asserting and maintaining social hierarchies. She also suggests that the contemporary world's emphasis on recognition and response has imbued the gaze with new significance, reinforcing the dominance of ableist

ideologies. The gaze also often includes a story; disability scholar David Bolt (2013) argues that when an able-bodied person encounters someone with a visible impairment, amputation, or even a scar, the observer assumes a kind of authorship and authority by assigning a story to the impaired.

Visual activism seeks to reclaim the visibility of disabled bodies, challenging the stigmatizing narratives perpetuated by the able-bodied majority. By celebrating difference and demanding attention, visual activists aim to disrupt entrenched power dynamics and offer new ways of seeing and understanding disability. This form of activism influences how normality and stigma are perceived in society, encouraging a more inclusive and nuanced view of human diversity.

To ground these theoretical discussions, I will analyze *World at Our Feet* (2016) by Erin Ball and Vanessa Furlong of LEGacy Circus. This performance exemplifies contemporary disabled circus artistry and provides a rich case study for examining the intersection of narrative, representation, and activism. Through their work, Ball and Furlong challenge traditional narratives of disability, presenting their bodies not as objects of pity or curiosity but as powerful instruments of artistic expression.

Through this multifaceted approach, I aim to shed light on the intricate and evolving narratives surrounding disabled bodies in the circus. By examining historical contexts, contemporary practices, and theoretical frameworks, I hope to offer insights into how these narratives serve to uphold or challenge existing power dynamics. Ultimately, this work seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of disability, normality, and the complex web of cultural practices that shape our perceptions of both.

Theory of Authorship

This article aims to recognize the various dimensions and types of storytelling and storytellers that thematize the disabled body in the circus. Before delving into the history of narratives about circus artists with disabilities, I want to offer a theoretical framework of authorship within the context of disability and circus, emphasizing storytelling as a social phenomenon rather than a purely individual practice.

Rebecca Mallett, in her paper titled *The Attribution of 'Authorship' in Cultural Interpretations of 'Disability'* (2004), challenges the traditional ways of analyzing disability representation by focusing on the role of authorship and the assumptions that underpin interpretive practices. Mallett examines how disability has been represented in various cultural mediums (e.g., media, film, advertising) over the last 20 to 25 years. She notes that despite increased attention to disability representation in policy and public initiatives, these portrayals often remain clichéd and stereotypical. She argues that instead of simply questioning the accuracy or positivity of these representations, we should explore how these representations are interpreted and understood, focusing on the role of authorship.

To comprehend authorship within a theoretical and philosophical framework, Mallett references two influential formulations by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Since Barthes' (1977) renowned declaration of *The Death of the Author*, cultural theorists have had to take seriously the claim that authors are unimportant and even repressive for purposes of interpretation. Barthes points out that the author is a modern figure, a product of modern society. Emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation, modernist society discovered the

prestige of the individual, and during the peak of capitalist society, the "person" of the author gained significance.

Barthes emphasizes the performativity of the act of writing: it is the language that speaks, not the author. He sees writing as reaching a point where only the language acts and performs, not an "I." Linguistics has provided valuable analytical tools to further explore the destruction of the author by showing that the entire utterance is an empty process that functions perfectly without being filled with the persona of the interlocutor. Barthes describes the text as a fabric of quotations from innumerable cultural centers, a multidimensional space where a variety of writings blend and clash without any of them being original.

Foucault, similar to Barthes, recognizes the author as a fiction and urges us to think about what this role does and what it enables. While agreeing that the biography and intentions of the author are largely irrelevant for interpretation, he suggested that authors still play a crucial role in our understanding. In his famous lecture *What is an Author?* (1988), Foucault claims that authorship and the associated values and meanings are cultural products that vary significantly over time and place. With this argument, Foucault encourages us to view authorship as an active process rather than a fixed moment in time. His legacy lies in the concept of the "author function," shifting the focus from "an author" as an existing entity to "the author" as it functions in discursive formations.

Mallett believes that both Barthes' and Foucault's theories shift the focus from the individual storyteller to the prevailing network of texts within culture and history, and to the writer as an active process.

Like all texts, the stories told about the disabled body should be viewed as part of an active process and continuum, largely depending on the prevailing cultural, historical, and

political circumstances. In the context of disability, Mallett cites charitable organizations as a phenomenon to which different forms of authorship are attributed depending on the situation and interpretation.

Publicly, these organizations are often perceived as implicit and undoubtedly trustworthy authors deserving of public support. In critical encounters, disability activists and scholars cast charities in the role of an oppressor, because they have become the central authors in the capitalist "disability industry," with most representation work being done by non-disabled individuals. Mallett further discusses how the social model of disability has influenced how charities approach representation, shifting from a focus on care and compassion to political advocacy. This shift has changed how these organizations are perceived as authors of disability representation. Mallett focuses on the "blaming function" (Mallett, 2004) of authorship, particularly in how disability activists often blame charities for perpetuating negative representations of disability.

To understand the different author functions in both the history and contemporary scene of circus artists with disabilities, I categorize them into three broad phenomena:

1. Authorship by 19th and 20th-century showmen:

Individual showmen in freak shows who used entirely fictional stories about their performers' lives and bodies as a marketing strategy.

2. Public consciousness: This includes generalized beliefs about the lives and bodies of circus artists and performers, produced and reproduced through various political currents, existing or lacking public representation, and processes of historiography, documentation, archiving, institutionalization, remembering, and forgetting.

3. Authorship by disabled artists themselves: This includes elements of visual activism, disability circus, and other art forms where artists consciously thematize their disabilities and tell their own stories.

In the following chapter, I aim to explore the roots of enfreakment as a social and cultural phenomenon, examining how fictional narratives have historically been employed to construct and reinforce the social categories of normal and abnormal.

Enfreakment

From prehistoric times to the modern era, extraordinary bodies have been both feared and revered, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards difference and normalcy (Fordham, 2007). The history of enfreakment is full of fictional stories, and therefore relevant for understanding the contemporary stories about disabled bodies.

The formal process of enfreakment began to take shape in the early 16th century with the collection of medical curiosities by affluent European families. This practice, initially private and often driven by personal fascination, laid the groundwork for the later systematic categorization of human bodies. The oldest cabinets of curiosities were established in Dresden (1560), Florence (1560), and Munich (1563) (Zittlau, 2012). In these collections, the exotic, meaning that they stood for the unknown (Zittlau, 2012) played a significant role, as well as the aesthetic value of the objects. By the 18th century, these collections had become more pathological and scientific in nature, reflecting the Enlightenment era's emphasis on classification and order. This period saw the establishment of systematic criteria distinguishing "normal" from "abnormal" bodies, which had previously depended on the individual perspective of a doctor (Stammberger, 2012).

At the end of the 19th century, an empirical scientific approach emerged, relying on the interrelationship between the development of scientific disciplines, public funding of research, and institutionalization. This transformation was linked to the growing recognition of evolutionary theory and embryology. The professionalization, institutionalization, and mass culture led to the birth of freak circuses in the USA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Stammberger, 2012). This era marked the height of enfreakment in popular culture, epitomized by the sideshows of the era's circuses. Central to this tradition was Phineas T. Barnum, a master showman whose success rested on his ability to craft compelling narratives about the bodies on display.

P. T. Barnum began his long career in show business and storytelling in 1835 when he exhibited the hymn-singing African-American woman Joice Heth, claiming she was the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington (Saxon, 1989). Between 1841 and 1868, Barnum owned the American Museum in New York City, which supposedly contained more than 850,000 "interesting curiosities" (<https://barnum-museum.org>). This museum evolved into a freak circus when Barnum began exhibiting living individuals with extraordinary bodies as public spectacles, with elaborate backstories designed to captivate and intrigue audiences.

Barnum's notorious success lay in his presentation of abnormality as an inherent essence rather than a performance. This approach not only enhanced the allure of his shows but also reinforced societal norms by starkly delineating the boundaries of normalcy. The sideshows thus served a dual purpose: entertaining the public while simultaneously affirming the bodily identity of the masses by contrasting them with the "freaks" on display (Zittlau, 2012). As Rachel Adams argues: "Freak shows are guided by the assumption that freak is an essence, the basis for a

comforting fiction that there is a permanent, qualitative difference between deviance and normality, projected spatially in the distance between the spectator and the body onstage" (Adams, 2001, p. 6).

Barnum's freak acts were categorized into three groups: so-called born freaks, made freaks, and novelty acts. The born freaks were born with an extraordinary body, and the made freaks were transformed into freaks through body modification. Novelty acts performed unusual feats, such as sword swallowing (Fordham, 2007). However, both born and made freaks should be considered equally constructed categories. As social scientist Robert Bogdan (1990) asserts, a freak is not an inherent characteristic of the body, but rather a social construct. "Freak is a state of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is not a person but the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation" (Bogdan, 1990, p. 28-31). Therefore, every freak show exhibition is more theater than biological reality—a stylized misrepresentation of the background, condition, and personal characteristics of the featured person.

David Gerber (1996) has examined the lives of freak performers and investigated whether they voluntarily chose their careers as performers. He argues that, for instance, short-statured people in Barnum & Bailey's human exhibitions had no other employment opportunities, even though they were physically and mentally capable of working a variety of jobs, because the popularity of freak circuses had so strongly influenced the social position and perception of these populations. Even if the performers had voluntarily chosen a career as freak performers, one must consider how the freak shows shaped the relationship between extraordinary bodies and society:

Persons who have no interest in being treated as exhibitions are assumed freaks by somatic

association. A person born with achondroplasia, for example, may be blocked from mainstream jobs if dwarfs are associated with the social status and grotesque exhibitionism of the freak show. (Fordham, 2007, p. 221)

The argument supporting the freak shows is often also based on the idea of community and family. It is assumed that people with extraordinary or disabled bodies are discriminated against in society but celebrated and respected in the circus. Discussions with freak show performers suggest that after being treated as strange and grotesque by the majority, persons with unusual bodies joined freak shows to find a community (Fordham, 2007). It is important to emphasize that people with disabilities were physically capable of working in a variety of professions and participating in various communities, but the shows limited the employment options open to such persons by identifying them as freaks rather than normal people (Fordham, 2007).

Non-Freaks and selective cultural remembering

In the historiography of the body, elements of ableist culture still prevail, also influencing the history of the circus. In her PhD dissertation, Katarina Carter (2014) writes that circus historiography tends to focus on so-called elite artists without disabilities (some of whom became disabled due to accidents), or disabled artists with a freak status. However, there were circus performers in the 19th and 20th centuries who had disabilities and were not —or not only— freak performers. Among them were the two legless men Johnny Eck (1911–1991) and Eli Bowen (1842–1924), who participated and performed in P. T. Barnum's freak circus and also had artistic careers as acrobats without a showman (Garraty, 2005; Carter, 2014). Another example is Frank Melrose, a gymnast with only

one leg who had a remarkable career in the 19th century. Although he was considered a novelty of his time and acknowledged as America's most wonderful one-legged gymnast he has been largely forgotten in history. Melrose performed without a showman and his audience did not view him as a curiosity but as a talented artist.

Carter (2014) emphasizes that the history of circus performers with disabilities is strongly linked to the history of sideshows and freak circuses and that those performers who were not exhibited as freaks, such as Melrose, have largely been forgotten. Peta Tait (2006) and Joseph Roach (1996) write that cultural memory is selective, maintaining some parts of history while erasing others to smooth over obvious discontinuities, mismatches, and breaks. Simultaneously, other past events are exaggerated to mystify a golden, bygone age. The history of circus performers with disabilities has been shaped by such a selective, blurred, and mystified historiography, which is a result of ableist culture, as Carter argues: "Circus artists remembered or forgotten are undoubtedly dependent on the opinions of those recording at the time, the culture in which they performed, as well as the interests of those writing the associated histories that follow" (Carter, 2018, p. 141).

Because the legacy of freak circuses is a strong tool in preserving ableist power relations in society, performers such as Frank Melrose "were ostensibly forgotten because they offered an oppositional account; in Roach's words, they presented obvious discontinuities to the freakery narrative and were therefore dismissed" (Carter, 2018, p. 141). The focus on the highly emotional subject of the freak leaves little room for artists such as Melrose to be integrated into accepted knowledge. Thus, the bodies of disabled performers have become objects of enfreakment not only on an individual level but also on a collective and historical level through historiography. The way a

disabled body in the circus is remembered underscores the processes of enfreakment and the overlooking of the fact that there were disabled performers who, within their contemporary artistic context, were not considered freaks.

The Greatest Showman

A compelling example of selective remembering and forgetting in historical narrative is the portrayal of P. T. Barnum and his freak circus in the 2017 musical film *The Greatest Showman*, which is based on Barnum's life and depicting the origins of freak circuses. The film was highly popular with audiences while receiving significant negative critique from reviewers. The biggest criticism of the film is that it whitewashes P.T. Barnum's controversial history, presenting him as a mythological figure to promote an inclusive message (McGuire, 2022).

Primarily, the film is a typical Hollywood narrative about a heroic, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, non-disabled man from the working class who works hard for his dream, takes social and financial risks, and becomes wealthy to claim that anyone can achieve their dreams if they believe in themselves and work hard enough. In the film, Barnum's story and life are presented not only as a tale of inclusion and acceptance, but also as a celebration of class mobility and the American Dream.

With an understanding of the history of disabled circus artists and Barnum's impact on the disability community which still resonates today, the film warrants critical examination. P. T. Barnum played a significant role in exploiting people with disabilities, turning the phenomenon of freaks into a spectacle for financial gain. Barnum's circuses dramatically altered societal perceptions of disabled bodies, emphasizing exclusion over inclusion. Since Barnum's time, the disabled community has struggled to shed freak status and reclaim their rights. The

film, however, falsely suggests that Barnum provided a home and community for those excluded from society, by depicting their lives in isolation before joining the show.

Such representation leads viewers to two detrimental conclusions about the disabled community: that the categories of freak and normal are essential and inherent and existed in society already before Barnum's shows, rather than his performances being a central part in creating them, and that the inclusion of disabled people in art spaces is due to the goodwill of non-disabled individuals or institutions.

One of the dominant features of ableist culture, both revealed and reproduced in *The Greatest Showman*, is the notion that disabled artists' agency always belongs to a non-disabled subject such as a showman, who controls their achievements, either facilitating or hindering them. This notion also creates the illusion that access to art institutions for disabled artists has historically been dependent on the benevolence of non-disabled individuals and institutions.

Historiography, as a powerful tool of ableism, perpetuates the idea that society is becoming more inclusive over time, granting more rights and space to disabled individuals. However, this perspective obscures the fact that society itself created the constructs of freaks and disability. *The Greatest Showman* portrays Barnum as a champion of the disabled community, strategically omitting that such an inclusive message offered about disabled artists today was preceded by acts of exclusion and discrimination.

This phenomenon, which could be termed retrospective othering, denies the agency of disabled artists in the past, creating an uncomfortable, underlying power dynamic where their inclusion in contemporary art spaces is seen as tolerating abnormality. In the 21st century, disabled

individuals achieving recognition in the art world often do so within a societal framework where inclusivity stays on a superficial, performative level. True equality requires actively deconstructing abnormality as a social construct, recognizing that such a category is historically and culturally produced rather than innate.

This phenomenon extends beyond the ableist majority-minority power dynamic and appears in various historical and cultural contexts. To further demonstrate this type of performative inclusion that primarily serves the purpose or need of an oppressing majority, one can look at the rights of marginalized groups during the 19th century. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2016), Hannah Arendt examines how 19th-century aristocrats in the Second French Empire began to tolerate homosexuals and Jews, who had previously been despised and viewed as criminals. Arendt explains that aristocrats did not abandon their prejudices but rather shifted their attitude towards criminality, making it more acceptable. Consequently, homosexuals and Jews were temporarily and conditionally accepted; once criminality was no longer in favor, they lost their rights again (Arendt, 2016). Efforts to create inclusive art spaces must be grounded in the understanding that abnormality is a societal construct that needs deconstruction and not mere tolerance. Only by addressing the roots of these constructs can sustainable and meaningful inclusion be achieved.

The Gaze

Narratives about disabled bodies often emerge through the act of looking. The gaze, a significant social and political phenomenon analyzed across the humanities and social sciences, is intrinsically linked to various power dynamics. In the context of disability, the gaze takes on a unique theoretical framework, making it anything but neutral. Disability studies theorists including Garland-Thomson

(1996) have explored the gaze in relation to disability, delineating the division between the observer and the observed, the normal and the stigmatized. She asserts that these categories are interdependent; normalcy is defined in contrast to stigma, and vice versa. She also argues that the dynamics of such encounters are part of a communal acculturation process established and maintained by the dominant group, which determines which traits or differences are deemed inferior, thereby reinforcing its own idealized self-description as neutral, normal, and legitimate.

Garland-Thomson further posits that staring at disabled individuals often stems from curiosity rather than hostile or prejudiced attitudes. However, she emphasizes that this curious gaze is neither politically neutral nor pleasant. While curiosity itself is not inherently negative, it has the power to transform its focus into an object of curiosity. She delves into the historical evolution of the gaze, suggesting that the societal shift from agrarian to industrial settings necessitated a new urgency in looking, allowing people to recognize and respond appropriately to one another in increasingly diverse social encounters.

David Bolt, in his paper *Social Encounters, Cultural Representation and Critical Avoidance* (2013), makes the intriguing claim that the gaze of non-disabled people towards disabled bodies often involves the construction of narratives about what might have happened to those bodies. He emphasizes that a social encounter with someone who has a visible disability, amputation, scar, or prosthesis seems to be demanding a story in the mind of the person looking. Arguably this can also apply to disabled viewers, especially those able to pass as able-bodied. In such interactions, the observer assumes a kind of authorship and authority by assigning a disability story to the impaired. When non-disabled individuals gaze at those with disabilities, they reinforce their position as

the normal subject in contrast to the abnormal object, perceiving disability as a sign of loss and hindrance.

On the specific dynamics of the gaze in contemporary circus involving disabled performers, Carter (2014) highlights the importance of analyzing how these artists handle the complexity of being looked at in their work. She raises the essential question of whether the performers address disability issues and their own impairments directly or leave it to the audience to navigate the intertextual layers of information without guidance.

World at Our Feet

The performance *World at Our Feet* (2016) by Erin Ball's and Vanessa Furlong's company, LEGacy Circus, stands as a testament to the power of contemporary circus arts to challenge and redefine narratives around disability. It is essential to not only analyze the performance through theoretical lenses but also reflect on the experience itself. Personally, I found the performance to be of exceptional quality, demonstrating remarkable artistry and emotional depth.

Since its inception in 2016, the performance has kept evolving and it is a profound example of how narratives about disability can be reshaped in an empowering light. I have had the honor to see two video recordings of the performance from year 2019.

Ball, an accomplished aerialist and pioneer of adaptive circus based in the area colonially named Kingston, Ontario, in so-called Canada,³ collaborates with Furlong in creating performances that are not only visually stunning but also rich in storytelling. The show is an aerial acrobatics

performance that narrates a story where Ball's character, Erin, gets lost in a cold, wintry forest and falls asleep until Furlong's character Legacy awakens her.⁴ Upon waking, Erin discovers that her legs are different, and begins to reacquaint herself with her body and the new possibilities for movement it brings. The performance skillfully incorporates prostheses and a wheelchair into the aerial routines.

Central to understanding *World at Our Feet* is Ball's personal journey into the disabled community, a journey she sometimes describes as "achieving disability" (Ball, E. personal communication, 2022, August 26). In *World at Our Feet*, Ball and Furlong subvert the typical ableist narrative by presenting the story of Ball's accident and subsequent amputation as a beautiful transformation and re-discovery of movement, evoking a wide range of emotions, rather than a merely tragic loss. Traditionally, amputated bodies and the use of wheelchairs and prostheses are associated with loss and limitations (Scheurer & Grayson, 2021). In this performance, these elements are recontextualized to highlight the new and enriching possibilities for movement and artistic expression. The wheelchair, rather than being a symbol of restriction, becomes an integral and dynamic part of the aerial performance.

The performance directly challenges the able-bodied gaze and its inherent narratives. Ball and Furlong disrupt ableist dynamics by reclaiming authorship over their stories, presenting disability from their lived experiences and perspectives. This reclamation is not just about representation but about asserting the agency of disabled individuals in telling their own stories.

Visual activism, a form of activism recognized in contemporary art spaces (Garland-Thompson, 2009),

³ This phrasing reminds us that these lands were not always called Canada and that the journey to calling it Canada was filled with violence & injustice.

⁴ Ball uses the neopronouns ze/zer.

plays a crucial role in challenging societal perceptions of disability through visibility and representation. Garland-Thompson explains that visual activism begins when individuals either cannot or do not wish to pass as non-disabled. By embracing their visibility and celebrating their differences in public spaces, they highlight the diversity of human bodies and influence societal views on normality and stigma. The performance *World at Out Feet* opens with guest performer April Hubbard's acrobatic solo performance and a vocal statement: "In pain and despair, I found my voice. So I will fight for myself and for others who never had the chance," which positions the performance as activism. The performance not only showcases the artistic potential of disabled bodies but also, by adding the vocal statement acknowledges the historical and ongoing discrimination against disabled individuals, and critically engages with and questions socio-political constructions of disability and ableist ideologies.

Carter (2014) highlights the omnipresent fear of disabling accidents in aerial acrobatics, exacerbated by a lack of historical and contemporary representation of disabled aerialists. Performances like *World at Our Feet* are vital also to professional circus artists as they provide visibility and challenge the notion that a disabling accident marks the end of an aerialist's career.

World at Our Feet holds profound significance for audiences with varying relationships to circus and disability. It confronts and challenges the able-bodied gaze, offering a narrative that underscores the artistic potential and emotional depth of disabled experiences. For disabled artists, it provides essential representation and a narrative that validates their experiences and potential.

Vanessa Furlong and Erin Ball are called pioneers in adaptive circus, however, they are not the only artists with disabilities integrating political activism and disability issues in their circus art practices.

British musician and actor Mat Fraser addresses with his solo show *Sealboy: Freak* (2001) the historical and contemporary issues faced by disabled individuals. Similarly, the theater group Graeae specializes in productions for deaf and disabled audiences, incorporating circus elements to challenge traditional narratives and showcase the talents of disabled performers without reducing them to mere curiosities (Carter, 2014). Another performance group based in the UK is Extraordinary Bodies. By exploring a mix of circus, dance, theatre, and music, they tell meaningful stories and bringing together the skill and talent of D/ deaf, disabled, and non-disabled artists. (<https://www.extraordinarybodies.org.uk>).

Conclusion

The complex narrative of circus history reveals much about how societies have historically perceived and treated disability. Circus and freak shows have been instrumental in shaping and reflecting broader societal attitudes toward disabled individuals. The exploration of these narratives uncovers the pervasive influence of ableist culture in historiography and public memory, shedding light on the nuanced and often overlooked experiences of disabled circus performers.

The first part of the article emphasizes the historical and social significance of circus performers with disabilities, particularly those who were often relegated to the freak show circuit. Figures like Johnny Eck, Eli Bowen, and Frank Melrose exemplify the rich and varied contributions of disabled artists to the circus arts. However, their stories have often been overshadowed by the dominant freak show narrative that emphasizes spectacle and otherness (Carter, 2014). The selective remembering and forgetting

in circus historiography reveal a broader trend of ableism, where the achievements of disabled performers are

minimized or erased in favor of a more palatable, non-disabled-centric history (Tait, 2006).

Peta Tait's and Josef Roach's analysis of historical erasure and cultural selective remembering highlights how disabled performers who did not fit the freak show archetype have been strategically forgotten. This selective memory reflects an ableist bias that persists in contemporary understandings of disability in performance arts. Tait's and Roach's argument underscores the need to reexamine and reconstruct the historical record to include and celebrate the full spectrum of disabled performers' contributions, rather than perpetuating a narrow, sensationalized view of disability in the circus.

The second part of the article extends this discussion into contemporary representations, focusing on the film *The Greatest Showman* and its portrayal of P. T. Barnum's freak circus. The film, while popular and celebrated in different communities, is criticized for its whitewashed depiction of Barnum and the freak show phenomenon (McGuire, 2022). It promotes a narrative of inclusion and acceptance that obscures the exploitative nature of Barnum's circus and the enduring impact of freak shows on societal perceptions of disability. This selective portrayal reinforces the idea that the progress and inclusion of disabled individuals are contingent on the benevolence of non-disabled figures, rather than acknowledging the agency and contributions of disabled artists themselves.

The analysis of *The Greatest Showman* reveals a broader pattern in which historical and contemporary representations of disability are shaped by dominant cultural narratives that perpetuate ableist ideologies. This retrospective othering denies the agency of disabled individuals, framing their inclusion in artistic spaces as an exception rather than a right. The film's narrative aligns with the tendency to view disability as a problem to be

solved or managed by non-disabled individuals, rather than recognizing disabled artists as active creators with their own voices and perspectives.

In contrast, the performance *World at Our Feet* by Erin Ball and Vanessa Furlong offers an important and empowering narrative that challenges traditional ableist views. By recontextualizing disability within the performance, Ball and Furlong demonstrate how disability can be a source of artistic innovation and transformation. Their work embodies visual activism, celebrating disability in a way that disrupts the normative gaze and reclaims agency over their stories. This performance serves as a powerful example of how contemporary circus arts can redefine and elevate narratives around disability, moving beyond the constraints of historical and cultural prejudices.

This article ultimately calls for a critical reassessment of how disability is remembered and represented in circus history and contemporary media. It highlights the need to acknowledge and celebrate the diverse contributions of disabled artists, not as curiosities or anomalies but as integral and innovative figures within the arts.

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