

Herza, Filip: *Imaginace jinakosti. Pražské přehledky lidských kuriozit v 19. a 20. století [Imagination of Otherness. The “Freak” Shows in Prague in the 19th and 20th Century]*.

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My review models a dialogue between Filip Herza and Helen Davies (2015),¹ the authors of two books that historicize the construction of freakery as an ambivalent process – in the Czech lands and Great Britain, respectively. With this syntopical reading,² I sharpen the challenges in moving beyond the limits of master narratives, for a more historically accurate vision on the social representation of otherness as “a process of knowledge production that is related to a series of socio-cultural influences.”³ Both authors consciously provoke an uncomfortable sense of identification with “others” through blurring “the boundaries between audience and performers, the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’, the ‘self’ and ‘other’ [...] in a constant process of negotiation and reconstruction.”⁴

Davies succeeds in exploring “an intoxication with the imagined sexual thrills of freakery which actually prohibits any consummation of our desire to possess the past.”⁵ Herza focuses on the germination of otherness into national identity and examines how its pillars, including nobility, motherhood, power, and authenticity, are exaggerated when they are attributed to “freaks.” The interactive manner of storytelling (the use of “we” to refer to readers and oneself, posing questions, inviting the comparison of content with readers’ personal experiences) is only a part of Herza’s style. Along with systematic historical interference in the formation of the collective “we,” Herza explicitly calls upon the reader to weigh the role of physical otherness, and even monstrosity, in the representative identities of Czechs. One compelling reason to review Herza’s book in comparison with Davies’s text is the notable similarity of their frameworks: the main part of *Imaginace jinakosti* (Imagination of Otherness) covers four cases, of the giant Josef Drásal, the Dahomey Amazons, the “Siamese twins” Blažek, and the Lilliput shows, while Davies’ book consists of five cases, four of which touch upon the same types of freakery.

It is not only similarities but also differences – even on the verge of mutually exclusive approaches – that connect these authors, stemming from opposing views

¹ Davies, Helen: *Neo-Victorian Freakery. The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*. Houndmills/Basingstoke, New York 2015.

² More about syntopical reading can be found in Adler, Mortimer J./van Charles, Doren: *How to Read a Book. The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*. New York et al. 2011, 313–317.

³ Mannarini, Terri/Veltri, Giuseppe A./Salvatore, Sergio (eds): *Media and Social Representations of Otherness*. Houndmills/Basingstoke, New York 2020, 18.

⁴ Davies: *Neo-Victorian Freakery* 206 (cf. fn. 1).

⁵ *Ibid.* 205 (cf. fn. 1).

on the historical continuity of freakery, which came into its heyday in the nineteenth century. Davies brings forward the complex relationship between the history of freak shows and the recent popularity of neo-Victorianism. Herza presents the decline and gradual demise of Prague's freak culture in the 1940s (pp. 25-26), posting it as a main difference in the history of freakery in the Czech lands in comparison with the United States and Great Britain (p. 216). Furthermore, he remains ambivalent regarding its historical echo during the socialist period (pp. 120-121). This apparent difference in approaching the timeline of freak culture impels Davies and Herza to pose different research questions and to develop different methodologies for their historicization.

Being directly interested in "extending the ethical work of neo-Victorianism in terms of redressing past inequalities of gender, sexuality, race, and class,"⁶ Davies examines, "[T]o what extent does the representation of freak show performers in neo-Victorianism think beyond oppressive and exploitative understandings of bodily difference in the Victorian era and our own cultural moment?"⁷ In a generally formulated goal "to think more consistently about the relationship between the historically very diversely conceived abnormality and the embodied differences, the breeding and interactions of which led to the production of particular historical discourses, practices, institutions," (p. 43) the reader decodes Herza's consistent interest in the question, "Who's afraid of identity politics?" The goal is embedded in questioning the role of intersectionality of disability, class, gender, and ethnicity/race.⁸

Davies builds her narration around the mutual interrogation of history and literature; the "self-conscious collapsing of the boundaries between 'fact' and 'lies' is particularly suggestive in terms of neo-Victorianism's investment in questioning [...] the genre's ideological commitment to offering alternative versions of the nineteenth century."⁹ Relying on the exploration of "pertinent allegories with metatextual implications,"¹⁰ she provides multiple forms of evidence for the different ways in which "a literary text comes to terms with the pressure of historical events and forces."¹¹ Her argument for using this methodology is "a very limited 'official' historical record of certain social groups or individuals, [for whom] fictionalisation becomes an important strategy for redressing historical power inequalities."¹² At the same time, the reader remains puzzled by missing an exploration of the continuity between Britain's past of freak shows and their present in neo-Victorian fiction, despite the fact that Davies acknowledges the ongoing process of freakery identities being reproduced: "Freak show representation certainly does become the carrier of

⁶ *Ibid.* 3 (cf. fn. 1).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Alcoff*, Linda M.: Who's Afraid of Identity Politics? In: *Moya*, Paula M. L. / *Hames-García*, Michael R. (eds.): *Reclaiming Identity. Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Berkeley et al. 2000, 312-344.

⁹ *Davies*: *Neo-Victorian Freakery* 103 (cf. fn. 1).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 204 (cf. fn. 1).

¹¹ *LaCapra*, Dominick: *History, Literature, Critical Theory*. New York 2013, 29.

¹² *Davies*: *Neo-Victorian Freakery* 204 (cf. fn. 1).

dubious ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability. Yet identity is [...] endlessly made and re-made in a process of self-conscious fabrication.”¹³ It is reasonable to say that in Davies’s interrogation of history and literature, the latter has “won.”

A reciprocal bond between social representations of otherness and mass culture is in the center of Herza’s analysis too, even he works through a hypothesis concerning the replacement of a manifest, non-scientific, image of otherness by an expert vision. Herza’s historicization relies on one of the typical dichotomies of modernity, namely science/secular knowledge vs. the religious/theological approach. Indeed, the replacement of a religious image of the world by the scientific image of human embodiment as a main driving force beyond the formation of social representation of otherness is one of the recurrent motifs (pp. 24-25, 31). Prioritizing radical changes in the images of otherness in his historicization, Herza ignores rival images of otherness and the interrelation among them. This contextual reductionism disrespects the complex role of theology in producing knowledge aimed at subjectifying otherness,¹⁴ as well as the long-term history of science, especially medicine, as a civil religion deeply infiltrated by Christian metaphors, as well as epistemologies. Ignoring the complicated interrelation between science and religion reverberates with a descriptive approach to medical sensationalism, seen by Herza as a predominant driving force in social representations of otherness in the Czech lands, which remains separated from the detailed historicization of the public reception of “freaks.”

In this turn, Herza’s book can be seen as a post-secular text, in which critical explanation suffices to reveal truth and a close reading questions ethical concerns.¹⁵ Such a view partially explains the vast difference between Herza and Davies with regard to the use of images of freakery. Re-centering the narration on marginalized groups inclines Davies not to use available visual representations of “freaks.”¹⁶ In contrast, Herza includes forty images of “freaks,” the main protagonists in his narration. However, actual visual analysis is missing from this extended visual accompaniment to the text, which casts further doubt regarding Herza, who leaves the readers to make their own associations.

A syntopical reading of *Imaginace jinakosti* and *Neo-Victorian Freakery* leaves many open questions regarding the possibility of an entangled history of otherness, including contemporary and historically informed practices aimed at achieving epistemic justice for people with disabilities. Neither Davies nor Herza have transcended the cultural boundaries of their narrative, remaining tied to the national context as the predominant locus for the historicization of otherness. Notably, none of the writers at the center of Davies’ analysis are mentioned by Herza, not even Mark Slouka, an author of Czech origin who wrote *God’s Fool* (2003), a fiction piece about

¹³ *Ibid.* 201 (cf. fn. 1).

¹⁴ Jasper, Alison: Theology at the Freak Show. St. Uncumber and the Discourse of Liberation. In: *Theology & Sexuality* 11 (2015) 2, 43-53.

¹⁵ *LaCapra*: Critical Theory 13 (cf. fn. 13).

¹⁶ *Davies*: Neo-Victorian Freakery 6 (cf. fn. 1).

the “Siamese twins,” Chang and Eng. With her focus on neo-Victorianism, Davies neglects the impact of both interwar German expressionism and the critical tradition of contemporary Francophone post-colonial fiction on problematizing the history of freakery.¹⁷ This omission requires additional effort not only on the part of scholars who use historical arguments to recognize otherness, but also on the part of readers, who must practice interactive reading as a way out of the trap of narrow vision.

Graz

Victoria Shmidt

¹⁷ *Flaugh*, Christian: *Operation Freak. Narrative, Identity, and the Spectrum of Bodily Abilities in Francophone Literature*. Montreal, Kingston 2012.