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The Colonization of the Bodies of Savages.

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Freak shows

Her face contorted in grimace, her arms raised as if in anger or fear, shrivelled, sagging breasts, torso leading to the tail of a fish – this was the mermaid that passing Londoners could see at a St James's Street café in 1822. So what if the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge had published the four-volume work *The Menageries* out of concern for keeping people's minds in order? They still knew that naturalists had not discovered everything. The animal kingdom could not be more enormous and strange, and was not as regular as science would have it. This was a proven fact – there were gigantic beasts and dwarf beasts, living ones and dried-out or fossilized ones.

Wonders, irregularities, and monsters have long attracted both collectors and passing viewers, although the reasons for their curiosity have been various. The value of the specimens showcased in a freak show depended on their peculiarity. The collector of oddities would look for the rare and remarkable. Among his treasures was a reliquary with the remains of a saint, a shell framed in gold, an ivory jewel case, a fly ensconced in amber, an Orthodox icon, a unicorn's horn and a tiny shoe carved out of a cherry pit. Here, the dried exotic fruit found itself next to the mummified "mermaid" – the mermaid was

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not at all out of place in a contemporary world which accepted the existence of monstrous creatures. As taxonomical systems were developed in the field of natural history, increasingly concerted efforts were made to search for the normal, typical, and exemplary. This also brought about a gradual change in the way in which peculiarity was understood. Rather than the vision of reality in which nature appeared as a series of revelations in which God intervened, working miracles and changing the course of events, or creating grotesque beings, increasingly there was a preference for a conception of the world in which exceptions pointed to the rules governing the universal order. Yet there was one area in which the freak retained much of its former character – that of public displays. Excitement remained over the fact that nature was capable of bewildering cases of redundancy – a woman with three breasts, a two-headed creature, or one with only one head, but two sets of limbs. Nature was amazingly inventive, and had been known to give one body the characteristics of both sexes. And sometimes it worked the other way, giving people diminished organs, leaving them out entirely, replacing some with others, changing human organs into animal ones... Sometimes the body of a pig, horse, or dog contained a human intelligence. What seemed curious was both the intellectual normality of people with strange bodies, as well often as the capabilities of those with average ones. Therefore, anything that diverted from the ordinary was sought, lunatics, savages, geniuses and monsters, to be exhibited for viewers' pleasure. Such "freaks" were a mainstay of sideshows, where the real was mixed with the artificial, the living with the dead. People of science often doubted the authenticity of such beings, while specialists spoke of the purveyors of the spectacles as charlatans and exposed the genealogy of the supposed mermaids. The aforementioned dried-out mermaid was in fact produced from the remains of a monkey and a salmon, probably in Japan, the global capital of manufacture of such wonders.¹ Still, though, the 19th century remained a happy hunting ground, and public shows were the stage of rival mermen and mermaids, gigantic whale skeletons and live exotic creatures, half-people and half-animals. The boundaries marked by scientists became somewhat blurred.

These curiosities were followed by physicians. They came to determine whether a freak of nature was really remarkable, and gave their verdict on the scientific value of individual specimens. Medics themselves were extremely interested in anything that might contribute to a better understanding of humankind. For them, the *lusus naturae*, or "freaks of nature," that drew a sensation-hungry public traced a certain order. An exception could be a pathological change, and a monster a missing link in evolution... On occasion, mingling

1 Altick, Richard D., *The Shows of London*, Cambridge, MA and London 1978, 303.

with the crowd of charlatans and owners of fairground stalls, physicians tried to purchase the curiosity, or what remained of it. Particularly cherished were “human oddities” – dwarfs, giants, specimens of extreme obesity or exceptional thinness, as well as “savages” who stood almost on the verge of the animal world. They watched the living from the outside, and subjected the dead to close scrutiny from the inside too. Specialists performed autopsies to verify the nature of the curiosity, after which they embalmed it, preserved it in formalin, and put the skeletons together. The stage career of living freaks also went on after death – appropriately dissected, they continued to draw crowds. Sometimes too a freak of nature would be taken on by the intellectual elite. The skeleton of a 12-year old Sicilian dwarf girl, whose appearances in Ireland and England made her famous, was exhibited at the Royal College of Surgeons, accessible only to scientists. Another type of spectacle concerned Julia Pastrana, who was found among Indians. Of diminutive stature, but with an impressive beard and a head shaped like that of a monkey, for some time she was an attraction at London exhibitions. As well as England, she appeared in the United States, Canada and Moscow. Upon her death, she was embalmed and exhibited at a gallery in London: for a shilling, one could see Julia dressed in the theatrical costume which she wore during her life. One eyewitness wrote the following:

The face was marvelous: exactly like an exceedingly good portrait in wax, but it was *not* formed of wax. The closest examination convinced me that it was the true skin, prepared in some wonderful way. [...] There was no unpleasantness, or disagreeable concomitant, about the figure; and it was almost difficult to believe that the mummy was really that of a human being, and not an artificial model. (Altick 1978: 276 (author’s emphasis))

So it was not just Julia who was admired, but also the craftsmanship that had gone into preserving her remains. A journalist from one London paper deemed it appropriate to inform his readers that:

This specimen of modern embalming, by a new and hitherto unknown process, has been most critically acclaimed by many of the first scientific gentlemen in London, and pronounced by them to be the most wonderful and marvelously-successful example of embalming ever recorded.²

We might at first be appalled by this kind of cognitive optimism as an affront to the dignity of a deceased human being. But it is worth considering what lay behind it. Perhaps this was not just about showing off the freak to delight the crowd and make the owner rich. It is true that the public likes to get excited,

² *Illustrated London News*, 29 March 1862, 316, cited in Altick 1978, 267.

and the sight of a human – dead or alive – awakens especially strong emotions. This triggers an interplay between compassion and self-recognition in confrontation with that which is different. The embalmed Julia is not alive and not a waxwork, yet it is *almost* as if she is alive, and *almost* as if she is made of wax. Though she is dead, she is no decomposing corpse – she has remained *practically* as she was when alive. When living, though, she was *almost* like others; more even – with her linguistic abilities, grace, love of dance and singing, she surpassed many women – but on the other hand she was also *slightly* like a man (how else did she get her beard?), and *slightly* like an animal with her skull, which, as the naturalist Francis Buckland pronounced, was of the orangutan skull *type* (albeit not entirely orang-utan). She was known as Baboon Lady – and we do not know if this was because she had *practically* grown up among animals, or because the Mexicans had deformed her skull, or if this was simply her human-animal nature. Her essence oscillated somewhere on the boundaries, as shown by this “almost,” “practically,” and “slightly.” And it was this that made her interesting.

The curiosity of savages

Was it empty curiosity alone that attracted the crowd? Was it not in fact the question of what we really are that lay beneath? Perhaps this was the setting for a kind of exploration of human nature, brought to life by the question of where the boundary between a human and a non-human truly lies...

Where does normality end? Does non-human mean animals, or is there some group of beings in-between? To find the answer to this question, beings with not entirely clarified identities were observed – individuals known as “savages.” Brought over from faraway countries (often together with botanic specimens, minerals and exotic animals), they evoked images of overseas worlds. They ended up in menageries and at fairs, where it was common for them to be caged and exhibited to paying customers. The same exhibiting system that organized the ways in which animals and madmen were displayed was applied here too. Yet savages were more than just an oddity. They were interesting in a unique way – by igniting the curiosity of viewers, they piqued their sense of identity. We are people – and they? How can they be judged – are they good or bad? Or rather: are they better or worse than us? Turning the question around, it turns out to be a question of our nature being good or bad. But is everything always about us?

It would seem so. Here we have those who differ from us – physically, mentally, culturally – and are called savage, nature’s children, primeval peoples, primitive cultures, and seen as a link in the evolution of the species and civilization, as inhabitants of paradise lost or elements of the world’s cultural

kaleidoscope. Yet it turns out that we need them. Depicting their differences is not just an intellectual and aesthetic adventure, but terrain on which we can recognize our own culture. Two visions of savagery, their various versions floating around for centuries, demonstrating Europeans' ambivalent relationship to themselves. The ideas of the paradisiacal innocence of savages (suggesting that it is the European culture that is the degenerate one) co-existed with images and tales relating their barbarism, and according undeniable values to Europeanness. Generally speaking, their perception was conditioned by conceptual categories which allowed the European consciousness to capture cultural difference. This meant at first the classification of "paganism," attributing to the Other of various types a place in the universal history of the world that began on the day of creation.³

When the Other is markedly different from us, it is not always easy to perceive the humanity in its dissimilarity, which is by no means obvious. The New World represented such a case. At play was on the one hand embodiment of the knowledge of it in an applicable model for understanding the world, and on the other granting the new a certain axiological and aesthetic autonomy. It was also about who could really be seen in the inhabitants of the newly discovered lands. At stake was the identity of otherness, and the savages were defeated in the first round. As Tzvetan Todorov wrote, "Columbus has discovered America but not the Americans."⁴ The Indians for him represented little more than the features of the landscape. "His attitude with regard to this other culture is, in the best of cases, that of the collector of curiosities, and it is never accompanied by any attempt at comprehension." (Todorov 1999: 36) This position may have been reprehensible, but was also popular among the inhabitants of the Old World, and subjects of attractiveness could therefore be played out in shows featuring savages.

Moral examples and scientific proof

When a savage is treated as a spectacle, his body becomes a rhetorical space giving meanings to *topoi*. In rhetoric, a *topos* is a form that can be applied to prove various arguments – this is what decides on its persuasive effectiveness. And the spectacular *topos* of savages also worked in this way. They could be viewed in different ways, treated as living moral *exempla* through which

3 Shelton, Anthony Alan, "Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance and the Incorporation of the New World," in: Elsner, John and Cardinal, Roger, *The Cultures of Collecting*, London: Reaktion Books, 1994.

4 Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999, 49.

certain concepts could be demonstrated in a condensed form (the simple life, immorality etc.). In one place at one time, *exempla* of very different meanings appeared. In London in 1822, for instance, a family of Lapps could be seen. It was thought that the severe climate and resultant tough conditions had shaped people of exceptional moral virtue (such at least was the civilizational myth). That same year, Tono Maria from Brazil was exhibited, and the meanings of lack of civilization that she invoked were quite different. Each of the (almost 100) scars visible on her body reputedly commemorated an act of adultery she had committed. The moral limitations imposed on Europeans by their civilization seemed to be compensated to an extent by watching the evidence of decadence in the Other.

Exhibitions allowed mythical places to become concrete in the imagination of Europeans. The savages could be remarkable, surprising, or miraculous. This motif of miraculousness accompanied the arrival of the so-called Aztec Lilliputians in 1853: "WONDERFUL! WONDERFUL! WONDERFUL! WONDERFUL are thy Ways, Oh, Providence! How wonderful are thy works!"

There were two of them – a 14-year-old boy and a 13-year-old girl. The boy was 111.6 cm in height (3 feet 8 inches), and the girl somewhat shorter at just 96.5 cm (3 ft 2 in).

One can hardly help at first looking upon them... as belonging to the race of gnomes with which the superstition of former times once peopled the chambers of the earth – a tradition which some have referred to the existence of an ancient race, of diminutive stature, dwelling in caverns, and structures of unhewn stones, which have long since disappeared.

Evidence of the existence of such races came in the form of the sculptures of Yucatan and Peruvian masks, now joined by living proof whose ambivalent human-animal-gnomic status was cause for excitement. Reports from New York suggested that these specimens were

Of an entirely new type – a kind of human being which we had never before seen – with physiognomies formed by descent through ages of thought and association of which we had no knowledge – moving, and observing and gesticulating differently from all other children – and somehow, with an unexplainable look of authenticity. (Altick 1978: 284).

The Aztec Lilliputians seemed to be chthonic beings, and factual proof of the correctness of the paths of Western history. They belonged to the world of myths, legends and fantasies, but their remarkable nature also represented a manifestation with scientific value. They stood somewhere on the edge of society, and it was as such that they were displayed, with romantic and scientific themes overlapping in the show. The pair's biographies excited

onlookers and set imaginations racing. The supposed Aztecs had been found in 1849 in Iximaya in Central America. Only one of their three Spanish discoverers had managed to escape the clutches of the bloodthirsty natives – it was he who had brought back the children, who became the subject of precise studies. Their appearance and level of intelligence were examined, they were measured and observed, and assessed. During a lecture at the Ethnological Society, the Aztec Lilliputians played with a pen, ink and paper, and Exhibited the behavior of intelligent English children at two or three years of age. They could pronounce only a few English words, which they had recently been taught – and had evidently no means of communication with each other by language.⁵

All indications suggested that the representatives of the lost race were retarded in their development. There was not even agreement as to whether they could be called people:

In point of size and shape, their heads are identical with the cast of the head of an orangutan [...] Theirs are not malformed human heads, but Simial heads on human bodies. It was therefore not justified to call them human, argued one of the London illustrated papers (Altick 1978: 285).

Arrangement of savagery for the needs of the show

Savages did not necessarily have to be brought over from distant lands. Like freaks or marvels of nature, they were exhibits *created* in specific circumstances, and presented using particular display techniques. The way a show was set up depended on the expectations of the audience. Of course, different histories sold better at different times. This was also the root of the various biographies appended to the “savages,” turning them into pseudo-apes captured in Borneo, African earth people or the beautiful daughters of the east, escaped from harems.

Maximo and Bartola (“the last of the ancient Mexican Aztecs”) were indeed retarded in their development. They suffered from microcephaly, which was why their skulls were small and pointed, and they were not very tall. Their exoticness was a product of the entertainment industry, and the whole enterprise was helped by Americans’ increasing interest in the natural and cultural history of their continent. Maximo and Bartola were born in the village of Decora in St Salvador, in the family of Innocente Burgos and Marina Espina. They were found by an enterprising Spaniard named Ramón Selva, who promised the family that he would take the children somewhere

⁵ *Athenaeum*, 9 July 1853, cited in Altick 1978, 284.

where they could be cured, before selling them to a certain Morris, who then launched their show business career. The biography of the “last Aztecs” was constructed with the help of John Lloyd Stephens’s three-volume travelogue *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841-1843). The illustrations of the ruins of ancient architecture showed the reliefs of figures with elongated heads – similar to those of Maximo and Bartola. Further inspiration came from a description of a huge walled city inaccessible to outsiders, which Stephens took from the account of a Spanish priest. It was in this city that the children were said to have been found, sitting on an altar and venerated by the locals as the heirs of an ancient holy clan. This was described in the booklet *The Fate of the Living Aztec Children* (1860).

One of the factors determining the show’s success was how the academic world would judge the authenticity of the Aztecs. In Boston, where Maximo and Bartola’s careers began, they were observed by members of the Boston Society of Natural History, and in England by members of the Ethnological Society. They were also exhibited to many of Europe’s royal families. The organizers of other shows observed the way in which Maximo and Bartola were presented and took note for their own displays. At the time, it was not rare to show intellectually backward people as ethnological curiosities. People took advantage of the fact that scientists were unclear as to the causes and roots of this type of deficiencies. Individuals who would today be taken into medical care, diagnosed as sick, subnormal or afflicted by physiological defects, were often Aztecs, Eskimos, Bushmen, or natives of Borneo.⁶ Did the public believe in these fantastic tales? Some were without doubt reckoned to be hoaxes. On the other hand, though, the stories invented by the organizers of sideshows were not entirely at odds with scientific theories. Even in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some forms of intellectual deficiencies were explained as regression to earlier phases of species development.

In 1853, the same year as the Aztec children exhibit, two Pygmies, or Earth people, were shown in London, the story being that they lived in caves, like some animals. According to the promotional material, they were much more judicious than the Aztec Lilliputians. The 16-year-old boy and 14-year-old girl were brought to England, where work began on civilising them. The pair mastered English, as well as learning to play the piano and to sing – their savagery was thus overcome. At the same time, once again European culture showed how good it was at certifying its own values. The

6 Bogdan, Robert, *Freak Show. Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

display of the civilized savages was undeniably an example of the mechanism of articulation of European identity.

The limits of humanity

The savage seemed a particularly interesting proposition when it was hard to say unequivocally what species it came from. It was not without reason that the stars of the show, whose main asset was their physical deficiencies, were presented as having something of the animal about them. For instance, a person with undeveloped arms was called a Seal Man, and someone with an excess of hair was a Lion Man. Promotional literature showed animals' bodies with human heads (Bogdan 1988: 100). The descriptions of exotic animals and of the inhabitants of distant lands contained the same fascination with the murky area between man and beast. The African baboon was so similar to people that:

A most strange and wonderful Creature, the like never seen before in England, it being of Seven several Colours, ... resembling a Man, its fore parts clear, and his hinder parts all Hairy; having a long Head of Hair, and Teeth two or three inches long; taking a Glass of Ale in his hand like a Christian. (Altick 1978: 38).

The natives of Black Africa were described in similar terms – they appeared to belong to the same indistinct area between species. One brochure advertising another show said that:

[The Bushmen] show more similarity to Apes than to people.... Notwithstanding their ferocity these Bushmen are nearly harmless, and even the most fearful person can approach and feel all over them with the greatest confidence.

So there was no reason to fear – they were like tamed animals. The Bushmen were also portrayed at the time in a very positive way, resulting from the earlier 18th-century myth of the noble savage – innocent, spontaneous, living at one with nature. Yet this topos could be applied in other ways too.⁷ The depictions of savage peoples stressed various characteristics: the Hot-tentots were seen as the most primitive, the Zulus as the wildest and cruellest,

7 Corbey, Raymond, "Ethnographic Showcases 1870-1930," *Cultural Anthropology* 8 (3) 1993, 347. Representatives of primitive peoples, so-called *Naturvölker*, were sometimes displayed in zoos, included in the same image of nature as wild animals.

Dahomey warrior women were seen as the African Amazons, and Bushmen were viewed as half-human beings of the earth.⁸

The secrets of black women

A perfect example of an inventive exhibition was the history of an African woman named Saartjie, whose case demonstrated how the bodies of savages were used in the civilizing rhetoric describing the identities of the inhabitants of the civilized world. Saartjie was known as the Hottentot Venus, and the Hottentots were a people who in the European imagination occupied a place that was the polar opposite to civilization, providing a distinct comparative background for assessing the values of the Western world. She arrived in London in 1810, having previously been a servant to Dutch settlers in the Cape of Good Hope. They had hatched a plan to send her to Europe, promising that after earning a not insignificant sum of money she should be able to return home. Upon arrival in Europe, her unusual figure, running counter to the European concept of beauty, drew onlookers in their droves. Their reactions were ambivalent. They tended to concentrate on Saartjie's extremely prominent buttocks. Supposedly, this characteristic of Hottentot women, which had long been the focus of attention of European travelers, was evidence of the unbridled eroticism, or even lasciviousness, frothing in black people.⁹ Caricatures in the press and urban ditties went two ways. They took as their subject the incompatibility of the newcomer's appearance with the European canons of feminine beauty, as well as the excessive delight at this curiosity. There was more serious criticism too. Letters to the *Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Post* during the London shows protested that the Hottentot was a human being, and as such should be treated with decency. Instead, though, she was dressed in scanty dark attire which practically merged with the color of her skin, giving the impression of nudity. Audiences were allowed to touch her ample buttocks to be sure that they were not artificial. Do those who treat humans as animals deserve to be called civilized? The African Association began an investigation to find out whether Saartjie had come to London of her own free will, if she

8 As late as 1922, a pamphlet promoting the appearances of Clicko – “the wild dancing South African Bushman” – proclaimed: “He is as near like the ape as he is like the human. He has a good understanding of things, but with the mind that would correspond favourably with that of a two-year-old child, and we cannot help but wonder of Captain Du Barry has not brought Darwin’s missing link to civilization.” (Bogdan 1988: 192) Clicko, who enjoyed a very long career on stage, entered barefoot, wrapped in a leopard skin, and danced, making “ungodly yells.”

9 Gilman, Sander L., “Black bodies, white bodies: toward an iconography of female sexuality in late nineteenth-century art, medicine and literature,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 1, 213.

was receiving the promised pay, and what she thought of it all herself – was she suffering, or was she happy. One of the Association's members was appalled after seeing her in a cage: "The Hottentot was produced like a wild beast, and order to move backwards and forwards, and come and go into her cage, more like a bear on a chain than a human being."¹⁰

The appropriate checks were made, the relevant people asked, directives issued, and ultimately the show could go on. In December 1811 the Hottentot was christened – from now on she was to be called Sarah Bartmann. It was not just Londoners who could delight in seeing her – she was also displayed around the country, and then taken to Paris for 15 months. There too she was a sensation, inspiring scientists, caricaturists and songwriters; at one theater, a vaudeville performance was composed in her honor. She also posed nude for scientific illustrations. When she died, her body was taken by anatomists. It fell into the hands of the famous naturalist Cuvier, who in 1817 published the results of her research. He claimed that his intention was to present the objective facts, repudiating the false suppositions concerning black people. However, his assumptions concerning the primitiveness of the natives of Black Africa did not diverge from the convictions of his peers. In describing Saartjie, Cuvier stressed her similarity to an ape – not only externally, but also in her behavior: "Her movements were sudden and capricious, like those of a monkey. In particular she had a way of pouting her lips exactly like what we have observed in the orang-utan." (Gould 1982: 22)

All this was of course rather contradictory to the observations made on her excellent memory and linguistic capabilities (Saartjie spoke Dutch quite well, a little English, and in France began to manage some French). But it was in accordance with the general conception of the savagery of the blacks. Like many of his contemporary naturalists, Cuvier was particularly interested in two of the Hottentot's features: her monstrous buttocks and the unusual nature of her sexual organs. Did the protruding rear result from the formation of the fat, muscle or bone structure, they wondered? The fascination with the bestial sexual nature of the Other found an outlet in the legal procedures of science, and the researcher's scalpel helped to clear things up. There was one more intriguing matter to be studied. Whereas her buttocks, albeit seen from the outside, had been the most obvious characteristic and the main thing attracting audiences to the Hottentot Venus, she had never allowed her private parts to be studied while alive. For two centuries, European scientists interested in human nature had been fascinated to hear suggestions that the sexual organs of black women are hidden in the folds of the elongated labia. What was the anatomy of this part, and what conclusions could be made on this basis on the

10 Gould, Stephen Jay, "Hottentot Venus," *Natural History*, vol. 91, 1982, no. 10, 20.

development of human races? Cuvier solved this problem, writing, "I have the honor to present to the Academy the genital organs of this woman prepared in a manner that leaves no doubt about the nature of her *tablier*."

He showed that this was no specific structure uniquely characteristic of Hottentot women (Gould 1982: 23). The results of the examination were kept at the Royal Medical Academy. Saartjie's skeleton was also preserved. Living or dead, savage or baptized, the Hottentot remained in the place where the Other is kept, so that they can be observed and their oddity can amaze and be studied. At the same time, not only in Saartjie's case, the differences were described from a moral point of view. As Sander Gilman points out, thinking about black women and white prostitutes took place on the same terms. Both represented the embodiment of the female element that was seen as the root of corruption and disease.

The association of primitivism with an inability to control oneself, and especially with unbridled sexuality, was a lively topos of contemporary thinking. It is true that the reaction did not necessarily have to be absolute condemnation. In the spirit of the Enlightenment ideal of the nobility of non-civilization, the spontaneous primal nature was sometimes praised. Yet it was more common to see savages as those who had got stuck in an earlier stage of human history – the sight of them gave people the sense of how far Western culture had advanced the ability of self-control. Loss of this capability meant regression to primitive forms of emotion, and sometimes falling into lunacy or giving into one's sexual instincts. Gilman shows that when 19th-century society looked at Sarah Bartmann it was a sexualized gaze. Her prominent buttocks were noticed, which hinted at the "anomalies" she concealed beneath her skirt. A spectator at public shows, like a scientist examining savage bodies, was at the same time a politician of gazing.

Savages and others in the dreams of civilization

The organizers of exhibits sometimes tried to lend a certain gravitas to their enterprises by using descriptions gleaned from ethnography, physical anthropology, and history. An "anthropological-zoological exhibition," as Carl Hagenbeck called his shows, suggested something more than a common side-show. At first, he concentrated on wild animals (as the head of the Hamburg zoological garden and circus), before in 1874 turning his interest and enterprise towards the peoples of nature. At first, he showed Lapps, along with the material products of their culture and reindeer. In 1876 he brought Nubians over from Africa, together with some of the animals typical of their home regions, later exhibiting them in various European cities. Subsequently, it was the turn of the Indians of North America, Inuit, Indians, Zulus, Sudanese, and

Bushmen. Targeting the middle class, Hagenbeck maintained close contacts with the Museum für Völkerkunde in Hamburg, stressing that the aim of his work was in fact to further knowledge. This kind of ethnological exhibitions was fairly common. Their twilight would come only in the 1930s as a result of criticism of the moral aspects of imperialism and racism. The role of exhibitions was partly filled by films – ethnographic, semi-ethnographic, and propagating missionary activity (Corbey 1993).

When the fashion for translating grand civilizing narratives into the language of world exhibitions took hold, a specific role was accorded to other cultures. Mastering the world went hand in hand with measuring, describing and classifying, and exhibiting the results of these activities was important from the point of view of civilizational self-confirmation. The broader perspective involved consolidation of the ideology of nation-states and the development of colonialism. Exhibitions were an intermediary link between the official, ideological, political, and scientific discourse and the broader scope of culture. In them, historical and anthropological narratives as well as national and supranational ideologies gained the quality of attractive and instructive entertainment. They were given a certain vibrancy by press commentary and various kinds of educational ventures initiated by religious, philanthropic and scientific societies.¹¹ Tacked on to the official exhibition space were spontaneous show and trade areas which tended towards burlesque and somewhat lewd entertainment, and often parodied the exhibits of the official fair.

The great world fairs offered an especially powerful space for expression. The first of them, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, took place in London in 1851. The huge glass-and-steel structure called the Crystal Palace built especially for the occasion housed displays of individual countries showcasing their accomplishments. The British exhibiting success was soon copied by others. The travels of a European with a taste for such events in the second half of the century sticking to his own continent would have taken him to Vienna in 1873, Brussels in 1883 and 1897, Antwerp in 1893, London in 1862, Dublin in 1853, Florence in 1861 and Amsterdam in 1864. He would have come to know Paris like the back of his hand, as the French outstripped all others in their passion for organizing Great Spectacles: fairs were held there in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900. If the passion of this fan

11 In these "sites of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish," as Walter Benjamin described them, people were seduced by things. See also: "The world exhibitions glorified the exchange-value of commodities. They created a framework in which their use-value receded into the background. They opened up a phantasmagoria into which people entered in order to be distracted." (Benjamin, Walter, "Grandville or the World Exhibitions," in: *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1989, 165).

of great exhibitions had tempted him to visit America, he would have visited New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Buffalo, San Francisco, Seattle, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Nashville. Some of these exhibitions were local events, while others aspired to the status of national or international ones. How did they present the world? What was the place given to the members of other cultures?

At London's Crystal Place, many products were shown made of materials from the colonies. The United Kingdom thereby emphasized its imperial position. The Paris exhibition covered ethnological and archaeological materials. These two types of colonial view of the material and human world (the industrial achievements of civilization and primitivism on the peripheries of the empire) were woven into subsequent exhibitions in various ways. Non-European peoples were portrayed as collective entities, which was in accordance with the general message of the exhibition.¹² The nation-states participating in the development of the world and improving its order were also collective entities. On the stage of the exhibition, national local times were related to a more general perspective – to the civilizing rhythm of the modernization of the world. National histories were thus given a favorable background. The national time of the host represented the time of modern aspirations. This was played out on several fronts, and all the more adeptly as various anniversaries provided a pretext and inspiration.¹³ While these celebrations recalled the nation's history, the general ideology of the exhibition referred to the international time of modernity and human accomplishments.

The representatives of tribal societies, showcased together with the material products of their craft in homesteads and villages arranged for this purpose, were no longer peculiar savages; they were the Other taken as a community with a particular place in the civilizational order. The display of inhabitants of the lands which had been conquered fulfilled a propaganda

12 At the time, two main ways of portraying Others were established: the Hagenbeck-style diversion, making claims to ethnographical reliability, and displays of freaks and curiosities in the style in which the famous circus impresario Phineas Tylor Barnum excelled. Incidentally, this was not an absolute division – Hagenbeck too was known to showcase curiosities. The world exhibitions drew inspiration from both models.

13 The *Exposition Universelle* in Paris commemorated the centenary of the French revolution, the Philadelphia exhibition of 1876 marked the centenary of American independence, and the one taking place in Melbourne in 1888 was held to celebrate 100 years of European settlement in Australia (a hundred years on, Expo '88 in Brisbane was held on the bicentenary of the colonisation). The 1893 Chicago exhibition marked the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, and New York's World's Fair in 1939 invoked the 150th anniversary of George Washington becoming president.

purpose. If they appeared brutal and ferocious, the role of Western civilization seemed clear: their “inhumanity” needed to be tempered. The exhibitions not only gave visitors an insight into craft and artistic products. They also depicted theatrical scenes of war, those from daily life and showing aspects of ritual activities. Audiences were especially fascinated by representations of acts of war and cannibalism and the practices of headhunters. Later on, alongside Dahomey, Senegalese, and Somalian villages those of Scotland and Ireland were also shown. But the proximity of images of the lives of simple Europeans and the natives of exotic climes by no means indicated that they were qualitatively similar; on the contrary, it emphasized the difference of the “primeval” nature of the Western world and that of the colonies. Whereas “primeval” in non-European societies could refer to an attribute of living ancestors and was part of the civilizing narrative about evolutionary and civilizational development, the latter was linked to the discourse on the ludic traditions of visitors’ own country. The representation of life in these own villages was an image of the national “beginnings,” helping to construct a vision of an internally coherent national culture with traditions rooted in history. However, numerous non-European cultures appeared to be bereft of such a history.¹⁴ Attempts were being made to unify the world, methodologically and in accordance with the laws of science, in an effort to liberate it from non-scientific traditions. Science could be used to sanction and authorize all kinds of acts, and the marriage of scientific discourse and spectacle could be very persuasive. Visitors to world exhibitions could also find out about research on racial characteristics, conducted in specialist anthropometric and psychometric laboratories. The inhabitants of Earth were measured, studied and compared, and all this contributed to the creation of a more general suggestion that it is possible for all exotic diversity to be contained within a certain greater whole. This whole was to be Western culture – an entity capable of consciously and responsibly taking care of the rest of the world, giving it attention, supervision, and control.

Savages needed by progress

At the same time, as informing spectators about the accessibility of the world and the power of science and the institutions introduced by civilization to bring order, exhibitions also strove to capture their hearts and minds. Visitors were seduced by promises of the possibility of an all-encompassing

14 Coombes, Annie E., “Ethnography and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities,” in: Hiller, Susan (ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism. Perspectives on Art*, London and New York: Routledge, 189-214.

overview. This would allow them to see a certain metonymically represented “whole,” opening up the world for the eye and the mind, and at the same time closing it within a certain conceptual judging whole.¹⁵ Tony Bennett argues that the “exhibitionary complex” takes various entities from a limited space that is not visible to all into a more open one. He tries to soften the rather common voices that liken exhibiting institutions to the Foucauldian institutions of confinement such as the asylum, clinic and prison.¹⁶ The exhibitionary complex gives audiences the right to take pride in the achievements of civilization and the right to a conscious look at their own society. In this civilizational utopia, the divide is not between the rulers and ruled-over citizens of a country. It has been transferred elsewhere – between the civilizational unity and other, uncivilized peoples. The vision linking the history and civilization of Western nations with other cultures was total. The narratives ran in a set direction, with primitive societies falling from the historical order, arriving somewhere between nature and culture (in some respects this was a space reminiscent of that previously occupied by anatomical curiosities). The history of humanity was painted as an epiphany of progress, and development as the transformation of savagery into civilization. The Europeans stood to the fore, ready to take more retarded societies by the hand. Those who remained behind were looked upon as an artifact from past times, as “contemporary ancestors.” Although those shown at exhibitions were authentic, they tended to be deprived of their own voices and minds. Corbey (1993: 364) puts it as follows: “Their own voices and views – ironically often as ethnocentric and omniscient as Western ones – were neutralized.” They were placed behind a fence, a barrier, or at least a row of benches, a boundary which not only designated the territories belonging to the spectators and the actors, but also defined the great distance of the relationship between the audience and the object of their gaze.

The above outline provides a generalized description of the dominant (albeit not only) trend in the message of exhibitions. The vision of the colonies as providers of raw materials and goods, as anthropological and ethnographical laboratories, or finally as jewels in the imperial crown, was at least the most visible aspect of exhibitions. A certain ambivalence can be seen in

15 Bennett, Tony, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in: Dirks, Nicholas B., Eley, Geoff, and Ortner, Sherry B. (eds) *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

16 This is shown by Douglas Crimp, for example, who stresses that they are part of the system of institutional relations and are dependent on certain discursive formations (scientific, aesthetic, artistic); and indeed exercise limiting functions (“On the Museum’s Ruins,” in: Foster, Hal (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic; Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Washington: Bay Press, 1985), 45.

the proud narratives of civilization. The belief in the undeniable values of modern progress was edged with fear of the “degeneration” of the Western world. From this standpoint, colonial cultures could be perceived as enclaves of naturalness or the sources of cultural and civic order. The message of exhibitions was not unanimous, and visitors’ interpretation was therefore not predetermined; furthermore, audiences were made up of individuals who not only “consume views,” but also interpret them. But this would be the other side of the work of rhetoric, allowing savages and the Other to be used in a wide-ranging civilizational self-presentation. All-encompassing civilizational visions only seemed valid for some time. They were appointed in a period when the individual parts of the human environment were set within a historicizing, evolutionary framework of representation. Such practices were gradually repudiated and criticized. The presentation of the Other as living ancestors and as objects submitting to the activities of the heirs of European civilization strengthens the inequality between cultures, in so doing arbitrarily defining the relations between their preferred values. This arbitrariness is unacceptable, just as is the fetishism of collections from other cultures.¹⁷ The criticism accompanied more general changes in the ways of perceiving reality and the methodology of cognizing them, as well as the breaking of grand narratives, and attempts to pay close attention to what cognitive constructs different from those formed in our own culture indicate. These debates concerned the Other as much as ourselves, our place in the narratives which we produce. It turns out that we need those who are different from us (physically, mentally, in their culture or their history), dubbed savages, children of nature, primal peoples, primitive cultures; seen as links in the evolution of the species and civilization, as the inhabitants of a paradise lost, or elements of the global cultural kaleidoscope, to gain a deeper understanding of our own identity. Bit by bit, the “savage” became less and less strange, gaining a soul, a personality, and an identity comparable with our own. In this way, the Other was formed. The savage was denied the right to exist for both epistemological reasons (he emerged from ancient myths and scientific a priori dogmatism) and moral-ethical ones too (the concept of savagery bears the strong imprint of value judgements). The Other should be not just a mirror in which the European sees himself, but an autonomous subject with the right to speak in its own voice. This is the source of the idea of setting the limits of freedom of representing the Other: let their bodies and souls remain free, and let the power of the gaze not be the preserve of just one side. Today, in various

17 Clifford, James, “Objects and Selves – An Afterword,” in: Stocking, George W. Jr. (ed.), *Objects and Others*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 244.

spheres of entertainment and recreation, we still see ethnic groups presenting traditional dances and rituals, often suitably tweaked and made more attractive for the purpose of the display; we acquire from natives (conscious of their ethnicity) tourist keepsakes known as objects of ethnic art, and we enjoy trying exotic cuisines. As before, the field of public entertainment is the living nerve of culture. Topics of diversity continue to be played out, curiosity and the desire for novelty are still piqued, although the old motifs of curiosities and marvels are now introduced in new ways. But that is an entirely different matter...

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