

STAGED OTHERNESS. HUMAN ODDITIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, C. 1850-1939

The project deals with the issue of presentations of human oddities in Central Europe between the years 1850 and 1939. We focus on presentations such as, among others, freak shows and ethnographic villages arranged within world fairs, when living people were presented in front of the public. We put the following groups of people into the category of human oddities: 1) 'ethnic others' brought from outside Europe; 2) people characterized by mental and somatic dysfunctions; 3) locals perceived as others by their own society. Therefore, we are interested in such persona as: Julia Pastrana, a Mexican woman with hypertrichosis (an abnormal amount of hair growth over the body), who was presented all around Europe, conjoined twin sisters Růžena and Josefa Blažkova. Subject of our study will be also staged ethnographical villages, e.g. of Hutsul or Buffalo Bill shows.

We have taken the 2. half of the 19th century as the start date for our studies in view of the fact that that moment sees an increase in the number of shows under consideration. The end date of our studies is designated as the year 1939. It marks the beginning of the period when the tradition of such presentations vanishes due to the II WW and legal regulations imposed by the Nazis.

Fundamental purpose of the project is to answer the questions as to how the other was construed and perceived in Central Europe and whether (and if, in what way) this perception differed from West European perspective.

Research material consists of written and iconographic sources such as: press notes and advertisements, travel journals, diaries, postcards, posters, prints, souvenirs etc. We approach every presentation as theatricalized, social event which took place on stage, in a well-arranged scenery, was it sophisticated or humble; the roles played in the show were strictly defined. Accordingly, understanding the nature of the show requires the analysis of theatrical construction of event (stage, scenario, scenery, clothes, etc.). This will make possible to answer the question as to what tools were used to build an image of the Other. Interpreting the relations between the other and the public we will focus both on the gaze as well as spatial distance and the role that touch and other senses (as olfaction and hearing) played in the way the other was perceived.

We approach the other on stage as cultural, political and economic construction whose specificity resides in her/his subversive identity. Accordingly, the social image of the other is the subject of our analysis. On the other hand, the other was also an individual speaking her/his voice. Therefore, our point is to tell the story of human oddities shows from the other's point of view using her/his diaries, memoirs and remarks.

The general methodological framework of the project is indicated by such approaches as: critical visual methodologies as articulated by Gillian Rose (Rose 2007), iconology (Panofsky 1962), critique of visual representations of the exotic as formulated by Peter Mason (Mason 1998). Moreover, in working on interpersonal relations as visualized in iconography, we intend to use the methods of analysis of non-verbal communication such as the theory of proxemics (E. T. Hall, L. Altman, M. L. Knapp) and gaze patterns (M. Argyle and J. Dean 1965, M. Argyle and M. Cook 1976, J. Berger 1999, 2008).

The phenomenon of presentations of human oddities in Central Europe remains almost unknown. The novelty of our study resides in both the archival material that will be introduced to international scholarly discussion and in the research methodology. Analyzing the phenomenon of human oddities shows we will take into consideration the role that the gaze played in domesticating or rejecting of the other; first and foremost, we will focus on how spatial distance, touch and other senses as olfaction and hearing were employed in construing of the other. Research will serve to recognize the extent of the phenomenon of presentation of human oddities in Central Europe as well as to understand how the manifold cultural practices and visual methods were used to define otherness. Recognizing the mechanisms governing the process of how the otherness was defined at the turn of 20th century has significant consequences for interpreting the iconosphere of contemporary visual culture and understanding cultural practices relating to discovering of the world (such as global tourism and contemporary media).