OUTRÉ AESTHETICS

by

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A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2015

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

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Since the revolutionary period in America, aesthetics has played a crucial role in political formation, social improvisation, and cultural imagination. Aesthetic contemplation offered a rich and evocative language for imagining political liberty, and for dealing with the inherent contradictions and challenges of a new democracy. At the same time, many Americans held substantially disparate concepts, values, and tastes. They offered alternative visions and 'outside' aesthetic expressions that continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and into the present. Outré aesthetic varieties testify to the tremendous diversity in American life, people, and art. Outré aesthetics connects corporeal and emotive responses to art and material appearances with the non-normative systems and disruptive forms that define them. I employ the outré as both an analytical concept and critical tool for understanding embodied approaches to aesthetic experience, with historical, cultural, artistic and literary examples. I bring together recent critical treatments of aesthetics across disciplines into conversation, including cultural studies, literature, philosophy, history, psychology, disability and freak studies, bio/neuro/cognitive and social aesthetics, and expand on recent claims. The dissertation attempts to contribute to revisionist American Studies by asserting an aesthetics that questions the distinction between aesthetic function and life, and examines both the significance and ubiquity of the outré in the relationship between politics and aesthetics in American culture.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my mentors and friends for the opportunity to learn alongside them, and to collaborate in so many ways. Thanks to Victoria Lamont and Jay Dolmage, for all their enthusiasm, guidance, inspiration, and understanding. Thanks to Andy McMurry for his support and kind words, and to Kevin McGuirk, who understood the vision of this project early on, and the many approaches to American studies and aesthetics. Joan Hawkins and Mario Boido took time to critically assess my work with thoughtful questions. Thanks to our Chair. My friends both within and without the program are all amazing and caring people. Thanks to Justin Newman, and to everyone who came through That House.

The Department of English also welcomed me, and facilitated years of research, work, and teaching. The atmosphere of community cultivates mutual growth. Thanks to Katherine Acheson for featuring this work on the departmental site, Fraser Easton, who interrupted an evening at home to help with an application, and Aimée Morrison. Randy Harris invented exceptions in my case. Fiona McAlister went above and beyond, and Julie-Anne Desrochers offered invaluable assistance and help. There are others.

Thanks to all those whose shared words and images fill these pages. Thanks to my family for putting up with my seclusion while I worked, and to Bear. Finally, and first, my mother's brilliant dissertation was permanently interrupted by my inconvenient birth, and yet she cheered me on, even through her serious illness. Thank you for the peace of woodland space, for being wonderful, and for making it possible.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Lynn York, with love.

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Introduction

"He wonders, Is it just these people I'm outside or is it all America?"- John Updike

Since the revolutionary period in America, aesthetics has played a crucial role in democratic political formation, social improvisation, and cultural imagination. Aesthetics was an important topic of discussion for early Americans who struggled both to define an emerging nation and to distinguish themselves from Old World Europeans. As early as the eighteenth century, transatlantic aesthetic theories and concepts permeated American public discourse and writing, and helped to navigate pressing national issues such as social cohesion, community values, and shared public perception. American pragmatism and efficiency favored aesthetic ideas that could unite people in common understanding and facilitate the formation of a national identity.[1] Aesthetics thus played a vital role in determining the limits of 'appropriate' American sensibilities.

Aesthetic contemplation offered a rich and evocative language for imagining political liberty, and for dealing with the inherent contradictions and challenges of a new republic. Ideas about nature, divine design, pleasure, taste, imagination, beauty, the sublime, and freedom, were both expressed and explored through philosophical aesthetic discourse. How to balance feeling and reason, order and chaos, clarity and complexity, and restraint or self-control in tension with creative or imaginative abandon? Slowly, an authoritative aesthetics emerged, one that emphasized both collective and self-governance through

[1] "We, the people," for instance, was a concept that suggested one mass body, a collective unit. As a social metaphor, the Body Politic became a central vehicle for American populism (Herzogenrath 2010).

rational ethics, conservative Christian moralism, neo-classicism, natural beauty, and simplicity.

At the same time, many Americans held substantially disparate concepts, values, and tastes. Certainly, not everyone embraced a national aesthetics. Indeed, many imagined a democratic republic in personal ways, and offered alternative visions and what would become known as (but did not originally constitute) outside aesthetic expressions. Such outré aesthetic varieties were a response to a dominant aesthetics. They embodied an American rebellious spirit and the will-to-freedom of those who had fled to America to escape traditional strictures and persecutions back home. In fact, outré presences and aesthetics were present from the very beginning, long before a united nation formed, and testified to the tremendous diversity in American life, peoples, and art. Through public cultural, critical, and legal pressure, many efforts were made (often unsuccessfully) to suppress outré forms, to render them invisible, or at least less visible, and to limit their popular influence and circulation. Yet the outré was simultaneously inspiring, regenerating, and nourishing. Thus, to frame it as oppositional or antipodal in relationship to dominant aesthetics is to overlook what is in fact a complex and vital dynamic.

In time, American aesthetic and cultural history was officially rewritten and retold to reflect the patriotic values and aesthetic productions of relatively small and privileged elites, including founding fathers, wealthy merchants and landowners, educated and literate authors and printers, and the doctrines of strict religious leaders – and reinforced by later republicans, Victorian moralists, and conservative governmental institutions. Outré aesthetics continued to thrive alongside authoritative aesthetics, and profoundly shaped what America could and would become. Importantly, it continues to provide an

alternative aesthetic history, and suggests an enduring popular connection to and affiliation with outré forms. Further, it reveals the dependency of both democratic function and an institutionalized aesthetics on the outré. The outré returns aesthetics to the domain of the body in affective experience, and further opens the fascinating and serious question of whether a dominant American culture has existed at all.

This study introduces what I am calling *outré aesthetics*, which connects corporeal and emotive responses to art and material appearances with non-normative systems and 'disruptive' forms that define them. Aesthetics here refers to the affect produced by presence or the effects of presence: what happens when we corporeally encounter other material or supramaterial presences – bodies, objects, environments, forces, moods, atmospheres, ambiances, or appearances – both outside of and including art. Yet if we do not know what we are encountering, how to approach it, or where we stand in relation to it (we may, in fact, fill more than one place), we are left wondering. The uncanny, strange, and outlandish, in particular, may at once invoke repulsion and attraction, confusion and recognition, anxiety and curiosity. Aesthetic experiences that shake us in this way return to an 'original' aesthetic in their the capacity to change and expand us, alter perception, and generate the potential for plurality and invention.

Etymologically, the term *outré* arose around 1722 in France, [2] to describe what is unconventional, excessive, bizarre, eccentric, and "beyond the bounds of reason" – definitions deeply rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and an insistence upon categorizational and hierarchical orders. Related to the term "outrage," it also describes what is off-putting in relationship to the cultural center and to the unwanted or uninvited

[2] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*; *Etymology Dictionary Online*.

performance of difference. In America, the heritage of logic, pragmatism and simplicity offers a parallel context for a dominant revulsion towards or rejection of the outré. In its early forms, the term also described those who had 'no regime' or who displayed a kind of audacity or non-conformity that failed to fit within any identifiable cadre. Thus the outré marks an ambiguous relationship with a classical-traditional aesthetics. The conspicuous presence of the outré reveals, at once, the 'lesser' presence of ruled order. Consider, for instance, the following quotes:

> "His costume of fringed buckskin was wild and outré even for our frontier camp" - Bret Harte, "Bulger's Reputation" (1906)

> "His dress was outré in the extreme: whether Spanish, Italian, or English, no one could say; it was like nothing ever worn" - Reese Howell Gronow, *Reminiscences of Captain Gronow* (1862)

> "He studies to be thought a gentleman; but the native porter breaks through the veil of a ridiculously affected and outré politeness" - Lewis Goldsmith, *Memoirs of the Court of St. Cloud, Complete* (1900)

> "She personified the outré; nothing so incongruous as her presence in that place could well be imagined" - Sax Rohmer, *The Return of Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1930)

In the above examples, the personages fail to register or signify appropriately within culture. Here, the outré can be understood as a curious few who are tolerated as alternative models for being and individuality; they introduce an undeniable aesthetic alterity. Nevertheless, they paradoxically dominate the scene as objects of attention.

This popular sense of outré functions within Western European (particularly French and English) models of aristocratic and bourgeois culture, wherein what is too excessive or outside cannot be appreciated or accepted, and therefore loses value. Unauthorized figures, comprehended as others, are recuperated through 'civilizing,' domestication, incorporation, or the performance of knowledge. They are permitted, observed, or engaged as idiosyncratic or necessary figures of diversity. Here, taste adheres to traditional standards and modes of authorization, and aesthetic hierarchies remain intact. The conflation of difference as *exceptionality* paradoxically reinforces absolute, determinist, nationalist, and structural carriers of identity. For example, the display of outsider, 'exotic,' and 'unnatural' bodies served to confirm Europeans' superior place in the firmament, and to justify both Imperialism abroad and institutionalism at home. Thus, the outré marks an inversely proportionate relationship with a classical-traditional Western aesthetics, reinforcing Europeans' longstanding traditions and stable sense of culture.

Americans, on the other hand, lacking clear traditions and faced with new social practices, gravitated to the outré, which they embraced as a model for becoming and possibility. Creative originality reflects the daring to dream, risk, innovate, individuate, and to explore new frontiers (the term "far out" is a common synonym for outré) – all cherished American ideals. Outré forms and presences helped to *create* conventions in

American aesthetics, even as they raised questions about convention itself. For instance, at a time when Americans struggled to traverse vast territories, and competed for the attention of large waves of immigrants, the bizarre and outlandish helped to attract citizens and customers to particular sites, and became staples of advertising and the aesthetics of environment, and thus part of the 'norm.' The notorious showman P.T. Barnum, and the popular diversions of circuses, sideshows, freakshows, and variety entertainments (to which we owe the invention of present-day malls), invented much of what would become centralized consumer American culture, and revolutionized aesthetic methods and practices.

Such garish aesthetics doubtlessly transcended the multilingual variations of immigrants (relying on visceral, rather than rhetorical modes of attraction), combining both the aesthetic shock of the new, and the uncanny familiarity of European *bizarrerie*, to stand out from the crowd. The mix of accessibility and inaccessibility embodied in the outré was key. Today, the branding of people, objects, or companies as trailblazers, and the propagation of outsider personas in social myths and media, continue to aggrandize the outré through the hyperaestheticization of novelty and the artification of specialness. Yet the outré also suggests decadence, depravity, artifice, and impracticality. It therefore teases the particularly American aesthetic boundaries between high and popular, realist and romantic, efficient and excessive.

What I am identifying as outré aesthetics is not, however, equal to the popular definition of outré or to the idea of performing eccentricity in art. It describes (as a second meaning or definition) aesthetic presences and effects that are degrounding and unstable and that extend perceptive autonomy in ways that cause us to become 'different'

than ourselves. In this sense, it relies on contingency to stimulate change and creativity. Outré aesthetics does not adhere to 'universal aesthetic standards' with an emphasis on taste, beauty, appreciation and harmony, which serve to justify established hierarchies and authorize some presences over others. Nor is it antipodal or peripheral in relationship to 'dominant' tastes and modes of perception. Rather, if aesthetics describes how some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies, and if, as symbolic creatures, we are faced with bodies and affects which we cannot read or interpret and lack the tools to understand, we enter multiple perceptive sites at once, are expanded and disoriented, and become altered by the experience of the possibility of multiple selves.

Outsiders: Beyond Liminality

Americans have always sought the edges of experience, from the imaginative power of the frontier to the influence of nineteenth century Romanticism, which finds meaning in the fringes of society. A number of early colonists were themselves on the European fringe, the émigrés and outcasts who fled religious persecution or rigid class structures back home. As such, many held opinions, beliefs and practices that were outré by Continental standards. The American love of outsiders and rebels is part of a legacy of rugged individualism, and a restless movement that resists consistent models. Further, the pluralistic and multicultural influences on America, and conflicting notions of conformity and belonging, make it difficult to identify a stable cultural center at all. How then to define what outrages it?

The individual outside society is an enduring theme in American art and literature, in part through iconic works such as Wyeth's *Christina's World*, or the fiction of Fitzgerald, Salinger, McCullers, Baldwin, Capote, O'Toole, Kesey, and Thompson, among many others. These artists and authors explicitly treat the outré in both form and content. In *A Nation of Outsiders* (2011), Grace Elizabeth Hale attributes the American love of outsiders in part to a rebel spirit that used outsiders and "freaks" to explore feelings of alienation, following the Second World War. Public entertainments continue to turn towards the freakish, outlandish, unconventional, and the spectacle of difference as a source of amusement and fascination. Indeed, American art gets its "greatest energy from its eccentric corners" and "favors aesthetic extremes" (Gopnik).

As a nation founded upon revolutionary autonomy, self-determination, and notions of liberty and independence, America continually tests the limits of its promised freedoms. A number of outsider artworks and movements – all of which are related to or referred to as outré forms – serve two American 'pleasures,' namely, regenerating public faith in the constitutional right to free speech, and engaging issues of power through taste. Few of these outsider forms are connected to moral or political meaning, however. Rather, they assert aesthetic affect in and of itself, in ways that are neither beautiful nor ugly, pleasurable nor painful, integral or disintegral. As such, they offer experiences of alterity through aesthetic mechanisms that deground us, destabilizing our somatic experience and, therefore, our identity.

American art emerged in conjunction with the crisis of modernity, and the continual drive towards self-reinvention that keeps society in *flux fertilis*. It is (to borrow

a repeated phrase from Tom Gunning) a "culture of shocks and flows," [3] chaotic and dynamic. One of the brilliant achievements of American democratic individualism is that the outré is not a threat to order, but rather a vital part of this process: that it is beyond established systems and representations is exactly what allows change to happen so quickly, and inspires imaginative invention. In other words, the outré makes manifest presences and effects that contribute to a fundamentally American and modern propensity toward newness and creative disruption. Radical disenchantment is a regenerative cultural feature played out in aesthetic experience, particularly in a democracy.

Approach

This study engages existing critical discussions by: a) contributing to revisionist American studies by asserting an aesthetics that questions the distinction between aesthetic function and life; b) bringing together recent critical treatments of aesthetics across the disciplines in conversation, rather than synthesis; c) expanding on recent claims by furthering an original view of *outré aesthetics* as both an analytical concept and critical tool for understanding embodied approaches to aesthetic experience and appreciation; d) critically and creatively analyzing American art, fiction, and social history as exemplifying outré aesthetics; and, e) applying and highlighting the material significance of the outré in the relationship between politics and aesthetics in American culture.

[3] See Tom Gunning's "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator."*Art & Text* 34 (Spring 1989): 31-45.

In an age when America has no identifiable demographic majority, and where the boundaries between people and/in the world are permeated at every turn, contemporary approaches to American studies, politics, and aesthetics continue to assert difference and democracy. Such approaches address the ambiguity and discontinuity of multiplicity, rather than a sentimentalized globalism, or the search for common experience. For instance, in political science, Morton Schoolman and David Campbell (2008) argue that in light of the recent globalization of contingency and emerging theories of pluralism, we ought to resist turning difference into otherness, challenge normative conceptions of power and politics, and consider an agnostic democracy in which differences are not only tolerated, "but are productive of debate and the creative source of a politics of becoming" (366). In aesthetic theory, Guiseppe Patella (2013) suggests *acuteness* as the aesthetic mode for contemplating difference, and notes that opposition can no longer be thought of in terms of "identity and dialogic logic" or the "so-called polarities of opposites" (n.pag.). When differences are considered non-symmetrically, they can retain their alterity without having to convert or assimilate. Resistance thus becomes the articulation and art of difference.

Interdisciplinary and transnational studies are particularly useful to understanding 'Americanness' as a constant state of eclectic becoming, and ambiguous blend of proximate differences. American studies thus combines material and visual culture, history, politics, sociology, psychology, geography, and other disciplines to explore what America might be, often with a focus on ethnicities, immigration, and internationalism. *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies* (Castronovo and Gillman 2009) examines difference through comparability, and approaches America as a changing

phenomenon along axes of time and space. "Objects" ranging from flags to cigarette butts, weather to AIDS, reveal various Americas according to their use. Migrant archives reflect a vastly different experience than the Anglo-American national archives.

Srinivas Aravamudan treats difference as collective outré outsiderness. He traces the "rich national imaginary" of the United States to a *permanent frontier* populated by "criminals, rogues, and runaways" – from the West to a dream of global domination – and embraces Rogue Studies as a tool for examining both global and disciplinary crises. By asserting difference as comparable, the essays question exceptionalist and cohesive national narratives that have often represented, but never constituted, American social reality. Yet by insisting on the thingyness, political potential, and methodological use of cultural objects, rather than their aesthetic qualities, *States of Emergency* reflects an enduring concern about the role of aesthetics in American studies. What follows is a short history of the tenuous relationship between aesthetics, cultural studies, and American studies.

The resurgence of aesthetics, in the last decade especially, marks a return to aesthetics as embodied, sensual, sensory, emotional and affective. Aesthetic experience extends beyond art to include an array of visceral intensities, everyday objects, and phenomena such as moods, atmospheres, weather, and ambiance. On the one hand, an aesthetics that oscillates between meaning and non-meaning is currently explored by scholars across disciplines, including Hans Gumbrecht, who responds to a longing for a return to the physical and palpable in disembodied technological society. Here, the potential for and experience of difference as aesthetic *encounter* or *presence* is tied to immersive sensation, beyond hermeneutic representation and meaning. On the other

hand, aesthetic experience as politically significant is examined in relation to democratic ideals and potentials, resistance and recuperation, deviance and difference, not least by philosophers like Jacques Rancière and his "distribution of the sensible." Further, aesthetics may describe an unpredictable or spontaneous experience to which we are constantly exposed or expose ourselves, and is therefore a site of risk that both insinuates self-differencing and enables social and political change.

Aesthetics and cultural studies, however, while mutually informing (for instance through the inclusion of popular forms), retain a double standard wherein neither is considered the 'proper' domain of the other. The divide has been clearly addressed by Bérubé and others. Aesthetics is difficult to define, often ghettoized as the experience of art (especially 'high art') or the appreciation of beauty, ugliness, or the sublime, and regarded as less rational or methodological than cultural and American studies. Recurring criticisms of aesthetics include that it is old-fashioned, elitist, and reinforces hierarchical divisions of power, that it fails to account for multiple aesthetic experiences, that it assumes a priori truths, or that it emphasizes the special properties of aesthetic objects, while disregarding how such qualities are determined, enacted, and enforced. [4]

[4] For instance, Severyn T. Bruyn, in "Art in Aesthetics and Action," (nd) notes that postmodernist critics reject aesthetics as an academic discipline, because it has no universal norms and values, and the variety in arts suggests that there is no conceptual foundation or consistent criteria for judgment. Feminist critics, like Mary Devereaux, address the establishment of norms and beauty and taste in the 18th century by white men of class, who could determine what aesthetic objects had value. Clyde R. Taylor and other African-American scholars suggest that no one general aesthetics can apply to all art, times, and cultures. The display of African objects in European museums, for example, robs them of an original and intrinsic context in which they should be viewed and interpreted. Critics of globalism note that the wide dissemination of western culture, art, and media throughout the world delegitimizes local cultures, and socialist critic Régis Debray argues that art is replacing religion as both sacred and a means of unifying the world.

Proponents of aesthetics hail it as conceptually progressive, expanding our understanding of embodied experience in remarkably varied ways, and reaching beyond designations of value or worth to articulate the unspoken or inconspicuous in human life. Thus, aesthetics has never had to be liberated from the cult of interpretation or an insistence on artistic autonomy. Cultural studies, in turn, continues to be misunderstood as 'reducing' aesthetic experience to political and social ideologies, power structures, and symbolic identity practices, or, conversely, underplaying the power and significance of aesthetics as essential to socio-cultural experiences and products – including media, messages, and literature. [5]

In the midst of all this, literary scholars continue to conflate aesthetics with the democratic, cultural, and political. Emory Elliott (2002), Michelle Elam (2012), and others analyze the implications of aesthetics in a multicultural, multiracial, and intertextual age, while Mary Esteve (2003) treats the aesthetic and political significance of the crowd. The ubiquity of the aesthetic in contemporary America continues to fuel critical discussions. What will the 'post-American century' look like? Is the worldwide influence of American popular culture an event of aesthetic function? What is the role of aesthetics in the fluidity of national borders? How does the spectacularization of the

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[5] For instance, Richard Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1997; Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000) reorients aesthetics towards a practical, progressive, and revitalized view of aesthetic experience and its relation to daily life. Hans Gumbrecht's *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006) examines the pleasure and beauty of athleticism and the human form in sports, while *Production of Presence* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003) moves beyond interpretation in art and aesthetics to consider the value of affective and non-meaning presence. George H. Hein (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2012) argues that in terms of museums, Barnes of the Barnes Foundation and others such as Dewey in his *Art of Aesthetics* believed that the educational use of aesthetics could provide progressive ends.

political affect the backlash against corporate and neoliberal models of meaning and doing? *The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture* (Benesch and Haselstein 2007) further demonstrates that the aestheticization of private and social practices is everywhere manifest in American life. Yet – the authors warn – to conflate the aesthetic experience of everyday life with consumerist ideology is to disregard the complexities of western aesthetic history. The call for deeper explorations of American aesthetics and its relationship to western aesthetic history remains pertinent.

Thomas Docherty (2006) asserts, "[w]e do not fully understand democracy unless and until we have an understanding of how much it depends on what is at stake in any given moment of the aesthetic" (ix), and, "the activity of criticism ought to be a site for the exploration of the unpredictable and unspoken" (xvii). Indeed, the unpredictable and unspoken may help to illuminate whatever unknown, dormant, or chaotic forces have shaped, and may yet shape us. Resistance to dominant forms that lump people together, or neutralize differences, is a vivifying feature of democracy. Further, democratic citizens may actively seek out the unusual and disillusioning in the face of comfortable complacency, predictable uniformity, or blanket mandates. The passion for outré aesthetics among American youth following the alienating effects of Second World War, for instance, and in response to 1950's utopian conservatism and suburban insulation, has been exhaustively illustrated. While in cultural studies, the unusual and outré is often equated with the unauthorized or marginalized (voices, identities, objects or bodies), in aesthetics, it is associated with the enduring mystery and elusive power of aesthetic experience, which is inexplicably essential to our existence. The outré is thus part of the democratic process: it manifests contingency by evoking that which we can not control,

asserts the immediacy of embodied experience over detachment, and dramatizes the risks of difference and of recreating ourselves.

Chapter Summaries

The thesis is divided into two main sections. The first deals generally with the concept of outré aesthetics and its immediate theoretical, material, social, and bio-cognitive applications in relation to American Studies. This section follows a chronological development of the outré in American history and culture, from early America to the twentieth century (as well as contemporary implications), with focus on particular examples, though it must be noted that as with most aesthetic and cultural developments, there are recursive and divergent waves. The chapter on bio-cognitive aesthetics is independent of this chronology, as it deals with concepts that are not temporally bound, and separates the two main sections.

The second section deals with the forms, functions and affects of outré aesthetics in American literature and creative writing or the craft of fiction, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While there are a striking number of outré works of American literature, not least in distinctly American popular genres and genre inventions, underground works, and lesser-known authors (to say nothing, for instance, of Jim Thompson's outré crime novel *Pop. 1280* (1964)), the focus is on a few major canonized authors and their works, with attention to the gothic mode and its practitioners.

The conclusion is devoted to basic reflections on political and democratic implications of the outré in relation to taste cultures, thought tribes, the aesthetics of war, and democratic concepts such as liberty and autonomous individuality in American

culture. Here, greater attention is paid to contemporary expressions or functions and possible future implications of outré aesthetics.

Chapter One, "Outré Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century," traces the outré in relation to American culture and aesthetics, and to emerging and dominant aesthetic forms, particularly Calvinist restraint, republican nationalism, and pragmatic simplicity.

Chapter Two, "Outré Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century," continues the discussion of the first chapter into the post-Revolutionary period, with emphasis on changing values, the rise and development of the concept of outré aesthetics as a departure from European forms, and the introduction of outré social movements.

Chapter Three, "Outré Exhibits and Performance," looks at the profound effect of carnivals, museums, and freakshows, and alternative movements on American culture, particularly through the revolutionary aesthetics and outré experiences pioneered by P.T. Barnum. Here, the spectacular, performative and illusory combine in unexpected ways. The performance of knowledge and knowledge entertainments are further examined in relation to national identity formation, ethnographic exhibits, and the culture of decadence that followed.

Chapter Four, "On the Road," examines the American phenomenon of outré roadside attractions and destinations, in connection with the development of highway systems, car culture, and road trips, as well as the 'enfreakment' of natural spaces, the growth of *aesthetobiographies*, and the concept of vacations from identity.

Chapter Five, "Rebel, Rebel," explores the role of culture industry in relation to the outré, outsider, rebel, and freak-positive aesthetics of the nineteen-sixties and

seventies, especially as it relates to the rise of alternative film, popular entertainment, and other forms.

Chapter Six, "Embodied Aesthetics and Outré Encounters: a Bio-Cognitive View," treats scientific analyses of embodied aesthetics, including bioaesthetics and neuroaesthetics, which often point to the distinctly adaptive roots of perceptive responses to beauty and art. Bioaesthetic studies, such as Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (2009) rejects a politics of aesthetics in favor of a progressivist view of art, arguing that aesthetic perceptive response is inherently evolutionary, and that humans and art are "advancing together." Yet beyond practical concerns like choosing mates, finding ripe fruit, or avoiding danger, why are aesthetics so important to our everyday operation and well being?

In *The Meaning of The Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007), neuroaestheticist Mark Johnson ties reason, thought and cognition to emotion in art, declaring that aesthetics are at once the cornerstone of all human meaning-making and necessarily embodied. The mind and body are part of an organic whole, he argues, and thus all language, thought and meaning "emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity" (1). I respond to biological and neurological theories of perceptive response, to suggest that outré aesthetics appeal to human adaptive behaviors, stimulate and expand our thinking with new forms, and promote both resilience and empathic socialization.

Chapter Seven, "Outré Shadows," treats the deliberate outré aesthetics of nineteenth-century American authors, specifically E.A. Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, and the spiritual, experimental, and affective turns that developed in

each. I also trace these developments into the twentieth century, and their effect on Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

Chapter Eight, "Startling Figures," expands on the previous chapter, to include a close reading of the works of Flannery O'Connor and her peculiar visions, the concept of *Stimmung* as it applies to outré presences in American literature, as well as a short reflection on contemporary outré literary forms.

Chapter One

Outré Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century, Americans were challenged with social uniformity as well as emerging tastes and forms, and sought to distinguish national from European aesthetics. In *Liberty of the Imagination*, Edward Cahill (2012) argues that aesthetics – as a cultural discourse in eighteenth-century America – addressed competing claims of self and society, universality and particularity, republican democracy and tyrannical coercion: "this dialectic of liberty in aesthetic theory offered American writers a rich critical vocabulary for articulating the imperatives and challenges of political liberty and, thus, for confronting the social contradictions" (5). At the heart of aesthetic theory was a language of liberty, individuality, autonomy and agency, as well as the limits of each: "Ideas about the 'liberty of imagination' – the mind's innate and vigorous capacity for creating associative chains of images and ideas – as well as the dangers of its excess, the moral need to constrain such excess, and the opposition between liberty and the power of such constraint" (5). Imagination, Cahill argues, has a dialectic structure that oscillates between imaginative creativity and regulatory aesthetic standards.

While pushing the boundaries of creative and imaginative limits appealed to American themes of freedom, discovery, and risk, the emerging dominant culture emphasized self-control and containment. Calvinist restraint, Enlightened reason, and refined aesthetic tastes all served to signify both moral elevation and upward class mobility. Moreover, the moral imperative to harness dangerous excesses was familiar to

American public discourse, for instance the idea of civilizing an untamed wilderness, or the call for God-fearing and pragmatic "citizens upon a hill" to renounce the indulgences of pleasure, profit, and superfluity.

Aesthetic discourse and production played a strong role in negotiating the parameters of a republic that was beautiful and free, but also harnessed and strong. A number of leading figures attempted to unite Americans through a moralized and balanced aesthetics that was consciously distinct from European aristocratic decadence and 'vanity.' Benjamin Franklin, for instance, had deep knowledge of visual culture that he employed in his printing and art, often by reinventing familiar symbols as Americana. A former Calvinist, he gave up writing poetry early on, in favor of more direct and playful prose in which he regularly touted the virtues of prudence, modesty, order, sincerity, humility, and temperance. In "On Simplicity" (1732), Franklin asserted honesty and simplicity over the vices of cunning, artifice, affectation and dissimulation, which were the fashion of the times. Franklin's common sense approach to ascetic self-control and applied work ethic resonated with the call for American purity. Further, his admiration of the aesthetics and forces of nature, the creation and sustainment of which he attributed to God, overlapped with his social ideals. How to unite a public with such vastly different characters, backgrounds, values, and goals? In "On the Providence of God in the Government of the World" (1730), Franklin admired the stars and planets, and God's ability "to govern them in their greatest Velocity as they shall not flie off out of their appointed Bounds nor dash one against another, to their mutual Destruction" [original spelling] (527). Similarly, he looked to the "noble soul" as an example of a

utilitarian and materialist aesthetics, one that would guide individuals in moral citizenship through the beauty of the spirit.

Franklin publically rejected European decadence, even as he privately enjoyed being lavishly hosted overseas. In 1784, in "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America," he claimed that Americans were neither as poor nor as rich as Europeans, but instead enjoyed a "happy Mediocrity" (267), and did not have to pay high prices for sculptures, paintings, architecture and other works of art that are "more curious than useful" (267). As a result, Americans were free to explore their "natural Geniuses" and talents in America, where they could be rewarded. While such statements appear anti-aesthetic, Franklin's aesthetic productions for the colonies, many of which were also rhetorical-visual propaganda (including his cut-snake image, symbols like wagons or turkeys, and images of united circles with mottos such as "We Are One"), reflected his love of domesticity, democracy, and the middle-class. J.A. Leo Lemay notes that Franklin's "visual creations – his cartoons, designs for flags and paper money, emblems and devices – reveal an underlying American aesthetic, i.e., an egalitarian and nationalistic impulse" (465). His various productions were created for the masses, and "[w]orking within a basically aristocratic and esoteric tradition, Franklin transformed it into a public and democratic one" (494). Yet while Franklin was pragmatic and sober in his aesthetic visions, Thomas Jefferson held a complex and in many ways delicate view.

Thomas Jefferson's personal library contained a wealth of books on aesthetics (principally by European philosophers and critics) and fine arts, and he studied the

subjects long before he built Monticello and his gardens.[6] He held what Lee Quinby calls an "aesthetics of virtue," a "fusion of art and morals [and of "Heart" and "Head"], whereby reflective beings are capable of discerning the path to virtue through aesthetic experience. For Jefferson, in short, aesthetics charted avenues of direction for virtuous conduct" (338). Imagination was not then something to be restrained, but channeled as a fertile guide in right being and right doing. Like many educated and privileged members of the 'gentler classes,' Jefferson connected beauty and sublimity in nature and in humankind with reflections of God's order. However, his religious views were controversial (see *Notes on the State of Virginia*).

Greatly influenced by James Gibb and others, whose aesthetics emphasized intuitive feelings over taste (Hayes 10), Jefferson deeply valued an embodied aesthetics and was keenly interested in the effects of presence. He applied this understanding in the public sphere to a democratic aesthetics: "[h]is goal [was] to create a chaste classical style that would be appropriate not just for Americans, but for all people" (Haftertepe 217). Guided by his belief that humans contained "an innate sense of proportion … he sought an architecture that would transcend regional variations and appeal to the sensibilities of all people" (220). Harmony and balance in aesthetics could then direct and inspire both social order and shared values through affect. Not everyone agreed with this attitude, however: Josiah Quincy Jr. (1744 - 1775) remarked in "The Consequences of

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[6] See Janice G. Schimmelman's *Books On Art in Early America: Books on Art, Aesthetics and Instruction Available in American Libraries and Bookstores Through 1815* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 2007), for information about the history, influence, and prevalence of literature on art in aesthetics and their inclusion in American national, local, and private libraries at the time. See also Frederick Doveton Nicholas and Ralph E. Nichols' *Thomas Jefferson, Landscape Architect* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978).

Taste," that he was told to keep his drawings of ancient ruins to himself, as objects of curious speculation, and not to bring them back to America, for "'let them get abroad, and you are ruined. They will infuse a taste for buildings and sculpture, and, when a people get a taste for the fine arts, they are ruined. 'Tis taste that ruins whole kingdoms;—'tis taste that depopulates whole nations …. Mr. Quincy, let your countrymen beware of taste in their buildings, equipage, and dress, as a deadly poison'" (289).

Co-existing with Calvinist and rationalist-moral emphases on self-control and containment, the outré aesthetic was an equally powerful force of American self-expression, individualism, diversity, and rebellion. As Richard Shusterman notes: "[t]his insouciantly rebellious attitude embodied in American popular culture is, I believe, a large part of its captivating appeal and genuine value for Europeans … it provides an invaluable tool for their growing liberation from a long entrenched and stifling domination by an oppressive tradition of disembodied, intellectualist philosophy and high courtly art" (196-197). Far from the din of Philadelphia taverns, halls, and libraries, colonists were drawn to the idea of rebellion and liberty precisely because they had largely rejected the Old Worlds and were not looking to replicate the past. A place to be freely oneself, or to reinvent oneself, or to experience the outré, held incredible appeal for a number of immigrants.

The colonies had in some cases provided a place for immigrants to flee the rigid structures or strictures back home, while for enslaved Africans, indentured servants, and others, there was no escape. They also provided a dumping ground for the unwanted European 'mad, bad, and strange.' Around 1702, for instance, Queen Anne 'ridded' of

her wayward cousin Edward Hyde Cornbury by instating him as governor of the colonies of New York and New Jersey. Cornbury was a flamboyant transvestite and *bon vivant* who publically donned extravagant women's clothes. He required audiences to listen to his odes about his wife's ears, rubbed the ears of men on the street, and spent public funds on personal luxuries. Colonists were so outraged by Cornbury's presence that he eventually returned overseas. However, to suggest that such unconventional figures are rare examples of eccentricity is to miss the mark.

While both newspapers and interpersonal gossip circulated stories of local color, the taboos and scandals that surrounded outré figures and encounters were in large part a response to their collective social, rather than individual, presence. Hermits like "Robert," Sarah Bishop, and John McQuain, were viewed not just as queer oddities who had chosen to withdraw from society, but as sympathetic social victims of wartime rape, slavery, and the failure of institutions to treat 'mental disturbances,' who were welcomed into the community. The original definition of the outré connoted pushing others beyond their own limits, through excess, and certainly this worked both ways. Dominant society was outraged by conspicuous unconventionality, but 'common folk' often refused such labels.

Certainly, there were no shortages of outré figures, tastes, and behaviors in early America. The preponderance of oddities has been whitewashed by a history that gradually gave way to the mainstream English influence in the colonies, as well as the massive thrust of the republic to organize competing aesthetic and social impulses. From its very inception, the New World had been a diverse mix of ethnicities, languages, religions, cultures, and styles that represented a wide variety of extremes:

> These people did not all want the same things, beyond the elemental notions of escape and a fresh start. If, for a determined handful, this meant social engineering and creating communities, for untold larger numbers it meant simply a vague but compelling desire to go where they could be left alone. "Get off my back" is a piece of twentieth-century slang, distinctively American, which well summarized the prime motivation and prevailing mood among immigrants to Britain's mainland colonies (Catton 168).

Distinctive regions took on their own flavors, marked by local characters and communities, often in conflict with one another.

Within the total, rather than ruling population, outré was the rule, rather than the exception.[7] Every day in eighteenth-century America, people got tattoos and painted their faces; committed crimes and tricks against one another; engaged in homosexual, premarital, or experimental sexual acts; lived with diseases and both mental and physical disabilities; explored deviance and spiritualism; told fortunes and ghost stories and rude jokes; handled serpents and ran away from home; worked as street performers, actors, prostitutes, brothel owners, or alternative healers; practiced polygamy and addiction and nudism; performed ceremonial dances and voodoo rituals and self-mutilation; shouted, urinated, kissed, sang, and slept in the streets; masqueraded and dressed as dandies or in shocking clothes; boxed and gambled and got high on hallucinogens; sold snake oil and quack medicines and cons; preached fiery evangelical sermons and spoke in tongues;

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[7] Carl Sifakis, in *American Eccentrics* (New York: Facts on File, 1984), compiled over 140 biographies of such characters, known for being "amorous parsons" (seductive) or "crazy Indians" (alcoholics who used basic cons to get drunk) or other, fairly benign attributes that were not all that uncommon. While such characters certainly contributed to local color, their reputation as markedly eccentric, rather than fodder for interesting anecdotes, bears further consideration.

became outlaws or filibusters; created and invented far-out objects or art, and indulged in whatever they could.

'Half-breeds' were hardly uncommon, nor were Chinese immigrants with their long queue hairstyles and 'unusual' ways of life, or Native American 'primitive savages.' Utopianists and cults (like the Rogerites) continued to find followers and found communities. On the streets of Philadelphia, around the corner from Jefferson's abode, an elephant was displayed on the street for weeks, as were a variety of exotic animals. Jefferson himself paid for years to attend such spectacles, and to see elks and tigers, pigs that could spell or read, trained insects and more. In small boxes on the side of the road, men often bet on fights between scorpions and deadly spiders. All of this was formally considered outré, yet all was part of the social fabric.

How to organize this motely crew was a serious concern. Indeed, in the trials for the Boston Massacre, which saw cousins John Adams and Samuel Adams argue head-to-head as opposing attorneys, the former described the mob as "a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes, and molattoes [sic; Crispus Attucks, who was of Wampanoag and African descent], Irish teagues and *outlandish* [emphasis mine] jack tars" (Zinn 67). In the resulting "propaganda war," artists and printmakers like Henry Pelham, Paul Revere, and Christian Remick depicted the bloody scene of the massacre in popular prints. The images were reproduced various newspapers, and hung in farmhouses all over New England (Ross 36-37). While such prints outwardly signaled a growing and unified patriotism, their sensual impression was one of homogenous invasion and menace against an individualistic population that shared the common bond of difference.

Between 1770 and 1774 especially, there was an everyday aesthetic presence of both looming and actual violence. British military 'lobster backs' filled the streets of the colonies, forming a visual divide from the citizens. Fires erupted constantly, both in houses (including Jefferson's), and onboard ships that were burned to the ground by angry colonists, especially in Rhode Island. Growing rebel throngs threw rocks and snowballs and congregated in angry mobs, while British soldiers earned a reputation for committing gang rape. There was also the constant daily violence of criminals who had been exiled to the colonies. The famed Boston Tea Party – in which Samuel Adams led over 200 men dressed as Mohawks onboard the *Dartmouth* and two other vessels – was witnessed by over eight thousand spectators on shore. All of these spectacles and atmospheres contributed to a palpable and embodied aesthetics: one of bloodshed and flames, finely tailored red coats and savage Indians, disruption and discontent. The new America had managed to produce its own mass outré aesthetic of gore and fire, which Melville would later describe in detail (see chapter two).

Americans also had to face the fact that both their heritage and their legacy were deeply marked by the outré. One instance was the Puritans, who had lapsed into mass hysteria, both with the Salem witch trials and with extreme forms of public punishment and shame for even the slightest offense, such as making bad bread, touching, or nagging. In New England, exaggerated tortures and bizarre forms of detainment were regular occurrences and popular events. Hundreds of colonists were dunked in water, shackled to chairs, put in stocks (where they were often assaulted anonymously and from behind), whipped, and forced to wear painful iron 'scold helmets' in the streets. Sermons were often darkly frightening and dramatic, threatening an elaborate Hell and a vengeful God.

Tracts heavily emphasized the sins of bestiality, masturbation, sexual fantasies, and extramarital sexual contact. On the surface, devout citizens were modest, somber, and uniform of both dress and living practice, yet this contrasted heavily with the imaginative and real terrors invoked in their daily experience. Yet the Puritans regarded the activities and pastimes of other colonists as excessive, unconventional, and unacceptable, just as they viewed German Christmas traditions as weird paganist idolatry.

Public executions were also a common spectacle throughout the colonies, and included days both before and afterwards of selling wares or holding large gatherings in the spirit of entertainment. Yet such punitive and restrictive violence seemed medieval, deranged, and terrifying to rationalist citizens, who had entered the Age of Reason, as were the common medical practices in colonial America, which included imposed masturbation on women for excessive shows of emotion, superstitions regarding sexuality, and the American courting custom of boarding, in which males and females were permitted to lie beside each other while independently swaddled to wooden boards, or separated by a board. Many rationalist Americans also rejected gaudy European styles, decadence, and Bacchan debauchery. Yet wealthy landowners, particularly in the slaveholding South, adhered to 'elevated' French notions of taste, and held elaborate hunts, dances, feats, and drinking festivities that went on for days, often in highly ornate homes and parlors on vast plantations.

Native Americans were regarded as primitive or naïve savages to many immigrants (though not all), and held incredibly complex relationships with other 'Americans.' Both tribes and individuals continued, as able, to practice traditions, ceremonies, and ways of life that seemed strange, over-the-top, and unbridled to a variety

of settlers and colonists. All of these events and scenes were part of daily life about the colonies, as well as beyond the fringes of the colonies. What to do with such a mélange of aesthetic experiences and traditions in both conflict and complement with one another? How to define the outré at the level of interpersonal contact?

One response was the Founding Fathers' vision of a just, fair, and powerful republic, expressed through an iconic neoclassical aesthetics that was quickly streamlined through national images, emblems, and works of art. Having rebelled from monarchal traditions in Europe, republicans turned to ancient Greece and Rome for aesthetic inspiration. This aesthetic essentially omitted and washed itself of the outré, by consciously failing to represent the weird and wild figures and forms that filled America. Likewise, nature painting and other beautiful pastoral or realistic scenes failed to capture the inherent strangeness of life, especially in the cities. While many Americans incorporated national emblems into their own ethnic aesthetic traditions, it is interesting to examine the ways in which subversive aesthetic traditions simultaneously disrupted them (See figure 1.).

Figure 1. American Artist Unknown, *Gentleman's Amusement*, Circa 1800; Wood, glass, and metal; Wintherthur Museum, Wilmington; 18 x 14 1/4 x 5 3/4 inches; Bequest of H. F. du Pont; Source: Winterthur Museum, with permission; See also Karen A. Sherry ("Winterthur XXX: Searching for early American erotica." *Common-Place* 4.3 (April 2004): n.pag); Web; The object is a piece of American folk art, and depicts a Native American woman flanked by two soldiers and concealed in a case. She is covering her body with the U.S. coat of arms. When the case opens, she is exposed. The object is an outré pornographic toy, likely used by men in groups.

A second response, stemming from the natural mashup of a great diversity of people, produced more organic aesthetic dialogues, particularly a host of popular materials that employed a full spectrum of themes and treatments, from the bawdy to the satirical, the horrific to the serious, the salacious to the bizarre. Within popular media, and under the guise of entertainment, the outré was non-threatening and had the potential to elicit different kinds of emotions. Brockdon Brown's *Wieland, or The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798) was criticized for elements like nightmare visions, spontaneous combustion, and ventriloquism, as well as being based on real American murders. Yet

Americans deeply enjoyed tales of the odd, scandals, inventions, curious objects, compelling art, and a variety of tastes and aesthetic experiences. Some adapted outré folk traditions from the old world, for instance altering the lyrical content of gruesome Irish murder ballads to reflect true American tales of murder, or "feminizing" their content, particularly in Appalachian music ("Appalachian Traditional Music" n.pag.). What was outré to one was not so to another, a reality that all Americans shared and protected by right, for instance through freedom of religion.

Outré aesthetics have always existed in America, often hiding in plain sight (See figure 2.). Great efforts were made in early America to suppress anything morally or aesthetically objectionable or obscene. Many materials were destroyed, eliminating what perhaps may have been a wealth of unconventional works from historical record. Even those works, objects, and experiences that did exist were often engaged in secret, and discarded by owners or uncomfortable inheritors. A common solution to dominant aesthetic and sensual strictures was to conceal whatever was deemed sinful or taboo. Concealment of outré objects was not always a matter of personal discretion, avoidance of punishment, or private group enjoyment, however. Often, half the fun was in risking exposure through accidentally discovery, or tricking polite guests and audiences into coming into contact with the forbidden (Sherry n.pag). Such is the case with the saucer depicted below, which was created in China for an American or Western consumer. Unlike the toy box featured above, which fetishizes aboriginal women as part of its surprise factor, the saucer would have been handled during the appropriate ritual of tea drinking, and thus its erotic charge came from what Karen A. Sherry (2004) notes as the privileged knowledge of the owner.

Figure 2. Artist Unknown, *Saucer* (top side on left and bottom side on right), 1735-1745; Porcelain with enamel, paint, and gilding; Jingdezhen, China; Collection: Wintherthur Museum, Wilmington; 7/8 x 4 5/8 x 4 5/8 inches; "Martin Hurst Collection"; Gift of Mr. Charles K. Davis; Creator design inspiration attributed to William Wissing, Peter Shenck, and John Smith; Source: Winterthur Museum, with permission; See also Karen A. Sherry ("Winterthur XXX: Searching for early American erotica." *Common-Place* 4.3 (April 2004): n.pag); Web. The top of the saucer depicts a man and his dog in a pastoral hunting scene, while the bottom depicts a woman with a single breast exposed, her skirts raised, and with a large leaf covering her genitalia.

In her search for early American erotica, Sherry describes her challenges in locating outré objects of desire within institutional archives. There are several reasons, she notes, for the difficulty in tracing such aesthetic productions. First, prevailing notions of moral propriety led to the censure and censorship of materials. Second, owners were reluctant to admit possession of taboo items, and seldom recorded them. Moreover, producers often worked in anonymity or used untraceable aliases – likely to avoid criminal charges or harm to their reputation. It is difficult, then, to discover too much

about the creation, consumption, and reception of outré materials in eighteenth century America. An exception is the *Veneres uti observantur in gemmis antiquis*, a "luxury item produced in Europe in the 1770s," which contained graphic sexual images of Roman gods or mythological figures, and other characters, with captions in French, and complete with women playing "a wheel of dildos" (n.pag). Sherry correctly notes that such an item would have belonged to an educated gentleman within a small elite circle of consumers.

Third, institutions such as libraries and museums play a strong role in how works are catalogued, displayed, and stored. Locked cabinets were often used to safeguard public morality, from the eighteenth century onward, and special permission or payments were required to view the collected objects inside. Sherry describes finding outré items in concealed parts of cluttered rooms full of "odds-and-ends," and many of them unmarked. The researcher's challenge at the outset is thus to locate objects she does not know exist.

Puritan Americans were less enthusiastic about the expressions of conscience and aesthetic experimentations that sprang up in the arts, however. Puritan censorship and punishments for obscenity continued to thrive in national discourse, and book burning was not uncommon. As American literary selections were fairly sparse, and consuming outré materials was difficult to conceal, readers continued to discreetly import books of all stripes from Europe. Yet even on the Continent, scandalous books were burned as fast as they were printed, including those by Voltaire. Booksellers like James Lackington refused to carry or trade particular stock. In his *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington* (1792), Lackington describes the censorship he practiced in his bookshop, which "contained very little variety, as it principally consisted of divinity; for as I had not much knowledge, so I seldom ventured out of my depth. Indeed, there

was one class of books, which for the first year or two that I called myself a bookseller, I would not sell, for such was my ignorance, bigotry, superstition (or what you please) that I conscientiously destroyed such books as fell into my hands which were written by freethinkers; for really supposing them to be dictated by the devil, I would neither read them myself, or sell them to others" (222). In America, the threat posed by local literature was taken seriously, and writers found guilty of seditious libel could be imprisoned for their political pamphlets. The literary underground in America was in many ways both suppressed and feared, largely because it threatened national unity.

How can one discern whether everyday Americans, who could afford neither luxuries nor privacy, and who were barred from freely accessing certain works, participated in outré experiences regularly or widely? The myth of a comfortable and chaste middle-class citizen as the 'average' eighteenth-century American is misleading. As Stephanie Grauman Wolf notes, in *As Various as Their Lands* (1993), tidewater planters, tobacco farmers, wealthy urban merchants, and rising Philadelphia Quakers did not represent the rest of eighteenth-century Americans, and consisted of a small and exclusive part of the population – their "confident voices" stood apart from those around them. The young, old, poor, women, slaves and free Africans, aboriginals, the infirm or injured, indentured servants, laborers, migrants, Muslims and Catholics, and countless others, who offered alternative visions and lifestyles, were not in fact hiding in the shadows.

In eighteenth century America, average people's lives were full of struggle and toil. Alcoholism, debauchery, and domestic abuse were rampant across the classes,[8] abortions were strikingly common if dangerous, and by the time of the American Revolution, one third of brides were already pregnant at their weddings (Wolf 76). Despite the profound effect of Puritanism on American patriotism, specifically through the idea of the "providential errand" (McKenna 8), there was nevertheless a large social rift between religious middle-class values and lived practice. While dancing, gambling, drinking, swearing, public kissing, and other activities were considered socially taboo and outré, they were widely practiced, especially off American shores (see figures 3. and 4.).

[8] Drinking and debauchery are astoundingly well documented at public houses, ordinaries, inns, outdoor gardens, festivals, and both "low pot houses" and "gentleman's clubs." Hannah Callender, Jasper Dankaerts, and many others wrote about all the drinking that went on in New York; beer, wine, rum, brandy, and meads were readily available; extreme public drunkenness happened even on the Sabbath; complaints about public drunkenness went on for 130 years, and the Governor of Virginia, in 1752, had to speak out publically against gaming, swearing, and "immoderate drinking"; William Tennant and George Whitefield preached in favor of sobriety and thrift; physician Benjamin Rush wrote a tract about the effects of drinking, which were causing men to – he said – howl like animals, smash China, dishes, and furniture, sing, haloo, roar, jump, tear off their clothes, break glass, and the like; Ben Franklin, as Poor Richard, wrote "The Drinker's Dictionary"; Philadelphia's Harrogate gardens, in the 1790's, tried to rival other taverns with lavish entertainments, and was full of men and women drinking beer and whiskey, and dancing; and American artists like George Roupell depicted friends drinking around the table in Charleston, South Carolina in the mid-century.

Figure 3. John Greenwood, *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam*, Oil on Canvas, Circa 1752-58; St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis; Source: *Wikimedia Commons*; Web; 16 March 2014; The scene depicts several prominent eighteenth century Rhode Island citizens enjoying indulgence, vice, and mischief in the foreign port and Dutch colony of Surinam, and are drinking, vomiting, gambling, smoking, dancing, falling of chairs and falling asleep drunk, and being served by curiously small 'natives.' Declaration of Independence signatories Stephen Hopkins, Governor Joseph Wanton, Admiral Esek Hopkins, and Governor Nicholas Cooke are depicted in the painting. A Rhode Island family privately owned the painting from its creation until the twentieth century, hence its omission from the public eye.

Figure 4. John Lewis Krimmel, *Dance in a Country Tavern* (top), Oil on canvas, 1833-34; Source: Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-22808; Web; *Fourth of July Celebration in Centre Square, Philadelphia* (bottom), Oil on canvas, 1819; Pennsylvania; Source: *Wikimedia Commons*; Web; Both images depict drinking, carousing, and dancing, in the early nineteenth century: a sign that eighteenth century activities continued after the Revolution. Paintings like his *Nightlife in Philadelphia* show a woman, and men both white and African-American in top hats, gathered around an oyster cart imbibing and eating by candlelight on a dark street, and *Merrymaking at the Wayside Inn* depicts more dancing and music, again with the same mix of figures.

The advent of the American Revolution was in many respects a call to empower the people with freedom of choice and expression. There was great hope that, given the chance, citizens of the republic would and could conform to the standards of a new nation. Jefferson, Franklin, Munro, and others, through their differing aesthetics of virtue, had supported a reasonable and tempered vision of self-comportment and restraint in line with moral purity. Their aesthetics, which provided a bridge between Calvinist thought and later artists and educators, even those in the Romantic strain, were largely utopian. In Jefferson's aesthetic schema, "happiness and harmony emerge as nothing less than the imperatives of God's and nature's artistry … not to be ignored by humankind," yet the "dialectical quality that characterized his aesthetics of virtue was overwhelmed by nineteenth century dualities that dichotomized humanity and nature, sentiment and rationality, art and morality" (Quinby 354-5). In the nineteenth century, free Americans would indeed find more vice in virtue, and virtue in vice.

Chapter Two

Outré Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century

In the years following the American Revolution, the struggles between individualism and unity continued, as did the conversation about outré figures and leanings. Distinguishing oneself from the crowd was both desirable and commodifiable, and yet, conversely, it also signified a weak character and an attempt to gain attention. *The Philadelphia Album and Ladies Literary Gazette*, in a piece entitled, "Sketches of Character," discussed persons who "do not seem to like to be classed with other men, and who endeavour, by affecting certain singularities … to stand out in bold relief from the rest of their fellow beings … They are chiefly those who have a strong desire to possess fame and notoriety, but being denied by nature the possession of the requisite endowments and talents, they attempt to attract notice by an *outre* style of language and manners. If they cannot raise themselves above, they endeavor, as a last resort, to sink themselves below the rest of mankind … unworthy of a person of common sense" (52.2: 28 May 1828. n.pag.).

At the same time, American art continued to move away from European moral or intellectual aesthetic appreciation, and towards feeling or emotional appreciation. The sublime experience of Nature, for instance, expressed in early American texts, paintings, and songs, had contributed to a powerful and sentimental connection to land and home, and to an emerging sense of national identity. Great beauty was to be found not only in works of art, but also in everyday encounters and surroundings. By the nineteenth

century, the Transcendentalists, particularly Thoreau, helped to glorify daily sensuous experience, and to find beauty in one's back yard as well as great mountain ranges and pastoral landscapes. Art was no longer distinct from the ordinary, but inclusive of the ordinary – a movement that both complemented and reflected American egalitarianism. It was not only trained minds that could apprehend aesthetic unity, but also the everyman.

The sentiments attached to nature and pragmatism echoed the call for simplicity: Emerson championed a good, natural, adequate conduct of life, [9] and in his essay on "Beauty," exclaimed: "it is proof of high culture to say the greatest matters in the simplest way … all beauty must be organic; that outside *embellishment is deformity* [emphasis mine]" (*The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 157, 155). He remarked, moreover, that beauty has the highest value to us, that beauty in nature offers more than sensuous pleasure, but is also useful, rather than merely ornamental, and that it is excellent in structure: "The line of beauty is the result of perfect economy" (156-157). In the Introduction to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman declared that the "art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity; nothing is better than simplicity" (Whitman viii). Willa Cather understood the dual pulls between what was outside and inside. On the one hand, she exalted simplicity and truthfulness in art, and the happiness of being absorbed into something "complete and great." On the other, she understood desire to be the one big thing before which all else was little, that there was such a thing as creative hate, and that human stories were a matter of repeating rather predictable cycles of conformity and non-conformity over and again. Higher art was that which did away with conventions but managed to retain the spirit of the whole –

[9] Ralph Waldo Emerson. *The Conduct of Life* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, reprinted by Forgotten Books, 1860).

a practical vision. For Cather, too, beauty was to be found in nature, and offered a kind of solution: she admired the trees for being "resigned" to live, as they must. [10]

If beauty was both natural and useful, then even common objects and mass productions counted as aesthetically valuable. Aesthetic taste was not, then, the exclusive domain of hierarchical institutions, artistic academies, and privileged classes, but also of the decentralized masses that flaunted their independence from old world ideals. Americans therefore *collapsed* the boundaries between common pleasure and beauty, art and life, mind and body – all long held distinctions in aesthetics going back to Alexander Baumgarten.

As American perspectives and products gained credence, popular arts thrived alongside 'high' art as a legitimate and valued aesthetic experience. Whether through landscape paintings or sensational literature, Americans looked increasingly to the natural, both as a means of unification, and to assert difference. Often, approaches to the subject were divided along lines of feeling and thought, hierarchy and commonality, virtue and vice. Grantland Rice (1997) argues that slackened Puritan censorship, the boom of commercial print culture, and copyright law, all led to the de-politicization and commodification of public free expression in the United States. Paradoxically, the strict censorship of anything deemed outré, taboo, or inappropriate helped to "confer prestige on texts as civic interventions," particularly the novel in post-revolutionary America (236). The shift in American writing thus moved from an earlier period of political authorship to one of individual civic expression, and finally, through economic liberalism, into a marketable profession.

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[10] See Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!: Authoritative Text, Context, Backgrounds, and Criticism*. Ed. Sharon O'Brien. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008).

As invention, success, and profitability were all secular American values, writers and artists were able to explore a myriad of gothic, romantic, and sentimental themes in emotionally gripping (but not necessarily artistically inferior) works that held mass appeal, in addition to socially critical and satirical tracts and essays, or more conventional American paintings and portraits. While dominant culture attempted to contain and repress the outré, the glorification of civic interventions and the market value of free expression, allowed the outré to thrive in the face of judgment.

The outré offered a powerful alternative to discourses and aesthetics of virtue. The right of citizens to criticize the society in which they lived was embodied in the spirit of the republic. As such, the idea of deviance was openly questioned, and gave way to the fashion for rebels. At the level of folklore, outsiders were often painted as righteous heroes that chose not to participate in a lost, rather than virtuous, society. The colonial perspective that hermits were often victims of social evils, for instance, was exaggerated in the nineteenth century by Romantic notions of self-invention, independence, and social criticism. Elective social outcasts were not just curiosities, but mysterious and enigmatic figures who perhaps harbored some truth that others did not. "Wolfman" Albert Large and Buckskin Joe were no longer left to their own devices in peace, but were made into minor celebrities. Tourists harangued Lange at his cave, arriving by the hundreds, and stealing whatever meager objects they could find as souvenirs, in a romantic spirit. Buckskin Joe, who wanted simply to live wild and free, later became the spirited and nostalgic frontier-style mascot of amusement parks and penny products.

At the level of literature, however, American writers were coming into their own, and took social criticism seriously, often through outré aesthetics. Robert S. Levine

(2011) describes Melville's outré aesthetics of war, and concern with the "modern era's turn to total war." In *Israel Potter*, Melville criticized the role of Ben Franklin in the turn to severe violence, by having consciously placed Paul Jones in command: a man of "degraded savagery" and corrupt power, who was "[i]ntent on destruction for the sake of destruction." Melville depicted Jones as a force of spectacular mayhem, particularly by burning boats before large crowds, and by committing striking physical violence against the British (Otter and Sandborn 163). For Melville, then, the revolution was itself outré, masquerading as something reasonable, noble, and pure. The aesthetics of violence and chaos was a daily reality, in contrast with images of a coherent and virtuous new nation. Melville reflected aesthetically on the horrific excesses of founding America, just as the founders themselves had also questioned their outré roots.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, from his short fiction, including "Young Goodman Brown," to the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, also explored the paradox of the outré at the heart of America. He consistently chose protagonists that were outcast from their pious communities, for committing crimes or sins that paled in comparison to the exaggerated and outré (and sometimes devilish) character of the communities themselves. The carnival stream in his works employs imaginative imagery, irony, and parody, both to suggest freedom and to ridicule at once Puritan discourses of virtue as well as social evils. Nineteenth century authors worked within a spontaneous tradition, when American values and a legitimate, distinctive culture were still being invented and negotiated.

Between 1850 and 1900 especially, Americans struggled to create a national aesthetic that would reflect the shared ideas of a distinct civilization.[11] In *Common Sense Applied to Religion*, or *The Bible and The People* (1857), American educator Catharine Beecher noted: "We are now going through a period of demolition. In morals, in social life, in politics, in medicine, and in religion there is a universal upturning of foundations. But the day of reconstruction seems to be looming, and now the grand question is: Are there any sure and universal principles that will evolve a harmonious system in which we shall all agree?" (9). Such principles were often defined in aesthetic terms, and in the nineteenth century, the word outré had entered public parlance, and was used to help negotiate whom or what was inside or outside of proper and shared values and tastes.

The term outré itself had first been documented in French dictionaries in 1695 to connote something "exaggerated" that pushed others beyond their limits of patience, but by 1835 it had evolved to mean scandalous, over-the-top, and undignified – outside of the mainstream, indeed, outside of the "academy" (*Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*). The word then connoted excess (usually language or behavior) in the sense of taboo or outrageous, but also, and increasingly, aesthetic self-indulgence and dramatic departures from the norm – largely in response to bohemian artistic depravity and fashionable slumming. Educated Americans, still influenced by institutionalized Continental taste as a sign of aesthetic knowledge, adopted the term and applied it to anything that outraged their own dominant and religious principles, or that signified the very demolition that concerned Beecher, and by extension, threatened social cohesion. Ironically, that which clung too closely to European aesthetics was outré and decadent by American standards.

[11] For a detailed discussion of this timeline and theme, see Martha Banta's *One True Theory and the Quest for an American Aesthetic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007).

The *outré* became vital to public aesthetic discourse at a time when Americans were challenged with emerging modern tastes and forms, and continued to distinguish national from European aesthetics. The term *outré* was bandied about in both popular and critical nineteenth century American publications,[12] to describe a wide range of excessive or improper objects, unusual behaviors or styles, experimental designs and innovations, and appearances of the bizarre. A host of aesthetic objects and appearances were labeled outré, even as they carried semantic and aesthetic variations. An outré designation thus often simultaneously implied *aesthetic failure* (a failure to comply with standards of taste, and by extension, social failure), *aesthetic anxiety* (the potential to corrupt, deform, or inspire deviance), and *aesthetic success* (artistic inspiration, creative novelty, or the production of captivating effects or appearances).

Oddness, queerness, and affected eccentricity were often regarded as *contretemps*, morally corrupt, vain, or indulgent. Conspicuously overdone literary styles were critically treated as either a failed attempt to emulate European manners, or a means of gaining and manipulating attention. Writers for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, for instance, often criticized what they repeatedly called "outré" American "trash rags" or gossip tabloid magazines for seeking authentic journalistic status. Columns and reviews critically addressed the fusion between decadent European sensibilities and popular American print, particularly the use of ornate style and excessive emotional appeal in place of the simple, honest, and direct:

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[12] Some examples follow. For further examples, see, for instance, *Scribner's, The United States Democratic Review, Scientific American, New England and Yale Review, the North American Review, Garden and Forest, Putnam's*, and newspapers such as the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* between 1840-1910. See American Periodicals.

There is a style of modern literature, as there is in social life, which aims at the suppression of all the larger sympathies, and the avoidance of all frank and outward expression …. This style which can be caught up and imitated by anyone … and Putnam's Magazine is a repository of it - Dainty spasms and emotions were described in a conventional jargon, uttered in the *outré* [emphasis mine] voice and style of mock refinement, such as an actor on the stage gives as a caricature of an exquisite in society . . . . All this was not well calculated to enlist the sympathies of the general public . . . . This coterie of writers had neither invention nor humour; and one test of this was, that not one of the ten thousand journals which make up their literature matter by borrowing from the columns of the Magazines, ever copied a story from Putnam! Indeed the contributors plumed themselves that what they wrote was "caviare to the general"; but who, of whatever appetite, longs for "caviare"? ("New England Magazine Literature" 1).

Again:

These volumes ["Papers on Literature and Art" by Margaret S. Fuller] are interesting to the general reader . . . [but show] the fashion of phraseology and sentiment at present or very lately, in vogue . . . . They are well, and in parts, handsomely written, but defaced by transcendental bombast, and an outre phraseology. The placing of words is often far from English, and the lines slip occasionally into a kind of thumping blank verse …. Another and principal fault of style is a violation of Aristotle's rule, that a great matter should be plainly worded, a mean matter exalted by a more elaborate phraseology . . . . The

> volumes before us being decidedly works of imagination should have been composed in a less magnificent phraseology ("Papers on Literature and Art" 514).
>
> And again:
>
> *Lippincott's* for April gives us another story from Amelie Rives "The Witness of the Sea"; and it is the same old story of outre and violent and affected expression in place of simple invention and narration of telling characters and scenes. What used to be called profanity occurs freely in nearly every modern European language … [and] usual raids into the recesses of the dictionary (Saltus).

Notably, critic M. Chasles (1857) said of Charles Brockdon Brown and of American society and art:

> [Brown] understood and could express passion . . . his efforts of imagination are the struggles of an intelligence that wishes to create but produces chimeras. There is a ridiculous super-excitement in these productions; all is forced, violent, incoherent. Nothing spontaneous, natural, simple; but always convultions, perpetual emphasis, and horrors crowded upon horrors. Whence comes this vehement exaggeration? Why this unheard of tendency to the pathetic, the immense, the romantic, fantastic, marvelous? Because American society has nothing fantastic in it; the drama and the dithyrambic are exotics in the United States. Brown is already forgotten. It is the inevitable fate of all outre literature. False colors soon fade; their own exaggeration destroys them (Arthur 135).

Chasles was incredibly wrong that all "outré literature" would soon fade, and with it the romantic, fantastic, immense, marvelous, horrific, and pathetic. Exaggeration did not destroy American art, nor was it a sign of "false colors." Despite enduring calls for simplicity in art, excess and emotion were often aligned with what was natural, expressive, and imaginative, and even social or personal truth. From the nineteenth century onward, many distinctly American genres and works of art would fall into the very categories Chasles described as outré, and would become both beloved and publically lauded staples of American culture. Moreover, the idea that America had "nothing fantastic in it" and that drama was exotic to the United States was a myth that continually presented itself as a defense against the outré. The honesty for which Chasles and other critics called, while denying a blatantly violent American history, and suppressing growth through free expression, must have felt to some like a cruel joke.

The idea that excess and eccentricity was outré to American tastes is also reflected in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American biographies and nonfiction books as well. In *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), Adams, a native of Boston who spent much time in Europe, writes:

> From the old-world point of view, the American had no mind; he had an economic thinking-machine which could work only on a fixed line …. The American mind was not a thought at all; it was a convention, superficial, narrow, and ignorant; a mere cutting instrument, practical, economical, sharp, and direct. [Whereas, of the English mind], the defect that most struck an American was its enormous waste in eccentricity. Americans needed and used their whole energy, and applied it with

> close economy; but English society was eccentric by law and for sake of the eccentricity itself … eccentricity was so general as to become a hereditary distinction. It made the chief charm of English society as well as its chief terror . . . . Numbers of these men haunted London society, all tending to free-thinking, but never venturing much freedom of thought . . . .The sum of these experiences in 1863 left the conviction that eccentricity was weakness. The young American who should adopt English thought was lost (100, 101, 106, 107).

By comparison, in writing about his trip to America in *Outre-Mer, Impressions of America* (1895), Frenchman Paul Bourget noted that American culture was immoderate, excessive, and unbridled. The expression "go and run your risk" seemed to him a national philosophy, and yet he found plainness in both the seemingly manufactured civilization and the condition of total equality. Bourget observed most American men were businessmen, and declared that there was no real American art, except for a few notable artists that lived outside of society. He found Americans too self-conscious, intense, and utilitarian for the aesthetic virtues of mystery, ambiguity, and the unknowable on which the "soul of great civilizations" depend. Bourget clearly illustrated the materialism of Americans, and articulated the link between popular consumption and a restless propensity towards newness, invention, and sensation. Yet he underestimated the tensions between plainness and excess, capitalist energy and creative sensitivity, in the development of American culture.

Mystery, ambiguity, and the unknowable – as Paul Bourget put it - were neither absent from an American aesthetic experience, nor distinct from the everyday. The

enduring mystique of the frontier, the heart of disorienting cities, the supernatural, mystical, and the carnivalesque all played an important role in American daily life and literature. Public affinity for uncertainties and attraction to outré oddities reflected a host of uniquely American concerns, and also served as a successful marketing tool.

In particular, Americans gravitated to plays of reality and illusion that intensified the search for common truth while testing the limits of veracity. Philip Fisher (1999) finds an aesthetic equivalent in the oscillations between abstraction and realism in American art and literature. Mitch Horowitz (2010) illustrates the profound influence of esoteric philosophies including Spiritualism, the occult, and Freemasonry on American politics, history, culture, and figures such as Joseph Smith, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. James Cook (2001) and others point to the fascinating and challenging interplay of deception and persuasion, fraud and authenticity in American entertainments, advertisements, and events. Philipp Schweighauser (2012) explores the status of deception in early American art and literature, as well as European aesthetics, noting that deception in American art occurs not only in the works, but also through them, by creating artificially constructed worlds or *trompe l'oeils*, for instance, which trick spectators into mistaking them for the real thing. Yet such deceptions were inherently aesthetic, Schweighauser posits, reflecting American eighteenth and nineteenth century debates about the nature and function of art and sensuous perception, as well as responding to shifts in social and political organization.

Hoaxes, hokum, hooks, and false narratives satisfied the American desire for aesthetic challenges and helped to solidify the boundaries of 'regular' experience. In part

because "vision itself" drastically changed in the nineteenth-century, James W. Cook describes the phenomenon as essentially cohesive:

> [What was distinctive about Barnum's 1860 exhibition was that] the image of the non-descript self, a liminal being with no fixed or final boundaries, no single or easily legible identity – which … served as the focus of attention for contemporary audiences more than any of its constituent parts or personas. It is also worth considering why Currier and Ives chose a group of well-dressed, white, middle-class urbanites to observe and interact with Barnum's boundary blurring nondescript – and more astonishing still, pronounce its categorical indeterminancy pleasing in every way. The viewers [should have been] put off, disturbed, or even frightened by such a figure … [but] It was precisely in opposition to the liminal self that the new middle-class urbanities initially defined their own status, character, and virtue … the antebellum cultural messages about crafting a public persona were roughly the same: a categorically precise, easy-to-read self was generally moral, upstanding, and trustworthy, whereas a formless, illegible, or variable self was at the very least rude – or possibly criminal (160).

Because Spiritualism, various forms of the occult, and sex magic (under popular American author and medium Paschal Beverly Randolph) were practiced largely by the middle and upper classes, there was a great deal of concern about the ways in which such outré movements affected their audiences. Misleading falsehoods and practices were thought by critics to degrade the moral, intellectual, and physical condition of Americans. Women who participated in sex rituals, for instance, were required to be married and faithful, morally "pure," clean, and not of the "lower classes" (Randolph 327-42).

Couples were then free to focus on mysteries as objects of aesthetic contemplation, and to transcend their perception of reality without being deranged or subject to the number of emerging American obscenity laws that banned pornographic, disturbing, and other controversial and outré pastimes and publications.

Outré aesthetics, when properly moderated, offered a safe space in which to explore and discover the Other, whether persons or beings, mysteries or the supernatural, sexuality or imaginative spectacle, objects or atmospheres. Gone were the days of severe Puritan punishments, and the insistence on original sin. By the mid nineteenth century, the American Renaissance was in full flower. There was a great deal of excitement about human possibility, Romantic notions of life abounded, and sensational literature had already taken root. Americans had begun to accept the innocence of childhood and play, the domestic joy of 'companionable couples,' the tender intimacy of friendships, the virtues of individualism, and a high regard for ego. The fascinating worlds of science, naturalism, technology, and reason helped to explain the unknown, exposed the varieties of nature, tested one's reflexes and gullibility, introduced new concepts and practices like phrenology, offered the thrills of novelty and surprise, and theorized the place of still uncertain Americans within the firmament and on the world stage. For all these reasons, curiosity was a healthy attribute that applied to all social classes, and bound them together in certain common amusements and knowledge seeking, as was the very dark reality of illness and death.

Disease was rampant, infant mortality high, mortality visited too soon, industrialization took its toll, and the ever-flooding cities, along with continual waves of immigrants, as well as pockets of severe poverty and continued violence, fostered both a

carpe diem mentality, as well as the sentimentalization of death. Again, the outré was interwoven with conventional culture: even as sober *memento mori* and photographic portraits thrived in proper society and became centerpieces of middle-class homes, so too did the widespread fad of headless photos, achieved by special order dummies, or by layering daguerreotypes. Subverting popular aesthetics was as beloved an American pastime as popular aesthetics itself – a kind of pleasurable culture jamming. Thirsty for experience, and faced with an increasingly commercial society that commodified everything, Americans turned to the unconventional and outré to cope with the strange commingling of loss, fear, grief, enthusiasm, energy, and creativity.

The collective instability of Americans, who were still defining what American and American art meant, fostered a creative boom. Upper class citizens were often nouveau riche, and brought their tastes along with them, whereas those of aristocratic lineage, divorced from strictly European models of high art, were drawn by their penchant for philosophy, talent, finer feeling, and the acquisition of knowledge, to the larger mysteries of life, the meaning of the soul, and the transitions brought on by cultural inventions. Unclear where the boundaries were drawn between high and popular culture, free expression and repression, life and the afterlife, Americans tried on a variety of radically unconventional practices, methods, beliefs, and amusements.

Many of the outré entertainments Americans enjoyed are bizarre and have no clear meaning. The "wily Yankee," for instance (see figure 5.), "was a popular mid-nineteenth-century stage character from American regional theater. With tricks of cunning and an *exaggerated* [emphasis mine] costume (top hat, wide striped pants), this stock player became the visual prototype for America's 'Uncle Sam.' The motif of the

whittler relates to the character's role. Between acts, the Yankee remained on stage, whittled, and told parables. At times, he also flirted with both the women and men in the audience as he suggestively carved a stick at his crotch" (Metropolitan Museum of Art) – in later versions, Uncle Sam fortunately points only his finger, and offers no mixed messages. Audiences of the time likely understood the act, which reappeared transversally between other acts in the vaudeville style, and were perhaps titillated or amused. Yet "wily Yankee" further exemplifies that much Americana was remarkably strange and, beyond the parables themselves, signified nothing. As an aesthetic experience, the act embodies the spirit of the outré – a palpable and excessive presence (in this case, multisensory) that defies both meaning and interpretation.

Figure 5. Artist Unknown [American School], "[Man Whittling a Stick], early 1850s," Daguerrotype, 1850 -1855, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; 3 1/4 x 2 3/4 in. (8.3 x 7 cm); Gift of Herbert Mitchell, 1999 (1999. 481.1); OASC; Source: www.metmuseum.org; n.d.; Web; 28 June 2014.

It is easy to imagine that in the blurred ether of constant exposure to newness – no doubt facilitated by the overwhelming availability of vast amounts of laudanum, cocaine, alcohol, and other drugs and 'medicines' to every American citizen, as well as the permissive environment of emotional and sensual indulgence – enthusiasts tripped and stumbled through the varied options before them, as did sober moralists and reasonable minds. One week, a young gentleman might attend an enlightening garden lecture with a guru from India, the next suffer disenchantment or discipline for having wasted his money on something as 'base' and exploitative as a freak show, and the next be invited into proper society, or even the White House, for a séance for some beloved who had passed on. Increasingly, the line between outré and conventional was thinning, especially in the cities. Further, in a very real sense, this fact both trained and honed Americans for the complex demands of modernity, technological adaptiveness, independence, and the challenges of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

The Spiritualist movement, for instance, began in 1848 in New York, when the young Fox sisters claimed to have communicated with the ghost of a man murdered in their house. Sensation and scandal spread, and reports appeared in newspapers in both America and Europe. Like freakshows, Spiritualism relied on a medium between audience and unstable presence. Mediums offered the illusion of cultural sanctioning of the outré, were thought to be endowed with supernatural gifts, and held both entertaining and mysterious séances for followers of the countercultural movement. Spiritualist shows were popular in America, especially to those who suffered grief, but less so in Europe where they were met with skepticism as a "strange and fascinating

American import" (Byrne 20). In addition to providing a kind of variety entertainment – signing, playing guitars, writing, speaking, and drawing – the Fox Sisters and other 'mediums' faked the presence of spirits by rapping on tables, using home made tools or technologies to displace objects, turn tables, or raise sheets in the form of humans, and dressed up in wigs and costumes in order to feign the dead.

The aesthetics of such spectacles were powerful and carefully orchestrated, and believers and disbelievers both agreed that "access to hidden things of the spirit" depended on the right medium and her sensitive and sensual knowledge (Peters 97). In many ways, the art of sensitivity was taken very seriously. Sarah Winchester, wife of William Winchester and American rifle heiress, was taken by Spiritualism and convinced that spirits would kill her if she completed the construction of her house. She famously squandered untold millions of her inherited fortune on continued constructions for thirty-six years. To outwit the spirits, she built staircases everywhere that led to nothing, and the house became a popular tourist attraction. By the 1870s, Spiritualism and mediums were "redefined as unrespectably outré" (96), and critics warned that it was an "'abuse of Spiritualism to *yield up selfhood* [emphasis mine] in the absorbing investigation of phenomena'" (Braude 190). The aesthetic effects uniquely mastered by outrageous knowledge entertainers like spiritual guides, circus showmen, and sex cult practitioners generated both acuteness and fantasy in their audiences while tapping into the desire for *internal* difference.

Chapter Three

Outré Exhibits and Performance

Nineteenth-century Americans engaged the outré in popular venues including carnivals, museums, and freakshow entertainments, all of which were central American pastimes and a major cultural influence from 1840 until the early twentieth century ("Freak Shows in the United States (1840-1940)"; Bogdan). Dime amusement and freakshow audiences consisted largely of the working class, and a wide variety of immigrants of various ethnicities as well as American "natives." Museums were widely attended by people of all classes, predominantly lower and middle, including women and children, and more formal displays and events were attended by the more privileged classes, predominantly while and male, and sometimes included celebrated freaks as guests. As the U.S. became more urbanized and industrialized, especially after the Civil War, cosmopolitan Americans enjoyed new technological and industrial conveniences, and developed the fever for consumerism. The outré was in many ways the perfect expression of American diversity, desire, and development.

First, it reflected diverse American tastes and forms. Outré encounters boasted individualism and independence through uniqueness, yet also allowed relative strangers to escape urban anonymity through shared experience, and the physical simulation of bonding over something remarkable or unusual. Experiences of this type made spectators or participants feel more worldly, satisfied their hunger for novelty, and broke up the banal familiarity of routines such as long hours of repetitive work, while offering

something interesting to debate and discuss. Indeed, such conversations were often impassioned, and allowed Americans to focus their distress over their interpersonal differences and tensions onto strange but abstracted others.

Second, anything outré continued to be associated with expressiveness, imagination, and invention, as much as with the 'forbidden fruit' of deviance, taboo, and experimentation. As such, it appealed to the drive to follow one's impulses and vicariously enjoy dramatic difference or radically alternate states of being. Curiously, this desire for internal variety overlapped with external commercialism. Outré entertainments, for instance, represented the freedom to consume an "ever-expanding variety of images and goods" (Sutherland 2007), which equated with conditions of democratic freedom.

Third, the outré helped to foster the public desire for distraction and sensation, and the enjoyment of sensual aesthetic encounters that surprised, baffled, or held attention, through "glittering appearances," especially that which that defied understanding. In one way, outré encounters reflected the embodied thrills that Americans enjoyed through speed, electricity, commercial packaging, vestibular self-motion, and the disorientation of cities and of new media. In another way, it stimulated their minds and hearts, and challenged them to discern, adapt, and respond to feelings and thoughts that were aroused in or conferred upon them, often beyond their control – an especially modern conundrum – and to discover their own limits. By leaving their 'comfort zone,' confronting ambiguous presences that could not be explained, and engaging complex sensations, Americans were pushed to aesthetic extremes that they

could not have anticipated and from which they could not return. Non-meaning presences thus provided a powerful alternative.

Fourth, outré aesthetics fostered an uncanny internal ambivalence in spectators or participants. Outré encounters were epiphanic, not in the sense of revealed meaning, or sublime awe, but in the sense of exposure to that which cannot be *un*-experienced. Encounters of this type both suggested and produced a merging between the outré and oneself that went far beyond the safe boundaries of artifice, or enjoying aesthetic excess from a place of self-containment. In a crude sense, the sensual awareness that what is *out there* can also be *in here* was staggering, and radicalized passive spectatorship by transforming it into a transcendental experience of plurality. Reacting to a freak show, for instance, or a far-out painting, could change a person from within.

Audiences, faced with the unusual, attempted to understand or decipher the thing before them. Often, it seemed that they were not necessarily in control of their bodies or emotions, and that the "things" before them either were, or were made by, other beings not wholly unlike themselves, were it not for some stroke of luck or fate or accident. Americans were beginning to grasp that aesthetic affect was not just a process of consuming, or of provocation and response, but of being awash in presence, and possibly consumed. One did not simply look at the Other, but communed with another simply by sharing space. Exposing oneself to the possibility of internalizing the outré unsettled as well as excited Americans, but exposing oneself *through* the outré – discovering it not as an other but as a 'we' – was a dimension many spectators were hesitant to experience. Individual integrity and identity, and by extension national self-image, dangled on the

edge of an outré aesthetics that seemed both real and impossible, authentic and artificial, strange and familiar.

Barnum, Museums, and Humbug

P.T. Barnum's American Museum was open fifteen hours a day and boasted up to 15,000 daily visitors at its peak. For the price of a quarter, 38 million customers attended the museum between 1841 and 1865: six million more than the population of the United States at that time (Mondello n.pag). P.T. Barnum combined the kind of provocative marketing used to sell snake oil with the reputable performance of knowledge. Known for "humbugs" such as the Fiji Mermaid, he invited viewers to question and examine the authenticity of his amusements. Thus Barnum – and other American showmen – engaged audiences in a "perceptual contest" that "created as many problems as they solved," and "socialize[d] their audiences to a brave new world in which the very boundaries of truth were becoming more and more puzzling" (Cook 28). Delaying the promise of truth, Barnum challenged audiences to risk the limits of their perception and knowledge.

American public curiosity was stimulated in artful deception, discovery and 'edutainment,' rather than intellectual disinterestedness and higher learning. This was in many respects a leap from Old World museums and galleries that controlled the performance of knowledge through intellectualism, progressive instruction, or displays of private (and therefore privileged) collections that reinforced existing aesthetic order: "… everything [in Europe] seemed to be set up before one as though it was a model or the picture of something. Everything was arranged before the observing subject into a system

of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere 'signifier' of something further" (Mitchell 460). While Europeans attended museums and galleries to enjoy the "aesthetic presence" of historical and static works like Chagall's paintings, "early American collectors were motivated by a different impulse than the kings in Europe." Americans, on the new continent, "were exploring and opening up and discovering," and both realized and sought a tremendous "variety of forms of life." Reflecting this variety and diversity, the earliest American museums were "kind of freak shows … the bizarre was collected together with sober specimens with no real order or organization" (Mondello).

American museums, following Barnum's American Museum, were in fact variety entertainments, mixing animate and inanimate objects, works of art, natural curiosities, tools and technologies, wax figures, preserved animals, living humans, live music and lectures, performances and dance shows, and a mix of odds and ends. Meghan A. Sutherland (2007) argues that variety entertainment as a "spectacular aesthetics" – beginning in nineteenth century America – can be used to understand liberalism and American pluralism as an aesthetic organization and hegemonic trope of difference-in-unity; the "showcase" aesthetic of variety entertainment presents a logic of variety, indexing the people, goods and values that constitute an ideal of variety in American culture.

According to Barnum, his specialty was "glittering appearances and novel expedients." A great showman was not a "swindler" or "impostor," but rather someone who managed to successfully entertain his audience, even if his displays were intentionally deceptive:

> "[H]umbug" consists in putting on glittering appearances—outside show—novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the public eye and ear . . . . If, however, after attracting crowds of customers by his unique displays, a man foolishly fails to give them a full equivalent for their money … He fails, not because he advertises his wares in an *outre* manner, but because, after attracting crowds of patrons, he stupidly and wickedly cheats them (Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World* 20-21).

Barnum sometimes wrote anonymous Letters to the Editor at well-known newspapers, declaring that one or more of his exhibits were false. The public continued to flock to the exhibits to figure out how they were done, or to see whether they were true, for themselves. One of Barnum's aesthetic strategies was what Neil Harris identifies as operational aesthetics. According to Barnum, "everything depended on getting people to think, and talk, and become curious and excited over and about the 'rare spectacle'" (Harris 76). A master showman, Barnum recognized the American desire for mystery and the unconventional, which had the power to generate public discussion. Moreover, he recognized that audiences were more interested in the aesthetic mechanisms of outré spectacles than the truths they claimed to represent. Debates about his Fiji Mermaid, for instance, centered on how, why, and for whom the bizarre object was made, rather than whether or not it was real.

One of the longest running displays at Barnum's Museum – an act that went on, in other venues, for forty years – was that of William Henry Johnson, also known as Zip the Pinhead. The child of slaves, Johnson was microcephalic. Barnum dressed him up in furry suits, and asked him to run about the stage grunting and making strange noises.

Though recognizable to national audiences as an African-American man, Johnson and his act were billed as, "What Is It?" and posters asked whether "it" was man, animal, or the missing link (Harris 76). Barnum then managed to create a visual investigation, much as he had with other freaks: "Barnum's audiences found the encounter with potential frauds exciting. It was a form of intellectual exercise, stimulating even when the literal truth could not be determined" (75). He "understood that people enjoyed the opportunity to debate the issue of falsity, to discover how the deception had been practiced, and that it was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself" (125). Thus, the aesthetic mechanisms that Barnum employed to present his acts were a greater attraction than the acts themselves. Those who attended the American Museum were left with new questions, participated in deceptive gambles and aesthetic frauds, and encountered the unconventional as respectable, and the conventional as reactive. In a profoundly democratic sense, they were conditioned towards modern uncertainty and destabilization, and engaged modes of difference that could not be confined or contained as deviant, exotic, or unnatural.

Barnum's entertainments used aesthetic presence to appeal both physically and psychologically to American crowds. His circuses were far larger than circuses produced in Europe, and special train deals were arranged to cart massive crowds out to the shows. Barnum's spectacles were nothing if not bawdy and sensually overwhelming, even before they began. His posters were bold, colorful, seductive and provocative. They were visually compelling, full of information, instantly apprehended by a viewer, piqued curiosity, and promised a valuable experience. Images and text on the posters combined to both grab attention and arouse emotion through the use of bright primary colors,

pictures of mysterious or odd beings, and the use of words and phrases like "bizarre," "amazing," "secret," "one-of-a-kind," "incredible, and "strange." Featured acts were billed as mysteries or ambiguities that dared audiences to participate in spectacles and decide what to believe. Ads for one of Barnum's first displays – that of Joyce Heth, or "George's Washington's 161 year old nurse" – told a story, aroused curiosity, and appealed to public nostalgia for a shared past. Many of the same tactics that Barnum used and invented persist in digital culture, as Nathalie Nahai has shown. [13]

Barnum's circus tents, sideshows and museums were massive and artificially produced worlds, and full of surprises, shocks, and novelties. Both outside and inside, Barnum's venues employed eye-catching and outrageous displays such as rooftop fountains, massive balloons, spotlights, strange lighting, intentionally discordant music (used to encourage visitors out of doorways and halls and into main entrances or exits) and the kind of barber-pole stripes that the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* referred to as a new but publically pleasing "outre though not unpleasant appearance" ("National Barber Poles" 15 December, 1868: 2). As sensually contained spheres, Barnum's venues and attractions offered far-out aesthetic experiences, or aesthetically controlled hyper-realities, that allowed audiences to safely encounter alternative forms.

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[13] In *Webs of Influence: The Psychology of Online Persuasion* (Harlow: Pearson, 2013), Nathalie Nahai employs these very same aesthetic devices in the "Secret Psychology Behind Persuasive Content" in contemporary web and Internet presence. Websites should be instant, data-rich and visually compelling; images must elicit emotion, tell a story, and create a curiosity gap; viral video must use nostalgia; writers of persuasive web-content should: a) promise something valuable, b) dare to engage, c) be bold, d) be seductive, e) be provocative, and e) make sure they can 'deliver.' Nahai also identifies the key 'trigger words' of web psychology as: *Strange, Bizarre, Weird, Mystery, Secret, Incredible, 'It's Not What You Think,' Amazing, Free, Effortless, Fun, Painstaking and Absolute*. That Nahai does not credit Barnum, who pioneered and perfected many of these aesthetic mechanisms and tactics, is perhaps a testament to the ubiquity of the outré in American marketing, entertainment, and media.

In both Europe and America, the overlap of freak performances and ethnographic displays or "human zoos," *objets d'art*, scientific tools and technological inventions, wax figures, public lectures, and talent shows – especially at world fairs and in select museums – created an atmosphere of eccentric learning, that was connected to the outré because it combined a spectacular and outrageous aesthetics with naturalism and higher learning, shifted the focus of disinterestedness towards embodied experience, and sensationalized a proper pastime. Outré styles of presentation and performances of knowledge were both visually appealing and decadent in their excess, in contrast to the physical self-control espoused by both European audiences and middle-class Americans. Yet as European and American styles and content departed from one another, they became divergent aesthetic authorities.

European museums and shows created a baroque-like interplay between sophisticated paintings, respectable talks or lectures, scientific and technological displays, music and poetry, occasional dissections, and the display of ethnographic 'oddities,' largely in portraiture or other art. The best European museums were derived from royal collections, private collections, or Medieval treasure troves. Visitors were relatively few and mainly educated elites who regarded collections as repositories of the past. They moved through them carefully, spoke in hushed tones, and participated in intellectual dialogue. The central theme was one of both aesthetics and history, and most visitors had a strong emotional connection to the objects on display. A defining feature was that many of the objects were still connected to their original sites, which gave meaning and continued social relevance to spectators.

American museums – following Barnum – added a variety of elements such as freak shows, announcers or 'barkers,' product sales, pamphlets and promotions, magic tricks and feats of amazement, business signs, popular prints and songs, bawdy or campy amusements, live music, oyster bars, cosmoramas, flea circuses, a rifle range, trained animals, ventriloquists, and adaptations of biblical stories. While aboriginal cultures, which were not recognized as equal in stature, had a rich and long history on the continent, relative to Europe, Americans had a relatively new history. The objects that more 'serious' American museums collected were acquired largely through financial investment in foreign deals and excavations. However, as members of a new nation, American collectors were both interested in and free to amass contemporary works, strange art, and common objects, and capitalize on their aesthetic appeal. Impressionist paintings, weird ephemera of culture, and far-out inventions were all outré aesthetics that the Europeans were not all that interested in collecting. American museum collectors, however, saw great potential in outré forms, and Barnum had proven that objects themselves were not risky investments if one could sell them to public interest.

Entrepreneurs like Barnum had blended together whatever stimulating or interesting flotsam and jetsam they could find, and had added the factor of entertainment. American museums moved towards edutainment and mass audiences, by organizing historical information into visually stimulating presentations, and placing objects to which audiences had no sentimental or personal connection into contextually realist settings complete with dioramas – part of the American penchant for naturalness. In addition, lectures, tours, and guides spoke to popular rather than exclusively educated audiences, and focused heavily on a modern experience. Another technique adapted from

Barnum, and from freak shows, was the use of contrast, such as pairing the exceptionally tall and small in order to dramatize them both and to connect objects to one another, rather than to the places where they were made and could remain.

There was also a difference between European and American human displays. Again, one of the first modern public human exhibitions was Barnum's display of Joyce Heth, and "Siamese twins" Chang and Eng, in 1835. Yet it was not until the 1870s that human zoos and the display of exotic peoples became a popular event in several countries. Self-consciously 'encyclopaedic' in character, European ethnographic exhibits and human zoos emphasized historical progress, the attainment of world power through colonial expansion, and the ascending victory of Western civilization: part of a united, but not uniform, discourse and practice that situated colony and city within a single analytic field. The accompanying narrative was the teleological evolution of humankind in which white, rational, and civilized Europeans were the heroes (Breckenridge 196).

Millions of people attended such shows, and advertisements largely depicted foreign people in their natural home environments, staged as natural habitats of exotic flora and fauna. While some humans were exhibited in cages, and nude or nearly nude, for the most part they were made to look as exotic as possible. Such shows were laden with mystery and ambiguity, and for many Victorians, the first Others they would encounter outside fellow Continentals. Hagenbeck and others procured Inuit and other indigenous and aboriginal peoples from all over the world, and often tried to recreate their villages as part of living displays. The genuine aesthetic and physical differences struck audiences as outré, and yet often such differences were forced or exaggerated in order to appear more authentic.

Americans in many ways emulated European ethnographic exhibits and held them at the same time. Humans were often presented in ways that dramatized exotic otherness, for instance through teased out afros, stage effects and strange props, elaborate, tribal, or shocking costumes; face and body paint; and foreign backdrop settings. Imperialist narratives included displaying people from the Philippines, after they had been defeated in war, and depicting them as less evolved. Primitives would become civilized workers through American intervention and acquisition of resources. American ethnographic exhibits also blended with freak show tactics. Freak shows were commonly held in taverns or fairgrounds – 'cheap' venues – and combined talent with the exploitation of human difference and variation. Moreover, they openly practiced racist duplicity, for instance by painting white sailors in blackface, inventing languages of jibberish for them to speak, and calling them "savage Zulus."

In America, the bizarre and the outré, embodied in sideshows, freak shows and circuses, demonstrated a disregard for European styles of display, but also a complex metanarrative. In a land filled with 'wild' Africans and 'savage Indians,' American presentations posed significant problems. Displaying an African in a cage with monkeys, as was the case with Ota Benga, was intolerably racist to many African-Americans who protested such inhumanity. Artificially constructed indigenous villages, for instance the popular Sioux villages, did not have the quite same exotic effects as in Europe. For instance, Geronimo sold his autograph as a national figure.[14] However, Native American

[14] Ota Benga was eventually taken in by an African-American preacher who had protested his showing. Benga was given false teeth to cover his 'sharp points,' American style clothes and an English tutor, but he quit to plant tobacco. When WWI prevented Benga from returning to his homeland, he suffered severe depression. In 1916, he made a ceremonial fire, chipped off his false teeth, and shot himself in the heart with a stolen

performers often wore headdresses to pose as Chiefs for predominantly white audiences who tokenized such things, displays often mixed cultural elements of different tribes including teepees and totem poles, and vendors sold feathered headbands, replica tomahawks, and other items of cultural (mis)appropriation.

Americans largely capitalized on exotic mystery through taglines like "What Is It?" and "The Missing Link." Barnum had combined ethnographic exhibits with freak show techniques to make even everyday Americans appear completely outré and unlike any thing the world had ever seen. Barnum in particular promoted freaks in ways that challenged and stimulated national narratives. His American Museum featured, alongside humans and menageries of animals, the hat of Ulysses S. Grant, the first Miss America style beauty pageants and American pretty-baby contests, captivity narratives, blackface shows, and a recreation of Uncle Tom's Cabin. He also billed performers as "Washington's nurse" and other bogus and exaggerated bio-narratives – a tactic Walt Disney would later employ to convert outré eccentrics like Johnny Appleseed, Davy Crocket and Ben Franklin into beloved frontier heroes (Gabler 2007).

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pistol and died. Six days later, Ishi, the "last Yahi" (Californian tribe), whose family and tribe had been eradicated by white Americans, and who was also forced to remain in white society, died of tuberculosis. Despite pleas to keep his body intact, as was the spiritual custom of Yahi burial, and autopsy was performed at the University of California, the brain removed and sent to a museum, and the body cremated. The fate of "freaks" and the fame that consumed them would later become a topic of public controversy, sympathy, and American cultural self-reflection.

Enfreakment and American Selfhood

Barnum also championed the aggrandizing method of *enfreakment*: the showcasing of freaks as gifted and unique individuals, rather than as inferior exotic others. By elevating the status of performers in the world of commercial urban amusements, he "emphasized how the freak was an upstanding high-status person with talents of a conventional and socially prestigious nature" (Bogdan 108). Barnum understood what many disability theorists have long noted: that freaks are socially constructed, not born. The absolute exteriority of freaks – which represented no one and nothing and particular— often evoked admiration in captivated audiences. To Americans, the idea of giftedness or talent coincided with pathological oddity, and implied a shared work ethic, as well as upward mobility through ingenuity. Star performers were both financially and commercially successful, and their *cartes-de-visites* were coveted souvenirs.

Freakshows thus animated the 'politics of the impossible' in a society that valued self-confidence and individualism. They also appealed to the contest for public attention. The real provocation was not in human biological variation and otherness – and by extension, multiculturalism, competition, and pluralism – but the aesthetic challenge of difference and newness presented as risks or dangerous experiences to which we perpetually expose ourselves. Nevertheless, both freaks and freakshows were outré not only in the sense of outrage/outrageous and overdone, or of pushing beyond the limits of convention and reason, but also in the sense of introducing ambiguous presences and complex sensations that could only be experienced and not explained. The idea that

nineteenth-century freaks were a "monstrous mirror" to bourgeois spectators and the "aristocrats of the common people" is repeatedly attributed to American culture by a number of Disability Studies and Freak Studies scholars. What has not been explored is the relationship between the aesthetics of freakery, creative innovation, and the plays of reality and truth in the self-(re)invention of everyday Americans.

While the "late nineteenth century witnesses the heyday of the display of corporeal anomaly for the sake of entrepreneurial profit and mass entertainment in the form of 'freakshow attractions'" (Kérchy and Zittlau 3), Elizabeth Grosz, Robert Bogdan, Rachel Adams, Leslie Fielder, Marlene Tromp, and Rosemarie Garland Thompson differ in their understanding of the significance of freakshows in the nineteenth century. Garland Thompson argues that freakshows took off in Victorian America, in an age of crisis and change, as "public rituals that bonded a sundering polity together in a collective act of looking" (4), and which helped to promote an American identity that was threatened by the challenges of modernity.

The exhibition of freaks for amusement and profit is of course neither modern nor American. Europeans also associated freaks with entertainment, vaudeville, and funfairs – though with some notable differences: "Continental European freaks are introduced as products of ideologically-infiltrated representations," yet "also emerge as embodied subjects with their own voice, view, and subjective agency," though "throughout the Continental European cultural history of freakery pain has had an equal share with amusement" (Kérchy and Zittlau 9-11). For both Europeans and Americans, the "(image of the) body re/presents, especially from modernism onwards, the human being measured

in terms of our own identity and its received images of integrity," and thus the freak evokes both anxieties and fantasies of otherness in the self-same (2).

Elizabeth Grosz argues that the awe and fascination of human spectacles and the spectacularization of the human "lies in the recognition that this monstrous being is at the heart of [the viewer's] own identity, for it is all that must be ejected or abjected from one's self-image to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible," and that freakery involves an "in-betweening" that both indicates and imperils the physical, psychic and conceptual limits that divide the subject from ambiguities "beyond normal, knowable, visible human subjectivity, and outside its corporeal limits effecting the lived and represented identity" (57, 65).

A number of late nineteenth-century American magazines and newspapers printed regular stories and commentaries, featured as news, about local outré characters that attempted, by some unconventional means, to refashion themselves as freaks in order to make a living in freakshows. One such story describes a Brooklyn man who tarred and feathered himself in an attempt to capitalize on the commercial success of "self-made freaks" ("Freaks." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13 October, 1890: 4). American audiences and readers were thus not only an integral part of spectacles, but also the spectacle themselves. Eager to obtain prosperity, achieve individual recognition, and forge their own grand (and often exaggerated) narratives, nineteenth-century Americans were stimulated by the possibility of multiple alterities, and found latent models in the successfully bizarre.

Joshua Norton, an American immigrant, heir, and entrepreneur who had lost his fortune in failed business investments, returned to San Francisco destitute and homeless

and, in 1859, reinvented himself as "Emperor Norton I, Emperor of these United States and Protector of Mexico." Impoverished but beloved by an adoring public, Norton wandered the streets in Imperial costumes and issued famous edicts to the press, as well as official approvals about town. An outré figure and eccentric, he was offered free meals and hotel rooms, and was known to prophetically call for the construction of a San Francisco bridge, as well as a tunnel. Emperor Norton also intervened in riots in which Chinese immigrants were attacked. He died a local hero, and thousands attended his funeral. Norton rose to fame through local newspapers, and had a profound effect on reporter Samuel Clemens, or Mark Twain (Moylan n.pag.). Initially a failed American success story, Norton achieved even greater recognition through aesthetic self-promotion and familiar forms of enfreakment.

Emperor Norton was in many ways an imitation of figures like Charles Stratton or "General Tom Thumb," who was at that time a wealthy American celebrity: "The presentation of human oddities in the Victorian era changed dramatically with P.T. Barnum and his famous attraction Tom Thumb. When Barnum arrived in England in 1844 the British showmen were amazed that Barnum [could make] so much money for simply exhibiting a dwarf. However, Barnum created a novelty act that would become one of the greatest attractions of the Victorian Era" ("Freak Shows," *National Fairground Archive*). Stratton was on his second tour of the United States and Europe, as one of Barnum's produced stars, at the time that Joshua Norton reinvented himself. Notably, Stratton had often dressed in Imperial uniform and feigned both high manners and haughty bearing in his acts. He was presented to Queen Victoria three times, as well as to Abraham Lincoln, owned property in downtown New York and a steam yacht, and

his marriage was front-page news. Stratton was an international superstar, and along with Barnum, the greatest American celebrity of the nineteenth century (Lehman). He performed in sold-out shows for over forty years, and was a singer, dancer, actor, raconteur, and lauded humorist.

Both Stratton and Norton regularly made headlines, and the mystery of their true origins and identity intrigued the general public. Neither, however, was treated as a freak. Freak performers professionally played with (and were often conflicted by) aesthetics of the bizarre, authenticity and forgery, and the rift between interior and exterior selves. Artists and entertainers like Stratton pursued mainstream cultural values, and helped to spread "Yankee wit" across the globe. Known for his spiritedness as much as his size, Stratton represented the capacity of all Americans to fulfill personal potential, maximize opportunity, and capitalize on specialness. In 'transcending his limitations,' Stratton (with Barnum) shifted the public view of little persons from pathetic defection to charming variation, and cultivated his celebrity image.

Everyday eccentrics, however, exhibited the inverse: their theatrics belonged to a complex private psychology that projected the freak as a calling, or as a genuine self in conflict with social mores. While Americans were busy trying to 'make it' in society, and keeping up appearances, oddballs and outsiders offered an alternative to individual, and often invisible, struggle. Figures like Norton saw themselves as if upon a stage, and found success in reinventing themselves in a collective act of outré social aesthetics. Norton lived inside a performance that emphasized the truth of false appearances, and embraced the aesthetics of enfreakment. Here, the self is a creative community project, and open to experimental image-making. Norton was not a con who played dressup for

free meals and attention. Rather, he believed in the value of his imagined Empire. Few understood that he had already experienced a conventional rise-and-fall as a businessman, and found new entrepreneurship in simply declaring what he hoped to achieve – a radical take on the emerging American Dream. In many respects, "Emperor Norton" was an unintentional parody of nineteenth-century America. His 'I seem, therefore I am' approach to life emerged as a spontaneous response to a culture of spectators and freak show audiences. Norton's reputation was its own *carte-de-visite*.

The rise of the freakshow coincided with the popularization of photography. Sheila Moeschen (2005) notes that the introduction of photography caused shifts in valuation of the visual in nineteenth-century America. Just as citizens manipulated and changed their appearances for the camera, photos of freaks were a way of playing with the politics of photographic representation to generate meanings for bodies that resist empirical explanation. Moeschen demystifies "the apparent contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity inherent in early photographic practices to reveal a strategic methodology: a way of playing with the politics of photographic representation to generate meanings for bodies that resist empirical explanation. Here, photography's structures of power and knowledge that imbricate the freak are made transparent, challenging the medium's claims to truth and 'reality' that inform its critical status in contemporary American culture" (n.pag.). Nineteenth-century photographs carried properties of immediacy, verisimilitude, and the uncanny: people recognized them as pictures but with a striking difference. The desire to manifest inside on the outside was evident in the ways that middle-class Americans posed themselves deliberately as conforming to social values (both sentimentally and hypocritically), and in which medical

authorities both photographed and demonstrated for large, live audiences the physical anomalies of the deformed, freakish, and diseased.

Moeschen indicates the interplay between art and science in photography, especially as it concerns the 'abnormal' body in the nineteenth century, and the overlap of artifice and realism in popular portraiture, medical photos, and the collectable freak performers' *carte-de-visites*. Photographers "also developed posing or arrangement strategies designed to showcase the ["healthy"] subject's most attractive or favorable features. Portrait photographers avoided working with those considered defective or deformed as these physical traits, according to conventional wisdom, represented outward signifiers of the moral or ethical depravity that lurked within one's soul" (Moeschen). Anxiety and ambiguity thus surrounded photography, the integrity and reliability of which were suspect. Physicians argued for the authenticity of their medical photographs, and were concerned about whether they would be used for scientific study or fetishized consumption – the latter use was certainly outré.

Yet Moeschen, in dealing with the complex interplay of constructing the middle-class American, and deconstructing the freak and the pathological body, overlooks a complex middle ground – that of the disabled veteran, or wounded. One has only to look at medical photos taken of Civil War veterans to be reminded of similar photos of freaks (See figures 6. and 7.). Over one hundred thousand surgeries were performed during the Civil War, and real-life encounters with injured, broken, mangled, and dead bodies were all to close to home. Yet while portraits of veterans were both taken and collected by doctors, army hospitals, and surgeons – for principally medical purposes – wounded veterans were not considered corrupted, depraved, or outré.

Figure 6. A composite of 19th century "freaks"; Top: (Left) Artist Unknown, "The Seven Sutherland Sisters," circa 1880, Photograph, n.p.; Public domain; The sisters, from New York, displayed their famously long hair in a Barnum & Bailey sideshow from 1882 to 1907, They were often posed so that their hair always touched the floor, an image evoking at once outré excess and the splendors of nature; Source: *Wikicommons*, 14 June, 2011, Web; (Right) Artist Unknown, "Anne Leek," circa 1870s, Photograph, Public domain; Also Anne Thompson, "the armless wonder," Leek joined a freak show to earn a living, used her feet to write, cut, sew, braid, and other activities; Source: Syracuse University Library Ronald G. Becker Collection, Syracuse; Bottom: Matthew Brady, "Barnum's Freaks," Circa 1860; Web; Source: *The American Eye*, Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington; 10 March 2007, Web.

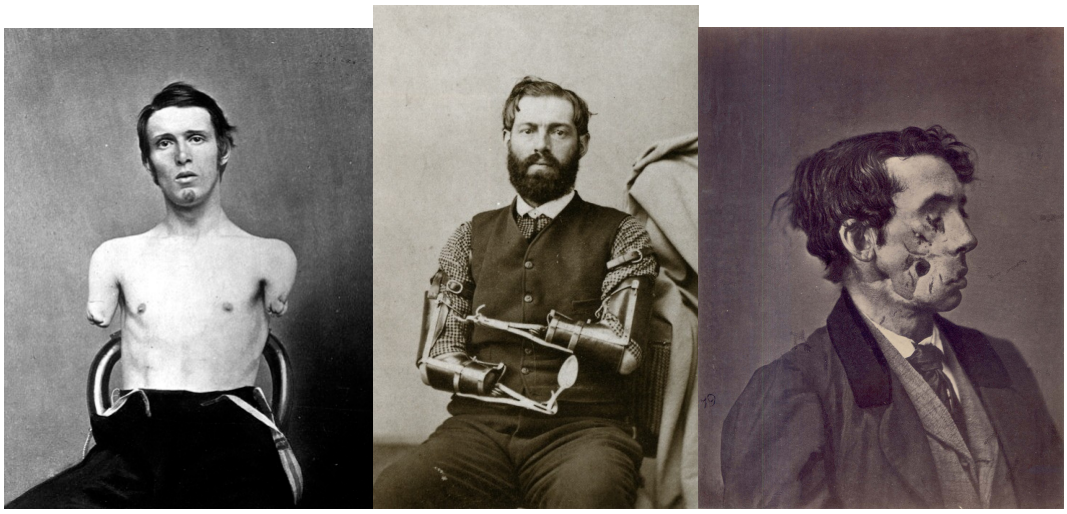

Figure 7. Wounded Civil War veterans, by shells or other combat injuries; 35,000 survived with amputations; (Left) Artist Unknown, "Alfred A. Stratton" (Sgt.), circa 1860s, CDV photograph, n.p.; Discharged because of wounds, Company G 14th Infantry Regiment, New York, on 27 September 1864; Source: Dolores Davidson, *Civil War Soldier Pictures*, Chautauqua County Genweb, Roostweb; Ancestry Online; n.d; Web; (Center) Artist Unknown, "Civil War veteran Samuel Decker built his own prosthetics after losing his arms in combat," n.d., Photograph; Source: Hunter Oatman-Stanford, "War and Prosthetics: How Veterans Fought for the Perfect Artificial Limb," *Collectors Weekly;* 29 Oct. 2012; Web; (Right) George A. Otis, "Civil war facial wound," 22 June 1865, Photograph, n.p; Accompanying text reads, ""Shell Wound of the face, with great destruction of the soft parts ... Private Joseph Harvey, Co. C, 149th New York Volunteers. Wounded at Chancellorsville, Virginia on May 3 1863"; Public domain; Source: Kekator, *WikiCommons*, 22 Dec. 2011; Web.

According to J.T.H. Connor and Michael G. Rhode (2003), D.C.'s Ford Theatre, where Lincoln was assassinated, became home to the Army Medical Museum. There, injured veteran's portraits were displayed along with photos of medical anomalies and "deformities" for a viewing public. The intention behind the photos was scientific and medical, "[b]ut that these human remains, paintings, photographs, and other reproductions originated from the tumultuous era of the Civil War also imbued them with a totemic significance—collectively and individually, the Museum's holdings of smashed skulls, amputated limbs, deformed bone, and diseased tissue were iconic symbols of a battle-worn and badly injured American nation" (n.pag).

Veterans of the Civil War used their own portraits to support disability and pension claims, recorded their biographies and injuries on the backside as a keepsake or record, and sold or traded them as commodities for personal gain. Civilians regarded veteran's portraits sympathetically as images of heroes, as curious specimens of the horrors of war, as historical artifacts, and "occasional worthless scraps." Thus:

> Along this path of varied uses many social issues such as race and gender, personal privacy and patient anonymity, sexuality, memory and identity, nationalism, warfare and death are encountered . . . it seems an inescapable conclusion that, at times, the photographers and their subjects 'knew' that they were participating in more than a simple, objective visual recording of biomedical condition or injury. Contemporary statements were being made through the medium of photography that would survive through time and the exigencies of American culture . . . the visual culture of medicine, like other forms of visual culture, is not merely a 'mirror that reflects national identity, but rather a complex

venue for its interpretation' (Connor and Rhode).

While all portraits were considered artistic, portraits of disease and deformity deliberately dehumanized the subject by emphasizing the offending or outrageous object, rather than the person, whose condition often defied interpretation. Such portraits embodied an outré aesthetic, particularly as audiences encountered them commercially, or later, and out of context, as examples of compelling strangeness.

Photos of veterans toured in exhibitions across the country, but the wealth of medical and veterans' portraits were soon forgotten, discarded and abandoned. The United States did not develop national archives until the 1930's, and it was not until the 1960's that a real interest in such photos returned, revisited partly by an interest in their outré aesthetic, as weird historical ephemera. In Major General Barnum's portrait (See figure 8.), for instance, "[t]his photographer seemed to view Barnum as a freak" (Connor and Rhode). The General seems to participate willing in a freak aesthetic, by demonstrating the seriousness of his injuries – beyond associations with contribution or sacrifice – in the showcase style. That he sold and signed his image as a *carte-de-visite* complicates his presentation, and suggests an affirmative embrace of the unusual body in narrative self-construction.

Figure 8. Contrast in three different styles of portraits, which curiously overlap; (Left) Artist Unknown, "Image 287," [Depicting Louisa Walters 1868], 1868, Photograph; Source: Otis Historical Archives, Army Medical Museum, *Photographs of Surgical Cases and Specimens and Surgica Photographs*; Walters' leg was successfully amputated at the hip at the age of twelve, without anesthesia, the first successful case of hip joint amputation in the United States. She was married with two children. The portrait is dignified, and meant as an example of medical success; (Center) Artist Unknown, Portrait of Major General Henry Barnum, signed, Circa 1880, Photograph; New York, Public domain; Web; The image is exaggerated by a freak show aesthetic. (Right) Artist Unknown, "Fanny Mills," n.d., Photograph; Syracuse University's Ronald G. Becker Collection, Syracuse. Fanny Mills, from Ohio, a circus sideshow performer (dime museums) who likely had Milroy disease, which causes leg swelling. Her promoters offered five thousand dollars and a "well-stocked farm" to any man who would marry her. She did eventually marry her assistant's brother and died in 1892. The portrait is a freak image or dime curiosity.

The same freakshow aesthetic of the body structured the popular fiction and literary inventions of Americans as well. Isabelle Lehuu (2001) argues that the carnivalesque influenced nineteenth-century American print inventions. Scandalous "penny presses" and massively sized "mammoth weeklies," or newspapers, defied convention and reflected a mass preoccupation with monstrous and 'over-the-top' embodiments. They were "the epitome of grotesque corpulence and a visual representation of bodily deformity, which was characteristic of manly popular culture and a taste for street festivals" (62). Penny presses transgressed traditional print culture through their form and content, particularly by turning private scandals into public news, and because their lurid descriptions of the "carnality that was attributed to the dangerous classes of the nineteenth century" stood in contradistinction to middle-class notions of bodily control (53).

Following Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of *carnival* as "a temporary suspension of all rules, privileges, and moral codes," wherein existing hierarchies and conventions could be "inverted or mocked," Lehuu applies the concept to the eighteen-thirties and eighteen-forties, and suggests that Jacksonian America's carnival was shaped by an emerging market culture, in which new media and sensations were commodities for purchase, not just products of the street. In this context, the "new reading materials shared a festive and somewhat transgressive quality. They performed a collective spectacle in which producers and consumers, publishers and readers, came to participate" (3-4).

Legacy

By blurring the line between conventional and unconventional, truth and illusion, provocation and satisfaction, outré showmen pushed audiences beyond the bounds of reason in ways that extended their perceptive autonomy, and produced aesthetic mechanisms that made spectators other than themselves. Barnum made excessive artifice and off-the-wall antics both accessible and inviting. The vulgar and strange, once monstrous and bad taste, were redefined as aesthetic instruction in competitive image-making. European displays were conventional, in that they reinforced the position of the 'objective' spectator and held political implications for imperial whites in contrast with primitive others. Yet nineteenth-century American sideshows, museums, circuses, and freakshows embraced an unconventional outré aesthetic: one that was not only risqué and controversial, conspicuous yet indefinable, and inherently bizarre, but also that produced an uncanny internal ambivalence to the viewing subject, who saw herself increasingly within the odd menagerie and spectacular varieties of life.

In time, public attitudes towards freak shows and ethnographic shows began to shift. For those in cosmopolitan cities like New York especially, where daily life was filled with diversity, alternative experiences, and rapid change, it was challenging to see others behind the glass, on the stage, or in the cage as all that different. Certainly, advances in medical science also helped to explain the mysteries of physical and psychological difference, and fostered public sympathy for freaks, the institutionalized, criminals, disabled persons, and savage races. Moreover, American audiences understood that they were participating in spectacular aesthetics for entertainment and curiosity, and

that the Fat Lady behind the curtain, and the obese woman down the street, were distinguished less by degrees of size, than by the work of aesthetic enfreakment. Yet perhaps most significantly, the explosion of commercial culture following the Civil War, and the rapid movement in American capitalism from clientele to consumers, meant that citizens were also on display in daily life, and cognizant of the ways that they, too, were objectified and enfreaked in media and advertising (see figure 9.).

Figure 9. Late nineteenth-century American advertisements, all circa 1890s; Top row: (Left) "Curves of Youth," Prof. Mack Chin Reducer and Beautifier, New York; (Center) "Heads of Many Shapes," Dewenter Hatter, Indiana; (Right) "Jolly Nigger," Mechanical Toy Savings Bank, Pratt & Co. New York; Center Row: (Left) "Boston Baked Beans," Henry Mayo & Co., Boston; (Center) "A Legend of Bagley's May-Flower Chewing Tobacco," Donaldson Brothers, Metamorphic Trade Card, New York; (Right) "Grove's Tasteless Tonic" (quinine), Paris Medicine Co., St. Louis; Bottom Row: "Wanamaker's Great Dinners," Oyster Theme, Business card, Philadelphia, possibly also 1870s-1880s.

Barnum's influence on American (and European) advertising was immense, and he had pioneered a number of advertising techniques that became staples of American consumerism and salesmanship. Barnum's colorful flags, posters, banners, handbills, bands, and other visual productions were stimulating, colorful, and above all, exaggerated. Color and design were expensive to print in nineteenth-century America, and served as aesthetic 'treats' by themselves, no matter what was being advertised. The public was drawn to the lavish images, which complemented the rise in their standard of living and the lust for luxury. American printmakers thus suggested beauty as the hallmark of visual culture – in ads, trade cards, wrapping materials, scrapbooks, posters, packaging, business cards, pamphlets, paper dolls, and the millions of other regularly consumed material – with the idea that more lovely and artistic a thing was, the more it would hold the buyer's attention. Yet Barnum had revolutionized visual culture through his outré aesthetics, and managed to make both the unconventional and the grotesque beautiful. Inspired by Barnum's success, American advertisers copied his aesthetic models and followed suit. Soon, ads for freakshows, circuses, and museums, were virtually interchangeable with ads for products, events, and services (See figure 10.).

Figure 10. Nineteenth-century freak show, sideshow and circus posters; Top: (Left) Artist Unknown, "Reynolds' Exhibition: The Wonderful American Bearded Beauty," Poster, Circa 1890; Image depicts [American] Annie Jones, whose appearance was often sexualized in posters rather than carte-de-visites; (Center) Artist Unknown, "Royal American Midgets at Picadilly Hall," Circa 1880, Poster and Advertisement; Image depicts "General Mite" and Millie Edwards performing before the Queen of England; Source: British Library, Web archives; (Right) "Barnum & Bailey, Clowns and Geese 2," Lithograph, Circa 1900, Cincinnati and New York, The Strobridge Litho. Co.; Source: Library of Congress, Web Archives; Bottom: Artist Unknown, "Beautiful Indian Maidens," [Theatrical Burlesque Show], Lithograph, Circa 1899, Cincinnati, Enquire Job Printing Company; Source: Library of Congress, Web archives.

The American Museum was designed to house aesthetic experiences that deliberately toyed with identity and alterity, the inherent and the foreign, the authentic and the 'humbug,' in ways that were not only sensational, but outside of any real meaning and performance of knowledge. Barnum's outré style created a lasting model for American museums, which continued to lure visitors "with buildings that look like giant glass guitars and block-long wads of crumpled titanium" (Mondello n.pag.). Outré aesthetics thus developed non-meaning but sensually affective presences that nevertheless compel because of their forceful materiality and 'thingyness,' in *proximity* to cultural reference and meaningful forms.

The glittering appearances and over-the-top aesthetics that Barnum had mastered were elsewhere manifest in nineteenth-century American culture. Barnum's gigantic American Museum was built in 1841, about the same time as the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans, and other enormous luxury hotels. Luxury hotels employed many of the same devices Barnum's amusements: giant statues of Americans, high powered lighting effects, technological gadgets, rooms large enough to host eight hundred or more, gilded dome roofs, colonnades, and murals that depicted African savages devouring meat, in contrast to the civilized opulence enjoyed by American tourists and guests. European visitors noted that Americans, high on individual ego and capitalist democracy, had replaced churches and palaces with hotels, as shrines to themselves. According to Molly Berger, "they compared [luxury hotels'] outré decoration to the most luxurious of Europe's palaces, as if to prove the young nation's achievement of old world sophistication" (81). Luxury hotels competed with one another to acquire new and better

gadgets or attractions, with the same urgency with which Barnum competed against himself. By 1891, Barnum had passed on, as had the heyday of luxury hotels in that era.

Aesthetic authorities and speakers were celebrated in American cities, where bourgeois youth entertained fantasies of aristocratic tastes. Oscar Wilde, an outré 'dandy,' toured the nation to great éclat. Hailed as the Apostle of Aestheticism, he quickly became the figurehead of a "dangerous" and subversive if popular new movement:

> In the aftermath of the country's splintering, bloody Civil War and its almost equally divisive Reconstruction, Americans were eager for a new truth, for a reform that would benefit private as well as public life. Oscar Wilde's persuasive preaching to follow a new religion of beauty [and to reject an aesthetics of war, "you don't want any more bronze Generals on horsebacks," he told Americans on his tour] focused the attention and creative energies of thousands of Americans, in the years following the Civil War. The Gilded Age would become quite simply the golden age of American aestheticism (Blanchard xii).

In the United States, American aestheticism differed from its European predecessor, and was "far more extensive and pervasive through all regions and classes than previous accounts have suggested" (Blanchard xiii). American aesthetic artists sprang up all over, and aesthetic products were widely produced. While men dominated the movement, women played a significant role, and were profoundly affected, liberated, and influenced by an outré aesthetic, to which they contributed:

> These new visionaries [American women artists] recognized in aestheticism an

> escape from Calvinist orthodoxy, an escape from tyrannical fathers and ineffective husbands and an opportunity to advance in the social and business worlds . . . . [but] Even more . . . an expansion and gratification of their imaginations, a scope for experimentation with the occult, the fantastic, and the symbolic, that had escaped their lives before . . . . In the end, however, it was precisely this liberating power of aestheticism that would bring down upon the American movement a repressive reaction . . . . Middle-class housewives explored alternative identities opened to them by the aesthetic quest. Some women wore . . . [an outré] uncorseted garment that was considered immoral by Victorian moralists. And under aesthetic dictates, the artistic parlor became a theater set to enjoy exoticism and other mind-worlds, as the objet d'art within acted as agent of individual visions – together with the 'soothing' and pleasurable experience of opium smoking. Thus American women found in aestheticism an alluring, and even dangerous mode of individual transformation. This was the subversive underside of [aesthetics] (Blanchard xiii).

Beyond aesthetic movements, capitalism and commercialism had allowed decadence to enter American popular culture to a degree that had not occurred in Europe. In the midst of all of this, Americans were driven by a dualistic impulse to reject popular culture for ideological reasons, or to embrace it for economic ones (Weir), just as Barnum had managed to combine a decadent aesthetics with lowbrow variety entertainment, and Wilde had managed to combine high aesthetics with common bohemianism.

In the years after Barnum died, outré aesthetics flourished in pockets all over America, in conjunction with mass exhibition style entertainments and advancements in

vestibular self-motion. World Fairs in America (including Chicago, and later, St. Louis) were extravagant and dizzyingly strange events that echoed Barnum's American Museum on a grand scale. The 1893 World's Fair in Chicago boasted the first Ferris Wheel, electrical experiments by Tesla and others, bizarre films and cinematic experiments with animals by Edward Muybridge, ethnographic exhibits, exotic villages, freak shows, a Wild West show with Wild Bill and Indians, gadgets and new appliances, belly dancers, thrill rides, functional opium dens and breweries, souvenirs, body parts in jars, byzantine chapels, monkey skeletons, pancake stands, new products, moving walkways, halls of warped mirrors, labyrinths and mazes, eerie music, and other strange wonders. It was in this exaggerated and odd environment that 'conventional' society found itself. Yet the Leibnizian effect of amusements, oddities, new technologies, and other displays all experienced together at once, allowed the truly outside to go unnoticed. What, in such an environment, could be considered unreasonable?

Perhaps the most harrowing example is the construction of the "World's Fair Hotel," or "The Castle," in a Chicago suburb in 1893. Built by Dr. Henry Howard Holmes (a pseudonym), to house visitors to the World Fair, the enormous and decadent structure spanned an entire block and boasted three ornate floors. The hotel contained shops, a pharmacy, and two upper floors for guest lodging that catered largely to single female travellers. The construction of the monstrosity was a public spectacle for years, as both a central attraction and architectural feat. In many respects, the edifice resembled Barnum's museum. Yet the building was created using a host of interchangeable craftsmen, builders, architects, and contractors, to conceal the secret of its true design. Holmes had in fact built an elaborate house of murder, where he tortured and killed over

200 women in often slow, prolonged, and horrifically gruesome ways. The interior of the hotel was a labyrinth, complete with secret passages, soundproof rooms, torture chambers, stairways that led to nowhere or to brick walls (in order to confuse and trap victims), false exits, peepholes, torture racks, gas chambers, fireproofs cells, incinerators, metal chutes for bodies, vats of acid, surgical tables and dissecting slabs where Holmes stripped away skin from victims and sold both their skeletons and organs to anatomical schools, colleges, and hospitals across America.

Countless persons and tourists who never escaped experienced the internal outré aesthetic of "The Castle." Tragically and paradoxically, many of them had enjoyed mock horrors and strange experiences in the form of carnivalesque entertainment at the World's Fair. This overlap of the outré aesthetic also worked in reverse: when Holmes was caught and executed, his hotel became a popular tourist destination. Mysteriously, the Castle burned down days before a former policeman was to open it to the public. The success of the hotel as a tourist site, however, was predictable – Americans had already been conditioned to 'come see for yourselves.' This interchange between popular aesthetics and outré aesthetics would continue in other American cities.

In 1892, Ellis Island began intensively investigating immigrants – its own ethnographic display. Nearby Coney Island, a day trip destination of beach culture of luxury hotels, gave way to an outré freak aesthetic. The giant Elephantine Colossus, a 150-foot tall hotel shaped like an elephant, had been a major tourist attraction. A feat of bizarre novelty architecture, it was built two years before the Statue of Liberty, and was the first thing immigrants saw as they approached New York, and hence America. It housed a cigar store in one of the legs, a museum in one of the lungs, telescopes and

observatories in the eyes, novelty stalls, a grand hall, and a gallery, and served variously as a hotel, a brothel, an amusement bazaar and a concert hall. As Coney Island became a popular tourist and leisure spot, it was marked by an increasing number of gaudy buildings, turrets, Ferris wheels, kiosks, and amusement park rides that shone blindingly at night. Giant hot dogs, beauty pageants, freak shows, weird contests, amazements, outsider figures, open sex, drug use, posters for "Headless Women" and "She's So Fat!" ladies, all filled the island in Barnumesque style.

Barnum himself had portrayed Coney Island as a bizarre realm where everyday Americans (rather than performers) could participate freely in the unconventional. His poster (see figure 11.) suggests that Coney is a place where one can fly away with umbrellas, plunge haphazardly into the water, share a see-saw with clowns, box with others, enjoy watersports, swim casually in fancy bathing suits, be chased or beaten by police, smoke in a top hat while floating, climb poles and cause mischief, or dance on logs. Despite the exaggerated gimmickry of the poster, Americans took the rhetorical invitation literally. Coney Island, like Vegas, was very much a place where 'anything goes,' where the main attraction was the outré. American amusement sites were like reservations for the outré – a place where one could dabble freely in indulgent behavior without being morally or socially judged. This phenomenon can be credited largely to Barnum, who employed many aesthetic tactics to positively reinforce audiences who attended his strange events. His poster, for instance, includes nationalistic and romantic cues including the American flag and a pair of gliding swans. Moreover, he replicated his images on popular snacks such as animal crackers, which both visitors and aspiring visitors to Coney Island enjoyed. Physically consuming both the bright, fun images, and

the pleasing or rewarding food, while internalizing a message of radical unconventionality, had a significant psychological impact on American audiences, especially children or future consumers.

Figure 11. (Left) Artist Unknown, "The Barnum & Bailey Greatest show on Earth: The Great Coney Island Water Festival," Circa 1898, Lithograph, Cincinnati & New York, Strobridge Lith. Co., Public Domain; Source: Library of Congress; Web archives; (Right) Artist Unknown; Barnum's animal crackers; circa 1890s, Public domain.

This Barnumesque aesthetic on Coney Island persisted until after the Second World War. Photos of the island in the late nineteenth century show modest crowds on the beach, whereas by the 1940's, when it had become a regular escape from New York, the beaches were a sea of densely packed bodies, and day trippers numbered in the millions. A great deal of sordid violence such as crimes, murders, gang fights, and rapes happened on Coney, in plain sight, further confusing the lines between conventional culture and unconventional aesthetics. The kaleidoscope of strangeness and indulgence continued to blur the imagined and the real.

A number of American artists were deeply inspired by Coney Island's outré aesthetic, and particularly those in New York. The parallels between civilians and freak performers are clear, and the both civilians and freaks continue to inform one another. Diane Arbus' 1961 portrait, "Jack Dracula, the Marked Man, NYC, 1961" depicts a known sideshow performer who was allegedly tattooed by Brooklyn Blackie on Coney Island in the 1940s. Photographers Arthur Leipzig, Harold Feinstein, Arthur Tress, Harvey Stein, Bruce Gilden, Sid Grossman, and other American photographers including Bruce Davidson, Ben Ross, Lisette Model, Elliott Erwitt, and Arthur Fellig (Weegee), have all both photographed and drawn heavily upon Coney Island aesthetics.[15] Arlene Gottfried was born in Brooklyn, and grew up on Coney. When asked in an interview if she thinks her photographic subjects – the "New York characters" she has shot for forty years from "Coney Island to Times Square and Harlem" – are "freaks," she replied, "I don't think they're freaks, because then I'd be a freak too" (Interview. "Ghosts of New York," n.pag.). Consider, for instance, the contrast in some performative identities in and around Coney Island and Queens, N.Y. (see figure 12.).

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[15] See web biographies (arthurleipzig.com; harveysteinphoto; haroldfeinstein.com; arthurtress.com; brucegilden.com; arlenegottfried.com, etc). Feinstein was born in Coney Island and began documenting it at age fifteen and for over forty years. Arthur Tress began was born in Brooklyn and began photographing Coney Island subjects at aged twelve. He began his camera work in the neighborhood of Coney, where "he spent hours exploring the decaying amusement parks." Arthur Leipzig, Ben Ross, Sig Grossman, Bruce Gilden, and others grew up in New York, and some of them born in Brooklyn. Gilden also photographed outré subjects such as Mardi Gras. Harvey Stein moved to New York for graduate school, and was drawn by the "variety, excitement and strangeness" of New York street life, as he has noted in interviews. See Michael Immerso's, *Coney Island: The People's Playground* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, UP, 2002). See also collections such as: Harvey Stein's *Coney Island: 40 Years, 1970-2010* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 2011); Harold Feinstein's *Harold Feinstein: A Retrospective* (Portland: Nazraeli Press, 2012); Bruce Gilden's *Coney Island* (London: Trebruk Publishing, 2002); and Arlene Gottfried's *Sometimes Overwhelming* (Brooklyn: powerhouse Books, 2008).

Figure 12. Photographs of Coney Island and Queens, by American photographers; Top: (Left) ©Harold Feinstein, "Muscle Man,"1950, Photo, Coney Island Beach, Brooklyn, NY, haroldfeinstein.com, Web; With permission from Harold Feinstein; (Right) ©Arlene Gottfried, "Hassid and Jewish Bodybuilder, 1980" 1980, Photo, Riis Beach, Queens, New York; arlenegottfried.com, Web; With permission from Arlene Gottfried; Bottom: (Left) ©Bruce Gilden, "Woman in See Her Change booth on the boardwalk," 1969, Photo, Coney Island; www.brucegilden.com, Web; With permission from Bruce Gilden; (Right) Artist Unknown, "Spaceman" [or the Astronaut], 1960s; A sculpture and attraction on Coney Island, 25 feet high, the astronaut has since been painted gold and the helmet removed; Source: *Roadside Architecture*; Web.

As Coney Island tapered off into camp and kitsch, American writers and painters began to take note of the dark side of the outré. By the 1940s, artists had grown up with Barnumesque aesthetics, and had internalized some of its more sinister aspects. The idea that America was full of freaks and outcasts was not new, and to depict America as a happy and progressive place, as in the movies, was to discount the horrors of war, depression, poverty, and urban violence. Noir and hardboiled fiction sprang up, and with it related arts and paintings such as Edward Hopper's classic *Nighthawks*.

Chapter Four

On the Road

The singularity of freaks and the spectacle aesthetics employed by nineteenth century showmen deeply influenced the creation of outré roadside attractions – a distinctly American phenomenon. In the 1920s, as the American highway system significantly developed, motels and gas stations appeared along mass routes to accommodate travellers on long rides, and families and individuals escaping the Dust Bowl or on their way to California and the new Hollywood. In particular, the iconic Route 66 – what John Steinbeck called the "Mother Road" and others called "The Main Street of America" – was formed in and around 1926 (Wallis), connecting bits of existing trails and roads, and it began to feature a host of weird and wild human-made attractions. The idea was that outrageous sights and unconventional forms would get people to stop and shop.

The novelty of early roadside attractions proved effective in attracting crowds and changed the ways in which people moved and gathered along highways, transforming liminal spaces of travel into destinations themselves. Popular songs like "(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66" helped to establish the concept of the road as a place, rather than a route between places. Figures 13 and 14 show two maps indicating this aesthetic shift in the experience of the route: the first, taken from the 1913 *Arizona Good Road's Association Illustrated Maps and Tour Book* shows the road from New Mexico to Los Angeles and refers to markers that help orient people directionally in space and locate their position on a map. The map features an "Indian Trading Post" and a sign advertising

"In Two States at Once," reflecting not only historical shifts in the concept of private and public, American and Indigenous land, but also the aesthetic experience of the road as a free conduit between cultural and spatial boundaries. The second figure is an example of the ways in which outré attractions reframed the Route 66 as a series of unique events and experiences in entertainment, tourism, and dining – including frozen custard stands.

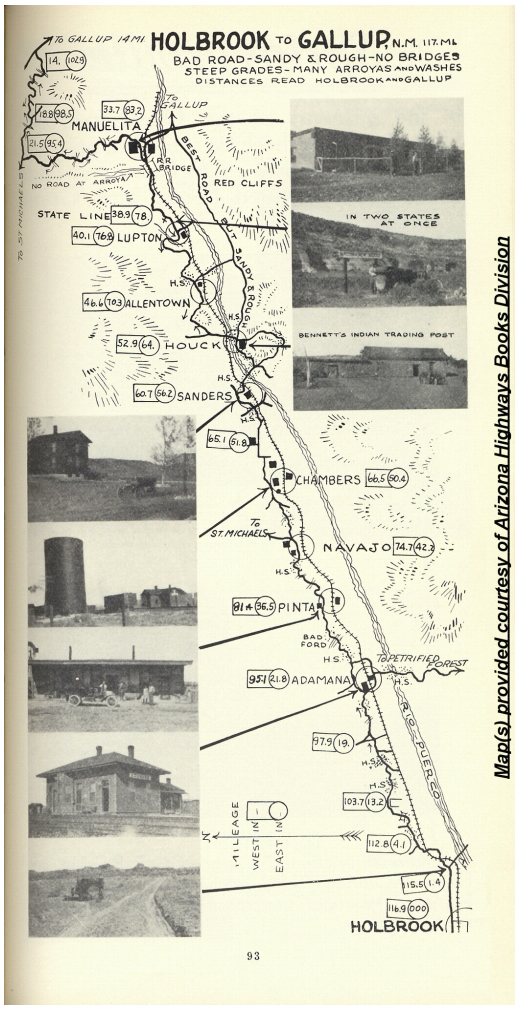
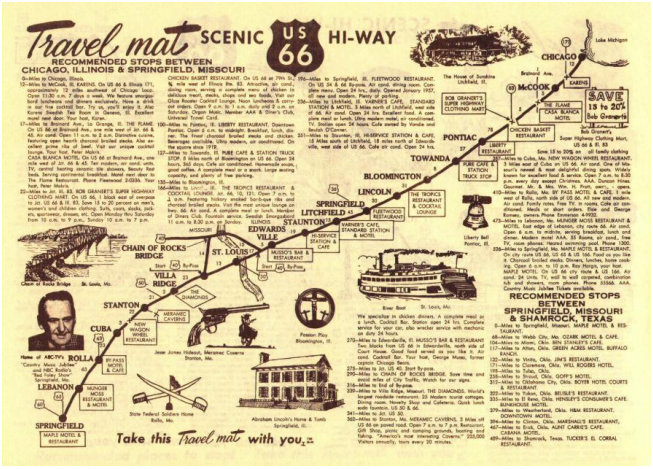
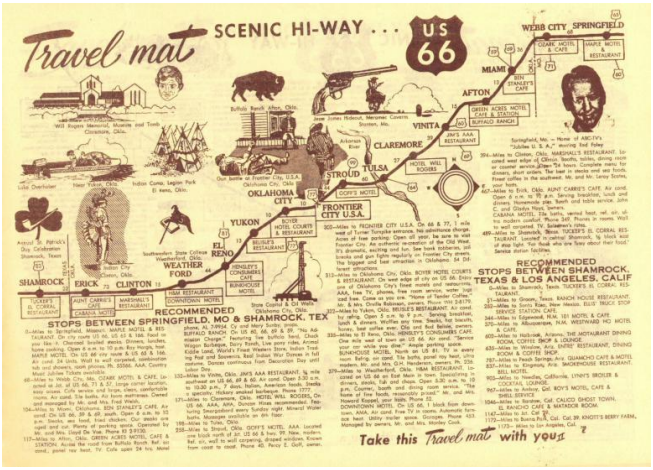


Figure 13. "Route 66 Map (1913)," *Arizona Good Road's Association Illustrated Maps and Tour Book*; Source: *Bygone Biways*; n.d.; Web; 7 Feb. 2014.





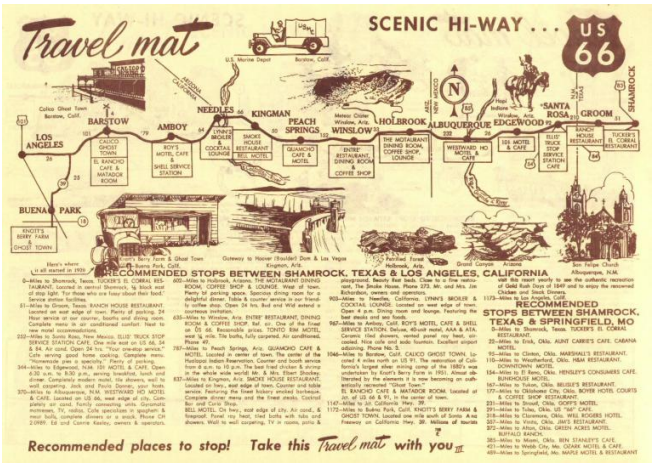


Figure 14. “Route 66 Travel Mats (1959)”; (Above) Chicago to Springfield, MO; (Center) Springfield, MO to Shamrock, TX; (Below) Shamrock, TX to Los Angeles, CA. Source: *Roadside Photos*; n.d.; Web; 7 Feb. 2014.

Roadside attractions filled the 'empty' spaces between American Natural Wonders and national artworks such as the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, Niagara Falls, and the Petrified Forest and ranged from larger-than-life architectural sculptures, gargantuan dinosaurs, insects, or animals, to restaurants shaped like everyday objects or foods, vortices, and drive-through trees. As such, they made conventional objects and encounters unconventional and corporeally stimulating. Perhaps the oldest example is Lucy the Elephant, built in 1882 in New Jersey, and which has alternately served as advertising gimmick, bar, office, and summer home (Wallis). The "World's Largest" roadside attractions [16] were and are outré object-novelties, in the tradition of Barnumesque amusements, as are campy recreations of European landmarks like *Foamhenge* (a full-sized foam replica of Stonehenge, in Virginia) and *The Leaning Tower of Niles* (a half-size copy of the tower of Pisa, in Illinois).

Much like Barnum's miniature Niagara Falls, or flea circuses, what makes the European replicas remarkable is their absurdly unremarkable presence and effects in comparison to the originals, and their de-contextualization within pointedly American landscapes. The trope is to take something magnificent, a splendor of beauty and might, and recreate it as something smaller, less interesting, or more silly. The grandeur of a circus, in which the spectator is diminished, is reversed when it is starring fleas, as the viewer is aggrandized. The drama, noise, and thunderous movement of the Niagara, which is both terrifying and awe inspiring, cannot possibly experienced through a model.

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[16] "World Largest" roadside attractions include: ketsup [sic] bottle (IL) pistachio nut (NM), Ten Commandments and concrete Bible (NC), chocolate moose (ME), ball of stamps (NE), blue bug (RI), gingerbread man (TX), birdhouse (IL), ball of twine (KS), ball of paint (IN), horseshoe crab (OH) and pheasant sculptures (ND), as well as baskets, peaches, and other sculptural or architectural objects.

The original tower of Pisa is a campanile of the city's Cathedral, and the third oldest structure in Cathedral Square. Groundbreaking began in 1173, and construction went on for two hundred years, combining Gothic, Romanesque, and Corinthian elements in perfect balance. The tower stands at nearly one hundred and eighty-six feet on its tall side, and it known worldwide for leaning on a slant – the result of an inadequate foundation and soft ground. The bell tower was an architectural feat and a beautiful example of aesthetics and building in any time. Climbing its 296 steps, one can experience the leaning effect both externally and internally. What makes the Pisa tower a particularly physical attraction, however, is its total spiritual and social resonance. The religious and cultural significance of the building, its placement in context of Roman Catholicism in Italy, and its utility as a bell tower for the cathedral, has hardly changed, and to everyone it is representative of a specific era, place, and meaningful values. It is also associated with Gallileo, and was used by Germans in the Second World War.

The Tower of Niles, by contrast, stands beside a YMCA and is a playful mockery of Pisa. It is half the size of the original tower, and was built as part of an amusement park for employees of the Ilg Hot Air Electric Ventilating Company of Chicago, near rides like the wooden toboggan run. Its only real function was as a utility tower that hid ugly water filtration tanks, and it is a roadside stop-off close to the airport and the first McDonalds. In a sense, then, what makes the European knockoffs outré is the impression that they are at once gaudy aesthetic failures and anatomical triumphs. They have no relation to the cultural, social, symbolic, or spatial meaning of the originals, a fact that is further emphasized by their location in a commercial, industrial American context.

Visitors simply look at them as singular oddities and leave – that the 'spoofs' are in fact somewhat sincere replicas makes them at once more intriguing and pathetic.

In the 1930s and 1940s, some eighty years after the publication of Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857), which satirized those outrageous "strangers" who would profit by cons and the exploitation of American Indians, American Frank Redford built and patented the Wigwam Motel in Kentucky. Redford collected Native American artifacts, and originally housed his collection in a large teepee-like structure, mislabeled a wigwam, in proximity to several Native American reservations. The construction expanded into a store and museum, surrounded by fifteen concrete and stucco "wigwam" motel rooms modeled after Sioux-style teepees, using wholly modern materials and a kitschy aesthetic style that included swastikas and coin-operated radios. At the time, Lone Ranger was a top radio program. The Wigwam Motel is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places, despite its fairly recent invention and bizarre design. It was so popular that it inspired spinoffs in Arizona, Florida, California, and other states. While most of the Wigwam Motels have since closed down, for some, they continue to evoke nostalgia for a bygone American era and its campy aesthetics (Levinger n.pag.).

The Wigwam Motel has been described by Larry Levinger and others as a prime example of kitsch in that it is cheap, marketable, and produced from a popular design which imitates previous aesthetics (in this case, Sioux) in an attempt to copy its beautiful aspects, but with no regard for ethics of cultural appropriation or high quality execution. Walter Benjamin distinguishes kitsch from art, claiming that kitsch "offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation" (Menninghaus 41); kitsch is immediately available for

consumption, is not ironic but rather 'heartwarming,' a practical or utilitarian object for which there is no critical distance between object and observer, and one that suspends normative taboos (Ibid).

If the motels signify as imitations or nostalgic visions of an aesthetic predecessor, however, the primary source is American sideshows and variety entertainments. The original Wigwam Motel did not represent anything indigenous, due to the clear misnomer of the title, its proximity to a number of aboriginal reservations featuring radically different aesthetics, the outrageous style and inauthenticity – in form, spirit, materials, construction, maker, purpose, owners, cultural context, and inhabitants – and the fact that the "teepees" were roadside motel rooms. Moreover, the shop-museum-motel structure and patented design suggested something new and invented, not a return to a rustic past, a learning activity, a showcase of an imagined Native American monoculture, or even a *souvenir of a souvenir* in the form of sentimental attachment to pop Americana and the kind of fantasy Indianism embodied in Tonto (as the owner of the Big Texan Steak Ranch on Route 66 said, "We don't sell steak here. We sell the Old West experience." Norton n.pag.). Rather, the attraction was the outré architectural singularity of the concrete tents – the interior of which closely resembled white, middle-class homes, with all the amenities – and the promise of quality time and togetherness shared by up to six people in an oddly shaped room. It made familiar bourgeois forms feel strange again, and heightened the novelty of motels as an experience, rather than a rest stop.

Finally, the Wigwam Motel modernized what Hans Gumbrecht refers to as "the long-term effects of the nineteenth century's epistemological crisis," namely, a tension between the "progressive" and "a feeling of loss [and] nostalgia … for that reference to

the world of objects in whose availability metaphysics" had given a higher value to meaning of phenomena than to their material presence" (*POP* 45). The Wigwam Motel provided an aesthetic experience based in the outré presence of concrete tents that had no meaning, and the sensual discovery of the adjacent collections which appeared to suggest meaning: part of the diverse visual/spatial/thematic experiments of roadside motel design.

Early roadside attractions often relied on outré advertising techniques and sensational displays in order to attract visitors and to generate mystique. Small towns and individual attractions had to work hard to compete with the larger ones. In 1935, Lester Dill opened the Meramec Caverns as "the Greatest Show Under Earth" (another Barnum derivative) and the one-time home of a saltpeter mine, an aboriginal shelter, and (advertised underground in bold neon letters) a "possible" Jesse James hideout (Norton n.pag.). Dill pioneered advertising techniques that are still used today, such as bumper stickers, and anticipated billboards by travelling the country and offering to paint farmers' barns for free, as long as he could emblazon "Meramec Caverns" on their roofs (Norton). In addition, like many showmen, he took advantage of free media as a form of advertising, by creating outré scandals and letting the newspapers report them. To keep people coming in the 1940s, Dill sent his son-in-law and an accomplice to New York City to threaten suicide by dressing up in caveman costumes, ascending to the top of the Empire State Building, and threatening to jump unless "everyone in the world agreed to visit Meramec Caverns" (Norton).

All the hype surrounding the caverns, and the myriad signs announcing their arrival, was also an aesthetic mechanism: just as the pyramids in ancient Egypt required visitors to walk through many progressive doorways before entering the central passages

and chambers, in order to feel that they had at last arrived at something great, the progressive cues and sensations of the Meramec Caverns made them feel bigger and more exciting once visitors arrived. Inside, the stunning caverns proved wonderful in person. The stalactites and stalagmites were a sight to behold, as were whole walls of onyx. "Mirror River" was crystal clear and a few feet deep, but due to an optical illusion, appeared to be "as deep as the Grand Canyon . . . . The effect is so real as to cause vertigo" (Norton). These natural and resplendent phenomena are enough to inspire awe. Perhaps in an attempt to mimic the aesthetic beauty of the caverns, or to civilize them, a ballroom was added in the 1800s. Dill, however, turned the caverns into an outré experience by adding all sorts of oddities including neon signs, and a "crescendo" performance by Kate Smith singing "God Bless America" as hundreds of colored lights flashed in sequence and converged to project an American flag (Norton).

Outré roadside attractions were – and are – particular to American culture and aesthetic experience in several ways. First, they are often site-specific and presence-based – attending in person is of central importance. No one, for instance, is interested in a photograph of the Leaning Tower of Niles, when they can have a picture of tower of Pisa instead. The whole joy of it is seeing it in person, as a replica divested of its original symbolic and cultural meanings, and experiencing it out of context in Chicago, perhaps while eating a hamburger. Many roadside attractions are interactive as well, or are the private homes and properties of people that visitors want to meet, or that are closed to photography and can only be viewed form inside. Moreover, site-specificity leads to spontaneous interaction and narratives of place. Many attractions both developed and continue to develop through the impulsive or deliberate addition of visitors' personal

objects, ephemera, markings or touch. Out-of-the-way places or uninteresting sites often gain their specialness through collective recreation, and become destinations that put 'nowhere' on the map. An everyday metal gate can become an attraction when dozens or hundreds of locks are added, one by one, making it a curious object or 'happening' that travellers want to see, experience, contribute to, and return to over time. The shoetree in Nevada is home to hundreds, if not thousands, of traveller's shoes, creating both an ongoing and suspended impression of time. The mystery of this attraction has led to several urban myths and legends about its origins. Second, roadside attractions often make use of local materials and refer to local natural wonders or phenomena: for instance, the petrified-wood gas station in Decatur, Texas, the giant turtle made of wheel rims in Dunseith, North Dakota, built in homage to nearby Turtle Mountain State Park, and various over-the-top sculptures made out of existing rock or stone, like The Freemont Troll.

Third, roadside attractions can highlight, capitalize on, honor, or commemorate some unique aspect of American history. The Purple Martin House, in Griggsville, Illinois, features 5,000 birdhouses, some as tall as 70 feet, and made by an antenna manufacturer and local resident, and houses the purple martin birds that eat the mosquitoes that plagued the town until 1962. The Boll Weevil Monument in Enterprise, Alabama, is a sculpture of a woman in the Classical style of ancient Greece, holding a large, bizarre, and scraggly-looking black bug above her head. The insect is the boll weevil, which destroyed the town's cotton crop in 1915, forcing the local farmers to diversify which, in turn, led to local economic prosperity (Matthews, McCulloch, and Pramis, n.pag).

Fourth, outré roadside attractions are often created in conversation with American culture at large. While the famous Cadillac Ranch features the back end of several Cadillacs sticking out of the ground in a field – in order to show the design evolution of the back fender over time – it invites visitors to interact by covering the objects with graffiti: marks which also change with time. The wildly eccentric UFO landing port, in Greenbay, Wisconsin is the sincere creation of American Welder Bob Tohak, and bears the sign: "If the government has no knowledge of aliens why did they make it illegal for US citizens to have any contact with extraterrestrials or their vehicles?" The Prada Marfa Store, an art installation in a small Texas town also known for its weird and unexplained light disturbances, responds to contemporary American consumerism as an exact replica of a typical Prada store selling shoes and bags, complete with window displays. The doors are permanently locked, and a growing population of moths has begun to take over the interior: despite this, or because of it, the piece is an interesting experience in commercial desire (Matthews, McCulloch, and Pramis).

Fifth, outré roadside attractions bear a particular and evolving relationship to American folk and outsider art. In particular, they are often dynamic works of what I will term *aesthetobiographies*. These abstract sculptural works of iron, steel, plastic, paint, bottles, buckets, dolls and other found or upscaled objects and materials convey a deeply personal vision of the artist, embody unique and outrageous styles, are typically both massive in size and constantly evolving, and take years, or often decades, to develop. Such works are often sentimental and inviting in nature, proclaiming a love of God or Jesus, of home and nation, or loving dedications to mom and dad, a spouse or a lover. Folk and outsider artists often report that they do not have any specific or clear

motivation for building their artworks, but feel compelled to do so. The works themselves contain strong autobiographical, historical, imaginative and visionary elements. Aesthetobiographies may take a lifetime to build and continue until the artist's death or physical impairment.

Some roadside folk and outsider art occurs on public land. Edward Leedskalnin's *Coral Castle* spans miles, and consists of sculptures and carvings made from pre-existing limestone or concrete base. *Coral Castle* rivals some of the world's greatest monuments and was carved in the dark of night in honor of Leedskalnin's bride, who left him at the altar. Most works of outré roadside folk art, however, are built on private property, an interesting expression of the boundaries between public and private, property and ownership in America. A well-known example is the vividly colorful *Watts Towers*, a common tourist destination. Works such as Billy Tripp's *Mindfield* and Leonard Knight's *Salvation Mountain* span several acres, are visible from great distances, and in the case of *Mindfield*, over one hundred feet high. These outré presences affect the local landscape and culture, as well as American art and artists. Tripp claims to be deeply influenced by the writing of William Least Heat-Moon, and his works have been exhibited in metal museums and art centers, and are documented by The Smithsonian. Knight claimed to have been inspired by the prospect of leaving town, an opportunity that he lost when his hot-air balloon failed.

Wisconsin Concrete Park, created by retired lumberjack Fred Smith, beginning in 1948 until his stroke some twenty ears later, is a "sustained personal vision that compelled him to animate his landscape with images from his life and imagination. Smith was not merely decorating his yard; his sculpture, sited intentionally within familiar

terrain, took the form of an ingenious spatial narrative." According to *Friends of Fred Smith*, the concrete park is:

> [A]n outdoor museum comprised of 237 embellished concrete sculptures and other objects . . . . In this sculptural environment Smith created a cohesive panorama of local, regional, and national history, combined with legends derived from late 19th and early 20th century Northwoods culture . . . . Fred Smith built [the park] as he said, "for all the American people everywhere. They need something like this." Throughout this extensive site Smith depicted history, not as a string of isolated moments, but as an elastic, organic entity in which local and national people, events, and histories were intermingled with animals, all sharing a common landscape. Self-taught and entirely unmotivated by financial gain or art world fame, Smith created this site for the people, and placed it where they could find it, not in an indoor museum, but right on the side of the road. The site is recognized as a masterwork in the genre of 20th century sculptural environments by self-taught artists (Homepage).

Grey Gundaker and Judith McWillie (2005) survey the aesthetic dimensions of the African-American tradition of "yard art," which is similar to but distinct from roadside art. Unlike outré forms, which are outside of any common interpretation, yard art is peculiar but laden with meaning. Throughout the Southern United States in particular, yard art's history extends back to slavery and features a number of recurring tropes and themes in relation to certain materials. Unlike the European-inspired gardens and middle class American grass lawns, yard art boasts the inclusion of a variety of materials including gravel, glass, chairs, stone, and other objects placed in particular

places for particular aesthetic and symbolic reasons. Thus, what may appear to be the eccentric and complex artworks of an individual folk artist is often tied to a long aesthetic and social history that remains largely underground – a plural form of aesthetobiography.

Finally, roadside attractions transformed rural and suburban landscapes, by: a) interrupting pastoral, rugged, or undeveloped rural terrain with the powerful material presence of strange man-made objects, and extending the conceptual and spatial presence of those objects by superimposing them on other spaces; b) shifting the visual focus of long horizontal stretches of road and land towards the sudden but reoccurring appearance of vertical objects of significant scale; c) injecting novelty, humor and modernity into relatively untouched landscapes, and disrupting American Romantic and sentimental perspectives of beauty, unity, and purity in Nature; d) introducing the concept of 'somewhere' as a variety tourist entertainment that combines food, shopping, lodging, peculiar experiences and site-specific art as a familiar, patterned, and replicable experience in juxtaposition to the surrounding, disconnected, and unfamiliar nowhere; and e) reappropriating American history, by introducing and contesting the importance of discordant, seemingly insignificant, or fringe aspects of American experience, and using aesthetic techniques to turn them into both significant events and nostalgic commodities.

Perhaps the greatest example of sensually consuming and outré roadside attractions is their dense culmination and proximity in the city of Las Vegas. From 1931 onwards, Vegas drew hordes of single male Hoover Dam workers with money to burn, and offered the kind of underground entertainments and pastimes that were illegal or taboo in other parts of America. Burlesque dances, gambling machines and tables, flashing lights, faux wonders and bizarre novelties filled every corner, and – as with yard

art – seemed to occupy every free space, a kind of aesthetic hoarding. Through endless diversions, sensational non-meaning attractions, corporeal seductions and over-the-top entertainments, Vegas became an ultimate roadside destination.

Surrounded by desert, Vegas was not en route to anywhere, but rather a metropolitan oasis that stood alone, a freaky no-man's land peopled by outsiders and experienced as a transient and temporary place. In Vegas, one could not only freely reinvent oneself for a time, but was corporeally and visually compelled to do so through a constant series of shocks and flows. Vegas lent itself easily to the kind of visual sensationalism that later influenced television, and produced stars like Liberace, or "Mr. Showmanship," who helped to fuse the spectacular aesthetics of the carnivalesque, the decadent costumery of theatre and drag, and the eccentricity of eighteenth-century parlors into a kind of entertainment that relied on appearance more than on musical talent.

The aesthetic experience and presence effects of Vegas are sources of enduring speculation. Jean Baudrillard described Las Vegas as stunning fusion of a radical lack of culture and natural beauty, while novelist Chris Abani, in *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, describes it as anything but natural or beautiful: the shores of Lake Mead are overflowing with the bodies of dead homeless men, the desert filled with murdered corpses, and the desert "moonscaped" by nuclear testing. In theory, Ritu Bhatt (2013) explores the tension between the aesthetic and anaesthetic in the Vegas Strip, and compares arguments of Venturi, Scott, Brown, and Izenour – for whom Vegas' visibly vital architecture in response to which withholding judgment was a tool for making later making later judgments more sensitive – and Nelson Goodman, who associates the

practice of disinterest with aesthetic cognition to argue that aesthetic experiences are not limited to art, and can happen anytime, and asks not what is art, but rather when is art?.

Martino Stierli (2013) treats Vegas from "apocalyptics" to the "integrated," as an emblem of American culture, a townscape and city-as-image, a perceptual form, a *roadtown* megastructure, a work of pop architecture, a nonplace urban realm, an invisible city, and a presence of monumentality. Sensual bombardment, it seems, correlates to the suspension of normative and aesthetic judgments, moral values, and personal identities. Yet while the signs and symbols of Sin City continue to be debated, even as it appears to mean nothing and exhibit a "radical lack of culture," the presence effects of Vegas are rarely treated critically, except in literature and film.

What does it feel like to be in Vegas? Does it play with perceptive autonomy? Does the physical isolation of Vegas change the way we perceive and apprehend it as an environment? Is a place with "no rules" and "no time" an imaginative-fantastical or somandric-sensual experience, or both? What aesthetic mechanisms cause us to feel suspended? Vegas is a place of flashing lights and beckoning signs, aesthetic seductions and strange monuments, available goods and prizes, the constant and seemingly arbitrary visual flow of money and images in and out of various hands and bodies, few clocks or windows, the stimulation of smells and bright lights that keep people awake, going, and stimulated, a place where you can do and express and be and create as you wish.

Environmentally, Vegas may represent a visual "problem to be solved": in environmental aesthetics, A.R. Cuthbert (2006) notes that an aesthetically pleasing experience provides pleasing sensory experiences, perceptual structure, and symbolic associations (74), yet the two most important factors affecting judgment are order and

visual interest – the latter of which tends towards ambiguity and complexity (Rapoport and Kantor 1967; Nasar 1994). Our innate desire to resolve visual stimuli into ordered patterns leads us to seek coherence and sense of order in a scene, but *stimulation of interest* must be managed so that the mind and body are not perceptively overtaxed.

Nasar notes that moderate stimulus generates a positive aesthetic experience, whereas pushing beyond that level leads to a diminishment in pleasure. Certainly, the competing forms, surface textures, patterns, provocative colors, dimensionalities, and styles of Vegas are collectively less than pleasurable. Moreover, our aesthetic judgment of an environment is colored by the nature of the activities – either real or imagined – that take place in an environment, and the degree to which they can imagine themselves participating in those activities. Our bodies may then respond to a space, building, or city based on what we sense happens (and stays) there.

Las Vegas embodies the best of roadside aesthetics and is an outré megapresence: a place that attracts you through bizarre and novel appearances, a temporary suspension, an atmosphere of total vision, a spontaneous and interactive happening, a physical gathering of strangers and tourists, a grand-scale expression of collective outsider and yard art, a public privacy, a seemingly autonomous sphere, a colorful wonderment, an inorganic event that moves inside itself and lurches out into the surrounding landscape, a spatial interjection and juxtaposition, an ambiguous meaningfulness that yet has no meaning, a plastic paradise, a nowhere and notime aesthetic power which signals: *here and now*. Vegas promises an outré-continuum experience that both interrupts the habits and routines of daily life and labor and suggests the world of fantasy as the realm of the real.

Similarly, roadside attractions interrupt a continuous and droning experience of highway driving – with its predictable rhythms, tiring repetitions, blending of long stretched lines, and sustained positional consistencies – by reenergizing the mind and body with a short break of movement, stimulation, newness, physical or sensual nourishment, the surprise or curiousness of the undiscovered, the aesthetic experience of place, and the sudden introduction of other, unknown bodies with which we interact spontaneously in liminal space. As such, it breaks up the suspended experience of car travel, which feels unspecific to place and time, and which physically stops or slows our bodies while accelerating both our movement and visual responses, with a surreal and outré experience that paradoxically – by virtue of ending vestibular self-motion and occurring outside on solid ground – feels like a return to the real and 'normal' world.

Today, tourists continue bring their own experiences to outré roadside attractions, turning them from static displays of bizarre ephemera into interactive objects-to-be-with. The addition of graffiti and personal items to outré attractions, as well as private ceremonies like weddings and photographic 'selfies' conducted under, beside, atop or near attractions, help to keep the objects or sites both relevant and changing. Interacting with the objects or posing with them has become more important than the objects themselves: as American author Don DeLillo noted in his novel, *White Noise* (1985), of the fictionally famous Most Photographed Barn in the World, "Nobody sees the barn."

Interiors and Exteriors: A Side Note

The period between the nineteen-forties and nineteen-sixties witnessed an explosion in car and biker culture, cruising, parking, racing, vehicular courting and sex, motorfetishism, and driving for its own sake. Much American literature has been devoted to both the road and cars as theme, and of travelling on the road, particularly as an outré aesthetic varying from wild or celebratory road-trip and open-road narratives, to gangs, outlaws, and countercultures, to cars that take on their own life, to violent narratives of sinister figures that threaten to appear or disappear in the anonymity afforded by the speed and distance. Little attention has been paid, however, to the presence effects and embodied aesthetics of car culture, beyond adornment as a kind of posturing, social statement, or political intentionality. For instance, the people, their vehicles, the production and act of riding, and the social aesthetics of cars, are often understood in relation to official, state, or national claims to public space, and the control or removal of marginalized figures' place in that space.

Ben Chappel's, *Lowrider Space: Aesthetics and Politics of Mexican American Custom Cars* (2012), deals with embodiment, spatiality, and performance in outré lowriding culture. While lowriding (including hydraulics, "scraping," design, and movement) can be understood as "existence and resistance," and other mantras of identity politics – for instance, lowriding as able to transform the spatial identities of the locations it enters and, in some cases, disrupts – Chappell describes such disruption or entrances into various neighborhoods as "counter-cartography that unmaps certain 'imagined cities' and renders others as visceral impacts on the sensorium" (29). What is more interesting

here than the treatment of lowriding as a liberating act of spatial decolonization, or the idea of identity and political and ethnic history, is the concept of unbounded spaces and "a material, space-making practice" as performance and expression (3) – in other words, what it presents rather than represents. The power of objects both to affect and be affected by their environment is expressed in lowriding as the material embodiment between the creator and the created, the freak body and its barker: "the materialized self of a customized lowrider therefore accrues a capacity to affect and to be affected ... it displays to the world, stands as the object of desire, and carries the vulnerability of a physical body" (107).

Chapter Five

Rebel, Rebel

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, outré artists moved from the margins to the mainstream. Pop art and neo-expressionism blended consumer culture, mass advertisement, and underground arts such as graffiti with high art in ways that intrigued the public and recast familiar everyday cultural objects. Celebrity artists like Warhol produced what would quickly become iconic American works. In principle, it signified a new take on what artists had done a century before. Punk and Goth thrived in shock rock, and the bohemian psychedelics and drug-fueled distortions of the beats and hippies, as well as early postmodernism, inspired literary and musical experimentation.

American public entertainment favored visually compelling and creative new forms, even if such overdone appearances offended 'traditional' American tastes. Variety television programs and late-night talk shows featured outrageous performers who became stars in their own right. Experimental and far-out art objects moved from galleries to public spaces to become social events and live happenings. Famous nightclubs, performances, and celebrities gained notoriety as outré fantasies, transforming subcultural aesthetics like camp, drag, burlesque, and circus costumes into decadent and exclusive experiences of the bizarre. English 'imports' and American stars like David Bowie, and his alter ego Ziggy Stardust, as well as Elton John, helped to bring camp into rock-n'-roll, where Jimmy Hendrix and James Brown combined spectacle with soul. The fashionable transgression of avant-gardes and deviant art, widely publicized through

household magazines, on television, and in commissioned public works, was appropriated for commercial purposes and used to propagate the logic and ideology of the dominant market. Weird and wild sold well, particularly to the new youth market, which was hungry for new experiences, identities, and amusements.

"Midnight Movies" – alternative films that were not acceptable for showing in mainstream cinemas – appeared in arthouses around the United States, and especially in college and university towns. Late night screenings added to the allure of alternative films, as a kind of thrilling and deviant experience for filmgoers – yet one that was far safer than the streets. Films including David Lynch's *Eraserhead*, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, and Perry Henzel's *The Harder They Come* played weekly for years to repeat audiences, mainly college students, as viewings became ritualized communal experiences and regular social events. In his documentary on Midnight Movies (2005), Stuart Samuels notes that when John Lennon and other respected and popular mainstream artists began attending midnight screenings of outré films, the events exploded as a popular youth phenomenon. In many respects, Midnight Movies were the first films to develop a mass following that now belongs to studio blockbusters. As director John Waters put it:

> Midnight Movies had to be funny and/or shocking in a surprising way: something completely new that you hadn't seen before. Mainstream society *hated* these movies and was against everything they believed in. Now that's radically different today. Everything that was in Midnight Movies is in Hollywood movies. Everything that Midnight Movies offered has become American humor (Interview in Samuels).

The experience of attending the films recalled drive-in movies, which allowed viewers to behave more freely in the privacy of their cars than they would in mainstream theatres, and that often showed what would later be known as cheesy horror and monster flicks.

Originally, outré films served to critique dominant aesthetic forms and genres. Waters referred to his own *Pink Flamingos* as "taste so bad it's good." Filmmakers deliberately upset popular notions of normalcy and social reality with their radical new visions, even as Midnight Movies articulated the *zeitgeist* of the youth generation. Yet Midnight Movies also introduced new aesthetic practices and sounds like reggae and transvestism to the mainstream, and modeled low-budget ways for unheard voices to gain visibility and credence (*Midnight Movies*). With a basic camera and a few friends, anyone could make a film – a revelation at the time. Subsequently, films like the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* became commercial hits in America, grossing far beyond their production costs, and studios took note. Blaxploitation, grindhouse, gothic, and experimental films became American cinema classics and appear in the Criterion Collection of visually relevant and artistically important films. John Waters, David Lynch, and George Romero all became known millionaires and cult heroes, changed public cinema, and deeply influenced American star directors like Quentin Tarantino, Martin Scorcese, Tim Burton, and Rob Zombie, as well as long-running cult hits like *Elvira: Mistress of the Dark*.

The passion for alterity stimulated by outré films produced creative effects in the culture. Inside theatres, audiences participated in the continuous interactive experience and future forms of outré art as influential cultural happenings (*Midnight Movies*). Middle-class Americans, mainly college and university students, called back to screens, performed scenes as they played, dialogued, dressed up in wild costumes, and used

familiar props in new and lewd ways. Inside private rooms, clubs, stores, studios, and on the streets, outré new fashions, works of art, critical theory and objects, and social groups were invented and reinvented, and became the subject of profiles in popular newspapers and national magazines including *Life* (Ibid).

The Midnight Madness movement also revitalized outré works like Tod Browning's *Freaks*, which cast real freakshow performers, and at the time of its initial release in 1932, caused such public scandal that it virtually ruined Browning's career (*Midnight Movies*). Kérchy and Zittlau note that 1960's American human rights movements, which reclaimed the words freak and freaky as positive self-identifiers, embraced "physiognomic deviation as a token of egalitarian political subversion, and the freak-hype of today's post-industrialist consumer societies functions as a mode of volatile self-expression" (4). Artists like Tom Waits, whose music celebrates outré sounds and styles, spent time at notoriously seedy hotels like the Tropicana, which Waits says was peopled by "four-speed automatic transvestites, unemployed firemen, dikes, hoods, hookers, sadists … reprieved murderers, ex-bebop singers and one-armed piano players" (Waits). He also spent a great deal of time in New Orleans, where the carnivalesque and strange are played out particularly during Mardi Gras. Repeatedly, Waits describes such freaky scenes, characters, and venues as ultra-American, and reflects on his youthful desire to blend in, rather than set himself apart, through unusual manner, bizarre posturing, and debauchery. "I'm not a drunk," he said in an early interview, "I'm a regular guy" (Waits).

Tom Waits began seriously performing in the 1970's, but his affirmative take on the outré reflects the legacy of the nineteenth-century freakshow aesthetic. He has said of

himself that he is deeply concerned whether he is truly eccentric or "just wearing a little hat" – an anxiety that speaks to performative difference. Waits refers to his music in metaphors that recall the hunt for success ("gold nuggets," or, "If I want a sound, I usually feel better if I've chased it and killed it, skinned it and cooked it."). Yet he also speaks to the tension between the excesses of performativity and American simplicity and authenticity: "[Onstage, one wants to] reach some level of spontaneity and just be as colorful and entertaining as I can … I want to avoid the unnaturalness of performing," yet "[s]ometimes it's hard to separate the two identities [person and persona] … I may exaggerate a little onstage, but I'm not trying to be anyone else but me. I try not to be compromising or condescending. I talk about things I know about." Nevertheless, Waits is aware that an authentic outré aesthetic carries effects of presence that provoke and change the artist: "What I like to try and do with my voice is get kind of schizophrenic with it and see if I can scare myself" (Waits). This last suggests the internal ambivalence and pluralities produced by freakshow aesthetics, and the romanticization of outsider art as both stimulating and real. Moreover, it points to a creative process in which experimentation with the bizarre is a form of shock stimulation. Waits' enduring search for his own eccentricity, and to push beyond his boundaries, is tempered by his concerns that the outré American art borders on accidental self-parody.

As the marginal became mainstream in America, the most outlandish aspects of outsider and underground art became subject to irony and cliché. Absorbed by the phenomenon of mass media, they lost power as platforms for social criticism and subversion. The love of outré heroes and forms, which had been gaining momentum in youth cultures for decades, and which allowed average Americans to imagine and cast

themselves as outsiders rather than insiders, and as creative producers as well as consumers, became diluted and commonplace (*Midnight Movies*). Perhaps more importantly, the aesthetic styles of fringe artists were replicated too often and too widely and lost much of the affective value that they once exclusively produced.

Art and the Academy

In the mid-twentieth century, American institutions and academies of American art also turned to and celebrated the marginal and outré. An historical-cultural explanation for this phenomenon is that:

> [T]he Cold War made art useful in a new way: as a political weapon. The creative freedom of American artists demonstrated the superiority of the American system no less vividly than its consumer products. It was in this brief period that the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] was founded [in 1965], with its initial mandate to stimulate "freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry."
>
> With the end of the Cold war, demonstrating the freedom of American artists was no longer politically useful. In the meantime, government funding for the arts had grown and state and local art councils were supporting a wide range of creative production coming from underrepresented minorities. When religious groups singled out "offensive" art as the cause around which to mobilize their constituencies, they savvily protested not the art itself, but the public funds that went to its creators. Countering that line of attack with the First Amendment

> obligation of government not to discriminate against artwork based on the viewpoint it expresses can lead to Pyrrhic victories: under pressure an art program can be terminated; art councils can be defunded (Cho, et. al 2003).

It was one thing for arthouses and independent artists to distribute their work in public, and in privately owned galleries, or even on public streets, but quite another thing to allocate national funds to the mainstream support of 'deviant' and 'uncontrolled' artists, as well as art that provided neither uncontroversial educational benefit nor 'morally elevating' value: "outside the hothouse of academia one can rarely hear a public defense of controversial art based on the importance of challenging set beliefs and dominant values" (Cho).

Artists, academics, and curators, however, suggested that social criticism in art was both healthy and democratic, that the autonomy of aesthetically challenging art was a matter of individual aesthetic judgment not prescriptive social mandates, that a variety of aesthetic forms reflected the real conflicts and diverse social fabric of Americans, that not all art is political and that some art is misrepresented, that traditional values and dominant culture were questionable concepts, and that outré art could generate dialogue between conflicting beliefs or divergent tastes in the safe spaces of creative and symbolic expression and public galleries and institutions.

In 1989, nearly twenty-five years after the NEA was established, the NEA made front-page news when the American Family Association protested the exhibit of works by award-winning Brooklyn artist Andres Serrano at a museum in North Carolina. In particular, Serrano's photographic artwork, "Piss Christ," which featured a crucifix floating in the artist's own urine, sparked public outrage as anti-Christian bigotry.

Serrano defended his art as both a presence-based exploration of bodily fluids and a critique of the cheapening of sacred symbols, but his defense went largely unheard or unnoticed by the American public.

Additionally, the gallery exhibitions of scandalous photos by Robert Mapplethorpe, the disturbing and far-out performance art of Karen Finley and the emergence of gay and lesbian film festivals all converged to produce a series of public outcries by politicians, the religious-right, family groups, and even much of the mainstream media, in protest against indecent art: "[thus] began the arts funding wars that dominated headlines for much of the 1990s" (Cho). The foundational rhetoric behind the protests was that government funding to art assumes that politicians or civilian groups have the power to veto or to approve the from and content of publically supported works. The National Campaign for Freedom of Expression, "a now-defunct advocacy group that represented the more cutting-edge artists and venues, later described the 'silence of the mainstream cultural organization' as 'deafening'" (Ibid).

At the same time that Serrano and other "Sensation" artists were at the heart of public arts scandals, pop music was having fun with outré forms. Michael Jackson's zombie chic, Madonna's massive cone breasts and sexual outrages, and Marilyn Manson's gothic shock rock antics and disturbingly radical appearance all suffered some public criticism, but largely blended into the world of culture industry. Today, stars like Lady Gaga, whose fans are called "Monsters," Katy Perry, and other pop stars continue to replicate the mock-outré aesthetics that keep their fans engaged and that allow them to practice continual and curious changes to their images and shows. While each of these figures pushed (or pushes) the boundaries of aesthetic norms and tastes, their use of

startling antics and effects do not ultimately disrupt social order or carry any dominant political message. The use of props such as prosthetic breasts and weapons, controversial makeup, wild costumes, blood, urine, feces, semen, or raw meat, "trash drag" accoutrements, outlandish violence or sex, and sideshow inspirations, all gained such public attention as to make the artists wealthy and famous household names.

Most of the aforementioned artists assert their normalcy in interviews, and are transparent about their use of excess and performativity as part of the sphere of art. Their display of difference is meant to excite and confuse, to disrupt aesthetic order, as a vehicle for visibility and notoriety, outside the uniform mundanities of middle-class America, in tension with everyday pragmatism, and with 'safer' artists. Yet their success in performing the outré simultaneously marks the fulfillment of the American dreams of self-made prosperity and individualism, part of the status quo. In American culture, which blends privileged and popular aesthetic forms, the outré now holds value in the form of cultural capital when it is integrated through popular consumption. While taste is individual and variable, mass consumption depends on visibility and distribution rather than public values.

Due to the variety of audiences and interest groups, media saturation, and the dissemination of creative technologies, what is popular need not be widely accepted or understood. Further, individuals may appreciate that which offends or eludes them – part of what art critic Adam Gopnik identifies as American "overeasy omnivorousness" (Gopnik). That which threatens us most – the unknowable, strange, unidentifiable, and shocking that nevertheless holds us in its grasp – becomes benign under the public gaze,

commercial value, and the veils of art and amusement. In this sense, the outré by popular definition is part of an American aesthetic tradition of self-reinvention.

Winifred Fluck (2007) describes a similar cycle in which the "unauthorized" seek modes of individual assertion, incorporating the performative as part of continual self-fashioning and attention seeking. Individual voices considered too marginal, uncontrolled, primitive, or emotional can gain recognition through art, and articulate imaginary elements that have no other vehicle of expression in culture. As such voices are considered "mere fiction" in art, the prospect of recognition carries no real political or social consequences (33). Yet when they radicalize the boundaries between aesthetic function and life, the endgame is their incorporation into dominant institutions and ideologies. Aesthetic function becomes subject to instrumental and pragmatic rationality, as art objects become valued for their market capital, rather than their aesthetic properties. Aesthetic function lends new credence and authority to the political, including unauthorized forms, both through the immediacy of aesthetic effects and, paradoxically, through the institution of art (42).

For Fluck, the ideology of American exceptionalism is thus contained within the aesthetic, which employs a liberal illusion of freedom and resistance. As a result of modernity, individualism and "imaginary self-empowerment," the condition of democratic equality in America paradoxically creates greater competition to be self-asserting. Equality of rank, competition, and the lack of traditional hierarchies, means that individuals must assert their own worth, and find new sources of recognition:

> This is especially true in a society of immigrants with great cultural diversity and great mobility because this mobility increases the frequency of encounters with

> strangers … A race for recognition sets in which fuels the restless individualism Tocqueville describes as a particular feature of American democracy . . . Inevitably, this new condition created by democracy must also affect the role of the aesthetic (38-39).

Thus the blending of art and life is part of an American aesthetic tradition of the theatrical, fictional, and fantastical, especially as it concerns image-making, self-reinvention, and by extension, upward mobility.

In searching for new forms of recognition, Americans turn time and again to the conspicuously unconventional. Paradoxically, this cycle promotes an ideology of assimilation, by relying on deviance to enact democracy as a series of relationally divergent postures. In the twenty first century, following decades of radical turns, avant-gardes, and celebrated rebels, outré has become a status symbol: the presentation of uncommon experience, unidentifiable style, and the nostalgic fantasy of difference as romantic alienation. It remains connected to established aesthetic histories of sensationalism and dissent in America. In fact, the word "outré" has become overused. The number of so-titled galleries, albums, bands, clothing lines, and clubs, paradoxically reinforce the very bounds they are meant to exceed. That is not to say, however, that the term has become ironic or banal. Rather, the appearance of rejecting convention, and therefore bourgeois mediocrity, has become aesthetic convention. The arts in particular provide a forum for 'playing' social critique and rebellion. Co-opted through public attention, unconventionals are no longer radical in the hermeneutic sense, representing that which we both desire and fear to become.

Culture industry's well-oiled machine continues to replicate the outré. Americans are overexposed to the outlandish as a publicity stunt, and a means of securing attention through continually shifting celebrity images that borrow, recycle, and recombine global aesthetics. Displays of decadence, excess, and strangeness, embodied in the popular, now smack of hollow formula. Even hip-hop, once a highly creative, vital, and socially critical genre, has become diluted and distilled by mainstream artists into materialist mantras, and the glorification of pimps and hustlers, greed and fame. The longing for authenticity, for a genuine outré aesthetic, remains poignant and even nostalgic. Those who delight in the outré for its own sake, who seek to create rather than contrive unconventional art, retain a special cultural role.

In "The Aesthetics of Resistance" (2013), Guiseppe Patella argues that in the wake of the twentieth century, and the ubiquity of aesthetic forms of "resistance" like the avant-garde and modern art, we no longer perceive such aesthetics as radical: "such art, now canonized and fashionable, is born of specific commissions from the media and publicity worlds seeking only to propagate their own ideology. This art is nothing more than a form of a functional expression of the system, perfectly integrated in the logic of the dominant market" (n.pag.). While unconventionality garners attention, it can tire through overexposure and repetition. Once we acclimatize or adjust ourselves to similar forms and stimuli, we are no longer challenged, and may seek new provocations.

Patella notes that the concepts of resistance and rebellion create binaries between conformity and non-conformity, conventionality and unconventionality as symmetrical but oppositional. In order to experience real aesthetic provocation, we need aesthetic experiences that establish a "radically asymmetrical relationship between self and

'adversary'": "In this provocation, what is important is the perturbing effect of uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) obtained when appealing to something that has remained latent in the adversary, and which he or she cannot not manifest without its force appearing to be destroyed" (n.pag.). In other words, an authentically radical and provocative aesthetic experience is one that does not challenge, oppose, or rebel, but is asymmetrical in relation to dominant culture and familiar aesthetic forms. Patella posits "acuteness" as the aesthetic mode for contemplating difference, which makes room for creative productions that may be recognized and retained in their alterity without being conciliated, annulled, assimilated, or converted one into the other. What makes society move today, he suggests, is not "the harmonious desire for pacification and consensus but instead of conflict, that is, an incessant fight for individual and collective recognition." Even cultural dissent, then, has been consumed by hegemony of the market and the logic of profit.

While Patella describes an aesthetics of provocation, he refers principally to movements, objects, or works in art that have been consistently labeled outré in the sense of unconventional, outrageous, and outlandish, and therefore challenging. What [Western] societies need now, he argues, is something wholly new in order to move democratic culture forward, through an aesthetics that cannot be understood in terms of binaries such as dominant culture and its oppositional forces, but an experience that is outside of such bounds. This search comes back to the outré in its second, more critical and vital sense: that which asserts presence and evokes the effects of presence, that extends perceptive autonomy, and that has the capacity – through its aesthetic mechanisms – to make us other than ourselves.

Notably, Patella finds his figure in the Dandy, whom he sees as embodying a provocative aesthetics through "distancing" and "absolute exteriority, converting himself into nothing and no one in order to adhere fully to his time and to the reality of things. The dandy therefore bets on difference and the unpredictability of this historic process" (n.pag.). For the dandy, dandyism is a "paradoxical strategy, a kind of politics of the impossible, that is supported by the unpredictable, by collision, by the hidden complicities it can arouse," and by igniting imagination in others. The dandy can thus resuscitate aesthetic stupor in society, evoking the admiration of others for whom only conformity or nonconformity, conventionality or unconventionality, are the only viable options. Yet do we always admire what both draws and offends us? A comparison with Susan Sontag's discussion of camp suggests that Patella's dandy returns in some sense not only to aesthetes like Oscar Wilde, but to an aesthetics of camp, which was prominent in the outré movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Both the dandy and camp aesthetics bear significant similarities and proximities to the outré and are often directly and critically described as outré.

Susan Sontag in her seminal "Notes on Camp" (1964) describes the tension inherent in camp as an aesthetic form that both compels and repels. One who wholeheartedly embraces an aesthetic sensibility does not need to analyze it, but only exhibits [or experiences] it. For Sontag, sensibilities that convert the serious into the frivolous "are grave matters. Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They *allow* that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And

even worse. To patronize taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free— as opposed to rote – human response" (n.pag). Sensibility is "almost" ineffable: once it is categorized or slotted within molds or systems, or "handled with the rough tools of proof," it is no longer a sensibility but "has hardened" into an idea.

Like Patella's dandy, Sontag's camp is a mode of aestheticism that perceives the world itself as an aesthetic phenomenon. It has the power to transform experience, but not everything may be defined as camp [or for that matter, dandy or outré.]. However, Sontag's list of camp elements is exhaustive, numbering some 58 features, effects, and aesthetic criteria, including some of the following, which apply equally to dandyism and camp. Both camp and dandyism:

- are apolitical and emphasize style while remaining neutral to content; can be embodied in things and people; are often decorative, with a focus on texture and sensuous surface; are not "bad art" but rather "some art" that merit serious admiration and study.
- contain elements of artifice, in juxtaposition to nature; respond particularly to the strongly exaggerated and markedly attenuated; suggest a vision of the world in terms of style, specifically a love of the exaggerated and "off," of things-being-what-they-are-not; suggest a world in quotation marks – to perceive objects and people in terms of understanding Being-as-Playing-a-Role.
- focus on when rather than why travesty, impersonation, and theatricality acquire a 'special flavor'; may exhibit a sentimental relationship to the past and older, ornate forms, but divorced from their original meaning; may be naïve or deliberate; posit the difference between the thing meaning something, anything,

and the thing as pure artifice; are only 'bad' when they are too mediocre in ambition.

- are alive to multiple senses of things and of things in the world; do not intend to be what they are but are nevertheless wholly conscious; are the hallmark of the spirit of extravagance; propose themselves seriously, but cannot be taken seriously because they are "too much"; can be imitated by other forms, but not replicated, because such forms succeed.
- are passionate and consistent in their extravagance; are subject to change and the unpredictable effect of time; glorify character and especially "instant character"; turn their backs on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgments; exhibit a high style of evaluation but do not only respect high style, and do not regard high culture as having a monopoly on refinement.
- are transitional figures; are modes of enjoyment and appreciation, not judgment; are misunderstood as embodying 'homosexual taste'; celebrate the energy, force, and presence that goes into all styles and forms; are likely humanist; and are 'good' *because* they're 'awful.'

Neither the figure of the dandy, nor the aesthetics of camp, offers a solution or a model for the "problem" of a contemporary lack of aesthetic provocation, and Sontag and Patella do not suggest that they do. Both, however, search for aesthetic experiences that are affective and transformative but outside of any clear meaning – experiences that return us to the somandric qualities of presence, and may be both attractive and repulsive, thereby stimulating change. An example of such an experience can be found in the a work of outré material art: Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*.

In 1981, Californian artist Richard Serra created and installed a government commissioned sculpture in the Federal Plaza in New York City. *Tilted Arc* was a long steel plate, two-and-a-half feet thick, twelve feet high, and one-hundred-and-twenty feet long (Senie 298). Adjacent to a large, non-functional fountain, the modernist sculpture occupied a thin slice of the square, with the intention, as Serra put it, of leaving ample room for social functions, while stressing that the experience of art "is itself a social function" (*The Trial of Tilted Arc*). Yet its presence caused such scandal that it became the subject of the most notorious public sculpture controversy in the history of art law, and following an extended public trial, *Tilted Arc* was removed in 1989.

Tilted Arc was an outré creation – a massive, dark and angular structure that changed the way workers, residents and visitors both experienced and moved in a public square. Thousands of people, many of whom worked in the federal building, complained and later petitioned that is was inconvenient, forcibly rerouted bodies and interrupted space, and was an imposing and intimidating presence. Some local employees at the site referred to *Tilted Arc* as "the wind breaker" suggesting that it had no artistic function (Senie 298). Serra had argued that the sculpture changed as one walked, seemingly expanding and contracting through a kind of *trompe l'oeuil*, and thus the viewer's movement altered her perception of both the sculpture and her environment as a whole. Moreover, from different angles, the sculpture appeared to transform. Both humans and the outré artwork thus shared shifting modes of embodied affect in a continual process of mutual making and unmaking, sensation and distortion, which extended the perceptive autonomy of the viewer. The sculpture was then a physically organic presence and an

interactive being-unto-form: one that made viewers aware of themselves and their movements in public space.

The sculpture itself generated powerful and confused effects. Viewers were divided as to whether it was beautiful, ugly, strange, modern, timeless, meaningful, meaningless, bold, shocking, upsetting, inspiring, bizarre, repulsive, awesome, or fearsome, but to no one was it a benign presence. Some perceived the sculpture as "threatening" (Senie 300). Though *Tilted Arc* occupied only a portion of the square, and was tiny compared the dramatically utilitarian federal building around it, it became the center of public attention and debate. The sculpture raised questions about the definition, value, and meaning of public art, to whom it belongs, how and why it is created and funded, and who should be involved (Senie 299). Notably, Serra was then a well-known and respected artist, sanctioned by both prestigious art communities and by national institutions. "Art is not democratic. It is not for the people," Serra said, fuelling further controversy (Serra 6). Yet the social effects generated by the sculpture were nothing if not public and democratic. When it was suggested that his art was not functional and therefore useless, Serra noted that it was designed to be site-specific, and that public concern with utility might be better directed towards the waterless fountain instead (*The Trial of Tilted Arc*).

Aesthetic affect, rather than art, was the true source of public concern. The sculpture was often vandalized in order to defile its presence, though it was nothing more than an unadorned and static sheet of oxidized steel. While the piece was unconventional, it was not altogether different from other modernist works and buildings around the city. The issue was not that no one knew quite what to make of *Tilted Arc*, or its size or shape,

but that they were forced to reckon with its material body in ways that made them perpetually uncomfortable. Harry Watson of the Bureau of Investigation for the state of New York said that whoever had approved the sculpture was "beyond the realm of stupid," "worse than insanity," "insane – more than insane," and that all those who were in favor of the sculpture should be taken on buses to Bellevue Hospital and singed into "the mental ward. That is where they belong" (Inde 64). Others argued that *Tilted Arc* was an obstacle to public use of space in concerts and performances, though it did not inhibit space and was proven through artistic studies conducted with composers Philip Glass and Alvin Lucier to have a *positive* effect on the musical sounds (Senie 301). Still others complained that the sculpture attracted graffiti, and, less plausibly, rats and terrorists. At best, this could be called grasping at straws: no one throughout the entire scandal could quite articulate the public *zeitgeist* surrounding *Tilted Arc*, and so looked for reasons to have it removed. At one point, the sculpture was plastered with posters bearing death threats, particularly an image of a Vietnamese man being shot in the head with a sign underneath that said "Kill Serra." Serra found the death threats more "excessive" than the object he created (Serra 6).

The sculpture was outré by public standards and tastes, but also outré in the true sense of beyond: it uniquely contributed to public hysteria by evoking or generating unspeakable responses. More importantly, it caused other bodies to change, rather than simply observe, and was thus regarded as both internally and externally invasive. While Serra had designed the sculpture in part as an aesthetic "bridge" between two federal architectures, "connecting and visually gathering" the buildings around it, "quite literally, many individuals could not see beyond its size" (Senie 300). While circumventing the

object in order to gain access to the plaza, citizens were changed not only physically and perceptually, but also emotionally and perhaps ideologically. It is possible that *Tilted Arc* reshaped some individuals' relationship to their work or environment, objects d'art, public space, one another, themselves, federal power, industrial materials, or wealth – even in the absence of clear meaning or representation: "over and over again, we see the public rendered helpless and hostile by art they don't or can't understand" (299).
It was precisely the inability of those who opposed the sculpture, as well as those who defended it, to articulate exactly how and why the odd presence affected them so strongly, or appeared beyond the bounds of reason, that bears significance.

What is clear is that the aesthetic affects of the sculpture: a) created the aesthetic experience of perceptive plurality through destabilizing form and function; b) resulted in social actions and changes, personal responses, aesthetic debates, and democratic processes on a local, and ultimately mass public scale; c) involved artists, community members, governmental institutions and civic bodies in socially aesthetic productions; d) continued long after the original event had ended and the object was removed, thus extending the aesthetic experience of *Tilted Arc*. Ultimately, public scandal resulted in campaigns to have the sculpture removed, and four years later, a hearing was held. Moving the sculpture meant destroying it, because it was built as a site-specific work. While testimonies in favor of keeping *Tilted Arc* more than doubled those against it, and despite appeals, the sculpture was removed eight years after its erection.

The shock of *Tilted Arc*, and of the trial, remained long after the piece was demolished. The excessive nature of such a large steel arc was symbolic as well as affective, primarily because the idea of an "impenetrable wall" in what was previously

"humane" and "pleasant" public space – as Chief Judge Edward Re put it – suggested, to some, a message where there was only the medium (*The Trial of Tilted Arc*). Yet the shock of modern art in general was by no means unfamiliar to the Manhattan public of the 1980s. Indeed, shock is an important American sensation, one quite divorced from traditional aesthetic taste for pleasure and beauty, and is related to the thirst for novelty. Shocks seize our attention, divert and distract us, and grip our curiosity. One can be invited or expect to be startled or thrilled, but shock itself works only at the levels of surprise and invasion: it is a nonconsensual encounter. By contrast, consensual encounters allow us to negotiate other bodies as integral selves. Thus, shock makes us vulnerable, and susceptible to change. In such moments we are at all levels temporarily suspended, responding instinctively, and separated from a moral or personal identity. The outré shocks or surprises because it is quite unlike anything else, conspicuously overdone and weird. That is not to suggest that it cannot also be pleasing, but that the presence effects of the outré diminish everything else by comparison. The outré is often fleeting: a temporary encounter that may nevertheless have lasting effects.

Tilted Arc was not dismantled because it was a modern work of art or because it was attached to a public institution. Indeed, the sculpture was created by culturally established American artist, rather than by and unknown or outsider artist. For all intents and purposes, its sleek minimalist design, solid color and shape, singular industrial material, installation in public space, site-specific design, and governmental authorization and commission, all pointed to a recipe for a common vision of broadly accessible art. However, the sculpture was regarded as a "threatening" and "insulting" work of personal and subjective artistic vision, and raised questions about the role of mass acceptance in

public art (Senie 300). Michael Faubion of the NEA expressed that the "message" of the *Tilted Arc* scandal was "that neither legal procedures nor an artist's wishes make a difference" (Ibid). Soon after the *Tilted Arc* scandal, another of Serra's steel sculptures was commissioned for the Sculpture Hall at Yale University, and again the sculpture was the center of public dispute: "one incensed academic wrote to the local press claiming, 'Serra's pieces are about as communal as the walls of a Gulag,'" and Serra claimed that comments were psychologically damaging to him (Serra 6).

Serra reclaimed his position as a popular national sculptor when, in 1997-1998, he displayed a series of curved sculptures called *Torqued Ellipses* in New York (See figure 15.). Though constructed from the same materials as *Tilted Arc*, and of similar in size and color, the *Torqued Ellipses* series was a public success. Serra speculated that the reason for such success "'was definitely the curves. When I showed the first series of Torqued Ellipses in New York . . . there was a definite sense that people were reacting to the work in a different way. People reacted to the curves in a way they didn't to the angles and straight lines. They hadn't seen that before. Modernism was a right angle; the whole 20th century was a right angle . . . . People were ready for curves'" (Serra 6).

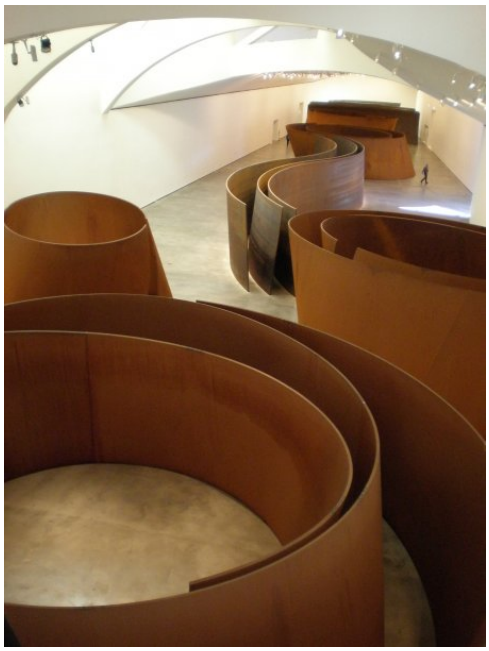

Figure 15. Richard Serra, *The Matter of Time*, 2005; Steel, Sculpture and Installation; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao; One of the works in the Torqued Ellipses series; Elliott Levitt, "Richard Serra's The Matter of Time," Photo; Source: Marjobani, *Wikicommons*, 24 April 2008; Web.

While the outré was affixed to early American discussions of aesthetics, helping to both determine and negotiate the bounds of national tastes and styles, its development in American aesthetics and incorporation into national culture(s) and art forms accelerated rapidly in the nineteenth century and permeated the twentieth century. As Adam Gopnik says, American art gets its energy from its eccentric corners and favors aesthetic extremes (Gopnik). The ubiquity of the outré as an expression of unconventionality in American popular culture has, however, run its course, and contemporary critical perspectives continue to illustrate the ways in which many Americans have been culturally conditioned to absorb the strange and outrageous in the decadent visuals of media aesthetics, understand national cultures as plural and

fragmented rather than dominant or monolithic, and expect or fetishize the outré as a non-meaning and artificially stylized precursor of the new or attention-seizing.[17] In many respects, then, long-repeated aesthetic expressions of unconventionality ring hollow in American culture, and the bizarre and strange have entered the realm of cultural overabundance – only touching on the mystery and unknowable to which they belong.

Outré aesthetics is not oppositional, however, but celebrates aesthetic plurality and diversity, extending perception in the moment of encounter, while fine-tuning our aesthetic responses to the unusual and inarticulable – the nexus of fantasy, reality, and creative potential. As such, the outré continues to transform, vitalize and mobilize American culture. Today, Hans Gumbrecht argues, we long for something real in aesthetic experience – beyond a world of aesthetic artifice, and disembodied media communications – and have an intense desire for presence and presence effects. We need, in short, a return to the world of things and being embodied in the world (*POP* 20). Outré aesthetics intensify the corporeal, substantive and *felt* in aesthetic experience, suggesting that both presence and presence effects in aesthetic experience never disappeared.

The outré offers what Gumbrecht refers to as "moments of [aesthetic] intensity" that allow us to feel or experience high-level functioning at the physical, emotional, and cognitive levels, and to experience complex presences. In such moments we are "lost in focused intensities": extreme physical states or nuanced epiphanies in aesthetic experience that offer no edification or message but are nevertheless important in our

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[17] This statement recalls fashion designer James Laver's formula: "The same costume will be Indecent 10 years before its time, Shameless 5 years before its time, Outré (daring) 1 year before its time, Smart, Dowdy 1 year after its time, Hideous 10 years after its time, Ridiculous 20 years after its time, Amusing 30 years after its time, Quaint 50 years after its time, Charming 70 years after its time, Romantic 100 years after its time, Beautiful 150 years after its time."

lives. Perhaps a twenty-first century American aesthetics is one that values aesthetic literacy – a better understanding of affect, presence, and effects in the aesthetic experiences that fill our everyday – and the role of the outré in longstanding American aesthetic experiments in exploring a felt world beyond the bounds of reason – a seemingly endless frontier.

Chapter Six

Embodied Aesthetics and Outré Encounters: a Bio-Cognitive View

There is something undeniably compelling about the ways in which the bizarre, the shockingly unusual, and the unknowable hold us in their grasp. Encounters with the bizarre may evoke a range of emotional, psychological, and physiological responses that are not immediately identifiable or qualifiable as something we like or dislike. Rather, responses to the strange tend to be ambiguous, blended, and complex. Weird experiences are provocative and stimulating because they occur outside of predictable or familiar experiences, and may therefore be at once attractive and repulsive. For instance, the November 17, 1901 edition of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* newspaper, in reference to modern "outré fashions," described them as "ugly splendor" ("A Modish Dinner Gown" 14). Humans are both socialized and aesthetically oriented towards shared cultural conventions. Aesthetic encounters that take us outside of comfort push the limits of reason and stimulate imaginative possibility. Despite the significance of the outré, however, few empirical aesthetic studies explore the bizarre and conspicuously unusual in aesthetic experience.

Outré encounters are significant because they help to stimulate change. Increasingly, scientists across the disciplines are proving that outré aesthetics cause us to alter our perception and expand our worldview. The over-the-top or outrageous strikes us as inherently dynamic, creative, and novel; in this sense, it inspires innovation and

appeals to ideologies of freedom. Perhaps for these reasons, the outré continues to both influence and be influenced by American culture.

American Perception and Aesthetic Response

Is there such a thing as American perception, and if so, what is its relationship to culture, art, and aesthetics? Scientists across disciplines continue to address this question, and differ in their understanding of what defines its key terms: perception, culture, art, and aesthetics. It is generally accepted, however, that culture affects perception, orients us towards certain types of experiences, and shapes our responses to stimuli. The well-known Müller-Lyer illusion (see figure 16.), for instance, demonstrates that Americans uniquely perceive a line to be longer if its ends are feathered outward, rather than inward. The implication is that physical environments shape perception: Americans grow up, live, and work in box-shaped rooms marked by carpenter corners, and consequently learn to see converging lines in three dimensions – a form of adaptive visual-spatial perception. In other cultures, by contrast, the lines were correctly perceived as equal length.

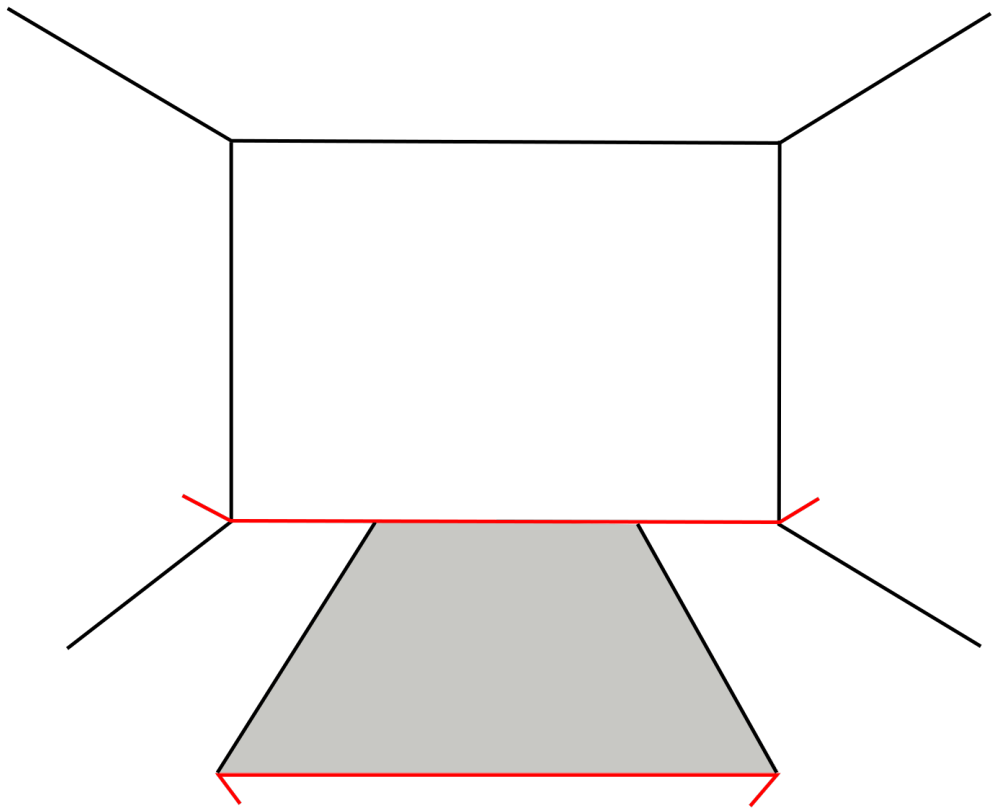

Figure 16. António Miguel de Campos, "Müller-Lyer Illusion"; The top line was perceived to be longer than the bottom line, despite equal length; Public domain image, May 2007; Source: António Miguel de Campos, *Wikicommons*, May 2007, Web.

In American Studies, Malgorzata Durska (2004) argues that national culture is "still the main factor determining human behavior in all aspects of social life" (121). Durska identifies key differences in North American and Western European cultures and values, and their effects on business life. According to the study, Americans are strongly individualistic and egalitarian: they highly value those who "stand out" and "challenge each other," and have a moderate "power distance" – that is, they are disinclined to accept unequal dispersions of power. Americans are also openly competitive and aggressive, and prefer that their relations to others "are limited to certain spheres" over

diffuse encounters. In other words, they compartmentalize business and pleasure, and authority in one sphere of life does not necessarily apply to other spheres. By contrast, Western Europeans prefer clear demarcations of power and structure, value the familiar, and observe a high power distance through hierarchical structure. In "highly diffused" and "high context" cultures such as in France and Germany, authority translates across all spheres of life at once.

Notably, Durska observes that Americans demonstrate "low uncertainty avoidance" as compared to Europeans, especially in France, which is a "high uncertainty avoidance" culture. Here, acceptance or avoidance "means that everything that is different, new, or unknown is treated either as dangerous or as interesting and challenging" (126). Americans "tend to be positively motivated and challenged by new, unknown or different solutions or situations. Their tolerance for deviant and innovative ideas and behaviors makes them better at innovations, but … an easy-going attitude… does not give them much advantage once the new ideas have to be implemented" (126-7). The study suggests that Americans may be: i) positively stimulated by novel and unknown situations or encounters, ii) accepting of different, deviant, or risky behaviors or ideas, and iii) respond creatively to unconventional presences or experiences. Within this framework, Americans are more likely than Western Europeans both to gravitate to the outré and to tolerate outré presences, which improves their ability to innovate, and, in turn, generate new challenges. Thus, the outré serves an important cultural function, and reflects existing American values.

In "The Weirdest People in the World," Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan (2009) found extraordinarily dramatic perceptive and psychological differences between

American and other world cultures, including Western Europeans, branding them the "outliers among outliers." Behavioral experiments including the "ultimatum game" revealed that Americans participated in balanced financial offers with one another (i.e. a 50/50 split), even if both parties stood to gain from any offer (i.e. a 80/20 split). "Fairness" was seen as more important than mutual profit amongst Americans. However, others, particularly non-industrial and non-Western cultural members, focused on luck and on the game itself. The authors conclude that American subjects acted in fairness according to the perceptual belief that "unequal presentations" would result in rejection. They speculate, moreover, that this perceptual attitude is likely shaped by Americans' continued engagement in complex market economies (going back to Europe), and habituation to doing business with strangers. The paper also refers to studies like that by Stanford University's Hazel Rose Marcus and Shinobou Kitayama (1991), which found that Americans strongly and distinctively see themselves as independent (versus the more interdependent East Asian countries), focusing on individual attributes and preferences, and perceiving themselves as apart from the group. When shown a cartoon aquarium, for instance, Americans recalled the details of the singular fish that occupied the tank, whereas Japanese subjects recalled additional elements like bubbles and seaweed as well. When shown a straight line within frames at different angles, and asked to tell which lines are straight, Americans perceived the line as distinct from the frame - a mark of individualistic reasoning and interpretation.

While these various approaches to Americanness indicate that culture indeed shapes perception, and that Americans tend toward individualism and invention, what characterizes individual perception in a culture already inclined towards individual

perception? The answer may reside in the outré. According to psychology, the human brain senses the world indirectly, as sense organs convert stimulation into neural messages. Due to sensory adaptation, we are able to handle change, and can adjust to all but *the most extreme stimuli* (Petti 8). Each of the senses extracts different information, which is processed in different parts of the brain. Sensations like pain, however, are in fact highly individual experiences, just as olfactory senses are related to emotion and memory. Perception does not then describe a perfect representation of the world, but the meaning we ascribe to sensation – an interpretation of the world. Perception is influenced by "experience, such as context, perceptual set, and culture"; in terms of aesthetics, even depth perception and "relative motion, linear perspective, and atmospheric perspective, seem to be learned" (45), and are therefore subject to potential change. Regular contact with the same stimuli over time (familiarity) seems to "numb" or "dull" our sensual and perceptive responses. In order to bring about change, or develop new modes of perception, we must be affected by extreme and unfamiliar stimuli, which are beyond interpretation, and outside of 'legitimate' culture: the weird, far-out, and unconventional are prime examples. Faced with strange new stimuli, yet unable to contextualize the experience, we change our behavior, and in time, our aesthetic sense and perception.

Steven Nelson (2006) draws on affect control theory to illustrate how humans react cognitively to information that contradicts culturally held sentiments. In particular, he studies the bizarre and unanticipated events. Nelson argues that when we encounter "bizarre events and presences," and have no opportunity to act so as to alter them, we must re-identify the actor, behavior, or person who is the object of the action. Behavior, Nelson concludes, is by far the most re-identified component, suggesting dynamism and

versatility in behavioral conception— an observation which social psychological literature underappreciates, due to its consistent focus on self-identities. Thus, when we encounter outré presences, which are beyond our control, we most commonly respond by re-identifying behavior, rather than the people, actors, or objects involved.[18]

The phenomenon Nelson describes is a recurrent theme in American literature. One specific example is Donald Barthleme's short story, "The Balloon," which describes an outré aesthetic: a massive helium-inflated balloon that hovers in the "air space" over Manhattan, and which covers forty-five blocks. The first-person narrator installs and inflates the balloon overnight, a "frivolous" and "free-hanging" presence, so that the next morning, it appears to have suddenly become manifest above the city. He hides the valves, so that even the police and their "secret tests" cannot discern either the source of inflation or how to remove the anomaly. When "public warmth" – mixed with "touches of hostility"— develops towards the balloon, the presence is tolerated (55). Early on, arguments over the meaning of the balloon are abandoned, and citizens agree that such discussions are "pointless, "since the meaning can never be known: "we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena" (54). People in the story are not affected by the ideological,

[18] In responding to bizarre and invented news headlines, subjects in the study were asked to change one word: the object, behavior, or identity of actors, to "resolve the strangeness by substituting a more likely word for one of the event components" and "construct a [more] realistic event" (Nelson 224). Often, the identity labels implied judgments, for example in the prompts "bouncer assaulted drunk" and "adulterer cheated call-girl." Subjects in the study chose to accept identity and object labels and far more readily than behaviors, and changed the behavioral terms or words more often. As such, their explanations for the events culminated mainly in a re-identification of behaviors: "[subjects] viewed behaviors as particularly open to different conceptualizations, regardless of any component deflections . . . . We seem to accept the labels attached to people as more accurate or more permanent than labels attached to their acts" (225).

artistic, practical, economic, or conceptual value of the balloon, but rather its material presence and bizarre effects. The balloon is then neither a symbol nor a representation, but rather a tangible and palpable aesthetic experience.

Civilian reactions towards the balloon are varied. Some find it "interesting," pleasurable, warming and "sheltering," while others feel constrained and "heavy," or lament its interference with the "clear" sky. Some see the anomaly as an "unanticipated reward," while others argue its form and introduce new ideas with which to regard or discuss it. Still others indulgence private fantasies – the origins of which are "deeply buried and unknown" (56) – of either losing themselves in, or engorging, the balloon. Children find the new presence exciting, and "daring" children play or jump on its surface. Citizens interact with the balloon by marking it with graffiti, hanging lanterns from its underside, or strolling along its top. Critical opinion is divided, and often (satirically) typical of theoretical aesthetic discourse. Those who seem to find the balloon outré, for instance, question whether "unity" has been sacrificed for "sprawling quality," or declare, "*Quelle catastrophe*!"(57).

The balloon – through its very presence – changes the way that people interact with and perceive their environment, each other, and their community, and alters the ways in which they live, think, and move. Everything is connected to everything else in relation to the balloon, and nothing is ever the same as it was before the outré *thing* arrived. The perceptive autonomy of individuals is expanded through sensual reckoning with the material presence of the object. People begin "to locate themselves in relation to aspects of the balloon" (57) – defining space through the crucial intersections between human and balloon, balloon and building, or balloon and balloon — and regard their new

"landscape." They admire the inflated presence because "it was not limited, or defined" (57). The balloon is subject to continual flux, alteration, and unpredictable "new dispositions." Its capacity to change, to produce new forms and states, as well as entries and exits, appeals to those persons with rigidly patterned lives to whom "change, although desired, was not available" (57). Caught in the predictable machinations of contemporary industrial life, and the hard, unchanging, surface "grid" of the city streets, the civilians respond powerfully to the unlimited potential of the excessively large, soft, transmutational, and non-meaning presence. People begin to embrace new modes and models for being, as both aesthetic producers and products: "more and more people will turn . . . to solutions for which the balloon may stand as a prototype, or 'rough draft'" (58). In response to an outré aesthetic, the citizens demonstrate creative generation and empathic socialization. The capacity of the experience to change the citizens depends on the aesthetic mechanisms of the balloon that cause them to suspend their identities, cultural perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors, making them other than themselves: "[the balloon] offered the possibility, in its randomness, the mislocation of the self" (57). In this sense, the outré aesthetic object promulgates democratic and dynamic social change.

Though some versions of Barthelme's story omit the final three pages, the original version offers a meaning (or inferred and intentionally misdirected meaning), in the last paragraph. Here, the balloon is a "spontaneous autobiographical disclosure": the unease the speaker feels with his lover's absence and his subsequent sense of sexual deprivation. After twenty-two days of existence, the balloon is dismantled, removed,

carried away by trailer trucks, and stored. [19] Faced with a curious object they did not understand, of remarkable and non-meaning presence, the citizens chose to abandon rational investigations and interface with the presence. Once the object is gone, and both the society and its frameworks are forever altered, the civilians are left to marvel at the experience of outré aesthetics "in bewildered inadequacy" (58).

Despite Barthelme's critical reputation as a postmodernist who abandons the search for meaning in his fiction, his works do not reject meaning, but exalt the sheer power of non-meaning presence and its ability to evoke epiphany. In this sense, his works complement the aesthetic theories of Hans Gumbrecht, and celebrate outré aesthetics.

Empirical Aesthetics and the Outré

Recent empirical treatments of aesthetics suggest a renewed theoretical interest in aesthetic experience as an embodied phenomenon. Relevant scientific disciplines include behavioral, brain, and cognitive sciences, social science, social and evolutionary psychology, and the burgeoning fields of neuroaesthetics, bioaesthetics, and social aesthetics. Empirical aesthetics often point to the distinctively operational and adaptive roots of perceptive responses to 'beauty,' 'art,' 'taste,' 'harmony,' and 'unity' – as such, they continue to propagate eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concepts as the primary determinations of the aesthetic. Scientists are increasingly concerned with questions about human aesthetic experience (AE) and aesthetic attitude (AA), like why aesthetics

[19] Interestingly, the story of the balloon bears striking similarity to the historical case of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which was constructed in 1981 – the same year that Barthelme's "The Balloon" was published – though *Tilted Arc* was not dismantled, carted away on trucks, and stored in a warehouse in Brooklyn until 1989.

seems to be particularly or uniquely human faculty (a major assumption), why and how we produce and respond to art and aesthetic objects, and what conditions produce aesthetic unity or beauty. According to the Johns Hopkins Brain Science Institute, it is "known" that art can create and manipulate emotions, that aesthetic environments have powerful psychological, emotional, and even physically healing effects, and that improvisational arts like dance or rap develop both cognitive skills and creative ability. What is "not known" is how a sculpture or painting is created or processed, why only human animals make art, and why art is "so special" to us.

While "research in the wide field of empirical aesthetics demonstrates highly reliable and consistent assessments of aesthetic judgments, especially in regard to what we like and what we hate from a visual and aesthetic perspective" (Carbon 2011), a number of scientific theories of aesthetics assume: a) that there are general mechanisms underlying aesthetic evaluations and that they can be "located" or "tracked" in specific regions of the human body or brain; b) that there are high consistencies and reliabilities in aesthetic appreciation across cultures, such as facial attractiveness, suggesting common human foundations in aesthetic experience, or universal operations; and c) that aesthetic experience can be understood on a sliding scale of what we "like" to what we "hate" – a view supported by Berkeley cognitive neuroscientists Art Shimamura and Steve Palmer (2012). Such assumptions, while useful to understanding aesthetic judgments and attitudes, offer little to explain the mysterious, bizarre, strange, non-meaning, and outlandish in aesthetic experience, other than by investigating sensations or responses like shock, distaste, avoidance, or curiosity in encountering new forms.

i. Neuroaesthetics and cognitive science

Neuroaestheticists study the mechanisms of the brain that produce, enhance, or process aesthetic experience, for instance through neuroimaging or brain lesion studies. AE is complex and elusive: there is no part of the brain devoted to aesthetic function or apprehension. Rather, neuroaestheticists claim, AE is related to nodal interaction among and across a sophisticated network of cortical and subcortical regions in the brain, that govern emotional, perceptual, imaginative, affective, and cognitive processes. These processes or underlying mechanisms facilitate such varied aspects of human experience as decision-making, abstract reasoning, perceptual detail, the ability to read small changes in an object, and navigating or establishing social relationships. Yet neuroscientists and cognitive scientists disagree about exactly where and when aesthetic experience originates, and what, when, and how regions of the brain are affected or involved. "Cold" cognitive studies of aesthetics focus on the operational mechanisms of the brain involved in, or triggered by, aesthetic experience. However, such studies are often inconclusive, limited to certain types of measurable responses, and posit the brain as the "seat" of aesthetic experience. "Warm" cognitive studies focus on interrelationships between body, brain and environment in aesthetic appreciation, and regard aesthetic experience as dynamic and changing. In *The Meaning of The Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007), Mark Johnson ties reason, thought and cognition to emotion in art, and declares that aesthetics is at once the cornerstone of all human meaning making and necessarily embodied. The mind and body work together as

an organic whole, and all language, thought and meaning, "emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity" (1).

Neuroaesthetic studies focus on artistic appreciation (particularly visual art and music), the experience of beauty, and aesthetic perception in relation to mental states and various levels of brain function. Attempts to address unusual, strange or unconventional aesthetic experiences have included the study of "radical departures" in art – particularly Cubist, Modern, representational, impressionistic and abstract artworks of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – as well as the influence of neural disorders and traumatic injuries on aesthetic experience in the creation and interpretation of art. Such studies investigate the influence of style-based information on cortical activation. Findings generally show that artists and the artistically educated are more 'tolerant' of unconventional aesthetics.

Two recent studies involved subjects that had little or no artistic background in fine arts. Subjects were asked to compare representational vs. abstract artworks, and to rate them in terms of both understanding and aesthetic qualities, under two conditions: with and without stylistic information about the images concerned. Petra Lengger, et al (2007) used current density analysis using low-resolution electromagnetic tomography, and found activation in left frontal lobe and temporal and parietal lobes, while Zaira Cattaneo, et al (2013), artificially stimulated and measured the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (lDLPFC), which is thought to play a vital role in aesthetic appreciation. Both studies found stronger activation in relevant regions of the brain in response to representational or figurative images, but not abstract images. Activation was also higher when participants had no information about the images, which they perceived as

indiscernible and "challenging" (7); once participants "understood" the images, however, cortical activation was reduced. Both studies found that people show greater activity in the brain when faced with artworks or images they "like" or "find beautiful" than those they judge as "not beautiful" or "like less," and that familiar (figurative/representational) images evoked more associations than abstract or unconventional images, which were harder to understand. Cattaneo's study concludes that judgments of beauty can be artificially enhanced using brain stimulation, whereas Lengger's finds that information on artworks influences or facilitates neural processing of stimuli, even if it has no effect on preference or taste.

Outré, abstract, and outrageous forms are stimulating, attention-provoking, and curious objects of difference. Why, then, do humans show no increased neural response to radically unconventional images and artworks? Why do we respond more powerfully at the cortical level to aesthetic "pleasures" rather than aesthetic "challenges"? An artistic knowledge of, or familiarity with, unconventional forms seems to incline us towards them and helps us to appreciate unusual aesthetic objects. Thus, repeated exposure to, or familiarity with bizarre and abstract appearances may help to acclimatize us towards new experiences by reducing our cognitive hyperactivity when faced with the unknown. Moreover, it may help us to appreciate different styles and ways of seeing, which is useful in both interpersonal and cross-cultural communication and exchange.

Claus-Christian Carbon (2011) argues that the media we consume can change our aesthetic appreciation, preferences, and view of the world as a whole. Thus, it is not our perceptual habits and processes that change our aesthetic experiences, but rather the other way around. This is particularly interesting in American culture, where over two

centuries of outré pop stars, avant-garde and provocative art, weird entertainments, and the mainstreaming of underground experimental film have permeated media content, if not media forms. According to Carbon's rationale, continued exposure to unconventional forms may have changed – or is changing – our tastes, capacity to appreciate stylistic variety, and our very concept of the world through a daring aesthetic lens.

ii. Bioaesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology

Bioaesthetic studies, such as Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (2009) rejects a politics of aesthetics in favor of a progressivist view of art, arguing that aesthetic perceptive response is inherently evolutionary, and that humans and art are "advancing" together. In his earlier work (2003), Dutton sketches the vital role of aesthetics in natural and sexual selection, environmental preference, problem solving and storytelling. Yet beyond practical concerns like choosing mates, finding ripe fruit and shelter, or avoiding danger, why are aesthetics so important to our everyday operation and well-being? Dutton openly acknowledges the limitations of evolutionary psychology in addressing art. He distinguishes, for instance, between what is pleasing and beautiful – the former being related to brain mechanisms and the satisfaction of desires and biological needs, and the latter being an object of contemplation, an aesthetic experience borne of imagination and reason. Thus, Dutton notes, our responses to profound and complex works of art remain a mystery, and involve layers of value and meaning that are difficult to disentangle.

Outré aesthetics might appeal to human adaptive behaviors by introducing new forms that awaken complex responses. Because the outré is not clearly related to biological desires or needs, it may serve a role in our capacity for resilience and individual well-being. Exposure to the bizarre and outrageous allows us to practice reading subtle or overt cues in figures or objects that we have trouble discerning. As such, it may help to foster both empathic and aesthetic sensitivities, which is important for socialization, resource selection, and physical survival.

For evolutionary psychologists, as for bioaestheticists, aesthetics is related to survival and adaptation. Here, aesthetic experience is part of the organizational, rather than the functional adaptive system. Natural phenomena such as human faces, landscapes, fire, changing skies, stellar bodies, and lakes are judged or perceived as attractive because they both furnish vital information and help to activate processes in our visual system. Aesthetic experience therefore stimulates the adaptive process, causing inward change, rather than solving external functional problems. In terms of activity and transparency, AE happens when we suspend automatic responses – wherein we process information from the world through stimuli – and are able, instead, to explore the world openly. Here, AE offers both a skilled and skill building experience. Aesthetic artifacts, including select works of art, are devices or mechanisms that are designed to grab our attention in ways that suspend sensory-motor functioning and open the categorizational process. Thus, aesthetic experience is a temporal episode, one that allows us to see the world differently, and to reflect upon it as well.

Unusual and ambiguous aesthetic experiences are neither clear punishers nor clear rewards, and may be sensed as both attractive and detractive. Strange and abstract forms

offer difficult objects for contemplation and categorization, and may stimulate a variety of responses, which offer perceptual challenges. Experience with outré forms can expand or change our thinking and perception, and introduce new tastes. Moreover, expanding our range of experience requires the development of a broader range of categories. As such, it may encourage motivation, as well as sophisticated and "higher order" thinking, by testing our aesthetic sensibilities and allowing us to experience the world around us in new and unfamiliar ways. In turn, encountering the world and its objects differently stimulates creative imagination, technological innovation, and artistic-reflective responses to our environments on which the cultural movement depends.

iii. Experimental Psychology

Experimental psychology suggests that creative people think differently. In "Why Weird Experiences Boost Creativity," Scott Barry Kaufman (2012) argues that we all have the potential for creativity, and while the "wrong" aesthetic triggers can "shut our brains down," the "right" triggers can "broaden our minds, inspire, and motivate. A crucial trigger is the experience of *unusual and unexpected events* [emphasis mine]" which leads to "flexibility and creativity" by diversifying our experience and "push[ing] you outside your normal thought patterns"(n.pag.). Studies of this hypothesis expose participants to a variety of weird and outré experiences and measure the effects on creativity and flexible thinking.

Social psychology experiments conducted by Simone Ritter, et al. (2012), required subjects to encounter strange objects or aesthetic experiences that "defy the laws

of physics" in a virtual-reality world. For example, they were made to feel like they were walking faster than they actually were, encountered a suitcase that shrank in size as they approached it, but expanded as they walked away, and witnessed a toy car travel up a bottle on its own. A second group of subjects participated in the virtual-reality world *without* these weird experiences, and a third group watched videos of the other two groups. The study then tested the cognitive flexibility of each group, and asked them to come up with answers for "what makes a sound?" Those who *actively* experienced "weird" events and encounters scored far higher on the test than all the other groups. A second experiment asked a group of subjects to build sandwiches in highly unusual orders and unconventional ways. Another group built sandwiches in "normal" or familiar ways, and a third group watched videos of the other two groups. Cognitive flexibility and creativity tests followed theses experiences. Once again, the group who actively participated in unusual experiences scored far higher than other groups, including those who watched videos of these experiences. Further, the results could not be explained by differences in positive or negative emotion.

According to Kaufman, studies by Ritter and others prove that in order to see and experience the world differently, "the *core feature* is actively experiencing a violation of how things are supposed to happen," or experiencing the outré. Moreover, "the results help explain why periods of immigration often precede extraordinary periods of creative achievement" as the introduction of new customs, ideas, and aesthetic forms in an environment "diversif[ies] experiences for *everyone*" (n.pag). Results of the experiments also indicate that in order to enter a "creative mindset," we need to "re-shuffle" our brains by breaking with conventional and familiar patterns, or routines. Kaufman recommends

"being weird" and adapting outré behaviors such moonwalking backwards to work, eating strange new foods, and relating to strangers in unexpected ways.

iv. Psychodynamics

Psychodynamic theories often treat the ways in which radically unconventional and strange forms relate to our sense of autonomy, anxiety, desire, and social belonging. The uncanny, in particular, is a subject of aesthetics (an 'aesthetics of anxiety'), because it involves sensations, feelings, and emotional impulses related to the fear of, and fascination with, the unfamiliar, weird, and grotesque. Uncanny experiences are provocative and uncomfortable in part because they may suggest a blurring of self and other. Freud's preoccupation with the phenomenon of the *Unheimlich* is often understood in terms of cognitive dissonance: simultaneous repulsion and attraction, strangeness and familiarity, conspicuousness and concealment (Freud). Freud held that the violation of social taboos taps into our repressed desires – thus, we experience radical unconventionality as an exposed secret. Jacques Lacan also understood the uncanny as (modern) angst or anxiety. The uncanny both seduces the subject into a "narcissistic impasse" and yet, through contingency, shows that she is dependent on some hidden object, thus challenging her sense of autonomy (Lacan). Uncanny experiences – which bear semantic proximity to outré experiences – may tap into parts of ourselves that we have hidden or repressed, feel like an exposed secret (perhaps an aspect of the self cut off from freedom and authenticity of expression, or a return to original childhood desires), or produce anxiety regarding our independence.

Drawing on psychodynamics, Freak Studies theorists have often argued that exceptional or radically unusual bodies evoke the terror of a dormant self, a kind of "doubling" or "in-betweening" (Kérchy and Zittlau: 2012). Here, the freak is experienced as aesthetically outré, and embodies all that must be ejected from ones self-image in order to become integral, socially obedient, and category fulfilling. The spectacle of freaks reveals the ambiguity and tenuousness of personal identity, by both preserving and imperiling the mental, physical, and conceptual limits of normalcy. This dynamic evokes what Ato Quayson (2007) termed *aesthetic nervousness*. Outré aesthetic presences are associated with freaks/freakishness, *bizarrerie, fantasie,* and the *carnivalesque*, as expressions of the outrageous, overdone, exaggerated, far-out, and strange. This may be especially important in American culture, where circus and sideshow entertainments were the most popular public pastime between 1840 and 1940 (see Chapter Two), and which has a long history of rebellion that values non-conformity and creative expressions of difference. Moreover, the uncanny, freakishness, and outré forms test the limits of normalcy.

Tobin Siebers, in *Disability Aesthetics* (2010) argues that modern artists are informed by the extraordinary – particularly images of disabled, broken, or unusual bodies and minds. These artists "employ substances thought to be beyond the bounds of art." The presence of these materials "makes the work of art seem more real, even though all aesthetic objects have, because of their material existence, an equal claim to being real. Nevertheless, such works of art are significant neither because they make art appear more realistic nor because they discover a new terrain for aesthetics. They are significant because they return aesthetics forcefully to its original subject matter: the body and its

affective sphere" (2). While images of disability are not inherently outré, disability aesthetics and outré aesthetics serve similar functions: they "force us to reconsider fundamental aesthetic assumptions and to embrace another aesthetics," and are valuable because they offer a critical resource for reflecting on what it means to be human (3). For Siebers, aesthetics is a human activity and "process by which human beings attempt to modify themselves, by which they imagine their feelings, forms, and futures in radically different ways, and by which bestow upon these new feelings, forms, and futures real appearances in the world" (3). Outré aesthetics reminds us, however subtly or overtly, of the possibilities in all life and human creative potential. Poetically speaking, it encapsulates a kind of beautiful exploration of boundlessness. The existence and material presence of outré forms do not challenge the idea of normalcy or conventionality, nor violate standards of beauty and unity. Rather, they reveal that we are always already variant and diverse, and evoke powerful emotional responses to the corporeality of aesthetic objects.

Implications for Future Study

Some questions for further consideration:

- What is the relationship between the bizarre, imagination, and creative production?
- Does an outré aesthetic produce a greater sensation of presence or the effects of presence –does it feel more materially or sensually palpable than other forms?

- If one definition of the outré is radical unconventionality, does familiar or conventional context play a role in aesthetic judgment and perception?
- Are Americans especially stimulated by outré aesthetics as compared to other cultures, and if so, how or in what ways do we respond so powerfully?
- Might the outré have helped Americans to navigate periods of mass immigration, modernization, and mobilization?
- Has the outré become aesthetically familiarized through the omnipresence of mainstream American popular culture, and the marketing strategies of consumer culture?
- Are there correlations between American ideologies and concepts such as manifest destiny, westward expansion, liberty for all, risk-taking, radical experience, or individualism, and the inclination of American culture towards excessive or outrageous aesthetics that are beyond the bounds of reason?

Empirical aesthetics continue to examine positive (beauty, pleasure, and the sublime) as well as negative (ugly, grotesque, shocking, and frightening) aesthetic judgments and responses. Yet very little study is devoted to the bizarre and outlandish in aesthetics, perhaps because such encounters are difficult to define, short-lived, rare, and occur on the fringes of familiar experience. There is some compelling scientific and social evidence, however, that unusual aesthetic experiences are importantly affective, and have the capacity to shape, inspire, and change us. Greater research in this area might move beyond studies of art, abstract or modern images, and strange events to include other types of aesthetic experiences. In addition, further studies into the physiological or

cognitive functions associated with the outré may help us to better understand why and how we are so fascinated by exaggerated forms, as well as outrageous styles and appearances.

Chapter Seven

Outré Shadows

American writers in the Romantic and Gothic traditions, beginning in the nineteenth-century, were deeply inspired by the sublime and supernatural experiences, as well as heightened feeling and sympathy. While the subject has been exhaustively treated in literary scholarship, critics continue to turn to social, metaphorical, and representational aspects of the fiction of authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. Particular to such treatments is the ongoing pluralogue about American themes of individualism, outsiderism, and rebellion, especially in relation to the historical and biographical contexts in which the writers worked and lived. Yet the outré aesthetic in all of these authors went far beyond social criticism, and helped to forge a new, distinctive literature that exposed the dark underbelly of American imagination, and explored its aesthetic beauty as a spiritual resource.

Nineteenth-century American authors emphasized palpable presence and embodied experience. In part, this was inspired by European Gothic tales of hauntings, settings, atmospheres, and 'perversions of Nature,' which were translated into American themes, places, and sins of a very recent past. In Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville in particular, the outré is encountered in intense and intimate ways, causing profound changes to both self and other. Both within and outside of their narratives, there is a tension between an unknowable, hidden, and non-meaning aesthetics, and aesthetics of meaning and material presence or manifestation. Within the narratives, the protagonists

are dynamically engaged with outré beings or forces at once real and conceptual, physical and metaphysical, which force sensual reckoning. As these presences gain substantive and corporeal power and spatial domination, protagonists like Ahab, Aylmer, Goodman Brown, Reuben Bourne, and the young scholar, simultaneously lose physical ability and psychic control. Their bodies and beings collide in liminal and changing ways, often linked to obsession.

Beyond the narratives is the palpable aesthetic presence of the works themselves – musical, imagistic, burning – that produces enveloping sensations and atmospheres independent of interpretive meaning. Powerfully, the texts then bring alive, with each new reading, embodied experiences that evoke presence through layered planes of time and affect; thus, we encounter the outré as both substantive and revenant. But what is it about the outré that seems at once present for the first time, and returned? What is its relationship to the unknowable, hidden, and elusive? Why does it both mean or represent nothing and yet suggest some ultimate aesthetic meaning? Why is change contingent upon physical encounters with the outré, and to what might one attribute this compelling and inevitable impetus?

In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Toni Morrison examines the unspoken and non-presence in (predominantly white) American literature. For her, the 'dark underbelly' suggests the negative space of omission, or compensation for failing to include the presence of racialized others. Early American writers, Morrison argues, competed with the Old World, rather than with Native American and African authors who were "stripped" of articulate and intelligent thought, presumed unable or disinterested in writing, divested of retaliation, subject to

unrequited gaze, judgment, and objectification, and rendered "uncreate" (25). Attempts to read African-American literature, from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, denied an authentic Afro-American art, qualified it in relation to Western aesthetic standards, or treated African-American art – where it was thought to exist – as natural "rich ore" or "raw" material that must be refined by Eurocentric intelligence into a complex aesthetic form (20, 23).

Here, Morrison distinguishes invisibility from non-presence, and "[i]n addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose" (24). She asks what "intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work? What are the strategies of the escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion?" (24). If American Romantic writers sought to escape reality and truth by seeking the ideal in the imaginary realm, "[w]here … in these romances is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled? Where does it heighten, where does it dislocate, where does it necessitate novelistic invention; what does it release; what does it hobble?" (24). This last word, hobble – which disability theorists may well note – offers a key insight into Morrison's use of disability in her novels.

The "shadow of the presence" from which American literature flees is everywhere manifest in the outré. The works of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, for instance, are replete with all-consuming, supernatural, mysterious, and unconcealed presences, which persist in making their elusive presence felt, and on which the very soul of fictional protagonists and poetic speakers depend. Morrison's own *Beloved* follows in

this vein. Yet according to Morrison, Melville's *Moby Dick* treats "whiteness as ideology" (27), a powerful concept born of "fear," and is exceptional in its attempt to both treat the racial saturation of the era directly, and to tackle the idealization of whiteness. Through the metaphor of the white whale, Melville attempts to "say something unsayable" and to dissect the ineffable (28).

Why, if choosing to say something unsayable, did Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne consistently turn to outré presences as an expressive form? In many respects, Morrison is addressing what Hans Gumbrecht identifies as oscillation between presence and meaning, cast as both figure and ground. Yet while Morrison reads it in terms of black/body-white/soul dichotomy, Gumbrecht illuminates the effects that such presences evoke. In *Production of Presence*, Gumbrecht suggests that materialities of communication are sensuously important: "any form of communication, through its material elements, will 'touch' the bodies of the persons who are communicating in specific and various ways" (17). In literature, meaning is thought to be dominant dimension of reading, yet the nonsemantic or material features of a text may be just as important. Poems, for instance, are "sung'" and therefore "truth" may reside as much in the performance of a poem as in its interpretive value or content (64). While the "meaning-dimension will always be dominant when we are reading a text . . . literary texts also have ways of bringing the presence-dimension of the typography, of the rhythm of language, and even of the smell of paper into play. Conversely, I believe that the presence dimension will always dominate when we are listening to music" (109). Writing and voice both assert physical presence and are based in the body. Thus, "aesthetic experience – at least in our culture – will always confront us with the tension, or oscillation, between presence and meaning"

(110). Moreover, this tension or oscillation endows objects of aesthetic experience with "provocative instability and unrest" (108).

If the body of the reader must always be affected at some level by a text, and if physicality resides – alongside meaning – in the core of books and printed words, then the aesthetic mechanisms that produce or enhance provocative instability and unrest warrant further examination. The outré presences in Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne – the unearthly white whale, ghastly birthmark, shape shifting demons, enormous killer spider, ambiguous veiled ladies, the coffin full of blond curls, bizarre and haunting visions, the scarlet brand, talking raven, incessant and omnipresent bells, and beating 'dead' heart beneath the floorboards – overwhelm and push the works beyond the limits of reason. In each, there is not only the unsettling physical sense of being overtaken by the outré, but the use of the effects of instability and uncertainty to introduce a medium through which the unspeakable and inarticulable can be encountered. Provocation is, in turn, a state of imbalance, which renders the reader both vulnerable and impressionable in such encounters. The logic of this participation recalls the adage, *lead with the body, and the mind will follow*: the effects of presence open the possibility of meaning, but a meaning which is not didactic or interpretive, and can only be intuited and felt as an experience.

Melville wrote of Hawthorne and his writing in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," that "you cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you but touch it, and you find it is gold" (n.pag.). He extends this idea of physical contact and affect further: "[Hawthorne] expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him; and further, and further, shoots

his strong New-England roots into the hot soil of my Southern [sic] soul." For Melville, artistic originality relies on risks and potential failures – a characteristically American view, but also one that supports the pursuit of the ineffable. In Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe, risk is also encapsulated in the madness or obsession that many protagonists experience in response to outré presences, which ultimately physically consume and diminish them. Conversely, the obsessive object grows and increases in power and presence, until a crescendo in which the two finally merge, and the outré figure is banished back into an unknown realm. This pattern inspired later Gothic American works, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Flannery O'Connor's short fiction, and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, *Child of God*, and *The Road*.

Melville found Hawthorne to be an "aristocratic mind," with a soul that was a "physical sphere" ("Mosses"). One side of Hawthorne's soul consisted of a "blackness ten times black." This blackness reflected the elder's profound depth, "genius," and truth telling, in contrast to the light of his "pleasant style," and appreciation of goodness. Melville claimed that no deeply thinking mind could ever be free from the greater formless darkness of the world – or its returning "visitations" – which suggests an outré presence. This horrible knowledge, which Melville claimed only gifted artists like Hawthorne could "wield" with terror, was linked to his ideas about both American literature and republican democracy, both of which he addressed in "Hawthorne and His Mosses." American literature must never be too nationalistic, he urged, but the physical disruptions caused by an outré aesthetic can manifest social change by affecting the reader deeply, and thus (perhaps unconsciously) imparting the darkest truths. It was this

vision that Melville both expressed and practiced in *Moby Dick*, which he dedicated to Hawthorne.

Melville condescended to both an American reading public and popular literature in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," yet he found profound importance in the powerful effects of presence. Particularly, he felt that most readers could not penetrate Hawthorne's deeper meanings, but could be reached through his enveloping dark aesthetic. Writing as far-out as Hawthorne's, he claimed, should be regarded just as the New World was discovered, as an outré encounter. More importantly, however, the link Melville found between an outré aesthetic, mystical blackness, and both the heart and "art" of truth, speaks to a form of spiritual *chiaroscuro*, a necessary interplay between "manifold, strange and diffusive beauties" and the corporeal manifestation of sin and the shadowy aspects of nature. Melville was not alone in these ideas, or the ascendant qualities of genius he ascribed to a well executed or fully realized outré aesthetic in literature. Poe and Hawthorne held similar views, but wrote consciously for both popular and 'literary' audiences. In all three cases, the "ideal artist" was one who could tap into the shrouded mystery of the outré, the very thing or revealed truth (what Heidegger refers to as unconcealment, and Being as "presencing") that they were chasing but never fully found.

Hawthorne's last work existed only in fragments, and though he asked to have it destroyed, his son Julian published it posthumously. In his notes, Hawthorne said that he was trying, in "Dr. Grimshawe's Secret," to get at something he had never been able to express. The work itself is strange and rambling. According to Julian, the doctor was based on a macabre figure in Hawthorne's early life: a bizarre man with eccentric tastes,

both “good and evil,” who affected Hawthorne deeply. In the tale, Grimshawe lives next to a graveyard, collects spiders, and conducts private and disturbing experiments. He is charged with the care of a young boy and girl, who are irrevocably altered by their guardian and his home. Grimshawe is killed early in the narrative, and the children respond to his strange disappearance. They feel his absence keenly, but simultaneously intuit or become aware of a greater presence, one that connects the doctor, as if in a giant web, to the bizarre events and surroundings. This outré presence carries a dark beauty, is exempt from the ‘normal’ world, and appears to the children to be greater than themselves. Wrapped in the mood that envelops them, the children experience a revelation, however fleeting, through the “crystal medium” of the “stranger’s character.” Here, their perspectives are temporarily inverted:

> [T]he children were left in great bewilderment at the sudden vacancy of his place. They had not contracted a very yearning affection for him, and yet his impression had been individual and real, and they felt that something had gone out of their lives, now that he was no longer there. Something strange in their circumstances made itself felt by them; they were more sensible of the grim Doctor’s uncouthness, his strange, reprehensible habits, his dark, mysterious life – in looking at these things, and the spiders, and the graveyard, and their insulation from the world, through the crystal medium of this stranger’s character. In remembering him in connection with these things, a certain unseemly beauty in him showed strikingly the unfitness, the sombre [sic] and tarnished color, the *outré-ness* [emphasis mine] of the rest of their lot. Little Elsie perhaps felt the loss of him more than her playmate, although both had been interested by him.

But now things returned pretty much to their old fashion (85).

The children's impression of Grimshawe as more "real," individual, and mysterious than others, is intensified by his connection to a larger, unidentified "something" they cannot name, and that had "gone out of their lives." They are, however, more sensitive to the doctor's strange visions and character, and their isolation in a queer world of his making. Grimshawe's is a place in which rules are suspended and the unconventional reigns – tropes of the carnival. The phrase "unseemly beauty" encapsulates the combination of attraction and repulsion inherent in the freakish and outré. Specifically, the unseemly beauty "in him" reveals the tarnished unfitness and "outré-ness" of all the rest.

The children become other than themselves, both through their unusual circumstances and the impressions that bind them to the dark mystery. Their connection to this world beyond allows them to enter a state of plurality, bound by their strangeness through the aesthetic mechanisms in their atmospheric surroundings. Things quickly return to "their old fashion," however. The remainder of the narrative hashes out the differences between English and American ideas of society, but the doctor is a revenant character in so far as he retains an aura of some burden of the past that consumes the children throughout their adult lives. The links between the spiderweb, artistic creation, an outré aesthetic, and some greater truth is at the core of the unrevealed secret.

Hawthorne claimed that he wished to finally encapsulate the dark visions that he had explored throughout his oeuvre. Melville read the revelation of *the outré thing unsaid* as the fulfillment of the ideal artist, and a means of changing the reader (and by extension society), through aesthetic experience, which alone could reach her. It is a theme Poe dealt with as well. Whatever the authors' intentions, however, their works explore the

power of outré presences as a primary mode for aesthetic affect. The children in "Dr. Grimshawe's Secret" intuit or feel the inarticulable, and through the lens of the doctor, who becomes beautiful in his darkness, are briefly able to see their own derangements and taintedness. Grimshawe's violent death happens off-scene, and he finally surrenders to or consummates with the forces he had so long pursued. One is left with the sense that he is rendered by the thing itself, and so receives the total vision. Though the children survive, the violence they experience is subtle and persistent, and they too are rendered by their strange circumstances and are able to 'see' – a model for later American fiction to which I will return.

Poe was a self-described occult artist (Levine xxi) who "believed that every tale should create a strong effect, bizarre, grotesque, outré" (252). The strength of this effect was not simply the product of a Gothic Romantic preoccupation with evoking feeling, atmosphere and mood, but the desire to make presences physically manifest and interact with the reader. For instance, Poe often employed the devices of repetition, sonorism, and suspense to achieve a heightened sense of presence: his "Bells! Bells! Bells!," "hideous" beating heart, and quoting raven all become palpable and revenant presences largely through the developmental aesthetic turns that evoke compelling sensations in the reader, who responds physically. The patterns Poe created and inscribed were part of a larger order that he respected: "Poe's subject is so *outré* (to use a word he liked) that it is difficult to take seriously, but [according to some mystical doctrines] any object is 'sentient' because the world is sensate and sacred'" (Ibid. Notes, 8. 101).

Poe employed the word outré countless times throughout his works. For instance:

"'As I was saying,' resumed the visiter [sic; the Devil], 'as I was observing a

little while ago, there are some very outré notions in that book of yours, Mr. Bon-Bon. What, for instance, do you mean by all that humbug about the soul? Pray, sir, what *is* the soul?'" (In "Bon-Bon" 404).

"Yet I must believe that my first mental development had in it much of the uncommon – even much of the *outré*" (In "William Wilson" 274)

"To wed immediately would be improper – would be indecorous – would be *outré* (In "The Spectacles" 340).

"These fellows are always doing the most out-of-the-way things in what they call an orderly manner. Now here—I conceive – is a positive paradox. True method appertains to the ordinary and obvious alone, and cannot be applied to the *outré*" (In "The Business-Man" 528).

"In the manner of thrusting the corpse up the chimney, you will admit there is something *excessively outré* – something altogether irreconcilable with our common notions of human action, even when we suppose the actors to be the most depraved of men" (In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" 192).

"'… this is a far more intricate case than that of the Rue Morgue; from which it differs in one important respect. This is an *ordinary*, although an atrocious instance of crime. There is nothing particularly *outré* about it. You will observe

that, for this reason, the mystery has been considered easy, when, for this reason, it should have been considered difficult, of solution.'" (In "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" 205).

These last three quotes are particularly important (mostly derived from Poe's "detective mysteries"), and reflect the development of a common theme. Only that which is ordinary, or familiar to human action and humanity – even in its greatest depravity and excess – can be dealt with logically, but the outré is at the heart of a far more complex pattern, one that engages both its creator and receiver(s) in expressions to be deciphered. A closer variation of this theme appears in the voice of C. Auguste Dupin in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue (*1841): "'It appears to me that this mystery is considered insoluble, for the very reason which should cause it to be regarded as easy of solution - I mean for the *outré* character of its features . . . it should not be much asked 'what has occurred' as 'what has occurred that has never occurred before'" (205).[20]

In pursuing what has never occurred before, one touches upon a greater truth, even in the absence of facts: here, the aesthetics of murder and of crime have the potential to reveal the deeper workings of the unknown. Like the mantra *never more*, we are visited by powerful but elusive effects the meaning of which escapes us, but which can only be understood by experiencing – not explaining – their epiphanic 'madness.' The majority of Poe's tales "can be seen as enactments of the nature of perceiving the complex and *outré* patterns and associations which he believed led to the core of reality"

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[20] This line was later adapted by Arthur Conan Doyle in the psychologically gothic *The Hounds of Baskervilles* (1901), when Sherlock Holmes says: "The more *outré* and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it" (151).

(Levine xxi); "In many of Poe's stories, a 'perceiver' has a 'vision,' which is usually complex, bizarre, and, to use one of Poe's pet words, '*outré*.' The plots deal largely with what happens to the perceiving character in order to make the visionary experience possible . . . . The creators of gardens and rooms do not have to be sick, drugged, or terrified before they can produce the complex and outré combinations which Poe calls beautiful. They are, apparently, ideal artists, able to perceive the supernal beauty of the universal order and to approximate it on earth"(3).

The beauty into which Poe wishes to take the reader, begins with the sensations and aesthetic effects that allow her to see or to enter the author's strange world, and to become part of a sophisticated web. Readers in Poe's time were familiar with the concept of beauty in Nature as the embodiment of God's perfect and sophisticated order. Yet to understand the spooky, sinister, and grotesque as patterned, lovely, and aesthetically (rather than morally) compelling, bordered on corrupting influence. Evils of the world were still relegated to the realms of chaos, demons, misfortune, and dark mystery. Madness in Poe often becomes a medium for engaging outré presences, an embodied experience beyond language. It is not a psychological descent, however, nor is it strictly supernatural. Rather:

> Like many of Poe's inspired madmen, … Montresor ["The Cask of Amontillado"] creates a beautiful (if horrible) pattern which will take the adjectives Poe uses to describe the beautiful effect – strange, grotesque, *outré*, bizarre, complex. But there are none of the usual expository passages to explain why the narrator is mad or how he reached the state which enabled him to create the 'beautiful' pattern; compare this to 'Hop-Frog,' a tale of vengeance which does explain these

> things"(Levine 455); "Hop-Frog now creates a 'brilliant' vision of revenge – complex, in other words, for all its horror, 'beautiful,' or in Poe's aesthetic, bizarre and outré (Ibid, Notes, 6. 290).

In order to reveal the raw and strange realities of life, the artist not only creates terrible patterns and communicates visions, but participates in something novel that is happening for the first time. As with death, one enters the fearful moment, only to discover the stunning and odd beauty of the unknown. The century in which Poe wrote was a bloody one, and death was relentless in American families and households. To deny the darkness of the world was to be unconscious. Still, Poe holds up the bizarre with delicate fingers, examining it with careful scrutiny, while admiring and reproducing an outré aesthetic.

American Gothic authors often fall into violent spasms of strangeness. Incest, necrophilia, infanticide, hairless or otherwise deformed demonic figures, psychotic episodes, cannibalism, resurrections, dismemberment, rape, torture, weird destructive forces, and other outré imagery and episodes are never too far or too outside. In the nineteenth-century, many critics regarded these elements as deranged, grotesque, and indulgent, both manipulating and twisting the sympathies, emotions, and physical responses of readers. Yet a certain natural realism in literary works often served to balance the dramatic, macabre, and excess of image or feeling – an oscillation between the familiar and the strange. Affecting the body of the reader was thus not only a way in to truth, but allowed the author to aesthetically forge, rather than reflect, a social vision based in the spiritual connection between the outré and the normative, beyond the supernatural and the real. To qualify such works as primarily inducing cruder responses

such as horror or terror, therefore, is to undercut the complexities, mysteries, and ambiguities that the authors struggled to create.

Nineteenth-century readers were already acclimatized to late eighteenth-century notions of sensibility, which celebrated the ability to feel deeply and to distinguish carefully between finer gradations of feeling. Literature of sensibility was marked by an obsession with the body, not just as a site for affect, but also as an expressive entity. Texts that could elicit involuntary displays of emotion held a particular fascination, and artists designed scenes that could pluck a number of internal strings. Hierarchies of taste in aesthetics of that period were tied to the emotional – significantly, those who could feel more "finely" were distinguished from "normal" people, and were capable of such strong responses that they themselves became objects that could be read (Gamer n.pag.). Internal virtue could be displayed through expressions of fine sensibility and moral thought, however, such displays could also be forged or deceptively misleading (Ibid). Performance and truthfulness were thus emphasized. In many ways, this culture of sensibility echoed the freak show, with its themes of hooks and hokum, abnormality as a key signifier, radical or involuntary appeals to the body and emotion, and the fetishization objects as curious creatures, and of people as objects to be read.

The legacy of sensible literature, alongside sublime Romanticism, contributed both to the physical aspects of Gothic literature, and to a search for 'meaning' in the psychological, social, political, and numinous aspects of Gothic fiction. Ted Billy (2013) notes that, "[a]ttuned to the dark side of human nature, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville were more descendental than transcendental in their portrayals of human experience" (n.pag.). The fiction of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, Billy argues, subverts

Transcendentalist literature, and particularly the concepts of the veneration of nature, self-reliant individualism, and utopian self-reform (and by extension the perfectibility of humankind). Poe "depicts the organic world as alienating and forlorn," dramatizes obsessive self-preoccupation, and depicts utopian reformers as "deluded characters who lack self-understanding." Hawthorne "associates nature with mystery, not mysticism," affirms the community over personal ego, and mocks reformers as "egotists or escapists." Melville offers a "foreboding sense of the peril of identifying with the organic environment," subverts the supremacy of the individual through the likes of Ahab, and develops "confirmed skepticism regarding the possibility of significant change" (n.pag.).

Robert T. Tally, Jr. (2014) finds that Poe in particular subverted American literature and culture through satire, fantasy, and critique. His "alterity can be seen in his supposed 'outsider' status with American literature, and his rather outré ideas and perspectives on the culture of the United States" (125). Poe satirized an emergent nationalist discourse, undermined earnest attempts to establish a distinctively national literature in the nineteenth century, and (retrospectively) subverts the tenets of an institutionalized American Studies in the twentieth century, as an "untimely" figure whose work mocks those who seek to contain it. Poe's writings offer an "alternative" to American literature, and an "otherworldly projection of a postnationalist space of imagination," both subterranean and nomadic. Yet he was a "thoroughly worldly figure," and "the otherworldliness of Poe's stories is often, perversely but appropriately, a mark of his worldliness, inasmuch as the most outré tales speak more directly to his readers' imaginations than the tales in the supposedly realistic mode could" (10). In Poe's "overall critical project," sardonic humor and "outré imagery combine to puncture the pneumatic

and triumphalist rhetoric of ascent" (16) in nationalist discourse, and "by denying the value of what was considered a virtue ('there is nothing easier in the world than to be extremely simple'), Poe makes the case for an extravagant complexity or outré sensibility as characteristic of a kind of writing" (88).

The idea that American Gothic literature unveils or recovers something beyond the boundaries of reason, and natural and social order – the repressed, oppressed, suppressed, supernatural, disremembered, or sublime – tends to overlook the non-meaning aspects of outré presence effects and in aesthetic experience. The interpretation of Gothic literature as an attempt to embody the features of cosmic, psycho-social, or national order that are "most difficult to represent and the least liable to be controlled or assimilated," (Gamer n.pag.) discounts the ways in which it successfully produces uncontrollable or unassimilated presences that are equally difficult to manifest. Hawthorne, for instance, notably represented the horrors of Puritanism, punishment, and original sin, and satirized church rituals and doctrines, but struggled to make present an outré aesthetic and sensibility that was greater than any reflective or critical meaning.

The carnivalesque aspects of Hawthorne's work are often read as a mode of freedom in the face of official virtue and evil itself (eg. Jamil), as when Goodman Brown laughs "loud and long" back at the wind, as he reaches the nocturnal meeting of twisted witches, ministers, community members, and "Indian priests," deep in the woods. That Brown meets a devil figure in plain clothes (distinguished only by his lifelike serpentine cane) on his path is a familiar allegory, and part of the atmospheric suspense and tension that gallops and slows in successive waves. The carnivalesque crescendo arrives after a series of emotional an aesthetic prompts, following an outré continuum, and is a device

not only for the suspension of rules and time, but for making an internal space for what is often referred to as the "possibility of the possible," or the potential to become other than oneself through a kind of deranged plurality and a confrontation of the totality of the bizarre and freakish. If it arrives too soon, it is laughable or the moment is lost, but if rhythmically, sensually, and imagistically timed, it is unsettling. When Brown arrives safely back in his village, he is forever altered, ostensibly by his social revelation, but more profoundly, because he has been aesthetically 'rewired' by outré experience:

> On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain. When the minister spoke from the pulpit with power and fervid eloquence, and, with his hand on the open Bible, of the sacred truths of our religion, and of saint-like lives and triumphant deaths, and of future bliss or misery unutterable, then did Goodman Brown turn pale, dreading lest the roof should thunder down upon the gray blasphemer and his hearers (n.pag).

Brown awakes suddenly in the night, and turns away from Faith. Despite his resistance to carnality, debauchery, and sin, he has merged with dark powers that grow as he diminishes. Brown remains in a state of solitude and despair, unable to free himself from the enveloping presence. It is unclear whether the witches' gathering was only a dream, but the effect is overwhelming and more real than real. The villagers go on about their daily lives committing small acts of performed virtue and obeisance to their repetitions and notions, which Brown sees as entirely false and deceptive. The story closes with cycles of birth and death, and Brown is buried, "his dying hour was gloom."

Similar scenes in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* follow Hawthorne.

Hawthorne thus resists the resolution implicit in Bakhtinian notions of the carnival that are so often attributed to him. Réné Girard similarly describes disordered (carnivalesque) galas as occasions that collapse or invert social hierarchies, and in which participants can behave illicitly, take risks or play games of chance, engage in physical excess and verbal debauchery, and dress in "outré costumes" (see also Ciuba 182). However, the rules and stylization attached to such events – which ritualize primal crises and violence – ensure that the chaos is only temporary, and the community remains intact. Yet, in Hawthorne, the ritual often fails and chaos continues. His attempts to drive right into the heart of the outré, as with Poe and Melville, had a tremendous impact on later American authors. For instance, Cormac McCarthy also employs carnivalesque themes and treatments, from the ornate imagery, arcane language, and baroque violence (all outré forms) in *Blood Meridian*, to Ballard's expulsion from his home farm in a festive auction, and the musicians who "came like a band of carnival folk" in *Child of God* (3). In *Child of God*, the Girardian ritual again fails, because it borders on Ballard's exclusion, and propagates new cycles of violence and revenge in the community (Ciuba 183).

Cormac McCarthy's, *Blood Meridian* revisits the aesthetic premises of nineteenth-century American gothicists, particularly as it relates to the outré. Within the text, the outré is a dominating and exaggerated presence, and this mood looms over the text. McCarthy's West is dark and degenerate world of relentless and meaningless violence, set in the liminal space of the US-Mexican borderland. Yet the atmosphere he creates is permeated with an enveloping outré strangeness, far greater and more disturbing than the narrative or its characters. In part, McCarthy's use of a queer and

arcane language, the terrible baroque beauty of his scenes and images, and the element of outré surprise – most famously, the Indian war party that descends wearing bloodstained wedding clothes, white stocking, veils, and carrying umbrellas – carry this effect.

However, throughout the text there are glimpses of an omnipresent and unshakeable force that is deeply weird, and that is suggested by omission. When the kid suddenly wakes in the dark of the hermit's dwelling, for instance, he discovers the man "bent over him and all but in his bed. What do you want? He said. But the hermit crawled away and in the morning when he woke the hut was empty and he got his things and left" (20). These lines say little, but the mood is deeply disturbing in the context of the scene, and the impression is one of being watched over in the dark by something for which the hermit is only a conduit. The word "crawled" here arrives as a kind of primordial scuttling. That the hut is empty when the kid wakes is only a slight relief: for an instant one wonders where the hermit is, whether he is fully human, and if he is waiting nearby. The lack of punctuation hurls the action forward, as quickly as the kid can depart. These brushes with the unspeakable occur throughout *Blood Meridian*. Critically, this unspeakable and elusive force is often treated as evil, and Judge Holden as the devil himself, a timeless horror with no origins. However, this reading insists on a familiar interpretive trope that limits the strange perversions in the text to familiar Christian themes, rather than the technically brilliant embodiment of unfamiliar affect and outré presence beyond any meaning.

The central outré figure in the novel is the freakish, wildly bizarre, and otherworldly Judge Holden. Like Melville's whale, he is the force with which all things must reckon. Some attempt to retain order or balance between Holden and the kid is

achieved mostly through free indirect discourse and parataxis: “He tried to see past him. The great corpus enshadowed him from all beyond” (327). Holden visits the Man (the kid) in his dream, a “great shambling mutant, silent and serene” (310). The judge is a sideshow figure. He is nearly seven feet tall, hairless, by many accounts an albino, and has small hands. He speaks innumerable languages, is loquacious, and has preternatural knowledge on almost every subject. The judge is always presented with ornate flare and dramatic posturing, and once describes himself as the only man on “the stage.” He is compared to, or serves as a doppelganger to the kid, who is hardly physically or psychologically described, except that he has large hands and wrists, is pale and thin and unwashed, speaks little, and has (early on) “almost innocent eyes” and within him, “already a taste for mindless violence” (3).

Other freak aesthetics abound in *Blood Meridian*: the captain’s head is ‘pickled’ in a glass jar (historically, the heads of American and Mexican outlaws, including Joaquin Murrieta, a figure in the California Gold Rush, were likewise preserved in glass jars and displayed for the cost of a dollar to willing audiences), and the hermit shows the kid “some [slave] man’s heart, dried and blackened,” which the old man “cradled … in his palm as if he’d weigh it” (18). Toadvine, the kid’s friend, has a “strangely narrow” head, with the letters F,T, and H burned into his forehead, and his hair is plastered with mud in “a bizarre and primitive coiffure.” A juggler and fortune-teller feature for many pages, and strange animals dance pirouettes. Old men appear in “tyrolean costume,” and “a little girl in a smock cranked a barrel organ and a bear in a crinoline twirled strangely upon a board defined by a row of tallow candles that dripped and sputtered in their pools of grease” (324). John Glanton, an ‘Indian hunter,’ who collects scalps, and kills nearly

every animal sight as a form of amusement, is one of many characters attended by an outré violence: he kills a defeated looking woman and a "fistsized hole erupted out of the far side of the woman's head in a great vomit of gore" (98). Even the horses "stood like roadside spectators waiting for an event" (117).

In the carnivalesque scene at the end of the book, the man travels to the most outré of towns, and descends to its end, and down the wooden stairs of a dim-lit doorway. He therein re-encounters the judge, after many years. The two connect eyes, and "[t]here was a mirror along the backbar but it held only smoke and phantoms" (325). In a parallel exchange, a freakshow dynamic takes place on stage: a girl plays an organ grinder for a strange dancing bear in a crinoline, "and the shadow of the act which the candlelight constructed upon the wall might have gone begging for referents in any daylight world" (326). The bear is suddenly shot and the girl stops playing, but the bear continues to dance faster, in silence, until he cries "like a child" (326) and dies. The girl holds the dead bear and sobs. A woman bears witness: "It's all over, she said. It's all over . . . the great hairy mound of the bear dead in its crinoline lay like some monster slain in the commission of unnatural acts" (326 -7) – here, the outré aesthetic of freakshow performance, bound up with twisted innocence, is portrayed as finite and fragile in comparison to the larger and more lavish outré aesthetics of the final dance.

The man and the judge speak on equal terms. The judge says that the man has come for "the dance" (327), and that the "straight and winding way are one" (330). There is talk of rituals, ceremonies, dances, the sanctity of blood, and the horrible loneliness with which men like the man are left, recalling the empty childhood feeling in which other children have all gone from a game, and the player is left alone with only the game

itself. The judge, in a highly aesthetic and obscure philosophical discourse with the man, tells him that only those who have "offered themselves entire" to the blood of war, who have been to "the floor of the pit and seen the horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his innermost heart, only that man can dance . . . . There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others are destined for a night that is eternal and without name" (331). The dance is an outré celebration and performance of complete communion with the chaos and disharmony to which we are all finally subject. True spirituality resides in an outré embrace – all others are doomed to meaninglessness and perpetual darkness. The phrase "learned at last that it speaks to his innermost heart" reflects the rhythmic, sensual, and imagistic aesthetic process that McCarthy engages, one that moves the reader towards envelopment in presence through the promise of deeper vision and feeling.

Like Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, the man repeatedly resists the devil rhetoric of temptation and tells his antagonist that he will not join him. Shortly thereafter, the man encounters the judge nude in the outhouse, who "gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh" (333). This ambiguous conjoining is often interpreted as rape or murder or both. The language, however, stems from the gothic merging in earlier American works, one of spiritual consummation and physical envelopment. Like the naked judge, the man is rendered and stripped down, divested of a clear identity, and forced into the heart of all that is deemed outré. Again, the most outré scene of the novel arrives by omission, a dramatic interplay between concealment and unconcealment. There is only the witness of other men, who gaze in horror and shock upon what they find in the outhouse, which is never revealed. The scene is marked by a continued and all-

consuming carnival atmosphere, which plays higher and louder as the man is undone. The tavern is full of dancers, "garishly clad whores," "squealing fiddles" and fiddlers, drunks, thieves, the slain and bloody bear upon the stage, "an evil fog," sweating and naked men and women, a "showman [that] made his way through the throng collecting coins in his hat" and all that "stomped and hooted and lurched against one another" (325-35).

The final paragraph of the novel follows this carnival to its end, driving the violent blow further with words and phrases like "jackboots," "slamming," "grinning hideously," and "canted pieces." "Towering over them all" is the freakish judge, who dances in quick and lively steps, "huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant," dancing nimbly in double-time and fiddling in the nude, his head a "lunar dome," and with over-the-top aesthetic eccentricity, "pirouettes" and "sashays backwards and throws his head back and laughs deep in his throat, and he is a great favorite, the judge" (335). Here again is the laugh of Goodman Brown, inverted. Brown laughs back at the wind that laughs at him, and confronts the crowd, whereas the judge's laugh is not defiant bur revelatory – he is the ultimate showpiece and beloved freak. The following phrases are thrice repeated at the end of *Blood Meridian*, with slight variation, in an incantation throughout the last paragraph, and included in the final lines: "He never sleeps." "He is dancing." "He says he will never die" (335). The cycle of decadent violence is unbroken, and the primacy of the outré reigns.

The Epilogue follows, like Goodman Brown's return to his village, in a short dénoument. The passage is cryptic and describes a plain/plane full of wanderers who both search and do not search for bones. A man chucks an unidentified steel implement into

holes that he makes in the ground, and strikes fire out of the rock "that God has put there" (337). He crosses over the rock as if in a tank, and all of the people move "haltingly in the light like mechanisms … so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness that has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one … [along] the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, validation of sequence and causality," chasing something they believe to be "perfect," but ultimately lost (335). The last line of the Epilogue is "then they all move on again" (337), much like Hawthorne's Puritan villagers, living a surface life of restraint and prudence that has "no inner reality" – their souls and hearts have not been penetrated by a deeper truth or the unconcealment of a chaotic and outré permanence beneath the holy stone they traverse.

In both Hawthorne and McCarthy, outré presences and encounters are often interpreted in the Christian-democratic tradition as powerful and timeless forces of evil, sin, violence, and what Poe named "the imp of perversion," expressed in the gaudy dynamism of Milton's Satan. In this view, only the corrupt, failed, lost, and wayward succumb to bizarrerie, or seek out fantastical melding with some dark beyond. In a rare 1992 *New York Times* interview with Richard Woodward, McCarthy said that a life without bloodshed does not exist, and "'I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous'" (n.pag.). Here again is the notion of freedom versus slavery, and a rejection of utopian reform as well as aesthetic and social notions of harmony. However, to read such quotes

as indicative of an authorial intention that equates with nihilism, Gnosticism, or nationalist criticism, is both to underestimate the unconscious and recurring symbolic momentum of the artist, and yet to miss the complexity and sophistication of outré aesthetics.

How to account for the outré? Much of it occurs off-scene and in negative space. The judge, as he appears in the kid's dream (described as a "visitation") has no roots – again, as with freakshows, his narrative origin is one of impossible explanation and unnaturalness, and yet part of a recurring pattern of queer variation:

> Whatever his antecedents, he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there a system by which to divide him back to his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of the void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear on the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. In the white and empty room he stood in his bespoken suit with his hat in his hand and he peered down with his small lashless pig's eyes wherein this child just sixteen years on earth could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men (*Blood Meridian* 309-10).

Here, in the judge's countenance and pig eyes, the kid sees his own name. It is a variation on the monstrous mirror, the unsettling aspect of the mutual gaze of freaks. Early in the story, it is said of the kid that his "origins are become remote as is his destiny, and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether

the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. The passengers are a different lot. They cage their eyes and no man asks another what it is that brings him here. He sleeps on the deck, a pilgrim amoung others" (5). Within his dream, terrified, the kid ransacks his pallet for "arms" and the judge "smiles." There are two other figures in the dream: the fool who disappears (a figure of benign goodness), and the artisan, a "worker in metal" and "coldforger," whom the kid can never see in his entirety, but is "enshadowed" by the judge where he crouches over his trade, forging coins as currency, a contriver and "false moneyer" who "seeks favor with the judge" and creates from "cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end" (310).

As with many gothic American authors, McCarthy plays with fire and the brightness of coins and flashes, the harsh and searing violence of a destructive sun, shadows and caves and darkness and night and black creatures like ravens and bats. Such plays of light and shade are less representative of good and evil, life and death, than presentative of the thrown angles against and through which we might see or hear the unseeable and unsayable – the forging of some deeper form as if in poetic strobe. Dowd (2103) finds parallels in the use of parataxis, analepsis, and geophysiology in McCarthy to achieve affective power and appreciation in the reader for the "hum of mystery," Hoborek (2011) considers it a precursor in McCarthy's later "aesthetics of exhaustion," including sentence fragments and indirect discourse, which stylistically moves away from complex prose to the affect of exhaustion, and others consider the affective properties of producing aesthetic presence. The labor of the artist, the fever and intensity of his

creation, is deeply felt in McCarthy, as is the struggle of characters to survive and to understand.

Blood Meridian is concerned with the responsibility of an outré aesthetic, the enduring nature of exceptionality, civilizing designs, and Barnumesque hokum that deceives and manipulates through the adornment of false truths. The judge crumples throws a Spanish boot on the fire, and is satisfied with the world, "as if" his counsel had been sought at its creation. He also remarks that "whoever builds in reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe." The coinsmith and others make false idols and sell them to men. When the hermit tells the kid that must have lost his way in the dark, to which the kid does not reply, the following conversation takes place:

> The old man swung his head back and forth. The way of the transgressor is hard. God made this world, but he didn't make it to suit everybody, did he?
>
> I don't believe he had me much in mind.
>
> Aye, said the old man. But where does a man come by his notions. What world's he seen that he liked better?
>
> I can think of better places and better ways.
>
> Can ye make it be?
>
> No.
>
> No. It's a mystery. A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he don't want to. Rightly so. Best

not to look in there. It ain't the heart of a creature that is bound in the way God has set for it. You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature than can do anything. Make a machine, and a machine to make a machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it. You believe that?

I don't know.

Believe that (19).

Later, the following passage marks the judge as a kind of naturalist-collector, showman, and gold panner, wherein he wanders off from his party with a "packanimal" to explore. He sits in a compound breaking ore with a hammer:

[T]he feldspar rich in red oxide of copper and native nuggets in whose organic libations he purported to read the news of the earth's origins, holding an extemporary lecture in geology to a small gathering who nodded and spat. A few would quote him from scripture to confound his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings. The judge smiled.

Books lie, he said.

God don't lie.

No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.

He held up a chunk of rock.

He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.

The squatters in their rags nodded amongst themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge

> encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools (116).

All that is certain in a world of strange and perverse shadows is that humankind will continue on, until its own end, in a predictable dance that is beyond the bounds of reason. The outré is omnipresent and arrives on its own terms to disrupt any semblance of order, provoke a level of affect that jars pain and beauty into being, often at the same time, and propels movement into places were the heart and mind do not 'naturally' go. There is also silence and stillness and peace that anchors, but never for too long. Even the text feels heavy after a time, an outré object full of words, sounds, and atmospheres that arrive before any meaning, alight with an energy and power that Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe also achieve, and which manifest and exalt the presence of the outré aspects of life.

McCarthy, in the tradition of nineteenth-century American authors, gives the outré a semblance of language and embodied form, in flashes of lyricism and image, rhythm and affect, concealment and unconcealment, seduction and repulsion, until one finds a way in to some deeper penetration of the outré, and to face the outré shadows that hover at every turn. Nineteenth-century authors experimented with the *Stimmmung*, presence, and affect of the outré in several ways. Poe's works often contain escalating sounds, repetitions, imagery, and pitch that spiral towards a breaking madness and obsession that delights for its own sake, and breaks the protagonists as one would break a horse, into confession, revelation, or merging. His use of animal imagery, whirlpools, eyes, masquerades, ironies and inversions, and the enigmatic blending of love and hate between oneself and one's rival or alter-ego, all provide sensually affective "ins" through enveloping experience.

Hawthorne uses similar methods to explore tenser spiritual phenomena, such as when Goodman Brown, in the height of the witches' frenzy, implores Faith to look up to the heavens and resist temptation, and is delivered from the final moment, only to bear its markings within him, in a quieter suffering, unto death. Goodman Brown, Reuben Bourne, and other characters, are driven by curiosity or obligation, haunted by outré forces, and suffer a sense of moral disillusionment and moodiness that set them apart from normal society. There is a certain reflectiveness in Hawthorne that Poe did not frequently share. Hawthorne manages to convey enough sympathetic reason, harmless intention, or guilty self-reflection in his characters to offset the atmosphere of chaos and darkness that surrounds them. His works also explore the affective sense of tragedy and loss that accompany the forced expulsion or obsessive correction of the outré, especially in the form of deviance or aesthetic flaw, such as in the *Scarlet Letter* or "The Birthmark," in which beauty and naturalness are enhanced by imperfection. In a classic reversal of positions, Hawthorne aligns the outré finally with those who would banish it, who insist on homogenous and untainted aesthetic perfection, and who, in calling for restraint in others, exhibit none of their own. Yet while Hawthorne typically plays out scenes of outré encounters, he also, notably, enacts Dr. Grimshawe's "consummation" with the spider off-stage, to curious effect.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville exploits the sensual and sensitive effects of writing to move the reader towards a climax of convergence with the freakish, powerful, and elusive Other. The sexualization inherent in the following passage evokes distinctive excitement:

Ripplingly withdrawing from his prey, Moby Dick now lay at a little distance,

> vertically thrusting his oblong white head up and down in the billows; and at the same time slowly revolving his whole spindled body; so that when his vast wrinkled forehead rose – some twenty or more feet out of the water – the now rising swells, with all their confluent waves, dazzlingly broke against it; vindictively tossing their shivered spray still higher into the air. So, in a gale, the but half baffled Channel billows only recoil from the base at the Eddystone, triumphantly to overleap its summit with their scud (635).

For three days, the White Whale is pursued, in an ebb and tide of tension and fleeting encounters, until the dramatic and all-consuming end. Ahab, who has been both 'hobbled' and 'maddened' by the whale, loses psycho-physical power and gains spiritual intensity as he comes closer to the final scene. Likewise, the whale suffers a similar fate: strengthening as Ahab weakens, and weakening as Ahab strengthens, until the two collapse in a dynamic, and "the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled on five thousand years ago" (662). The fever-pitch that Melville evokes brings the interaction, and strange connection, between two freakish oddities to the level of thunderous epic, with such intensity that the reader is overwhelmed, and so follows them into the deep.

Yet McCarthy, along with other writers of his generation, withdraws wisely (and provocatively) from the revelatory moment, and both complicates and intensifies the outré from the outset, to achieve sophisticated affect. In *Blood Meridian*, the final embrace, as in all good gothic literature, is left largely to our imagination and interaction: once we feel ready for revelation, the scene is offered in two ambiguous sentences – rather than across several pages – and the action occurs in negative space. We are left with the knowledge that we have followed to some untidy conclusion, and that whatever

madness is within us shapes whatever outré encounter we will find. As with horror, what we imagine, or cannot imagine, is more unsettling than revelation. The tension between the tender "gathering in his arms," and the creepy formless terror of "immense and terrible flesh," is sensuously complex. McCarthy's omission calls for individual interaction at the immediate moment of envelopment. However, he manages to do so objectively, by asserting the external materiality of presence, and evoking an internally outré resonance.

Chapter Eight

Startling Figures

In addition to Cormac McCarthy, many twentieth-century American writers include elements of the carnivalesque and freakish in their works. Examples of such authors include Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Philip Roth, Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut, Chuck Palahniuk, and Bret Easton Ellis. Here, figures and forms considered too strange, outside, or unnatural serve aesthetic purposes that extended beyond the political, to create emotional, physical, or atmospheric resonance that envelops the texts. Moreover, much twentieth-century outré fiction deliberately resists clear meaning, in favor of the affective power of the outré.

Some authors foreground the carnivalesque and freakish, and employ them as central motifs. In Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989), for instance, owners of a traveling carnival use radioactive material on their own children to turn them into freaks for profit in a freakshow. Flannery O'Connor is especially well-known for employing freakish characters and outré aesthetics throughout her short fiction, particularly in stories like "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "Greenleaf," "A View of the Woods," "A Circle in the Fire," "Good Country People," and "The Lame Shall Enter First." The author's conscious inclusion of theses elements is clearly described in her discussion of the processes of writing and reading.

Flannery O'Connor, when asked about the significance of her stories, said: "forget about the enlightenment and just try to enjoy them" (MM 107). A good story

ought to "expand the mind," and the "best reason to hear a story read" is to stimulate "primary enjoyment," rather than analysis (108). It is an argument for affect over meaning. O'Connor noted that her own fiction demonstrates a "reasonable use of the unreasonable" and "should elicit from you [the reader or listener] a degree of pity and terror," though it also had a "comic seriousness" (108). Writing in the Southern Gothic mode, O'Connor claimed that "the more a writer wishes to make the supernatural apparent, the more real he has to be able to make the natural world," and that insuring "our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil" (117). Yet "[w]e are now living in an age which doubts both fact and value. It is the life of this age that we wish to see and judge. The novelist can no longer reflect a balance from the world he sees around him; instead, he has to try to create one . . . with one stroke the writer has both to mirror and to judge. When such a writer has a freak for his hero, he is not simply showing us what we are but what we have been and what we would become. His prophet-freak is an image of himself" (117-8). The freak becomes "a figure for our essential displacement" (45).

The specialness ascribed to the prophet-freak is thus tied to the artist's ability to reveal that we were all always already freaks, wayward on our true path. This revelation echoes the patterns behind earlier Gothic works. O'Connor used the grotesque and the outré to achieve an expanded vision or "whole gaze" that blends the natural and the eternal, the concrete and the absolute (27). Her vision is characteristically Christian, but also mystical: "the Christian poet, and storyteller as well, is like the blind man whom Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision, and it is an invitation to deeper and stranger visions that we shall have to learn to accept if we want to realize a truly Christian literature" (14-85).

O'Connor described her use of an outré aesthetic as a device for communicating her visions: "My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable . . . . The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can [not] assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do . . . then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (34).

According to Arthur F. Kinney, O'Connor:

> [D]eveloped, too, a conscious aesthetic for grotesquerie, creating an art of distortion, eccentric characters, even freaks, hoping to show how malformed the 'normal' among us who sin must appear violent and deformed from the perspective of Christ. She drew on Poe and Hawthorne for models; her reading (and her library) show us too that she learned, from the start, from Gogol. Her sense of humor, once larklike and satiric, turned grim and mordant. The urgency she felt to draw boldly the queerness that marked souls deliberately turned from Christianity despite their conventional allegiances—mere mockeries, those—meant an increasingly queer art, too, one that, to her surprise, failed to communicate (n.pag.).

The effort to move her readers through affect, then, only drove O'Connor deeper into an outré aesthetic, which (most) readers could neither identify nor understand. In time, both author and reader regarded each other as dramatic others.

The disturbed presences O'Connor created are less extreme than the presences she imagined while writing: "When I sit down to write, a monstrous reader looms up who sits down beside me and continually mutters, 'I don't get it, I don't see it, I don't want it,' . . . . Some writers can ignore this presence, but I have never learned how. I know that I must never let him affect my vision, must never let him gain control over my thinking, must never listen to his demands unless they accord with my conscience; yet I feel I must make him see what I have to show, even if my means of making him see have to be extreme" ("Some Aspects"). The extreme and outré means O'Connor employed to 'open the eyes' of her readers theoretically allowed (and allows) them to see inside themselves, and to contemplate their own unsettling nature. The resistance of readers to this vision in O'Connor's time, however, was strengthened, rather than fostered, by the fiction's outré elements. O'Connor accepted that the majority of readers could not understand her, and presumed it would take many years for her writing to break through.

O'Connor's stories contain excessive violence and deception, but what makes them especially taboo and outrageous is their outré strangeness. The vision of an awful woman whispering into a bull's ear after it has fatally and pseudo-sexually impaled her heart, or writhing on the ground in rambling ecstatic prayer, a boy hanging from the rafters, persuaded he should die an innocent child, the theft of a girl's prosthetic leg by an impostor Bible salesman, the burning of the woods and the celebratory pagan dance at its center, the blunting of a child's head with a rock, after she tries to savage her grandfather

with tearing teeth and nails, the Misfit's killing sprees, and other elements, create the impression of a world with neither vision nor knowledge, and lacking self-refection. Often in O'Connor's stories, the arrival of disturbed outsiders spells havoc for the families they disrupt (who learn too late that they have been corrupted), suggesting that outré presences are part of some greater evil. Paradoxically, as she explored this aesthetic further, the sense of evil waned. The only 'purity' O'Connor achieved was the full and consistent execution of her outré visions, which served as more perfectly felt and realized creations than her allusions to God's Grace.

The queerness that O'Connor attaches to the many kinds of violence and harm we visit on ourselves, and one another, carries a visceral power because it arrives as more invasive, acute, and memorable than conventional fictional violence – it tweaks what Hans Gumbrecht refers to as *Stimmung*, which has the ability to test our emotions as if on a vast musical scale. Collectively and individually, O'Connor's narratives create a mood and atmosphere of some lurking unknown, some palpable but unnamable aspect of the world and of our being that can only be experienced through the outré. The complexity and ambiguity inherent in extreme strangeness and macabre turns are far more provocative and disorienting than straightforward sinister plots of revenge, theft, sexual abuse, or murder in cold blood. In the end, the effect is one of uncanny naturalism, and the monstrous mirror. That O'Connor regarded her bizarre characters as essentially sinful is less important than the realization that such oddities exist in everyday American culture and cannot be explained. American Gothic, and particularly Southern Gothic, continues to reinforce the old adage, "we don't hide our crazy relatives, we parade 'em right on the front porch."

The deeply bizarre registers on levels that we are neither accustomed to, nor know how to qualify, and as such is met with trepidation, and sometimes also excitement. Yet by hitting these internal notes so directly and unabashedly, O'Connor plucks something in the reader on a physical level that insinuates her mystical vision, and suggests that the outré is inside us all along, if only we could see. In this sense, the outré becomes revenant – not only as a symbol of recurring sin and the terrors of the past, but as a long dormant snake that is charmed within us, the stirring of the freak we all contain. Despite O'Connor's claims that Grace is a kind of antidote to the horrors she describes, perhaps her greatest strength is in capturing outré encounters as part of the cycles of life, change, growth, and transmutation. Only in facing the outré, and forcefully surrendering to it (a rendering), do the characters find the core of their nature, desires, and flaws, almost unanimously to their disadvantage and destruction, and are changed by conjoining with compelling forces to become other than themselves. Yet therein, too, lies Grace – not as an antidote to the outré, but in the very heart of its revelation.

While O'Connor thought that many of her readers could not understand her fiction, or be moved by its outré aesthetic, several stories were – and continue to be – effective in relating her strange visions through affect. "Greenleaf," for example, begins with Mrs. May's bedroom window facing the east, and under her window is a bull, "silvered in the moonlight … his head raised as if he listened – like some patient god come down to woo her – for a stir inside the room" (*Complete Stories* 311). The story is often treated through familiar themes, symbols, and allusions to godhead, Christ figures, and myths and poems like "Leda and the Swan," in which a god comes in animal form to couple with or rape a human woman. At the level of affect, however, the words "patient"

"silvered," "woo," and "stir," set the tempo for seductive entry into an outré experience. The bull seems somewhat majestic, elusive, and substantial, drawing on the concrete materiality of his physical form. The use of a dash, before "for a stir inside her room," disrupts the prompt and sensually suggests an encounter that is yet to come. The tension between the figures is present in the first paragraph:

> The window was dark and the sound of her breathing too light to be carried outside. Clouds crossing the moon blackened him and in the dark he began to tear at the hedge. Presently they passed and he appeared again in the same spot, chewing steadily, with hedge-wreath that he has ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns. When the moon drifted into retirement again, there was nothing to mark his place but the sound of heavy chewing. Then abruptly a pink glow filled the window. Bars of light slid across him as the venetian blind was slit. He took a step backward and lowered his head as if to show the wreath across his horns . . . . as he raised his crowned head again, a woman's voice, guttural as if addressed to a dog, said, "Get away from here, Sir!" and in a second muttered, "Some nigger's scrub bull." (311).

The animal paws the ground, and Mrs. May, with her nightgown hanging loose about her thin shoulders, stands bent "behind the blind" and closes it for fear that the bull will charge:

> She had been conscious in her sleep of a steady and rhythmic chewing as if something were eating the wall of the house. She had been aware that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house

> and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue to through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs … in the middle of what had been her place (311-12).

Mrs. May regards the bull as an outré presence, along with Mrs. Greenleaf, who writhes on the ground yelling, "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" (317). She excludes the Greenleafs from her fine company, and wants their bull expelled from her land and shot dead. Her neurotic tension, repression, and need for control lends the story its tense atmosphere and disturbing vision. Her body language is strict and constrained, and she speaks and in sharp sounds and commands, "shrieks," utters sharp cries, and honks the car horn repeatedly while waiting for Mr. Greenleaf, all to jarring effect. Her sons continue to provoke and concern her. The Greenleafs, particularly the males, lend a sense of peace and goodwill to the narrative, along with the few pastoral descriptions of the fields.

The language of outré vision moves "Greenleaf," in recurring and waves and gestures, from a didactic social tale about class conflict or character study into an outré aesthetic. A bizarre and escalating violence hovers at the edge of Mrs. May's perception and threatens to undo her mind, as well as her insistent and exclusive way of 'seeing things' that governs those around her. The bull's presence strengthens as her perception slides, and she is aware of a larger unspeakable force in both the sun itself and the wilderness that surrounds her. These moments signal a shift in mood and atmosphere from a narrative concern about the 'bull problem' and the anticipation of sudden violence, to an unknowable outré 'something' that looms just beyond the bounds. O'Connor gradually distorts perspective, through unsettlingly strange glimpses of

interiority, through which the story's dramatically outré ending can be fully felt and realized.

Every time Mrs. May looks out the window, she experiences an increasingly compromised and confused vision. At first, she looks towards a "scene of indistinct greys and greens . . . the scene in front of her flowed together anyway into a watery gray mass" (321). Suddenly, the introduction of violent or disturbing adjectives and nouns signal the queering of perspective, and the un-naturalization of the pastoral. Mrs. May's green pastures, in which she sees her own character, are fenced in from "a black wall of trees with a sharp sawtooth edge that held off an indifferent sky" (321); "[t]he metal stanchions gleamed ferociously and she had to squint to be able to look at all . . . . The light outside was not so bright but she was conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain" (325); The sky is crossed with "bars" of color and seems to descend behind the eerie treeline (328). The bull continues to both observe and disturb Mrs. May, whose vision slips from her, even as she feels consumed. In her sleep, Mrs. May hears:

> [A] sound as if some large stone were grinding a large hole on the outside wall of her brain. She was walking on the inside, over a succession of beautiful rolling hills . . . . She became aware after a time that the noise was the sun trying to burn the tree line, and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it couldn't, and had to sink the way it always did outside of her property. When she first stopped it was s swollen red ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the treeline and raced down the hill toward her. She woke up with her hand over her

mouth and the same noise, diminished but distinct, in her ear. It was the bull munching under the window (329).

Overcoming her secret fear, Mrs. May orders Mr. Greenleaf to shoot the bull. She is exhilarated and finds her senses "sharpened" by her own attempts to claim power, and to diminish and insult Mr. Greenleaf, in order to get her way. Here, "birds were screaming everywhere the grass was almost too bright to look at, the sky was an even piercing blue" (330); "Though she closed her eyes, she could feel the sun, red-hot overhead. She opened her eyes slightly but the white light forced her to close them again" (332). Mrs. May is annexed from the luminous beauty around her, and unable to sustain the light of some revelation or truth. Yet the intense and searing luminosity is also a non-meaning and sensually felt presence. Moreover, the text here heightens the sense of reading as vision. In the final collision between Mrs. May and the bull, this effect is played out, including a sense of perceptual disorientation, until its breaking point. To move beyond it, and to create total envelopment, as well as a sense of mystical secrecy, the primary senses shift back and forth between the visual and the physical sensation of violent-intimate merging – moving from interior point of view to exterior observations of pseudo-conversion – and then finally, after an allusion to not hearing, the primacy of unuttered sound:

> She remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in freezing unbelief. She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild and tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her

> side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed – the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky – and she had a look of someone whose sight had been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable . . . . She saw him [Mr. Greenleaf, but also a double entendre] approaching on the outside of some invisible circle, the tree line gaping behind him and nothing under his feet. He shot the bull four times in the eye. She did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear (334).

Anyone who has lived in the rural South amid real-life characters like Mrs. May and the Greenleafs recognizes not only the outré visceral qualities of the story, but also the ways in which the text embodies or carries a socio-historical mood and atmosphere that is more particular than what is often vaguely described as gothic. It is precisely the difficulty of articulating this outré atmosphere, the *esprit* and energy of which O'Connor manages to capture or materially manifest, that makes the work all the more poignant, outside of its thematic meanings.

Hans Gumbrecht argues for the value of such works, and their (at once) unsettling and compelling properties, the "enshrouding" outré atmospheres of which are often elicited or conferred by twists in language, rhythm, or tone:

> A more important function of literary texts lies in the potential that their concreteness and historical immediacy hold. By "concreteness," I mean that every atmosphere and every mood … has the singular quality of a material

> phenomenon. One can gesture towards this singularity; however …. [i]t can never be defined absolutely. . . . In many cases, it is better to gesture toward potential moods instead of describing them in detail . . . . Often we are alerted to a potential mood in a text by the irritation and fascination provoked by a single word or small detail – the hint of a different tone or rhythm . . . . [following such "hunches" is] a step toward describing a phenomenon that remains unknown – one that has aroused our curiosity and, in the case of atmospheres and moods, often envelops and even enshrouds us. When a description of this kind occurs in reference to a literary work, it is probable that the effect … coincides with that of the 'primary text' (*AMS* 14 -17).

For Gumbrecht, reading for *Stimmung*, and concentrating on atmospheres, moods, and tones, reveals the "presentification" of the past, or the experience of cultural and historical alterity through immediacy, presence, and objectivity. Reading literature in this way, he argues, "offers literary studies for reclaiming vitality and aesthetic immediacy" that have gone "missing" (12-13). The objective "is to follow configurations of atmosphere and mood, in order to encounter the other in intense and intimate ways" (13).

Stimmungen "never exist wholly independent of the material components of a works – above all, their prosody. Therefore texts affect the 'inner feelings' of readers in the way that music and weather do" (Gumbrecht 3). Reading for *Stimmung* "always means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality – something that can catalyze feelings without matters of representation necessarily involved . . . . Indeed, a special affinity exists between performance and *Stimmung*" (3). Thus, there is a relationship between certain forms of

narration and particular atmosphere that does not have to be primarily descriptive. One does not have to read Mann's *Death in Venice*, for instance, as failed love story or an existential being-unto-death. Rather, it is "the evocation of a certain *fin-de-siècle* decadence in all its complexity— all the nuances, smells, colors, sounds, and, above all, dramatic changes of weather— that have made this work so celebrated . . . . the fascinating thing about Mann's work is a particular atmosphere that can only be experienced in a historically specific awareness of the presence of death in life" (6).

Gumbrecht sees texts as absorbing something of the world around them – as with the works of nineteenth and twentieth century outré American authors. However, this dynamic can be complex: against the advanced process of Modernity, for example, aesthetic experience can "consist of a tension-filled simultaneity of effects of meaning and effects of presence," and, because in the contemporary technological world we long for effects of presence and encounters with presence, we "pay more attention" to atmospheres, moods and the dimension of presence than ever before. It satisfies a deep innate desire (7). Elsewhere, Gumbrecht explores whether this phenomenon of *Stimmung* in the twentieth century may be explored as a "nostalgia principle with futures" or as the existential condition of "thrownness" (9) – after the World War, it was "no longer charged with the performing the role of 'mediation' and 'harmony'" (10) Notably, he finds that the two of the three major periods in Western Cultures in which *Stimmung* achieved condensed and intensified form, include Romanticism (via "nostalgia or protest, which stood in opposition to the monotony" of bourgeois society) and the end of the nineteenth-century (as "the uncritical appetite for nostalgia") (11).

What does it mean to "absorb" one's era? Ralph Ellison, for instance, whose most popular outré figure is the invisible man (in the so-titled work) – an urban squatter and outsider figure with his thousands of subterranean lights – was inspired by spectacular and unconventional forms of his day, one of which was embodied in the carnivalesque zoot suit. Malcolm X referred to the suit in the sonorous jazz-form language that first emerged in the Harlem Renaissance, and the rhyming verse practiced by later zoot-suit wearers, as *a killer-diller coat with a drapeshape, real-pleats and shoulders padded like a lunatic's cell*. The history of the zoot suit in the nineteen-forties is well documented and exhaustively treated as an outré aesthetic style that inspired the racial violence of the Zoot Suit Riots all over America, and especially in Los Angeles. The zoot suit was banned because of its extravagance and excess (and by extension, the space it confidently occupied), punishable by a thirty-day jail term. Public posters announced that the use of extra material in wartime was wasteful and profoundly unpatriotic, and newspapers printed that zoot suit wearers should be divested and stripped of their suits, and the clothes burned.

The aesthetic atmosphere embodied in the outré countercultural style, gestures, and postures of (mostly Latino) zooters – distinguished by smooth decadence, and aggrandizing swagger – sent thousands of white men, most of them servicemen, into a fit of destructive rage. Stuart Cosgrove notes of Ellison's zoot-suited youth: "These youths were not simply grotesque dandies parading the city's secret underworld, they were 'the stewards of something uncomfortable,' a spectacular reminder that the social order had failed to contain their energy and difference" (Cosgrove 77). In *Invisible Man*, the word "uncomfortable" appears numerous times, as the protagonist feels deeply unsettled in the

presence of others, particularly culturally conventional American people and environments.

The invisible man, however, sees the zoot suit as a compelling spectacle in itself, and those who wear it as more than silent "sinister clowns" (Cosgrove 77) or political and social rebels. Rather, he describes them as a physical aesthetic presence that blurs aesthetic ideas or notions of conventionality, perfection of form, natural, Western, African, art or sculpture, deformity, and movement, devoid of any clear meaning: a thing of unknown design and designer. Unlike himself, the boys are hyper-visible and performative, but like him, they are distorted, uncomfortable, and freakish:

> What about those fellows waiting still and silent there on the platform, so still and silent they clash with the crowd in their very immobility, standing noisy in their very silence; harsh as a cry of terror in their quietness? What about these three boys, coming now along the platform, tall and slender, walking with swinging shoulders in their well-pressed, too-hot-for-summer suits, their collars high and tight about their necks, their identical hats of black cheap felt set upon the crowns of their heads with a severe formality above their conked hair? It was as though I'd never seen their like before: walking slowly, their shoulders swaying, their legs swinging from their hips in trousers that ballooned upward from cuffs fitting snug about their ankles; their coats long and hip-tight with shoulders far too broad to be those of natural western men. These fellows whose bodies seemed - what had one of my teachers said of me? – 'You're like one of those African sculptures, distorted in the interest of design.' Well, what design and whose? (Ellison 440).

The effect is one of physical strangeness and novel experience: it is the form-in-life, an animated aesthetics, "*as though* [emphasis mine] I'd never seen their like before," that is emphasized. The boys come along the "platform" as one indistinguishable unit or entity, down to the cheap, matching costume hats perched awkwardly on their "crowns." Their smooth, slow and loose movements keep a tense pace with the violent suggestions of "clashing" with the crowd, "conked hair," the "harsh cry of terror," "noisy silence," "severe formality," and tyrannical, almost claustrophobic sense of constriction in the heat and tight collars, stiff forms, tight big jackets and exaggerated shoulders, and above all, an unnatural theatrical impression.

A Note on Contemporary Outré and *Stimmung*

In the twenty-first century, much American fiction, particularly small and midsized press literature, exhibits a nostalgia for a freakish underbelly America, and for a time when outré characters and aesthetics thrived at the fore of literary attention. A score of more recent works recreate the heart of American urban dives, such as the relatively unknown Kirby Gann's, *Our Napoleon in Rags* (2005), in which a number of strikingly bizarre characters – so outlandish and saturated in the outré that they seem real – gather at a bar called the Don Quixote. The regulars at the Quixote are described as a fragile group of outsiders, and an errant cast of society's dispossessed. The novel is an experimental work of bipolar point-of-view fiction that imaginatively blends atmospheres inherent in *Invisible Man* with those of *Barfly*, and presses narrative psychotics to surprising

extremes. Its protagonist, Haycraft Keebler, "self-appointed savior of humanity," attempts to inspire others to rise up against the powers that be and to achieve social equality for all. Among other things, his outré activities include distributing a 'revolutionary' newsletter and covering debris and trashcans in gold.

Better-known works, like Jerry Brockmeier's bestselling, *The Brief History of the Dead* (2004), is a fantasy and adventure novel complete with a global lethal virus, static radios, and world domination by Coca Cola. The work blurs a middle-twenty-first-century America and Antarctica with "The City": a place beyond death that houses both the dead and the last people who remember those who have died, which expands and materializes in buildings and blocks, but disappears as the living who remember the departed also die. The palpable materiality and *Stimmung* of these works convey, at least in part, the fragmented and fallen materiality of American urbanity, and the disembodied and broken psychologies of a techno-corporate and lost contemporary space, in which we struggle to connect with others, ourselves, and the value of human life.

Conclusion

Outré aesthetics has always played an important role in American life and culture and has offered an alternative aesthetic history, experience, and discourse. From the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, the outré developed alongside of emerging nationalist ideals and offered alternatives to Calvinist restraint. The emergence of the outré in cultural discourse continued throughout the nineteenth century and shaped the performance of knowledge and changing notions of collective taste. The ubiquity of American shows, exhibitions, roadside attractions and destinations became known as uniquely American phenomena. Outré showmen helped to revolutionize advertising and both romanticize and corporatize the freak aesthetics that were later appropriated by American entertainment, and the rebel and deviant culture of late-twentieth century America. As it became appropriated by culture industry, the outré lost its power as the aesthetic of difference.

Meanwhile, outré aesthetics has been a consistent and distinctive element in American literature from its emergence and into the present. The link between outré aesthetics and the uncanny, troubling embodiments and exaggerated forms, recalls the powerful role of Romantic, Gothic, sublime, and subversive traditions in American literature. However, the outré is both palpable and present throughout most of American fiction.

Currently, both political aesthetics and aesthetic politics in American culture are at once a theoretical and practical concern. What happens when we are relentlessly

bombarded with meaning/non-meaning presences at every turn? How do we continue to attach meaning to the outré in the politics of space, representation, and social aesthetics? In the twentieth century, taste publics have been often associated with issues of identity and class politics (positions that uphold the notion of dominant, minority, and sub-cultures); yet today, Americans tend to oscillate between the neutrality of mass "nobrow" culture, and the vitalizing kaleidoscope or 'dappled presence' of taste cultures and thought tribes. "Taste cultures" are "clusters of cultural forms which embody similar values and aesthetic standards" and "correspond to a diversity of taste publics, defined as unorganized aggregates of people sharing similar aesthetic standards" (Ollivier and Fridman n.pag.). By contrast, "thought tribes" refer to unorganized aggregates that share similar values, ideas or ideologies.

At a basic level, Americans from strikingly varied backgrounds, affiliations, and demographics can share affinity for specific and outré aesthetic combinations in unexpected ways. One can "cluster," for instance, around the love of black velvet landscapes, sweat lodges and Francophilia, with others vastly different from oneself, and have access to the production, consumption, and cultivation of nearly every conceivable taste. The seemingly endless spectrum of possibilities fosters a collective space in which the outré is increasingly difficult to identify, and thus paradoxically, the nostalgia for an American aesthetic status quo has gained momentum in recent years.

At the community level, one example is the current and ongoing dispute in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the historic district of Oakwood, where the "neighborhood features a variety of architectural styles, from postwar bungalows to Greek Revivals, shotguns to Queen Annes" (Arieff n.pag.). Local residents are suing architect Louis

Cherry, who has begun construction (under permit) on a modern style home, and want to see it demolished. Through a series of scrupulous processes, the groups like The Oakwood City Preservation Alliance rally against what they perceive to be an outré aesthetic. Allegedly, opponents fear a "holocaust" of modern architecture that "'could inspire a rash of tear-downs which could then be replaced with modern homes'" (Arieff). What might an historical American architecture be, how is it embodied in or reflected by culturally appropriated styles like Greek Revival and Queen Anne, and what threat does the modern aesthetics of a safely built home pose to an already aesthetically diverse community? What is an aesthetic holocaust and why this dramatic characterization? From whence does this visceral resistance to (by American standards, passé) modernist forms stem? In many respects, this incident might be compare to the phenomenon of slum tourism, which first emerged in New York in the nineteenth century, in which a privileged few delighted in consuming and fetishizing the outré aesthetics of local and impoverished slums, to 'see how the other half lives.'

In contemporary America, the conflation of culture industry, consumerism, pan-economization, and technocratic social organization has changed nature of aesthetic experience and discourse. In a 1993 interview devoted to (trans)gender politics and the body, Judith Butler said, "we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms" (n.pag.). Here, she was referring to a politically staged artistic event that "posed questions without providing either answers or tools for legibility." Butler's call for a disruptive

aesthetic practice, and a new critical framework for questioning "recuperable" aesthetic representations, remains relevant. By pointing to the tension between a political aesthetics (of meaning) and an 'unknowable' aesthetics (non-meaning), she noted that what is uncontrollable, multivalent and uncertain in aesthetics "makes us think we have to renegotiate the way in which we read public signs." Thus, Butler was creatively and critically addressing the heart of an outré aesthetic.

As Butler predicted, the "renegotiation of the way we read public signs" is not only desirable and necessary, but has become part of everyday aesthetic experience. In order to change, to keep democratic culture in flux, engage plurality, and expand perception, Americans continue to rely on the "disruptive" qualities of outré aesthetic experiences to move and to alter them. Indeed, an "aesthetic of contemporary life breathes new relationships into objects and the objects attached to us change the perspective to it" ("Aesthetic – Responsibility – Drones" n.pag.). The outré is an aesthetics of presence or "presence culture . . . what one might describe as 'events of self-unconcealment of the world.'" And this is an unconventional form of knowledge: "substance that appears, that presents itself to us (even with its inherent meaning), without requiring interpretation as its transformation into meaning." (Gumbrecht *POP* 81). Outré aesthetics thus push against "meaning culture" by simply manifesting themselves, seeking out moments of embodied intensity as objects (or performances) for interpretation, not interpretation itself.

Among the many aesthetic visions in America, the outré has been often ignored and its contributions beg further exploration and examination. America has always been pluralistic, heterogeneous, and multicultural, and American aesthetics reflect this

diversity. American culture is constantly changing, subject to invention, revision, and 'radical disenchantments.' The aesthetic function is at the heart of this process, and thus the outré both outrages American cultural boundaries beyond reason and carries aesthetic function to its end.

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