

Abnormality, Deformity, Monstrosity: Body Transgressions in Contemporary Visual Culture

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Abstract

With the development of cultural studies about the human body, predominantly with regard to body perceptions in certain forms of contemporary culture (including popular culture and mass-media), my study investigates the reflection of abnormality and corporeal monstrosity in some forms of contemporary visual culture, and proposes to illustrate, in a large context of historical anthropology, how a form of voyeurism first incriminated in the 1930s (once the exposure of 'monsters' in fairs and salons was prohibited) reappears in indirect ways in the contemporary culture, particularly in certain elite forms of visual art and theoretical studies.

The study first documents how, with the passing of time, old voyeuristic practices have gradually evolved, in principle, to total interdiction and dissimulation, even to the denial of people's curiosity, fears or instinctive disgust towards physical abnormality.

And, if trivial observation can account for the fact that nowadays popular culture still tends to maintain old voyeuristic practices under some false pretences (like certain American medical dramas in search of high TV ratings), my study would like to point out at two different ways of monstrosity approach, one from the inside (when the subject-artist accepts to exhibit his/her own handicap), and the other from the "peaks" of high art. Both ways (German film director Niko von Glasow and art photographer Joel-Peter Witkin, respectively) propose artistic and ideologically credible approaches to contemporary monstrosity or physical disabilities. In this second section of my study, I chose to focus the title theme on a medical leitmotiv: the thalidomide.

Keywords: *monster, corporeality, transgression, freak shows, thalidomide, popular culture, German documentaries, shock art*

The interest in monsters and monstrosity dates back to the early ages of humankind, and should probably be recognized as an anthropological constant. It has appeared in various kinds of cultures, usually following the trend of the times. Theoretically, monstrosity is defined and perceived by people as an extreme form of abnormality, either physical or mental, and, particularly, as a single or multiple manifestation of deformities or infirmities that can be either innate, or developed, or imagined, or indicative of obvious forms of degeneration. Over the ages, monstrosity has represented, consecutively and sometimes simultaneously, a religious, medical, legal, social and/or anthropological issue. Starting with the second half of the 17th century, within a process that was continued and completed throughout the following century, monstrosity was gradually

expelled from the sphere of the sacred and was systemically rationalized, medicalized, translated into scientific terms, much to the enlightening of an ignorant and superstitious audience.

By transgressing body norms, monsters have always caused reactions of fear that were (most often) accompanied by an irrepressible fascination for the ugly. The etymology of the word *monster* (from *monere* "make smb. wonder") suggested to analysts referrals to a religious meaning, that of divine warning. Monsters would, therefore, represent failures of divine Creation which, with each appearance, have the beneficial power of indirectly reassuring us of our own perfection and, consequently, of God's goodness and love for us. The idea that the evil and the ugly were left by God in the world to enhance its beauty and to

point at God's almighty power is so ancient, that it seems to come from immemorial times, being present on all continents and cultures, including non-European ones. Most often, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic monstrosity were projected by humans at a certain *distance*¹, considering that monsters could be found mostly in the tales of travellers to distant lands (and invariably amplified and increased by the people's imagination). This physical presence of the monster 'far away from here' also indicated his or her *moral* and *cognitive* otherness: everything that people could not understand or assimilate, just like everything that did not fit their commonsensical morality, was usually connected to various transgressive practices or was projected by people outside their worlds. This imaginary projection of the monster outside one's self or familiar space can also be seen in art, which, in various forms of artistic expression, from ancient times and up to approximately two centuries ago, used to conceive and build monstrosity in pure intellectualist ways, like a mathematical equation, an enigma for the brain, passed through the filter of our religious fears (see, for instance, artists like Bosch or Goya).

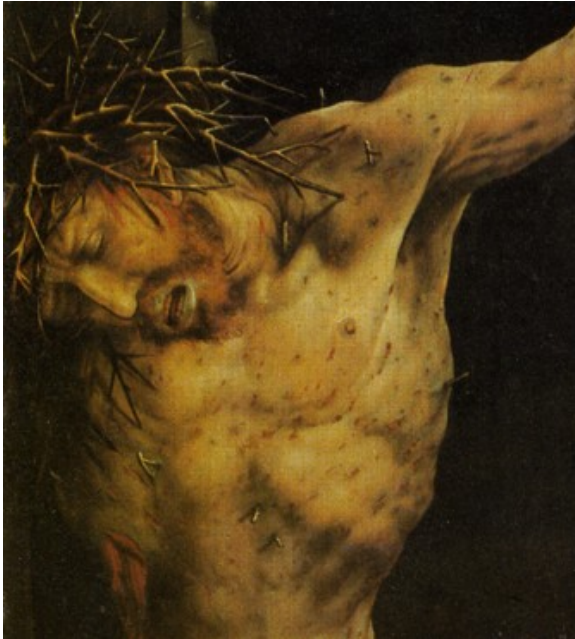


Fig. 1. Mathias Grünewald, *Crucifixion*, 1515 (detail). Source: nonsite.org.

¹ See Umberto Eco, *Istoria urâtului* [On Ugliness], particularly the chapter "Monștri și fapte nemaîntâlnite" [Monsters and Unheard-Of Stories], in edition cited, pp. 107-130.

On the other hand, although it is less obvious and particularly rare, a *familiarity with the monsters* has also existed, which had sacred origins, because, according to Saint Augustine, "if they are humans, remember they come from Adam, too" (*Civitas Dei*, XVI, 8, qtd in Eco 114, my translation). For instance, to the alchemists monsters were even seductive, and were often present in the definition of divinities, including, according to certain theological texts, in the definition of the Christian God (Eco 125). The first (and also most resistant) sacred prototype of deformity was the body of Christ himself, who was tortured and crucified for the sins of humankind. From the old visual representations of German and Flemish artists (Fig. 1) and up to the bloody Christ of Mel Gibson (see the film *The Passion of the Christ*), the uglification and mutilation of Jesus Christ's body has been understood as an obligatory benchmark for the Christians on their way to sanctification: "In order to consolidate your faith, Christ became hideous, while remaining forever beautiful", says Saint Augustine:

This was his very power: mocked and ridiculed, His body was twisted and full of wounds, with so much pain endured. But Christ's deformity is embellishing to humans. Since, had He not agreed to become hideous, you would not have regained the divine beauty you had lost. (qtd in Eco 51, my translation)

Considering the foregoing, we could say that, until the 17th century at the latest, cultural history continued to provide various *transcendental* rationale for the existence of the ugly and monstrosity on earth.

On the first level of understanding monstrosity we should place the old perception of zoomorphic monsters, which, just like with the perception of anthropomorphic ones, has had a long history, although not that spectacular or tragic as the second. Not once did masses of people crowd and stare in bewilderment at the animal monsters depicted on the fronts of Western cathedrals, sometimes to the dissatisfaction of clerics like 12th-century Bernard de Clairvaux, who would see this kind of curiosity only as a distraction from the divine purpose of the sermon (Theodorescu 35-36). But if such monsters were mostly imaginary projections of

the architects and sculptors, people from the old times also showed amazement at the existence of some ordinary animals like giraffes or rhinoceros, which they first perceived as monstrous. Marco Polo was absolutely positive, when seeing rhinos, that he saw unicorns and that they had been mistakenly imagined as white and beautiful, when they were actually dull, grey and unbelievably ugly (Eco 127). Eventually, once the understanding of the living animal forms developed and science provided elaborate explanations about the species, such 'monsters', with all their variety and millenary history, came to be assimilated and reduced to a small minority, and only exceptions or anomalies in the animal world are still to be labelled as monstrous.

On the other hand, in aesthetic terms, animal 'monstrosity' (understood as 'ugliness') is a nonsensical concept, considering that, however surprising it may be, nature has come to be accepted as what it is: anonymous physical nature, that is, a reality not subject to aesthetical canons, and therefore *a priori* beautiful². The fact that nowadays no animal that conforms to its own species is deemed monstrous, even at the level of mass perception, proves the advance of our education. Nevertheless, on the other side, the people's (still surviving) interest towards exotic animals, even disguised as scientific interest, shall prove another idea.

A false etymology of the word *monster* long ago advocated for the origin of the word in the Latin *monstrare* "to show". Monsters were therefore regarded both as public objects of show and (see the first meaning indicated in a sub-section above) as signs of wonder, respectively. In both cases they were meant to be *visible*, which explained and probably justified, in the eyes of most people, the public parade of monsters and of hideous human beings (or animals), as well as the avid curiosity of the masses towards them.³

² See Tudor Vianu, following the ideas of German aestheticist Julius Schultz (Vianu, 10, 379-380).

³ Precisely as a consequence of this idea, we could say that the interest towards zoomorphic (quasi)monstrosity has not disappeared once the masses got familiar with the basic secrets of biology. Disguised in the form of innocent entertainment, like watching TV channels such as Animal Planet, Nat Geo Wild or National Geographic, the 21st-century people also experience a late avatar of their curiosity towards zoomorphic monsters. These television channels usually report satisfactory ratings especially through shows that promote violent, exotic, strange and far-too-much abnormal species. At the same time,

Nevertheless, contemporary morality condemns this kind of curiosity. As far as humans are concerned, the modern perception of the monstrous body regards it as a *suffering body*. Consequently, in the history of these bodies, modern approaches emphasize the progressive rationalization in understanding monsters, together with the restraining of people's curiosity, up to the interdiction to stare at them. Thanks to science and to humanitarian stands, monstrous bodies have more and more come to be seen as belonging to poor creatures who should be regarded as no less sacred in their humanity and who should have the same rights (to work and socialize, to freedom or happiness, etc.) as their healthy fellows.

The history of the "archaic and cruel exercise of curious eyes" (Courtine III, 228, my translation) is very long. However, ancient monsters were usually fictional, considering that testimonies about their lives were much more literary than historical; which is why we should say that the history of this curious gaze is mostly of recent date. Only starting with early modernity could we read credible stories about encountering human monsters, converging, in the 19th century, into an unprecedented exhibiting of the abnormal in popular culture. This was also the century that eventually put an end to such voyeuristic practices and condemned them irrevocably. In a time when monsters occupied hundreds of pages in the tabloid press and satisfied the public's taste for queerness, they were also marketed and displayed without reservation in fairs (the famous *entre-sorts*), in salons and even museums. In 1841, the opening of the American Museum by Phineas Taylor Barnum, in the very core of Manhattan, made a recognition and even climactic point in the trade with monsters, for this museum was also, from its establishment and until 1868 (when it was destroyed by a fire), a kind of Sunday entertainment for families and was even named today, retrospectively, "a Disneyland of teratology", or defined as a "field of experiments in the industry of American mass entertainment" (Courtine III, 241, my translation).

Toward the end of the century, after a slow change of mentalities, showing monsters was increasingly questioned. The prefect's offices started to say 'no' to the requests of itinerant

easy-going cinema productions relying on the creation of studio monsters through optic illusions and computer programmes, are an answer to the same anthropological need, and seem to be a harmless continuation of some old voyeuristic practices of humankind.

circus directors who wanted to display body deformities in exchange of money, and the middle class, influenced by the intellectualist stand of scholars and philanthropists of the time, started to associate fairs and anatomic abnormalities presented there with the cheap entertainment of low classes, which the former would disapprove of in the name of good taste and decency.



Fig. 2. *Freaks* by Tod Browning - film poster. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freaks>.

The end of this era may be symbolically marked, in the opinion of anthropologist Jean-Jacques Courtine, by the production, in 1932, of Tod Browning's movie *Freaks* (Fig. 2). Against the background of a personal history that also included professional experience in circuses and itinerant fairs, and also encouraged by the request of a Hollywood producer to make a *horror* film, Tod Browning was convinced that it would make a hit with "a film of maximum horror". To that purpose, he gathered the most famous teratologic people of his time and imagined a romantic drama where the female attraction of a circus, in secret understanding with a Herculean athlete, schemes against a midget and tries to take advantage of his feelings in order to take his money. Their plan is

intercepted and counterworked by the other monsters of the circus, who, in the final scene of the film, disfigure the beautiful girl and reduce her to their own condition, that of a monstrous creature, a new freak attraction for the circus.

Instead of becoming a blockbuster, this film made the final point of Tod Browning's artistic career. From the refusal of intelligent actresses



Fig. 3. *Freaks* by Tod Browning – a film scene. Source: <http://monovisions.com/tod-brownings-freaks-1932/>

like Jean Harlow or Myrna Loy to play the main female character and up to the final reactions of the press, both the public and the press were hit by the cruelty and vulgarity of this film, where the screen was invaded by hermaphrodites, Siamese twins, legless people (like Prince Randian, also known as the Human Caterpillar or the Snake Man – Fig. 3), a woman resembling an ape, and other similar poor specimens. F. Scott Fitzgerald even remembers with horror how, in 1931, he visited the Metro Goldwyn Mayer studios and left in a state of irrepressible disgust after he caught a glimpse of the shooting of some movie scenes, while the critics wrote, not without reason, at the film's premiere: "There is no excuse for making such film. One needs a weak character to produce it, just as we need a hard stomach to watch" (Courtine III, 292, my translation). Last but not least, the critics noticed, as the film's point of maximum fallibility, the public's impossibility to identify themselves with any of the characters:

A story that raises no interest to anyone and which at the same time does not please anybody, since it is impossible for normal men or women to sympathize with the

aspirations of a midget⁴. (qtd in Courtine III, 293, my translation)

From that very moment, believes Courtine, the cinema started to “prohibit” “offending exhibitionism” (ibid., 288), replacing it with conventional simulacra like King-Kong and other studio-designed monsters, which from now on would make a long career. Starting from that point, on the way already opened at the end of the 19th century, the only gaze accepted to be bluntly addressed to corporeal human deformity remains the *medical* one, and any other forms of curiosity would be deemed as disgraceful manifestations of voyeurism, against a background of cruelty or ignorance, or indicating the absence of any elementary education⁵ of the watcher.

As anticipated earlier in my paper, contemporary studies do not dissociate at present physical monstrosity of humans from the *complementary history of how to look at it*, an evolution that has developed in recent history a more and more oblique and respectful look, which tries to seem either drawn away, or not curious, or uninterested in one’s physical looks.⁶ In other words, from the old objectification of abnormality, now we have come to the recognition of such people as subjects with full rights. This makes the history of hideous bodies to be read as a history of the normalization of ‘abnormality’ through acceptance, inclusion and gradual empowerment of the now-called ‘disabled’.

At this point, Western Europe and the United States of America played a crucial role in the socio-professional and economic integration of the disabled. In highly developed civilizations, public opinion has massively contributed to the understanding of this phenomenon, up to assuming or even pretending that such people

are normal and should be provided with equal chances. And if, in pre-modern ages, the people often got in contact with body deformity as a result of war mutilation or serious diseases, modernity then brought, after industrialization, the emergence of workplace accidents, which were followed, after the two world wars, by the war victims and, eventually, once with the much-acclaimed progress of medicine, by the victims of drug-induced prenatal malformations.

A paradigmatic case of such situation was the pharmaceutical scandal of Contergan, when, at the end of the 1950s, the German company Grünenthal marketed a thalidomide-based medicine which was prescribed to pregnant women as light sleeping pills or against morning sickness. Within a few years only (1957-1961), predominantly in Germany and in the UK, but also in many other countries where this medicine was occasionally prescribed to pregnant women, an approximate number of 10,000 children were born with serious malformations of the limbs (and not only). Four thousand of them were born only in Germany. Although the guilty pharmaceutical company played dirty in the law suits filed against it when demanded to take responsibility for the disaster and to pay life annuities to the surviving children, today there is no doubt on its legal liability and nobody questions any more the teratogenic effects of thalidomide. (*Sunday Times, World Social Web Site*)

In a recent study, after resorting to the philosophy of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Alexander Kozin, researcher at Freie Universität Berlin, provided an onto-phenomenological rationalization of his shocking meeting with a “Contergan” woman, in the context of an exhibition of surrealist art. Starting from a personal experience and without any reluctance to appeal to subjective confessions, the researcher managed to provide splendid theoretical and cultural density to a life situation that marked him profoundly. The deformed, limbless woman encountered at an art exhibition overwhelmed him with her apparently easy-manageable manoeuvres from the stub of a shoulder, which helped her move her wheelchair or make way through the groups of visitors. While barefoot, her extremely mobile toes were pushing the audio-guide buttons or taking the audio-guide to her ear, and apparently easy movements of her entire body were now and then helping her to redress her position in the

⁴ I do not discuss the offensive, politically incorrect stance of this affirmation.

⁵ And, incidentally speaking, isn't it perhaps even this “medical” gaze the pseudo-justification of contemporary Anglo-American series that revive monsters just to satisfy the curious eyes of the public? (see mostly *Nip/Tuck* but, to a much lesser extent, even some episodes of “Grey’s Anatomy” or “House, M.D.”).

⁶ “[A]n effort of calculated distraction”, pursuing “the reduction of eye contacts”, “an education of how one should watch so that would rather ‘not see’ the visible side of the Other’s body” (Courtine III, 301-302); “Nowadays the etiquette requires that looking at the other should not be persistent on corporeal abnormalities (...): irrespective of what one may look at, deformity should pass unobserved” (ibid., 303, my translations);

wheelchair. To the German researcher, that woman had the seductive force of a miraculous and at the same time majestic appearance that seemed to the viewer, from all points of view, poetic, “wondrous” and irreducible, like a surreal work of art herself, moving against the background of the visited exhibition. Thanks to that woman, Kozin felt that he had to look into books to find something that could help him understand what he felt, and thus he ran into the pages of some philosophers, just as into the creations of some artists that provided him with some answers (Kozin 463-484).

But the confrontation with extreme deformities is even much more spectacular when it comes from the inside and especially from the will of the actors themselves of such disasters, in what we should call an exercise of sincerity and generosity on their part. In 2008, German film director Niko von Glasow (born in 1960), one of the contemporary personalities affected by the side effects of his mother taking Contergan while pregnant, was awarded a prize deemed as a kind of “German Oscar”, for *Best Documentary*, won by his production *NoBody's Perfect* (Fig. 4). In this film, he managed to persuade other 11 persons of his own generation, who all suffered from the same type of disabilities, to pose naked for a calendar and an album of artistic photographs. The achievement of this project, completed with the protagonists' statements and confessions about the effects of their body malformations upon their lives and personal fulfilment, made the very substance of the documentary film. The director formulated the novelty of his project in these terms:

It was the first real cinema film, historically, made by a disabled director about disability. It was time to face my demons! I always wanted to avoid the subject of disability. (...) I never wanted to admit publicly I'm disabled. My wife said it was time to look the devil in the eye! We started with a very simple question: who could be the hero: answer, me! (qtd in Kingsley 7)

As for the theme of nudity, which is the leitmotiv of his film, Niko von Glasow explained his choice in very simple terms:

What's my biggest fear? In my case it's public nudity. People stare at me anyway.

When I go to a beach with my swimming suit on people stare even more, so I don't go to beaches. I had to find 11 other Thalidomiders who strip naked for a calendar and I became Mr. December. It became a dark but very funny comedy. I did it and now I feel better! More secure: in my soul, in my being, inside. Once you go into it, honesty is very healing. (ibid.)

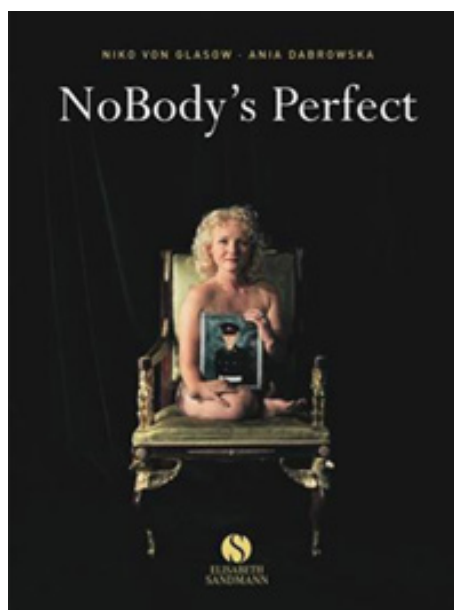


Fig. 4. *NoBody's Perfect* by Niko von Glasow – the film book. Source: http://www.nobodysperfect-film.de/en/film_book.html

What the German director intuitively felt without being an anthropologist, was that the morbid interest for human monstrosity or deformity has, since always, had a sexual component. In the 19th century and up to 1930 approximately, there even existed postcards with ‘monsters’ which were purchased by tourists as souvenirs. But none of them was so interesting as the so-called “medical photograph” (Courtine III, 256), where the hideous body was displayed in all nudity, supposedly to be “investigated”. Later on, when science and education forced the gaze to be discreet, the public was also deprived from the pleasure of contemplating monsters out of mere curiosity. And yet, nowadays a question arises: were the people actually deprived? At present, the process of civilization seems complete, with socially recommended gestures and postures that provide the right to intimacy for abnormal people, as well. However, von Glasow's words

suggest that not everyone is such a good actor, and even that good acting is rare. The same old reaction of people to abnormality, either disguised in vulgar gullibility or experienced in a superior cultural, religious or emotional way, seems to be irrepressible. Which is exactly why the project of von Glasow is ultimately a generous one, because, as he declared on the web site of his film, to pose naked in such conditions means “to allow those who regularly throw furtive glances at Thalidomiders and other physically disabled people, to take a good, long look”. (<http://www.nobodysperfect-film.de/en/filminfo.html>)

The press reactions to this project, as we can also anticipate from the awarding of the aforementioned prize, were completely different from the reactions of the American press at the old premiere of *Freaks*. But also the differences between the two films are, I believe, pretty much obvious: on the one hand, there was the intent of making profits by causing a “visual commotion” (Courtine III, 292), while on the other hand there is a wish to raise public awareness on an issue of irresponsibility and economic corruption in the medical world; with the American film, we only see a forced parade of helpless people, sometimes simpletons, who were completely dependent financially on such “opportunities”, while in the German documentary we have the mature and conscious agreement of adults, most of them professionally fulfilled, who, just like the film director, wish to break the wall of false prudery and show how their lives were affected or ruined by insufficiently-tested products marketed by greedy, superficial medicine manufacturers, as well as by decisions that were not theirs. On the one hand, we have a cheap romance, on the other we have a genuine documentary, where the author passes the test of self-inclusion, starting from “producing” himself in the first place.

Last but not least, maybe the most important difference beside ideological issues, consists in the difference of timing between the two films. At premiere *Freaks* had become, without even acknowledging that, twice outdated, even in relation to its own age, because it was the first ‘artistic’ manifestation of the time that produced the distasteful impression of human exploitation. On the contrary, the German film of 2008 is still of topical interest, because the suffering and

deformity of its heroes are not exploited but *revealed* with humour, fine irony, decency and also with a gentle reprimand addressed to the nature, sometimes ignoble, of people’s curiosity. On the whole, it is inarguable that the artistic interests and political stands of these two *freak shows* are of ultimate difference.

In his cultural investigation subsequent to encountering the “Contergan” woman, the German scholar Alexander Kozin came to invoke the name of the controversial contemporary art photographer Joel-Peter Witkin. Born in 1939, this artist is associated to a form of postmodern art called *transgressive art* or *shock art*, his challengers reproaching him that he practises forms of exploitative and manipulative art based on models featured by marginal people like midgets, hermaphrodites, transsexuals and, in general, by any type of disabled or physically deformed human being. Beside this already controversial option, his subjects are presented from the perspective of death, degradation, disease and various forms of transgression. In Witkin’s case, the source of his art obsessions was made public.



Fig. 5. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Un Santo Oscuro* (1987). Source: http://www.all-art.org/history658_photography13-30.html

The artist told that his anguished and morbid imagination originated in two childhood traumas: in the divorce of his parents, a Jewish father and a practising Catholic mother, who

could not find, given their religious differences, common points for cohabitation, and secondly, in a car accident that occurred right before their house, when the head of a little girl who was decapitated rolled at the legs of the future artist, by that time aged six. Witkin continued to remember all his life that first contact with death, which he could not understand at such early age. He remembered wishing to touch that head and speak to the child, but he was quickly removed from the scene of the accident before being able to find out if any 'dialogue' was possible.



Fig. 6. Joel-Peter Witkin, Preliminary Sketch for *Un Santo Oscuro* (1987). Source: http://www.all-art.org/history658_photography13-30.html

Considered at present “the reigning king of deviant imagery” (Cintra Wilson, 2000), Joel-Peter Witkin knows how to produce art out of anything that an American series like *Nip/Tuck* (to give one example) would treat in trivial terms, with media instruments and rating goals. Witkin once introduced himself as a “portrait painter” who depicts “the splendour and miseries of the human condition” (qtd in Biroleau 10); in his art prospects, as noticed by favourable critics, he managed to “reveal the potential of horror and suffering in the human condition” (Palmer, *The Metropolitan*). The main particularity of this

artist consists in displaying his models (which are always real people or corpses) in stylized “high-art” backgrounds, where the photographer rebuilds some symbolic and mythological luxurious scenery, taken over from or inspired to him by the classics of the fine arts. His works have been compared with the surreal art of Dali, but also with allegorical compositions of great classic masters like Bosch, Goya, Velazquez or Botticelli, passed through the filter of early modern techniques experienced in daguerreotypes or in the photographic work of E. J. Bellocq or German August Sander (Dolan 1697-8). Other critics have emphasized, in the philosophic conception of his art, a mixture of Jewish cabbalistic thought, Roman-Catholic practices, Eastern philosophy and 1960s counterculture ideas, and they have interpreted his art as “an artistic revolt against both traditional Jewish iconoclasm and the Christian taboos of Eros and the body” (Hai Fisher, qtd in *A World History of Art*). Critics have also said that his photographic creations vest human deficiencies with metaphysical powers, and the artist’s idea of turning the deformed and mutilated of human society into “living myths” of our contemporary times is credible thanks to the rich scenery in which he places his models, to the devotion he pays in using most painstaking and precise artistic techniques and, last but not least, thanks to the statements of the models themselves. Unlike the hypocrisy of human society, which only reserved exclusion to this kind of people, Witkin’s models have always declared that they were treated with most gentleness and dignity when they worked for the artist and that they felt they were really valued.

A meaningful example of the photographic art of Joel-Peter Witkin should be (particularly for its coincidence with the medical leitmotiv of the previous sub-sections of this paper), the 1987 composition entitled *Un Santo Oscuro* (An Obscure Saint). Witkin discovered in a shabby hotel of the United States of America a little weird monster, faceless and armless, who was living in a wheelchair. At first sight, all he could see was “this kind of plastic head” and “this little body” that will be also shown in the final image processed by the art photographer (Fig. 5, Fig. 6). When they started to talk, Witkin found out that

[T]his man was a Thalidomide victim. He was Canadian. His mother took Thalidomide, and he was born without skin, without arms or legs, without hair,

eyelashes or eyelids. Early on, from the time he was a child, he was the subject of ridicule and curiosity and wanted by side-shows and freak-shows. I talked about how I wanted to photograph him. I wanted to photograph him as clerics would have been depicted, mostly in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Spain, as martyrs, and I told this man that he was a martyr to life. (Witkin, qtd in *A World History of Art*)

It was most probably that Spanish parallel the reason why the artist chose to give his work the Spanish title *Un Santo Oscuro*. In order to better emphasize the idea of martyrdom, he accompanied the almost inhuman and also kind, uncomplaining figure of his hero with the signs of outward aggression and violence: an axe cleaves his hairless head, a knife stabs him in one of his shoulder stubs, a monstrous prosthesis, instead of helping him, stabs his breastbone with a spear. The irony of such an appearance is that the artist met this disfigured sick man in Los Angeles, the world capital of beauty and human shallowness, and also the ultimate centre of aesthetic surgery.

At the beginning of the 21st century, a film like *Freaks* has modern avatars in the new production of *freak shows* that continues, under hypocritical neo-humanist pretexts, to speculate the same trivial interest of the masses towards body monstrosity. A paradigmatic example would be the American series *Nip/Tuck*, simply defined by a fan as “the biggest freakin’ show ever”. A careful analysis of this so-called *medical drama* could easily prove that the *freak show* dimension of the series is not at all incidental, and does not stand for some genuine humanistic intentions either. If anything, they still could not resist any comparison to forms of art like the one practised by Joel-Peter Witkin, and neither could be placed in the proximity of respectable testimonies of victims, like the case of Niko von Glasow. The purpose of a media production like *Nip/Tuck* is only one: get rating by all means.

And the result is unquestionable: under the false pretence of a “medical” gaze, the people of the 21st century are invited to watch everything that an entire century of persistent education tried to teach them not to do.

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