

## Filip Herza

filipherza@gmail.com

Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Humanities, Charles-University in Prague

### **Freakshow and the Imaginations of the Collective Body of Nation.\***

#### **Popular Culture in East-Central Europe before WWI**

*Come and see, you won't regret -you will find – what you've never met*

*Round the world this journey leads – Vršovice, Popowitz*

*Come and see, without a fee, the fattiest lady, just for free*

*Come and see without a cash, nothing's rubber, all is flesh<sup>1</sup>*

Slogans of this kind, alluring people to come visit commercial exhibitions of the so called “abnormities” or “freaks,” could be heard in most of the European cities throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and, more scarcely, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> My aim in this paper is to introduce the exhibitions of the then called “Giants”, “Lilliputians”, “Conjoined twins” and other “freaks” as an institutionalised social practice, which was a specific part of the changing terrain of the popular entertainment industry of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the first part of the essay, I briefly describe the transformations of the different forms of freakshow exhibitions, beginning with the early 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of fairs, up to the mass entertainment institutions that emerged in the 1880s-1890s. In the latter part of this paper, my aim is more ambitious: Examining two particular cases from the Prague’s freakshow tradition, I’ll try to demonstrate how the popular representations of “abnormities“ could be critically grasped in order to understand their ideological work in defining the collective body of the Czech nation, as imagined by the liberal middle-classes of the

---

\* \* This essay is a part of my dissertation project, supported by the Charles-University Scholarship Agency (GAUK), project *Imaginations of Bodily Otherness and Pragues Freakshow Culture 1850-1930* nr. 838214. My thanks go also to Michaela Appeltová, who helped me read through the first draft of this paper.

1 „*Sem se pojd'te podívatí nebudete litovati / co zde všechno uhlídáte, ani poněti nemáte / Zde je kolem světa cesta, Vršovice jiná města / Kdo navštíví naši panorámu, ukážeme zdarma tlustou dámu / Která tady v extra kabinetu, zazpívá vám něco hned při flašinetu... /Všecko živé je, nic voskového / všecko pravé a nic gumového / Pojd'te z civilu i z militéru, je to zdarma na mou věru / Děti vojsko platí polovic a kdo nemá drobné nedá nic.*“ A satirical allusion on Pragues freakshows in: *Liliputánské divadlo, komické duetto pro pány od Bachmanna a Frankla, Švábovy hudební humoristické listy* nr. 39., ca. 1910. (Translation F.H.)

2 Note on the use of language: Throughout the essay I make use of the expressions such as “Giants”, “Lilliputians”, “Amazons” and others, which are nowadays considered offensive. By using inverted commas, whenever I use these words, I try to indicate their problematic, ideologic nature. There is nothing “monstrous” on some bodies, and “normal” on the others. These categories are mostly contested, ambiguous and need to be deciphered in their ideological context – which is the goal of this essay. The expressions freakshow and ethnographic exhibition denote the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century exhibitions of the so called “freaks”, respectively “savages”, organised for amusement of their audiences and profit of their impresarios and exhibits-performers themselves. Since these are expressions that are widely used in contemporary discussions (See Robert Bogdan 1988; Garland-Tomson 1996, 1997 and below in this essay) I use these expressions without inverted commas.

late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This brief theoretical suggestion, should demonstrate and underscore the interconnectedness of popular, political and expert discourses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – particularly in their focus on the human body and on the imagined national collectivity, as characterised by distinct corporeal gender and racial traits.

## **Transformations of the Prague’s freakshow tradition**

The tradition of exhibiting people claimed to be “different” in Prague reaches to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Herza 2012: 15, 25). Featuring mostly a small number of “abnormal“ bodies, these early exhibitions were organised in pubs, on the streets and at the popular fairgrounds such as Matějská or Josefská pouť (St. Matheus and St. Joseph fair), addressing predominantly the “common folk” of Prague (Míka 2008). As some personal testimonies document, character of these exhibitions remained unchanged circa till the 1870s.<sup>3</sup>

Notable transformation of the freakshow tradition came in the last two decades of the century, following a general shift in the entertainment industry. The rapid social changes, industrialisation and the growth of the city of Prague in the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century created a new broad audience of middle-class urbanites, who were – especially after the economic crisis of 1870s-1880s was over – willing to pay for being entertained. This led to the emergence of new forms of popular mass entertainment,<sup>4</sup> which in many cases adopted and transformed the older tradition of exhibiting the “corporeal otherness“.

Freakshow, which bore the stigma of folk entertainment, not suitable to middle-class taste had to transform itself in order to acquire the needed respectable status and thus to win the new middle class audiences. There were at least three possible ways how could the promoters of the freakshow re-package their product and sell it to the new consumers.

First way was to change the rhetoric of the exhibition. Instead of arousing shock and horror which were both part of the folk exhibitions, the promoters might switch to more humorous ways of framing the “abnormal bodies”. This move went hand in hand in preferring certain “types” of exhibits. A typical example would be, in this instance, the conjuncture of the “Lilliputian” exhibitions at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Herza 2012). Freakshow promoters allegedly saw the potential of the “miniature” bodies in the context of the middle-class society's orientation on child (Lenderová 2006) and thus developed certain aesthetics, which inscenated the “Lilliputians” as “cute” objects of admiration and maternal emotions (Merish 1996).

Another way to attract the new audiences was to frame the exhibition as a quasi scientific,

---

3 See the memories on the popular fairgrounds of 1870s in: (Herza 2012: 25-26).

4 The emergence of mass popular culture in Czech lands was described by Robert Kulmiński (Kulmiński 2009) and Jakub Machek (Machek 2013).

educational programme. As I shall demonstrate below on the tradition of the so called ethnographic exhibitions<sup>5</sup>, this led to a rich exchange between the newly emerging scientific disciplines and popular culture. Enduring contact between these two spheres affected the establishment of new scientific disciplines (anthropology, ethnography, medicine) as expert discourses, defined against the lay-popular discourses, but it also contributed to the dissemination of expert knowledge (racial theories, evolution theory) among the mass audiences<sup>6</sup>

Last but not least of the transformations of the freakshow culture was its incorporation into the newly emerging popular entertainment forms, where “freaks” appeared alongside other entertaining “specialities“. One of these new entertainment forms was represented by the Theatre Varieté. Offering literally a variety of entertainment forms – music, dance, magicians and circus acts – one following another in a series of rapidly changing scenes, this new type of entertainment institution well suited the sensibilities of the new urban citizens, characterised by Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel by fragmentarity, rapid pace of life, volatility and hunger for new.<sup>7</sup> Theatre Varieté, modelled after similar venues in Paris, was brought to Prague by entrepreneur Eduard Tichý and was established in Karlín in the year 1881 (Novotný 2001). In its “specialities programme“ (*divadlo specialit*), Varieté featured some of the most famous central European “freak” performers, such as the “armless fiddler“ Carl Hermann Unthan<sup>8</sup> or the famous Czech “conjoined twins“ Rosa and Josefa Blažek. Emerging cabaret and revue scene of the turn of the century later took up the model of “specialities programme”, while giving it more political, satirical edge. “Freaks” kept on appearing also on various cabaret stages, of which witnesses, for instance the programme of Cabaret U Lhotků, which featured freaks also in the last years before the First World War.<sup>9</sup>

Another form of presenting “abnormal” bodies in the 1890s was the so called Panopticons, whose tradition actually reaches to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Jordán 2007). These were mostly travelling enterprises, which framed their exhibitions as quasi scientific educational displays, presenting wax figurines of famous individuals (Characters from Bible, members of the imperial Habsburg family) alongside various anatomical models of human body and technical novelties (predominantly visual stereoscopic media such as Camera obscura or Kaiserpanorama). The exhibitions thus offered moral and patriotic education, sexual and hygienic enlightenment and, f.e. by presenting figurines of infamous murderers, also commented on actual events happening in the urban space. Some of these exhibitions then combined the wax models with live “freaks acts”, which was the case of panoptikum Kosmos (*Traberovo panoptikum Kosmos*), which took place on one of the Prague’s

---

5 For a definition as well as overview about the ethnographic exhibition, see (Blanchard at. al. 2012).

6 The general relationship between the discourses of anthropology and freakshow describes (Lange 2003) and (Zimmerman 2010). For the role of freakshow in disseminating the theory of evolution see (Durbach 2010: 89-114).

7 For more on the Varieté and Cabaret tradition see (Jensen 1990) and (Jelavich 1993).

8 On Carl Hermann Unthan in Czech context see (Storchová 2011).

9 See for instance a leaflet for the performance of „Giant“ Machnow at Cabaret U Lhotků. Muzeum hlavního města Prahy, inv. nr. MMP H 103486.

main avenues, Ferdinandova třída (today's Národní třída) around the year 1900 (Herza 2012: 35-36). Kosmos allegedly presented around 1000 wax figurines, supported by the live acts of “exotic-abnormal” performers such as the Permal and Permaloo – a conjoined men from India,<sup>10</sup> an Indian midget Jamagato or an abnormally fat 4-year old child Marie Jouzková, from the village of Selce.<sup>11</sup>

Now, how should we, as scholars, conceptualise this, from our perspective rather peculiar social practice, in order to grasp its significance in the modernizing society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century? In the following argument, I make use of the concepts coming from the critical culture and disability studies discourse<sup>12</sup>: namely the concept of extraordinary body and the intersectional approach.

The concept of extraordinary body was introduced by Rosemary Garland Thomson in her 1997 book on the tradition of American freakshows (Garland-Thomson 1997). She thinks of the freak body as an ideological construct, created through special representational practices. A construction, which is shaped by different ideological discourses, reinforces individual and collective identities as defined by their relation to the notion of bodily normality, and thus legitimizes social hierarchies based on the imaginations of the body. An appropriate analytical approach to disentangle the complex ideological nexus of extraordinary body then is the intersectional approach, which is widely discussed in the contemporary gender and postcolonial studies (Raab 2010, 2012, Storchová 2011). Its critical potential rests in its urge to interrogate the interdependencies of different axes of difference (race, class, gender, normality or heterosexuality) present in particular historical representations of “Otherness”, against which the dominant subject of the modern European society emerges.

In the following, I will thus first characterise the ideological context in which the presentations of extraordinary body in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Prague took place, to later concentrate on two particular cases. Both of them should serve here as examples of the exchange between popular and scientific domain, and, at the same time, serve as suggestions for how the “freak” body could be interpreted within the 1890s Czech nationalist discourses.

---

10 Doppeplmensch – poster, Muzeum hlavního města Prahy, inv. nr. 42564-1-2.

11 Panoptikum Kosmos, Pražský ilustrovaný kurýr 41/1900, p.3.

12 For an introduction to disability studies and its application on history see (Bösl - Klein - Waldschmidt 2010).

## Body, ethnicity and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism

The context of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century freakshow culture was to a great extent shaped by the rapid success of natural sciences, and by the emergence of racial anthropology, which markedly influenced national discourses in the 1880s-1890s Europe.

Lennard Davis has shown that the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed the emergence of the concept of the “normal” body, defined as the average in the statistically measured population. While a putatively neutral scientific concept, the definition of the “normal” was in fact an ideological construct enacted by (or that represented) the bourgeoisie. The average position was praised as the moral and political ideal, and thus supported the power claims of the liberal middle-classes (Davis 2012). The “others” - aristocracy, peasantry and before all, the emerging working classes - were on the other hand described in terms of degeneracy, backwardness and pathology, and became targets of the different forms of discipline, social hygiene, and later eugenics (Hobsbawm 1989: 252; Davis 2012)

A prominent role in this move toward normality had the discourse of anthropology, which established itself as a professional scientific discipline in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and which defined itself mostly as an empirical, natural science of men. Anthropologists brought not only insight into the physical, corporeal nature of their societies and its biological history but also contributed to the legitimisation of social hierarchies on putatively biological basis. Comparing different societies around the world, at least some of them took up the earlier 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century racial theories (Mosse 2006, Bancel-David-Thomas 2014) and transformed them into new racial hierarchies, legitimizing colonial rule of the West over the rest of the world. The knowledge of demographers, statisticians and anthropologists, together projected the dominant subject of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century bourgeois politics as middle class - “able- bodied”, “white” and - we should add - male.<sup>13</sup>

This ideological move affected also new forms of nationalism that appeared after 1870 (Hobsbawm 1989), the Czech national movement included. During the last decades of the century, there was a transformation of the very idea and image of the Czech nation, which was originally derived from the romantic tradition of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The older generation of philologists and historians (such as František Palacký), who formed the conservative fraction of the Czech National Party (Staročesí) was in the course of the 1880s-1890s gradually replaced by the more radical liberal fraction (Mladočeši) represented mostly by life scientists (turn it around and make an active voice sentence, it will sound better). The new political generation, represented by for example Eduard

---

13 On the middle class subject and normality see (Davis 2012). On the intersections and interdependencies of race and disability see (Raab 2012: 6; Garland-Thomson 2012: 366). On the masculine character of the norm and intersections between femininity and disability see (Garland-Thomson 1997, 2012: 365) and essays of Swantje Köbsel and Heike Raab in: (Jacob - Köbsell - Wollrad 2010).

Grégr (who was trained as physician and conducted craniometrical research) and Karel Sladkovský (natural scientist and supporter of darwinism) (Gabriel 1987, p. 12), promoted new, aggressive nationalism, based on the biological- and racial- conception of nation (Urban, 2003, p. 235). It is in this more radical, middle-class liberal politics, where, according to recent historians of Czech nationalism<sup>14</sup>, a certain image of the collective body of the nation appears. It is an image of a nation imagined as an organism, whose survival in the struggle between other nations/organisms relies on its strength and procreative potential. As I argue, this biopolitical, socio-Darwinist image of the nation projected by the Czech scientific and political elites was based on particular notion of race (and racial hierarchy) and also on the notion of bodily normality (that is able-bodiedness).

In the next two chapters, I will briefly introduce two particular cases from the Prague's 1890s freakshow tradition, both of which - each in its specific way – elicit the main points of my argument. Firstly, each of them demonstrates a particular case of the exchange between the spheres of popular-entertainment culture and science, and secondly, each of them could be linked to one of the aspects of the imagined body of the Czech nation as it emerged in the last few years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I therefore (provocatively) entitled them as: “The Colour of the National Body” and the “Proportion of the National Body”.

---

14 See the works of (King 2002), (Cohen 2006) and (Zahra 2008).

## Gutta, the “Dahomey Amazon“ - or - The Colour of the National Body

As the title evokes, my first example points to the role of race in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century freakshow and imaginings of the collective body of a nation, which I would like to demonstrate on the tradition of the so called ethnographic exhibitions in Prague.

“People of colour“ played a dominant role in the freakshow spectacles already at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. However, it was in the last quarter of the century that the model of the so called “Human ZOO“ (*Völkerschau* in German) as a mass entertainment form, associated with entrepreneurs such as Carl Hagenbeck, emerged.<sup>15</sup> From the 1880s on, following the outbreak of the “Scramble for Africa“, these shows were often casted by performers of African origin. This was also the case of the group of the so called “Dahomey Amazons“, which was brought to Prague by an entrepreneur John Hood in September 1892, the year in which the second Franco-Dahomean War broke out in Western-Africa.<sup>16</sup> At the time that the group set up its camp on one of the islands (*Střelecký ostrov / Schützinsel*) in the *Moldau (Vltava)* river, the Prague audiences were already familiar with the form of exotic-ethnographic exhibition. The famous traveller Emil Holub (1847-1902), whose 1892 African Exhibitions in Prague was visited by nearly two hundred thousand visitors (Šámal 2013) played a decisive role in making the “exotic” known to Prague citizens.

Holub’s exhibitions, which served as a means for raising money for his next expeditions, represent an example of an intensive exchange between, as well as the negotiation of, the ambiguous lines between the expert and lay-popular spheres. The exhibition was presented as a scientific educational display, it nevertheless had a commercial aspect (to collect money), and, above all, its form was derived from the older tradition of popular panopticons of wax figurines (see above). The 1892 ethnographic exhibition of „Amazons“, posits a similar example (even though it had its specificities). The Dahomean exhibition was organised in the form of a native village, with a few straw cottages built on the *Střelecký* island – a popular pastime spot with a beer-garden located basically in the centre of the city. There was a fixed performance programme in the “village”, consisting of warrior songs and dances, battle exercises and a simulation of a fight, which the 27 female and 7 male performers repeated several times a day.<sup>17</sup> During the breaks between the performances, the audience could freely walk through the village, observe the life of Dahomeans or – when they dared – talk to them. A printed guide to the exhibition, which was distributed in exchange for a small change to every visitor, instructed the audience what to look at, how to

---

15 For an overview about the U.S. and European human Zoos, see (Blanchard 2012), specifically for Austro-Hungarian Empire see (Schwarz 2001). On Carl Hagenbeck see (Ames 2008).

16 For more about the Franco-Dahomean Wars see (Hargreaves 1980).

17 Guide to the Exhibition: *Amazonky. Kratičkový nástin o zemi a obyvatelstvu černošské říše Dahomeji*, Tiskem Antonína Rennna – Nákladem Johna Hooda, Praha 1892, p. 1. Archiv Národního muzea v Praze. The practice of providing printed guides to the exhibition was common among every ethnographical show throughout Europe, see (Schwarz 2001, Ames 2008, Blanchard 2012).

interpret what they saw, and framed the visit as a quasi ethnographic experience.<sup>18</sup> Both the spectacle and the guide posited the audience as an ethnographer, i.e. a (supposedly) neutral beholder, observing and classifying the people on display. The main criteria of classification – as suggested by the guide – were one of race (*plémě*)<sup>19</sup> and the level of civilisation (*civilizace*). The guide described the Dahomeans accordingly, as one of the most developed African races, as supposedly proved by their good physical appearance. Nevertheless, they were still portrayed as savages, whose lack of civilisation implicated superstitiousness, political despotism, and the lack of what the guide described as ordinary family relations, i.e. the very opposite of the European middle-class norms. As the newspaper articles from the period indicated, at least part of audience appropriated this “ethnographic gaze“ and pondered the issue of Dahomeans, using the concepts from the racial theory of the time – such as the concept of „Ethiopian race“ (*Plémě etiopské*)<sup>20</sup>. Amazons were also, in accordance with the racial ethnography of the time, portrayed as supposedly less developed people, which was repeatedly achieved by the use of the trope of childish, careless native – which is to be ruled and protected by the patronising, white, civilised men.<sup>21</sup>

Beside race and the level of civilisation, gender was another object of the “scientific - ethnographic gaze” forwarded to the audiences at the popular exhibition. A form of popular entertainment served here as a mean of naturalisation and dissemination of certain image of respectable middle-class femininity. This was achieved by inscenating the deviation of the dominant Western norm. Given that Dahomeans performed as Amazons – i.e. female warriors, who should served as the life-guard of the Dahomean King and fought against the French colonial army – they embodied confusion of the normative gender roles. As *Národní listy* pointed out, “Amazons” were cruel warriors, who spend the peace time: “...*playing different competitive games, chewing tobacco and getting drunk from day to day.*“<sup>22</sup> The performance of Amazons (and their representations in the contemporary media) thus negatively defined the respectable middle-class female (and implicitly also male) subject and secured it's borders by pointing to the monstrous aspects of its transgression.

Moreover, the issue of racially distinct femininity/masculinity was connected with certain notion of corporeal characteristics of the “white”, respectively “coloured” body. In the second half

---

18 Guide to the Exhibition: *Amazonky. Kratičkový nástin o zemi a obyvatelstvu černošské říše Dahomeji*, Tiskem Antonína Renna – Nákladem Johna Hooda, Praha 1892, Archiv Národního muzea v Praze.

19 The Czech concept of *plémě* pointed to various referents in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Beside the species of animals (*zvířecí plémě*), family lines and societies in general, it's use coincided also with the concept of race. See for example the definition of *plémě* in *Ottův slovník naučný*, the entry Human (*Člověk*) which introduces racial classifications of Friedrich Blumenbach and other theoreticists of race: *Ottův slovník naučný. Ilustrovaná encyklopedie obecných vědomostí*. Volume VI. 1893, Praha: J. Otto, p. 792-793.

20 The concept of „Ethiopian Race“ was introduced by German racial theoreticist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840). However it remains unclear if the author of the newspaper account related relied directly on Blumenbach, or whether the expression denotated simply a “black“ person. Original source: *Amazonky z Dahomeje v Praze*, *Národní listy*, 11.9. 1892, p. 4.

21 On the tropes of savagery and representations of race in general see (Hall 2010).

22 “...v čase míru provádějí všelijaké válečné hry, žvýkají tabák a opíjejí se ze dne na den“ in: *Národní listy* 24.7.1885 (odpol.), p. 2.

of September 1892, the audiences and the press eagerly observed the case of one of the female members of the group called Gutta, who died of typhus on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September, supposedly after having a bath in the Moldau river.<sup>23</sup> The question behind this, and many other historically documented cases of exotic people, who died in the Western world while touring as exhibits-performers, might be following: is the “coloured body” able to acclimatise in to various conditions? And is it therefore able to travel?<sup>24</sup>

The question of acclimatisation was clearly of utmost importance not only to the colonial entrepreneurs and imperial officials, whose aim was the effective exploitation of the workforce of the colonial subjects. The notion of “weakness” of the coloured body reinforced the colonial hierarchy by assigning certain physical qualities to the “white” body – the *ability* to acclimatise in different conditions and thus to travel – and *dis-abled* the “coloured” ones. The colonial discourses thus associated the “black” body with pathology, or disability in broader sense, and in the same move legitimised the imperial hierarchy built upon the seemingly objective biological basis.



*Illustrace 1: Postcard from a 1893 Dahomean exhibition in London, Crystal Palace. Although remains unclear if it was the identical Dahomean group, it's stage-stylisation, number of children performers and even the usage of stage-names corresponds with the group that visited Prague in 1892. source: private online postcard collection <http://www.jeffreygreen.co.uk/098-amazon-warriors-from-dahomey-1893>*

23 *Smrt Amazonky z Dahomeje v Praze*, Národní listy 20.9. 1892, p. 3.

24 See the discussion about acclimatisation in (Schwarz 2011: 21-22).

To summarize the case. The popular ethnographic exhibitions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century staged a particular encounter between the members of European and non-European societies, which was framed as a quasi scientific enterprise, with the former observing and describing the latter. The preferred descriptions combined the racial theory of the time with the middle class notion of normative femininity/masculinity and with the belief of corporeal inferiority of the non-Europeans and thus produced a figure of “the other,” against which the normal self of the audience could emerge. Although the dominant self that was being produced in this case was a general European, “white” self – acquired by the audiences irrespective of the fact if they identified themselves as German, Czech or neither of these – those who wrote about the Dahomeyans from the nationalists positions (or visited the exhibition) implicitly situated the Czech national collective among the civilised nation of the World and thus defined the Czech national identity in terms of the able-bodiedness and through distinct – “white” – racial traits.

### **Josef Drásal and the development of Czech Anthropology – or – The proportion of the national body**

If in the first case, I tried to demonstrate how the popular entertainment industry benefited from appropriating some of the elements from of the expert discourses, my second case points to the ways in which conversely the expert institutions exploited the presentational forms that originated in the popular-entertainment sphere. And again, the case should demonstrate one of the characteristics of the imagined body of the Czech nation, in this instance, its proportions.

Josef Drásal (1841-1886), born in Chromeč in central Moravia, performed for the most of his life as a “Giant“. As many other individuals, performing as “Giants” in this period, Drásal was always shown, home and abroad, exclusively in a folk costume. Far from being a passionate Moravian patriot, as many contemporary authors hurried to accentuate, Drásal adopted for himself a common representational pattern, commonly used in entertainment industry of the time for presenting people of “giant height“. Most of the European “Giant” performers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century were claimed to have come from some mountainous, rather backward rural regions – predominantly from the Tyrol (Austria) – or from the “oriental” East (Russia, China). The giant body thus played on various contemporary imaginations and national-colonial discourses, merging together images of “oriental” and “exotic” people with that of the “underdeveloped”, “backward” peasants.



*Illustrace 2: Cabinet photography of Josef Drásal (author: Atelier Carl Dittrich in Dresden). Source: Moravian Museum Olomouc (<http://www.vmo.cz/rubriky/akce-a-vystavy/oblecme-obra-drasala/>) Note the contrast between the folk costume of Drásal and the noble middle-class dress of the other figure.*

Leaving aside the representations of figure of Drasal as represented while he was touring Europe alive, I would like to focus on his afterlife, precisely on his “presence“ on the 1895 Czechoslavic Ethnographic exhibition 1895 in Prague, where he was presented in a form of life-scale wax figurine.

As the recent research shows (Brouček 1996, Stübner 2009, Filipová 2011), the complex of the great exhibitions of the 1890s in Prague, could be interpreted as a series of nation-constructing performative acts, to be read in the context of the socio-political struggles of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Habsburg Monarchy.<sup>25</sup> However, what seems rather neglected in the previous research, as I argue, is the fact, that the 1895 Ethnographic exhibition was about to construct and offer a new conception of the Czech nation and Czech nationality, defined in terms of ethnicity and also in terms of a particular corporeality. Apart of displaying only the classical items of traditional folkloristic gatherings – albeit on a previously unimaginable scale and in a quite a new form of presentation – a part of the exhibition was designated to the search for the biological characteristics of the Czech nation. This task was to be entrusted to the anthropologists – in this particular case, to Jindřich Matiegka (1862-1941) a physician, who would later become one of the founders of the Czech anthropological tradition (Malý 1949; Janko 1997). His anthropological display in the main exhibition palace, was to unveil the people from their different regional folk costumes and demonstrate the ethnic homogeneity of the population of Czech lands, centred around the so called Czech „ethnic type“.

Matiegka’s exhibition was divided into three parts. The first part examined the present biological characteristics of the national collective, the second provided a peek into the biological history of the Czech race (*české plémě*), and the last part evaluated the present national body from the perspective of national biopolitics. That is, it focused on the viability, strenght and fruitfulness of its population.<sup>26</sup> The search for the Czech “ethnic type“, i.e. the biological identity of nation, was undertaken by two compatible methods: by statistically measuring the national body and by comaprng the it with other nations.

As for the measuring of the national body, the exhibition itself preceded a notewhorthy activity of the organizers, who encouraged Czech elementary school teachers to measure Czech children and to send the acquired data over to Prague.<sup>27</sup> According to Matiegka, the call had an

---

25 For the role of the exhibitions in European culture in general see (Mitchell 1989). For the role of exhibition in imperial context see (Hoffenberg 2001) and (Kember- Plunkett – Sullivan 2012). For another national-building contexts see (Della Coletta 2006) and (Novikova 2013).

26 See Matiegka’s contribution to the monography about the exhibition: Emanuel Kovář (ed.). 1895. *Národopisná výstava Československá 1895*, Praha: J. Otto, p. 68-76.

27 Unfortunately less is known about this measurementscampaign in contemporary historiography. Further research is therefore needed to elicit all aspects of Matiegka's activities in the 1890s and to interpret it's meaning in

enormous success, since the teachers got data from about 100 000 schoolchildren and about 6 000 adults.<sup>28</sup> Based on these measurements (and on the measurements of skulls from different ossuaries in Bohemian lands) the “Czech type” was defined as having generally average corporeal measures, and medium characteristics. Matiegka himself summarised these characteristics as following:

*”The Czech type is nowadays characterised by medium body height (169,2 cm men, 157,3 cm women), balanced shape, short skull (index 83'3), oval face of medium size, brown or dark brown hair and blue or brown eyes.”*<sup>29</sup>

As the exhibition demonstrated on comparative material, based on these bodily traits, the Czechs were different from the long- skulled Germans, Jews and particularly from the Roma people – who were by Matiegka described as having smaller skull (and, therefore, inevitably a lower intellect). Still, despite the differences from the Germans, the Czech type was not described as much different to the other European nations and – according to Matiegka – belonged among the „*Europeans of the Aryan origin*“.<sup>30</sup>

Having in mind, that Matiegka defined the national identity in terms of bodily averageness - what was the place of Josef Drasal in the exhibition and why did his wax figurine belonged to “the most beloved items” in the collection – as Matiegka himself put it?<sup>31</sup>

The popularity of this particular item in the display obviously rested on the fact, that Drásal was a famous freak exhibit, allegedly well known among the audiences (died 1886, just few years before the exhibition).<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, I argue, that it might be also the form of wax figurine itself, that brought Drasal the attention of the visitors. As an opposite to the expert-made maps and skull-collections that might not be really intelligible for the lay audiences, the wax figurine was something familiar, something that people knew from the popular entertainment culture.

Moreover, the wax figurine was installed in the way, that it inscenated particular kind of experience. Each of the visitors to the anthropological display had to pass across the figurine and measure his or her own body against the excessive measures of Drásal. As I argue, this experience played an important role in the way people interpreted and experienced what the experts presented to them.

---

the light of Tara Zahra's insights into the battle over Czech/ German children in 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Century Bohemia. See (Zahra 2008).

28 Emanuel Kovář (ed.). 1895. *Národopisná výstava Československá 1895*, Praha: J. Otto, p. 68.

29 „*Nynější typ český: střední výška těla (169,2 cm u muže, 157,3 u ženy), proporcionální vzrůst, krátká lebka (index 83,3), oválný obličej středních rozměrů jak v celku tak v jednotlivých částech, hnědý nebo tmavohnědý vlas, modré nebo hnědé oči.*“ in: Emanuel Kovář (ed.). 1895. *Národopisná výstava Československá 1895*, Praha: J. Otto, p. 71.

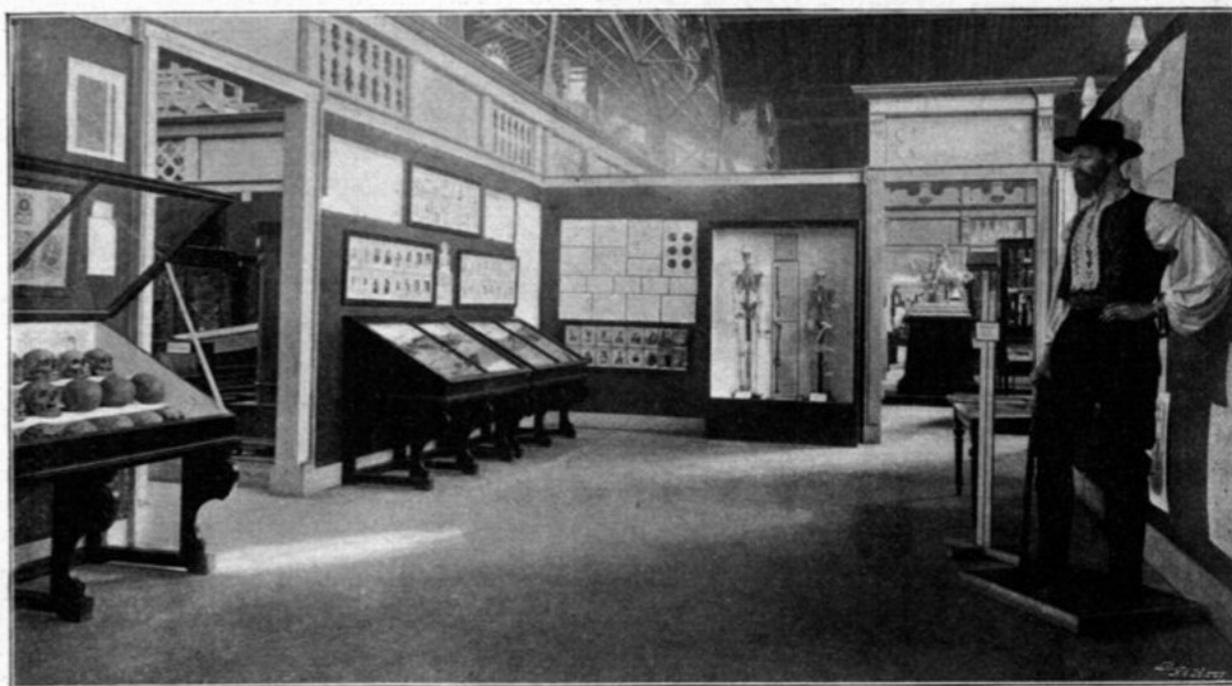
30 „*Jak zkoumání kostí v kostnicích dokázalo, jeví obyvatelstvo českých zemí průměrné proporce a délky údů Evropanů árijského původu*“ in: Emanuel Kovář (ed.). 1895. *Národopisná výstava Československá 1895*, Praha: J. Otto, p. 70.

31 *Ibid*, p. 71.

32 See: Jaroslav Kvěch, *Český olbrím na Národopisné výstavě československé*, Světozor, 38/1895, s. 450-451.

The figurine of Drásal stood in the display as an excess, against which the normal body height (which was marked on a measuring stick, next to the figurine) emerged. By comparing itself with the “abnormal” Drásal and with the “normal” size of Czech population, every visitor might experience his/her body against the bodily norm and experience being part of a nation as defined by certain corporeal traits.

Nevertheless, both the personal story of Drásal as freak performer, most certainly known to many visitors, and also the context in which the wax figurine was displayed, could – as I believe – lead also to another associations. The figure of the “Giant“, traditionally associated with miraculous appetite and limitless strength,<sup>33</sup> could for instance be read within the biopolitical notions of nation. The “Giant” figure in a *folk costume* might thus represent the strength and viability of the national body. Indeed, it seems that the figure of Drasal as “the Czech Giant“ (*Český olbřím*)<sup>34</sup> was to some extent incorporated into the national discourse. Many contemporary commentators would write in the newspaper of the time, talking about „our Giant Drasal“ and comparing his height with that of the tallest men of the other European nations in a quasi international competition.<sup>35</sup>



Pohled do oddělení anthropologického.

Dle fotografie Otty Večerníka, žena K. Č. F. A.

*Ilustrace 3: Look into the anthropological display of Czechoslovak Ethnographic exhibition. Note the wax-figurine of Drasal and the demonstration of average height on the right side. Author of the photography: Otta Večerník. Source: Emanuel Kovář (ed.). 1895. Národopisná výstava Československá 1895, Praha: J. Otto, p. 74.*

33 Compare with (Huff 2008).

34 Jaroslav Kvěch, *Český olbřím na Národopisné výstavě československé*, Světozor, 38/1895, s. 450-451.

35 *Ibid*, p. 451.

To sum up. The case of the figurine of Josef Drasal on Matiegka's anthropological display indicates, that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the experts from newly emerging disciplines (in this case anthropology) took over some of the forms of display that originated in commercial and entertainment sphere, and adopted them for their own purposes. These forms, which were intelligible for the lay audience enabled the anthropologists to comprehensibly present their ideas about the biological nature of the Czech nation. The confrontation of the audience with the “excessive” figure of Drásal moreover allowed the visitors experience their bodies against the notion of bodily normality and experience belonging to the nation, defined by the anthropologists as a distinct biological entity.

## Literature

- Ames, Eric. 2008. *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Bancel, Nicolas; David, Thomas; Thomas, Dominic. 2014. *The Invention of Race. Scientific and Popular Representations*. New York: Routledge.
- Blanchard, Pascal; Bancel, Nicolas; Boëtsch, Gilles; Deroo, Eric; Lemaire, Sandrine. 2012. *MenschenZoos. Schaufenster der Unmenschlichkeit*. Hamburg: La editions du Crieur Public.
- Bogdan, Robert. 1988. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bösl, Elsbeth; Klein, Anne; Waldschmidt, Anne (eds.). 2010. *Disability History. Konstruktion von Behinderung in der Geschichte: Eine Einführung*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Brouček, Stanislav. 1996. *Národopisná výstava československá a česká společnost*, in: Brouček, Stanislav; Pargač, Jan; Sochorová, Ludmila; Štěpánová, Irena. *Mýtus českého národa aneb Národopisná výstava československá 1895*, Praha, p. 7-30.
- Cohen, G. 2006. *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914*, W. Lafayette: Purdue University Press.
- Davis, Lennard J., 2012. *Konstrukty normality: Gaussova křivka, román a vynález „postiženého těla“ v 19. století*. s. 71 - 103 in: Kolářová, Kateřina (ed.): *Jinakost, postižení, kritika*. Praha: SLON.
- Della Coletta, C. 2006. *World's Fairs Italian Style: The Great Exhibitions in Turin And Their Narratives, 1860-1915*, Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.
- Durbach, Nadja. 2010. *Spectacle of deformity: freak shows and modern British culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Filipová, H. 2011. *Peasants on Display: the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895*. *Journal of Design History*, 24: 1 .
- Gabriel, Jiří. 1987. *Pronikání darwinismu do českých zemí*, Sborník prací Filosofické fakulty Brněnské univerzity – Studia Minora Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Brunensis, B 34, p. 7-18.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie (ed.). 1996. *Freakery. Culture spectacles of the extraordinary body*, New York.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 1997. *Extraordinary bodies. Figuring physical disability in american culture and literature*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 2002. *Začlenění kritické analýzy ne/způsoblosti jako cesta k proměně feministické teorie* in: Kolářová, Kateřina (ed.): *Jinakost, postižení, kritika*. Praha: SLON.
- Hall, Stuart (ed.). 2010. *Representations: cultural representations and signifying practices*, London:

Sage.

Hargreaves, John D. 1980. *The French Conquest of Dahomey*, History Today 3/30.

Herza, Filip. 2012. *Liliputáni: Reprezentace tělesné „odlišnosti“ v tradici pražských „přehlídek lidských kuriozit“ 1820-1940*. Unpublished MA thesis, Prague, FHS UK.

Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1989. *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, London, Cardinal.

Hoffenberg, P. 2001. *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Huff, Joyce L. 2008. *Freaklore. The Dissemination, Fragmentation and Reinvention of the Legend of Daniel Lambert, King of Fat Men*. In: Tromp, Marlene. *Victorian Freaks. The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*. Columbus: The Ohio State University. p. 37-59.

Jacob, Jutta; Köbsell Swantje; Wollrad, Eske (Eds.). 2010. *Gendering Disability. Intersektionale Aspekte von Behinderung und Geschlecht*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

Janko, Jan. 1997. *Vědy o životě v českých zemích 1750-1950*. Praha: Archiv Akademie věd České republiky.

Jelavich, Peter. 1993. *Berlin Cabaret*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Jensen, Wolfgang. 1990. *Das Varieté, Die glanzvolle Geschichte einer unterhaltenden Kunst*. Beiträge zu Theater, Film und Fernsehen aus dem Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der Freien Universität Berlin, Band 5. Berlin: Hentrich.

Jordán, Hanuš. 2007. *Lidové kabiny doktora Caligariho*, Divadelní noviny, roč. 16, nr.15, p.10.

Kember, J., J. Plunkett, J. A. Sullivan. 2012. *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840- 1910*, London: Pickering & Chatto.

King, Jeremy. 2002. *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kulmiński, Robert, 2009. *Źródła czeskiej kultury masowej – zarys zjawiska*, „Pamiętnik słowiański”, zeszyt 1.

Lange, Britta. 2003. *„Ächtes und Unächtes”. Zur Ökonomie des Abnormalen als Täuschung*. p. 214-234 in: Petra Lutz, Thomas Macho, Gisela Staupe, Heike Zirten (eds.): *Der [im-]perfekte Mensch. Metamorphosen von Normalität und Abweichung*. Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden in Zusammenarbeit mit der Aktion Mensch, Berlin: Böhlau.

Lenderová, Milena; Rýdl, Karel. 2006. *Radostné dětství?: dítě v Čechách devatenáctého století*. Praha: Paseka.

Machek, Jakub. 2013. *Počátky populární kultury v českých zemích na přelomu 19. a 20. století*. In: Daniel, O. – T. Kavka – J. Machek (Eds.). *Populární kultura v českém prostoru*. Praha: Karolinum, 2013, p. 88-104.

Malý, Jiří. 1949. *Jindřich Matiegka*. 1. vyd. Praha: Čes. akademie věd a umění.

- Merish, Lori. 1996. *Cuteness and Commodity aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple*, in: *Freakery. Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (ed.), New York – London, p. 185-203.
- Míka, Zdeněk. 2008. *Zábava a slavnosti staré Prahy: od konce 18. do počátku 20. století*, Praha.
- Mitchell, T. 1989. "World as Exhibition". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 31, No. 2. (Apr., 1989).
- Mosse, George L. 2006. *Die Geschichte des Rassismus in Europa*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.
- Novikova, Irina. 2013. *Imagining Africa and blackness in the Russian empire: from extra-textual arapka and distant cannibals to Dahomey shows – Live in Moscow and Riga*, *Social Identities*, Vol.19(5), Routledge 2013, p.571-591.
- Novotný, Antonín. 2001. *Karlínské divadlo Varieté*, Praha: Bystrov a synové.
- Raab, Heike, 2012. *Intersektionalität und Behinderung – Perspektiven der Disability Studies*, <http://portal-intersektionalitaet.de/theoriebildung/schluesstexte/raab/>.
- Raab, Heike, 2010. *Shifting the Paradigm: Behinderung, Heteronormativität und Queerness*, in: Jacob, Jutta, Köbsel, Swantje, Wollrad, Eske (eds.): *Gendering Disability, Intersektionale Aspekte von Behinderung und Geschlecht*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Schwarz, Werner Michael. 2001. *Anthropologische Spektakel. Zur Schaustellung „exotischer“ Menschen, Wien 1870-1910*, Wien: Turia+Kant.
- Storchová, Lucie. 2001. *Z našich neúplných těl vytryskovala chuť k práci. Gender, normalita a produktivita v autobiografickém psaní prvorepublikových „bezrukých zázraků“*, *Dějiny-teorie-kritika* 2/2011, Praha.
- Stübner, Jos. 2009. *Nationsbildung durch symbolische Interaktion. Der Besuch von Prager Ausstellungen um 1900 als Praxis nationaler Anerkennung*. *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 58, nr. 1-2, p. 33-76.
- Urban, Oto. 2003. *Kapitalismus a česká společnost*, Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.
- Šámal, Martin. 2013. *Emil Holub. Cestovatel – Etnograf – Sběratel*, Praha: Národní Muzeum-Vyšehrad.
- Zahra, Tara. 2008. *Kidnapped Souls : National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948*. Ithaca, NY, USA: Cornell University Press.
- Zimmerman, Andrew. 2010. *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.