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Ethnographic Showcases: Account and Vision

RAYMOND CORBEY

‘To see is to know’: this motto was attached to the anthropological exhibits of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, one of the many world fairs during the era of imperialism and colonialism (Rydell 1984: 44). At these gigantic exhibitions, staged by the principle colonial powers, the world was collected and displayed. Natives from a wide range of colonized cultures quickly became a standard part of most manifestations of this kind. Together with their artefacts, houses and even complete villages, so-called ‘savages’ or ‘primitives’ were made available for visual inspection by millions of strolling and staring Western citizens. Comparable places of spectacle such as zoos, botanical gardens, circuses, temporary or permanent exhibitions staged by missionary societies and museums of natural history, all exhibited other races and/or other species.

In this chapter, I shall put these ethnographic exhibits in the wider context of the collecting, measuring, classifying, picturing, filing and narrating of colonial Others during the heyday of colonialism.¹ All these modes of dealing with the exotic, with colonial Otherness, functioned in a context of European hegemony, testifying to the successful imperialist expansion of nineteenth-century nation-states and to the intricate connections that developed between scientific and political practices. Of course, I cannot bypass the historical changes and national differences in exhibitionary practices in the period under study – the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century – but I will concentrate on the similarities which in my view are predominant, arguing that it is possible to have a wide range of seemingly divergent modes of dealing with the Other within one single analytic field.

World fairs or international expositions were very large-scale happenings that combined features of trade and industrial fairs, carnival, music festivals, political manifestations, museums and art galleries. But primarily they were ‘pilgrimage sites of commodity fetishism’ as

Walter Benjamin (1984: 441) put it rather pointedly. The idea was to show progress in all fields – not only in industry, trade, and transportation but also in the arts, the sciences and culture. Meanwhile, there was no mention of poverty, sickness and oppression, or of social and international conflicts.

'Savages' on Show

Placed alongside all kinds of objects and products, colonial natives quickly became a standard part of world fairs, for the education and entertainment of Western citizens. Not only the citizens themselves but also the natives figured as categories in Western representations of self, as characters in the story of the ascent to civilization, depicted as the inevitable triumph of higher races over lower ones and as progress through science and imperial conquest. Often ethnologists were ahead of their times concerning interpretations of other cultures, but Charles Rau, for one, who created the ethnological exhibits at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876 on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, stated that 'the extreme lowness of our remote ancestors cannot be a source of humiliation; on the contrary, we should glory in our having advanced so far above them, and recognize the great truth that progress is the law that governs the development of mankind (see Rydell 1984: 24).

Two years later, the Paris world fair of 1878 was the first one in which many people from non-Western cultures were exhibited, in specially constructed pavilions and 'native villages'. The display of 400 natives from the French colonies met with huge success, as did the exhibits of indigenous peoples from Java, Samoa, Dahomey, Egypt and North America itself at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

Native villages were a standard part of world fairs from 1878 onward. Equally popular were the 'foreign streets', such as the 'Rue du Caire'. Around the turn of the century, the International Anthropological Exhibit Company commercially exploited exhibitions of non-Western people in the United States in several settings, including world fairs. At the Dutch Internationale Koloniale en Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling in Amsterdam in 1883, natives from the Dutch East Indies and West Indies were shown. The Greater Britain Exhibition of 1899 included a Kaffir Kraal – A Vivid Representation of Life in the Wilds of the Dark Continent, an exhibit featuring African animals and 174 natives from several South African peoples brought under control only shortly before. They were divided into four native villages, showing their crafts, performing

'war dances', and riding ponies. Among them were San, who characteristically were exhibited as part of the natural history of Africa, together with baboons (MacKenzie 1984: 104). Often the European impresarios travelled from one world fair to another with the same group of people – the Senegalese who constituted the well-known Senegalese Village, for example – and had them perform at other venues and on other occasions as well.

It was light against dark, order against violence, and a European nation as the bringer of civilization. 'Amazons', depicted as both barbarous and alluring, true personifications of the Dark Continent, performed throughout Europe. When they appeared in the Moskauer Panoptikum in Frankfurt in 1899, they were introduced as 'wild females' – *wilde Weiber*. A group of women from Samoa, however, was described by the press and in brochures as a breathtakingly beautiful, always cheery, erotically permissive, and lazy people from the paradisiacal Pacific Ocean (Schmidt-Linsenhoff 1986: 257). North American Indians were similarly idealized and romanticized.

The 1909 world fair that featured the Amazons also included a native village of nomadic Kalmyks from Central Asia, brought under the control of the Russian Empire shortly before. At the Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung of 1896, which led to the foundation of the Deutsches Kolonialmuseum, over a hundred natives from the German colonies were present, each group in its own carefully imitated cultural and natural setting. They had to call 'hurrah' at set times in praise of emperor and *Reich* (Schneider, G. 1982: 167). Governments were keenly aware of the opportunity to publicize their colonial policies and to manipulate public attitudes toward the newly acquired territories. German, Dutch and Irish villages were also (re)presented at the world fairs as part of the national exhibits, staged in this case, however, by the exhibited peoples themselves, not their colonizers.

The *Völkerschau* and Other Exhibitions

Persons from non-Western cultures appeared not only at world and colonial exhibitions but also at special ethnographic shows, called *Völkerschauen* in German, where this type of manifestation had proliferated since 1874 when Hagenbeck staged his first show.² Fear was but one of the mixed feelings German citizens experienced when visiting ethnological exhibitions. Another reaction was sexual fascination and curiosity, as is clear from contemporary press coverage and from preserved posters. Admiration of the supposedly great sexual potency of

the scarcely clothed 'primitives' competed with deprecation because of their alleged bestial lust (Goldmann 1985: 263–64; Thode-Arora 1989: 115–19). Disgust alternated with exalted attention, wonder, and enchantment when Western citizens were confronted with picturesque scenes from 'savage' life.

In the Netherlands, too, ethnological exhibits took place. In the year 1900, for instance, the *Groote Achantees Karavanen* [large Ashanti caravans] attracted much attention in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and Nijmegen. The Ashanti, usually shown at the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris, now toured the rest of Western Europe. In the Netherlands, they were described on a poster as 'old natives from the Gold Coasts of Africa ... Warriors, fetish, priests, snake-charmer, women, girls and children. The most uncommon human race that has ever been seen in Europe. Most interesting for everyone' (Municipal Archives, Rotterdam). A few years earlier, *De Boschmannen of wilden van Afrika* [The Bushmen or savages of Africa], as the title of the accompanying brochure reads, were on tour. Judging from their appearance, this brochure states, 'they show more similarity to Apes than to people ... Notwithstanding their ferocity these Bushmen are nearly harmless, and even the most fearful person can approach and feel all over them with the greatest confidence' (Municipal Archives, Rotterdam). The suggestion that they could be touched indicates how close the attitude toward these people was to the attitude toward animals. That the exhibited people were similar – metonymically, metaphorically, qua appearance and behaviour – to animals, especially apes, was indeed a common perception, fed by contemporary scientific theory. In recent decades, in contrast, Bushmen once again came to play a positive role in Western imagination, similar to the one they played in the eighteenth century – that of 'noble savages', spontaneously and innocently enjoying a pure, natural, paradisaical existence.

The natives performed in several roles. The American firm William Foote & Co. African American Characters exploited a show with African-Americans – as the letterhead of the firm stated – appearing as 'savages, slaves, soldiers and citizens' (Thode-Arora 1989: 41). Crafts, hunting techniques, rituals, dances and songs were among the activities staged, as well as stereotypical 'authentic' performances like warfare, cannibalistic acts and head-hunting. At the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Igorots from the Philippines could be seen eating dog meat, a food taboo in the West, while African Pygmies illustrated decapitation. The above-mentioned Dahomey 'Amazons', heavily armed, simulated fights. On exhibit at the Frankfurt Zoo and elsewhere

in May 1885, Aborigines from Queensland, Australia, presented as 'Austral Neger', were described on posters as cannibals and bloodthirsty monsters [*wirklich blutdürstige Ungeheuer*]. Another poster, printed for their appearance in England, continued a European iconographical tradition reaching back to De Bry's late sixteenth-century *Grands Voyages* and earlier, by depicting them engaged in a ferocious cannibal ritual, with the following text: 'Male and female Australian Cannibals/ R.A. Cunningham, Director/ The first and only obtained colony of these strange, savage, disfigured and most brutal race ever lured from the remote interior wilds, where they indulge in ceaseless bloody feuds and forays to feast upon each other's flesh/The very lowest order of mankind, and beyond conception most curious to look upon' (Schmidt-Linsenhoff 1986: 228).

Commerce and Science

Hagenbeck was certainly not the first to take such an initiative. Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés had already brought back American Indians and Aztecs from the New World. European princes such as the Medici in Florence had scores of aliens at their courts as curiosities and for purposes of prestige. During the age of European expansion, virtually every generation of Europeans could see Nubians, Inuit, Saarmi, North American Indians and Pygmies at fairs, in inns – like the Amsterdam Blaauw Jan, precursor to the Artis Zoo – in theatres or, together with exotic animals, in zoos and princely menageries. An analogous practice was that of exhibiting the insane, who were usually presented in cages, with an admission fee. In eighteenth-century France, insanity was seen as a decline to a state of wildness and unruly animality, associated traditionally with all that was wicked and unnatural (Foucault 1961); at the same time there existed a whole body of publications theorizing on similarities of physical appearance between particular types of insanity and particular animal species. 'What was presented here,' Dörner writes, 'was wild and indomitable nature, "beastliness", absolute and destructive unruliness, social danger, which, behind the bars installed by reason, could be staged the more dramatically for showing at the same time to the public reason as the necessity of controlling nature, as a constraint upon unlimited freedom and as securing the order of the state' (1984: 22).

The way exotic animals were – and still are – shown and handled in circus performances elucidates practices of discipline and the concomitant idiom of wildness and taming that were present more implicitly in

many exhibits involving people. P. T. Barnum's shows and, somewhat later, the German Circus Sarrasini had for decades ethnological acts on their programme, often combined with acrobatics.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exhibits of live 'specimens' were increasingly re-framed in terms of science, especially physical anthropology and natural history. Aside from their entertainment and curiosity value, their educational value came to be stressed more and more. Hagenbeck, for instance, advertised his manifestations as 'anthropological-zoological exhibitions' [Anthropologisch-Zoologische Ausstellung]. In many ways, exhibitions of human individuals were related to scientific practices and purposes anyhow. The lunatic asylums where the insane were put on show were in the process of being medicalized; what was 'monstrous' or 'exotic' was often as interesting from a scientific point of view as it was shocking or fascinating to the general public. Anthropologists used to be represented on the committees heading the anthropological sections of world fairs, often quarrelling with those who wished to cater more to commercial than to scientific or educational interests.

In anthropometric and psychometric laboratories at the world fairs, visitors could witness and even take part in scientific research on racial characteristics. Phrenology, craniology, physiognomy and anthropometry shared the assumption that in the outward shape and physical appearance of the body, the inner character – of different races, but also of criminals, prostitutes and deviants – was manifest. So science, commerce and imperialism went hand in hand.

It is not difficult to show the central role of narrative structures in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century world fairs, museums, or missionary exhibitions. Narrative plots are as pervasive in the civilizational, imperialist, missionary and scientific discourses of the period as in the three-dimensional spectacles that, to a considerable degree, were governed by these discursive activities. As many contemporary book titles suggest, the history of mankind was narrated essentially as a heroic ascent toward the natural and ultimate goal of cosmic evolution: the industrial civilization of white, European, middle-class citizens of the nineteenth century. Other races followed the same path, it was postulated – especially in evolutionist ethnology, which was a scientific manifestation of the discourse on progress – but lagged behind culturally and physically. Imperialist expansion was represented in terms of a social Darwinist natural history, and European hegemony as a natural and therefore desirable development. There has been some controversy over the question of whether the master narrative of progress and civili-

zation is essentially a secularized avatar of the Christian idea of world history as God's working, but in any case, it was not formulated in religious terms. The implied development was from lack of civilization to civilized state, from wildness to civility, achieved heroically by the white, Caucasian race under its own power, and by the other races with the help of the Caucasian one, insofar at least as their constitutions allowed them to progress. The stage-by-stage development from savagery through barbarism to civilization was suggested by organizing museum and world fair exhibits into evolutionary sequences.

Sekula's stress (1986: 58) on the spirit of optical empiricism and encyclopaedism of pictorial archives, with their purely iterative character, is heuristically useful and certainly justified to a certain degree; but in many contexts of collecting, filing and exhibiting, an order was imposed on the data that went beyond mere iteration and taxonomy. In many cases, all essential ingredients of the story, or at least of a certain type of story, are present: a beginning where some desirable good is lacking; an end that is somehow implied by that beginning teleologically; acting subjects; strife and struggle; and other plot elements. World fairs and museums not only categorized peoples, races, cultures, species and artefacts, by creating taxonomies, but also ordered them syntagmatically, creating the well-known plots of civilized/Christian whites bringing light to the savage/heathen in the name of some higher instance. The same goes for many photographs from colonial contexts, showing moments from the story they presuppose and illustrate (Corbey 1988; 1989; 1990). Those well-known plots – flexible and capable of incorporating disparate elements, of outdoing alternative readings – are as pervasive in nineteenth-century discourses regarding Otherness as they were in the spectacles and pictures that were governed by these discursive activities. This century saw the proliferation of historicized, evolutionary frameworks of representation – of artefacts and natural history specimens, of human, racial and national origin.

One aspect of these spectacles, pictures, and narratives was that they neutralized the cognitive dissonance and the threat to Western middle-class identity constituted by the baffling cultural difference of new peoples. Colonial Others were incorporated narratively. In a 'mise en intrigue', they were assigned their roles in the stories told by museum exhibitions, world fairs and colonial postcards. They were cast as contemporary ancestors, receivers of true civilization and true religion. The radical difference of the Other was made sense of and thus warded off by a narrative 'discordant concordance' between 'civilized' and 'savage'. Money, trade and exchange mediated between peoples,

but on another level stories were created in order to mediate the basic contradiction between the two states of mankind. Here I concur with Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of myth as a struggle with contradictions or paradoxes, as a syntagmatic mediation of paradigmatic oppositions.³ Carol Breckenridge points out the analogy between the building of private collections by colonial officials, creating an illusion of cognitive control over a colonial experience that might otherwise have been disturbingly chaotic, and the world fair as a reminder of the orderliness of empire, which consolidated the sense of imperial knowledge and control in the imagined Victorian ecumene (1989: 211).

To return now to the 1893 world fair motto we began with – 'To see is to know' – we do not, of course, know how things are by simply looking. The eye is not innocent. The motto succinctly expresses an underlying ideology that is at work in a range of seemingly disparate practices in colonial times: photography, colonialist discourse, missionary discourse, anthropometry, collecting and exhibiting, and so on. What people saw, rather than reality as it is, was, to a considerable extent, reality as perceived, as actively constructed by images, conceptions, native taxonomies, stories and motivational attitudes in the spectator's mind. The perceived order was an imposed one; the citizen's gaze on alien people was determined to a considerable degree by stories and stereotypes in his or her mind.

Persons from tribal cultures, on show in the West, were cast in the role of backward, allochronic contemporary ancestors, receivers of true civilization and true religion in the stories told by museums, world fairs, and imperialist ideologies, thus becoming narrative characters in the citizen's articulation of identity – of Self and Other. Their own voices and views – ironically often as ethnocentric and omniscient as Western ones – were neutralized. Fitting cultural Others into narrative plots, we suggested, was a way the citizen's panoptic eye/I dealt with their wondrous, disturbing difference without annihilating it completely.⁴ These plots came with the illusion of the panoptic position of an omniscient spectator, functioning as another strategy of power – the illusion that 'to see is to know'.

Over the last centuries the 'we'-group, as an emic category of Western middle classes characterized by true humanity, has been expanding continuously to include many categories that were formerly excluded or considered ambiguous: women, slaves, peasants, the poor and non-Western peoples. In this chapter, occasional reference was made to analogies between how other races and species were thought of and treated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By now the

boundary of the human species has been reached and, in fact, is being questioned – not least as to its moral significance – and transgressed. The discussion is now shifting towards zoos, circuses, dolphin shows, bio-industry and animal experiments; towards ‘simian Orientalism’ (Haraway 1989), and other forms of anthropocentrism. It would seem that our observations on ethno-/euro-centric ethnographic exhibits during the heyday of colonialism are in many ways readily extendable to present-day forms, in theory and practice, of anthropocentrism and ‘speciesism’.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was published as Corbey 1993.
- 2 See Thode-Arora on Hagenbeck in this volume.
- 3 At the same time, as may be clear to insiders, we take some inspiration from the structuralist narratology of A. J. Greimas and the Paris School – without necessarily subscribing to all its presuppositions. For an as powerful but more radical, poststructuralist, analytical approach to exhibitionary practices, see Bal 1996.
- 4 For a more extensive analysis of the relationship between the quasi-panoptic perspectives of the eye, the camera and the narrator, see Corbey 1997.