

# **Content-oriented or audience-oriented: the approaches to define freak**

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**Abstract.** For a long time, people define the freak by means of the so called “the content-oriented approach”. It is not enough when theorizing stage freaks because this approach alienates the key role of the audience in defining someone as a stage freak, when the occurrence of stage freak is constantly associated with the notion of giving performances to the audience. So in this article, the author will talk about both “the content-oriented approach” and “the audience-oriented approach”. After offering background, the author will then discuss the methods employed by different materials to define stage freaks under a framework consisting of the two approaches. Finally, the author will give some recommendations on how to define stage freaks in a more comprehensive way.

## **1. Introduction**

From the Victorian sideshows in the 19th century to the reality shows in modern days, freak shows have gained great attention from both the public and the academia. For the public, freak shows are means of entertainment. For scholars, freak shows were once regarded to provide a valuable specimen for Darwin’s evolution theory. For now, they are mostly studied as an interesting social phenomenon which reflects some historical backgrounds and vibes in a society. This essay focuses on how stage freaks are defined in different materials. By limiting the scope of my discussion to stage freaks, I refer to people who are known as freaks to the audiences on various stages.

## **2. The definition of content-oriented and audience-oriented approach**

### **2.1 The content-oriented approach**

The “content-oriented approach” describes the method of defining or theorizing certain groups of people, things, or events that are based primarily, sometimes entirely, on the characteristics and content of the objects studied. An example of this approach is the way people define cars. According to the Dictionary by Merriam-Webster, a car is a vehicle moving on wheels. When we adopt this approach, the definition of objects is concerned mainly with the intrinsic properties of the objects. In the car case, the definition is made up completely of the intrinsic features of the object: whether it is a vehicle and whether it moves with wheels. However, how the objects are perceived by their audience, whether they are silly, beautiful, or strange, is irrelevant. So if we were to use this “content-oriented approach” to define stage freak, the definition would be that a freak is a person with physical deviance from norms. We could not know the emotions or attitudes by the audiences under this definition. Whether it is derogatory or commendatory, we cannot tell clearly.

### **2.2 The audience-oriented approach**

In addition to the content-oriented approach, this article provides a second method of defining or theorizing a certain group, which is “the audience-oriented approach.” In contrast to “the content-oriented approach”, this approach assigns objects to different categories based primarily, or entirely, on the feedback or responses get from their audiences. A typical instance of this approach is the way people define beauty. According to the Oxford Dictionary, beauty is a combination of qualities that pleases the aesthetic sense, especially the sight. Similarly, the Dictionary by Merriam-Webster defines beauty as a beautiful person or thing that could bring pleasure senses or

pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit. Both definitions put a premium on the object's ability to trigger certain impressions or feelings of certain audiences.

When we adopt this approach, the definition of the objects is concerned mainly with the reactions and perceptions they stir in their audience. If a so-called beauty fails to be regarded as beautiful and delightful by its audience, it does not suffice to be defined as beauty. In this case, the intrinsic properties of the objects are not as important as how their audience subjectively perceive them when theorizing. Even when a cloth is designed by a famous designer with popular elements such as colors and styles, it is not a beauty if it fails to provide its audiences with visual pleasure, or make them feel delightful.

The main difference between the two approaches is whether the psychological reactions and perceptions of the audience play a role in the definition, or in other words, whether there exists a relationship between the characteristics of an object and the perceptions of its audiences. It is out of the scope of this passage to categorize all objects into two groups where one group should be defined by one approach, and the other group by the other approach. But it is meaningful to discuss the usage of these two approaches to define the stage freak.

I assert that the "audience-oriented approach" is better for defining freak as the occurrence is constantly related to giving performances to the audiences. Moreover, stage freaks are constantly presented in ways to stir certain impressions or feelings in their audience, and on many occasions, people watch the sideshows or the image of freaks exactly for the purpose of experiencing certain strangely psychological feelings. So if the stage freaks lose their defining feature, their ability to stir certain psychological perceptions in their audience, they cannot be categorized as stage freaks. Thus, if we use the "audience-oriented approach" to define stage freaks, the definition would be that a freak is a person whose presentation triggers certain strangely psychological feelings or impressions among its audiences.

As the things that trigger a sense of oddity and strangeness in people are quite contingent and shifty, it is quite difficult to find a certain relationship between certain stage freaks' intrinsic characteristics and the audiences' psychological perceptions. For instance, the sexual orientations of homosexual people were once taken to be odd and wired. But as homosexual marriages are legalized in many parts of the world, people adjust their mindsets and the sense of strangeness when they come across homosexual people wears out gradually. Thus, I believe that if the "content-oriented approach" is adopted to define stage freak, the definition should keep evolving according to the "audience-oriented approach" psychological perception changes.

### **3. Analysis on the approaches of defining freak**

#### **3.1 The analysis of "content-oriented approach" in defining freak**

When started the research, the author presupposed that the term freak could be defined perfectly with "content-oriented approach". If we analyze the definition that freaks are as deviations from statistical norms. Under this definition, let's take a sole factor, the height of a person, as a key component that makes somebody a freak, and make a graph displaying all of the heights in the population by conducting a survey. Then we consider those whose height in the middle of the graph "normal," and those whose height falls in the two slopes of each side "freaks", which is for sure unreasonable. The reason is because it is hard to define the factors that make people norms. All these factors are also "audience-oriented". There are a great deal of articles and essays theorizing freaks by adopting a similar approach which based solely on some intrinsic characteristics of stage freaks. But they have also tried to construct a relationship between the inner traits of stage freaks and the audience's perception of strangeness. In this way, they add some "audience-oriented" factors into the "content-oriented approach", and try to construct a relationship between freak characteristics and psychological perceptions of audiences.

### 3.2 The analysis of “audience-oriented approach” in defining freak

#### 3.2.1 Examples of the “audience-oriented approach” usage

Indeed, the practice of constructing the relationship between the stage freaks’ special traits and the audience’s perceptions of them in defining stage freaks has been advocated in many materials. Durbach stresses the role of the audience in the sideshows by pointing out that anomalous bodies on display were often interpreted by audience as steps on the evolutionary ladder or throwbacks to earlier forms in the 19th century. Robert Bogdan’s contention that freak is a socially constructed rather than natural artifact also implies that the definition of stage freak is closely related to the audience’s responses to the freaks. Also, in a discussion of sideshow freaks, Sweet include the Lobster Claw Lady’s ability to amuse audiences as Lobster Claw’s key feature of being a freak.

#### 3.2.2 The analysis of “audience-oriented approach” with the case of Krao

However, these authors do have not given enough attention to establish and investigate this relationship carefully and explicitly. In the following, I will use the image of stage freak Krao, one of the most famous freaks in Victorian sideshow stage, constructed by Durbach as an example to illustrate my point. In the discussion of Krao, Durbach pinpoints three intrinsic traits of her that rendered her exceedingly freakish and popular. Among them, one factor primarily contributed to Krao’s perception as a freak, while two others explain why Krao was very popular. The one feature that essentially made Krao a freak is Krao’s artificially exaggerated simian characteristics. Durbach stresses this by pointing out that the images that accompanied Krao’s 1883 exhibition stressed her simian characteristics. The illustration that adorned the cover of her souvenir pamphlet represented Krao as a small monkeylike child, naked except for copious amounts of body hair, indeed, much more hair than contemporary photographs of her indicate that she actually possessed. There are many other instances in the discussion where Durbach describes how the hairy body features of Krao was manipulated to become her simian traits and thus renders her a freak.

If Durbach only offers these as what made Krao a freak, a “content-oriented approach” is then used. However, it is insightful that Durbach actually took a contextual approach to analyze the construction of Krao as a freak, in other words, she acknowledges the audience’s perceptions in render Krao a freak and attempts to build the relationship between Krao’s simian features and the audience’s responses of a sense of oddity. For example, she argues that Krao was an extremely popular freak show actress because her exhibition capitalized on late nineteenth-century preoccupations with the interrelationships among Darwinism, imperialism, and the sexuality of the “primitive” body. She also reveals that Krao’s simian characteristics made her a freak because those traits generated an inference to the hot issues in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries England: the missing link in Darwin’s evolution theory. She takes this further by stating that the liminal being that bridged the animal and human worlds was a trope of the display of human oddities. By arguing that the simian beings were perceived as human oddities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Durbach implicitly points out and establishes the relationship between Krao’s abnormal features and corresponded audiences’ psychological perceptions of strangeness and oddity toward her. The establishment of this relationship when defining stage freak is very important because if simian beings were not seen as human oddities and fail to evoke their audience’s feelings of strangeness, they might not suffice to be defined as freaks.

### 4. Conclusion

Although Durbach tries to establish the relationship, the above are the only occasions where such a relationship stated in her article. Generally, there are a lot of different definitions on freaks stated in different books and articles, but the key role of the relationship between the freak’s own characteristics and the psychological perceptions they trigger in its audience is not explicitly pointed out and recognized. Even though some of the relations are occasionally mentioned, the definition is a little ambiguous. So in order to get a more clear and general definition, I recommend that scholars put more emphasis on examining the freak’s ability to evoke the audience’s certain feelings, narrow down the exact characteristics and corresponded psychological perceptions, and

develop the “audience-oriented approach” to define freaks in a more comprehensive way.

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