



Robert Bogdan, With contributions from Martin Elks and James A. Knoll. *Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen, and Other Photographic Rhetoric*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012. 198 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3302-0.

Reviewed by Laurel Daen (College of William & Mary)

Published on H-Disability (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison

Construction of a Visual Culture of Disability

Robert Bogdan's foundational contributions to the historical study of disability, primarily through his analysis of the cultural and commercial world of the freak show, are well known from his previous work, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988). In his latest work, *Picturing Disability*, he returns to questions about the audience for disability, although this time with a more explicit emphasis on the production of a visual culture of disability.

The book is a visual treasure trove for scholars in the field. Drawing from his own archive and from private collections largely inaccessible to the average researcher, Bogdan, with contributions from Martin Elks and James A. Knoll, presents readers with a vast and diverse array of photographs of people with disabilities. On the front cover is one such alluring image.[1] Taken in 1907 at a "county home," this photo postcard depicts sixteen men, women, and children—many of whom present visible manifestations of physical or mental disability—posed in front of a shack. Some individuals sit in the front on the shack's steps; others stand in the rear holding hands. Most look into the camera with expressions of ambivalence, indifference, or disgust. In the back, a man proudly holds and waves an American flag. The image is complex, captivating, and confusing. By featuring it on the front cover and again on the first page of the introduction, Bogdan draws readers into his project of exploring photographers and photographic representations of peo-

ple with disabilities from the 1860s to the 1970s.

Bogdan's aim is to "examine the worlds in which [the photographers, subjects, and viewers] operated to decipher the relationship between the images and the picture makers' perspectives" (pp. 1-2). He is interested in both the context in which the photographers worked and their objectives in taking the pictures. Bogdan offers two reasons for this approach. Through an analysis of the role of these photographers, he demonstrates the social construction of disability and its variations across time and space. In addition, Bogdan argues that scholars have largely overlooked the historical and cultural contexts of photographs of people with disabilities. Instead, they have preferred to focus on whether particular photographs depict people with disabilities positively or negatively and how these images reinforce and challenge the cultural categories of race, gender, and class.[2] By re-centering the photographer, Bogdan intends to recapture the meanings of these pictures for the people who produced them and the visual techniques that they used to accomplish their explicit and implicit goals.

Picturing Disability is organized into nine thematic photo essays. Beginning with freak portraits, chapters move to examine photographs of people with disabilities in begging cards, charity fund-raising drives, asylums, advertisements, movie stills, and family portraits. Contributions from Elks and Knoll focus on clinical photographs and art photographs, respectively. Privileging

thematic over chronological organization, a chapter on family photographs at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, follows an essay on art images from the 1950s through the 1970s. Bogdan's nonchronological structure seems to aid him in drawing connections and comparisons across time and photographic genre. For example, he underscores the theme of pity in both begging cards and pictures used in early charity drives but notes that this theme is absent from portraits of people who performed as freaks. The conclusion of *Picturing Disability* features photographs that embody mixed genres (a blending of family and begging visual conventions, for example) or that stand outside Bogdan's specified categories (such as photographs of "town characters").

Themes of deception and performance underlie Bogdan's first two chapters on freak portraits and begging cards. In the former, he draws heavily on his earlier work to present photographs of people who exhibited as freaks from the 1860s to the 1920s. Bogdan emphasizes the visual conventions—the props, clothing, and set designs—that photographers used to create and represent the category of freaks through the bodies of people who may have had physical and mental disabilities. He examines the productions of Charles Eisenmann, a late nineteenth-century commercial freak photographer, and two modes of visual presentation that would be familiar to readers of *Freak Show*: the "aggrandized" and the "exotic."^[3] Chapter 2 brings Bogdan into new territory. He studies begging cards, photo postcards that beggars gave away or sold to potential benefactors as part of their solicitation efforts. Bogdan focuses on the visual strategies that beggars used to depict themselves as worthy recipients of charity. He finds, for example, that mendicants often demonstrated their self-reliance by picturing themselves completing physical activities, such as playing music,^[4] making crafts, or traveling great distances from town to town. In the first two chapters, Bogdan's interest in disability as performance leads him to interrogate the veracity of freaks' and beggars' claims. He argues that "a degree of fraud" defined both types of individuals and visual styles, writing that "it was the degree of deception that separated the liar from the deceitful" (p. 25). Although Bogdan is careful with his words and claims, one nevertheless wonders whether his emphasis on the connections between disability and dishonesty unwittingly perpetuates the long history of skepticism and suspicion that has characterized ableist attitudes.

Two especially successful chapters in *Picturing Disability* explore photographs of asylums and their residents. Bogdan examines three types of asylum pho-

tographs: picture postcards taken by businessmen and sold as souvenirs, public relations photographs taken by or for asylum administrators, and muckraking images intended to publicize institutional abuse. Comparing the visual rhetoric of these three types of pictures, Bogdan finds that they portray people with disabilities in drastically different ways. Postcards highlight the architecture of institutions and are largely devoid of people; public relations images depict residents completing neat and orderly labor;^[5] and muckraking photographs focus on institutional filth and chaos.^[6] Elks extends Bogdan's analysis of asylum pictures in his chapter on clinical photographs. He focuses on photographs that were taken by asylum doctors and administrators for use in patient records and in eugenicist texts as examples of mental deficiency. Two types of images predominate: portraits of people who were deemed to be "feebleminded" and pictures of parts of their bodies—most often ears, tongues, hands, and brains. Over the course of the chapter, Elks convincingly demonstrates the subjective construction of these ostensibly objective pictures and the ways that the notion of photographic truthfulness helped to elevate eugenicist thinking to social policy. Together, Bogdan's and Elks's essays on asylum photographs exemplify the mission of *Picturing Disability* at large: they show the significance of photographic context and intention to the visual display of people with disabilities and the historically and culturally specific meanings of disability more generally.

Essays on advertising and art photographs are somewhat less successful. In the former, Bogdan explores advertisements that feature people with disabilities as product symbols or as curiosities designed to attract prospective buyers. Particularly interesting is his treatment of advertisements in which people with disabilities were both retailers and consumers. For example, he examines turn-of-the-twentieth-century cabinet cards by A. Niehans, a Chicago producer of artificial limbs, and finds that pictures of respectable and discerning customers as well as those showing people before and after they purchased artificial limbs were successful promotional tactics. Bogdan's discussion of advertisements for products that he deems to be "of dubious value" is less convincing (p. 109). His claim that an advertisement for "Dr. Clark's Spinal Apparatus" was fraudulent because the girl pictured had "no apparent disability" is simplistic and overlooks a long history of interest in female posture and spinal alignment (pp. 109-110).^[7] More minor, Bogdan seems to misread an advertisement for "Dr. Brown's eye treatments" (p. 111). Bogdan writes that Dr. Brown

“used a photo postcard to claim to be able to straighten crossed eyes and restore sight *without* using eyeglasses.” The text of the photo postcard pictured reads “Crossed Eyes Straightened and Sight Restored *with* Glasses by Dr. Brown” (p. 111, emphasis added). Perhaps Bogdan misread this source or a typographical error exists in the publication. Knoll’s chapter on art photographs also contains less persuasive elements. He focuses on mid-twentieth-century photographers who took pictures of people with disabilities and who identified primarily as artists rather than as journalists or social advocates. Examining photographers from Garry Winogrand to Diane Arbus, Knoll argues that their work was primarily about the formal elements of art—line, composition, and style—rather than the social conditions or experiences of people with disabilities. Clearly, however, both could be true. Knoll’s desire to determine artistic intention and establish singular meanings for complex works of art seems unnecessarily reductionist.

Bogdan’s final photo essay highlights themes of family, belonging, and citizenship. He examines what he terms “citizen portraits,” or photographs in which people with disabilities are depicted as “regular citizens and family members” (p. 144). Bogdan argues that these pictures—which were primarily produced and saved as family keepsakes—are largely devoid of photographic conventions about disability. Instead, they portray people with disabilities in what Bogdan calls “ordinary” ways: in everyday locations, wearing typical clothing, and surrounded by family members and friends. In one studio portrait, for example, a young girl places her arm around her sister, who has visible signs of a developmental disability.^[8] In another, a man, and a woman who sits in a wheelchair, look lovingly at one another, his hand resting on the back of her chair.^[9] Bogdan convincingly demonstrates that citizen portraits minimize the significance of disability and depict it in more positive ways than other photographic genres covered in the book. At the same time, scholars may question his reading of these photographs as evidence of “normal” or “regular” interactions. For one, this approach re-inscribes categories of typicality and deviance even as it uncovers these genres in the past. In addition, understanding these photographs as examples of unselfconscious inclusion and acceptance conceals what were likely more complicated and contested relationships among family members and friends. Bogdan’s desire to see family photographs as devoid of visual conventions and outside of historical and cultural circumstance is curious considering his book’s mission.

Picturing Disability makes significant contributions to the field of disability studies. First, it provides important visual evidence of the historical and social contingency of disability. The vast dissimilarities between clinical portraits and movie stills, begging cards and art photographs, show that disability is depicted and conceptualized differently based on historical and cultural context, intention, and structures of authority. The idea that disability is historically and socially dependent is not new in disability studies and is now recognized as a central tenet of the field. Nevertheless, the immediacy of Bogdan’s visual sources and his broad topical scope reminds scholars of the value of this approach for studies of disability in both historical and contemporary periods.

Second, each photograph and photo essay in *Picturing Disability* provides a starting point for future research. Bogdan is adamant that his work has “only started the job of systematically scrutinizing the wide range of historical photographs of people with disabilities” (p. 165). Future studies might examine pictures that stand outside of Bogdan’s specified genres, such as those of disabled veterans, performers with disabilities, and African American subjects. In addition, scholars might explore particular photographs more closely by locating and examining related textual sources, such as diaries, correspondence, and medical reports. With the wealth of previously unpublished images in *Picturing Disability*, scholars would be wise to build on Bogdan’s material and methodology to learn more about the diversity of depictions of people with disabilities.

Finally, and perhaps most important, *Picturing Disability* makes over two hundred hard-to-find photographs accessible to scholars and students of disability.^[10] Most major archives and museums have neglected to include disability as an area of collecting and a keyword in searchable databases. As a result, private collections are often especially valuable for scholars in the field. *Picturing Disability* draws from both Bogdan’s personal archive—which comprises nearly thirty years of active collecting and spans time period, region, and genre—and numerous private collections from across the United States. The product is of great value to scholars of disability as well as those studying poverty, charity, art, film, medicine, and the family, among other topics, in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

Notes

[1]. See the photograph at http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/6/1/94154494011849466792/.

Alan Griffiths's website Luminous Lint for Connoisseurs of Fine Photography has published an online exhibition of select photographs from *Picturing Disability*, complete with an introduction by Bogdan. Hyperlinks throughout this review direct readers to images available online and in the book. "Picturing Disability," Luminous Lint for Connoisseurs of Fine Photography, last modified December, 2012, accessed July 24, 2013, http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/2/0/0/.

[2]. Here, Bogdan cites such works as Martin Norden, *Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetoric of Disability in Popular Culture," in *The New Disability History*, ed. Paul Longmore and Lauri Uman-sky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 335-375; and Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[3]. Bogdan writes that the aggrandized mode depicts the subject "in a way that inflates his or her status or flaunts his or her high-achieving normal lifestyle while celebrating his or her embellished talents." Conversely, in the exotic mode, "the emphasis is on the disabled person's inferiority, his or her strangeness or abnormal origins, and the alien land where he or she allegedly was born and raised" (p. 11). Further discussion of the aggrandized and exotic visual styles can be found in Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 94-119.

[4]. See, for example, http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/6/9/9595606649547494092537903782.

[5]. See, for example, http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/6/19/075598683494197734844515/.

[6]. See, for example, http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/6/21/9135355494215914919028/.

[7]. See http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/6/30/07153494309370730510/. For example, see Katherine Ott, "The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to Modern Histories of Prosthetics," in *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*, ed. Katherine Ott, David Serlin, and Stephen Mihm (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 29; and Ann Chisholm, "Incarnations and Practices of Feminine Rectitude: Nineteenth-Century Gymnastics for U.S. Women," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 737-763.

[8]. See http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/6/41/7035839494418709469821/.

[9]. See http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_THEME_Picturing_Disability_01/6/44/83150494441578333709/.

[10]. Bogdan has also made over two hundred photographs from his collection available on the Disability History Museum website: <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/index.html>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Laurel Daen. Review of Bogdan, Robert; With contributions from Martin Elks and James A. Knoll., *Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen, and Other Photographic Rhetoric*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38430>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.