

BEYOND THE 'HUMAN ZOOS'  
EXOTICISM, ETHNIC EXHIBITIONS AND THE POWER OF THE GAZE

Guido Abbattista

Guido Abbattista is a modern historian at the University of Trieste. He specializes in eighteenth-century historical, political and anthropological culture. He has recently researched on living ethnographic exhibitions in nineteenth-twentieth century Italy and is currently working on a project on European representations of China 1750-1860.

ABSTRACT

This essay dwells on the concepts of 'human zoos' and 'living human exhibitions', in order to show that the first was a particular case of a larger family of cultural practices in early modern and modern Europe, where the appropriation of human 'others' was inspired by the will to exercise the 'power of the gaze'. Human aliens were repeatedly and often voluntary victims of abduction from their countries of origin and public exhibition in several different venues in European cities according to widely diffused practices of 'public othering of the human body', which was made available to the observation of the Western gaze. The great nineteenth-twentieth century world expositions offered one of the most influential contexts for such ethno-shows, innovating the pre-existing performances in several ways, in particular by taking over the 'human zoos' format. It would be partial however to interpret the latter only in terms of the obvious aspects of 'animalisation' of human 'others' and racism. Public exhibitions of living humans 'other' were in fact complex performances involving ideas of civilizing and Christianizing tasks and occasioned unexpected reactions on both sides of the exhibitions, so that to reduce the latter to a mere expression of power and racist domination means to miss important aspects of the complex relationship between exposé and exposed.

Keywords: cultural history, world exposition, ethnic show, anthropology, race, racism

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I.

This contribution discusses some aspects of what is conventionally termed as 'living human' or 'ethnic exhibitions': an expression denoting the mainly nineteenth-early twentieth century Western practice of putting on display in public spaces, such as fairs, expositions, theaters, museums and exhibition halls, members in the flesh of non-European ethnic groups for different and often overlapping purposes: entertainment, show, attraction, purported popular education, scientific observation.

I would like to suggest some reflections drawn from my own and other scholars' recent research<sup>1</sup>.

The public exhibition of human beings of non-European ethnic origin was a widely diffused and enormously successful if controversial practice – gradually more controversial with the passing of time – throughout nineteenth and early-twentieth century Europe and North America: the last organized exposition of this kind was recorded at the Brussels 1958 universal exposition where, just on the wake of the Belgian Congo independence, a Congo village was erected and authentic Congolese people hosted in it, soon to be dismantled, however, and its guests repatriated, under the pressure of public and diplomatic protests. The frequency of such displays increased from the mid-nineteenth century onward when they were absorbed and became a regular component of the great national, international and universal expositions taking place in growing numbers throughout Europe and North America. It is possible to speak of a transnational cultural history of such public human exhibitions that mirrors directly the colonial, imperialistic and missionary politics of the white, Christian West: a history revealing the dimensions of spectacularization and of standardization typical of the advanced capitalist and industrial societies going through identity-building and national integration processes. No European or North American country was exempt from this phenomenon, which reached a peak around the turn of the nineteenth century and subsequently transformed itself, more than

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<sup>1</sup> I permit myself make reference to my book *Umanità in mostra* (Humans on Display), Trieste: EUT, 2013, to the recent collection of essays I edited with the title *Moving Bodies Displaying Nations. National Cultures, Gender and Race Nineteenth to Twenty-first Century*, Trieste, EUT, 2014, and to other recent publications, in particular the just published collection of essays, *Early African Entertainments Abroad*, by Bernth Lindfors, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2014, the author of the seminal study *Africans on Stage*, 1999, Catherine Hodeir, “Les exhibitions humaines dans les expositions universelles: entre categorisation scientifique et exotisme ? World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893”, in Nicolas Bancel, Thomas David et Dominic Thomas (ed. by), *L’invention de la race. Des représentations scientifiques aux exhibitions populaires*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014, pp. 247-259 ; Luis A. Sánchez-Gómez, *Human Zoos or Ethnic Shows? Essence and contingency in Living Ethnological Exhibitors*, in “Culture & History Digital Journal”, a. 2, n. 2, 2013, [12/12/2014]: <e022. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2013.022>> and, by the same author, *Dominación, fe y espectáculo. Las exposiciones misionales y coloniales en la era del imperialismo moderno (1851-1958)*, Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas , 2013.

disappearing, and found new ways of expression, soon severing its connection with the big world expositions, in after WWII-mass consumer and communication societies.

It would be erroneous to think of the public display of living human beings only in terms of a typical capitalist, colonialist, imperialist exploitative practice, unless we are ready to assign these attributes to the European modern society since at least the late fifteenth century or even before. In fact, such a practice should not be related only to the great expositions and world fairs, on account of its ancient roots in the history of European social and cultural practices. It should be considered rather as a particular manifestation of a richer category of events for which some particular definitions have been suggested such as “embodiment of cultural encounters”<sup>2</sup>. I would rather adopt the less neutrally resonating expression of ‘public othering of the human body’. In this sense, it cannot be considered as belonging to a world that we have definitively left behind and which we can refer to in the past tense. Both a retrospective, historical gaze and a critical consideration of aspects of our contemporary culture could significantly enhance the definition and understanding of the ‘public othering of the human body’.

## II.

A series of specificities connoted living ethnic exhibitions in the second half of the nineteenth century, differentiating them from a long sequel of antecedents belonging to the wider category of public shows, fairs, spectacles, exhibitions of every sorts<sup>3</sup>.

Living ethnic exhibitions multiplied in quantity and frequency especially since the early 1870s as a consequence of the colonial, territorial and commercial expansion –

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<sup>2</sup> *Embodiments of Cultural Encounters*, (eds.) Sebastian Jobs, Gesa Mackenthun, Münster-New York-München-Berlin, Waxmann, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For England fundamental is Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1978.

let us even call it ‘globalization’ – of European and North American nations, which accelerated and intensified from the mid-nineteenth century onward, and with the concomitant diffusion of an imperialistic culture, mentalities and imagination; They attracted growing scientific interest. In eighteenth-century Europe several, if occasional cases had occurred of scientists and philosophers showing interest or wish for the observation of non-European individuals (real or fictional) arrived in Europe for reasons mostly unrelated to anthropological study. But during the nineteenth century, public expositions of groups of people of non-European, mostly African origins were welcomed, at least at first, by ethnologists and anthropologists, which saw them as valuable substitutes for costly and dangerous investigations on the spot. In particular cases, developing academic anthropology and its most prominent representatives were indeed directly involved in the planning of the expositions, to which they contributed with ethnological and anthropological exhibits, also in the form of living human exhibits meant to document the human and cultural national varieties – as it happened at the 1893 Chicago’s World Fair with the first true American anthropologist, Frederic Ward Putnam (1839-1915), and his collaborators among whom the young Franz Boas (1858-1942)<sup>4</sup>. The scientists’ cultural and educational investment in the exhibitions was soon demonstrated by their concern that a clear distinction was established between displays of a scientific and didactic character and the purely commercial enterprises that someone called “deceptive shows”, dedicated to exhibiting “zoological curiosities” and deprived of a clear educational purpose: Putnam himself, faced by the unstoppable prevailing of mercantile upon scientific intents at Chicago’s World Fair, tried to distance himself from this undue confusion between science and spectacular entertainment<sup>5</sup>. Human living exhibitions, however, were increasingly associated with an anthropological culture characterized by anthropometric practices and the dominance of an essentialist, hierarchical and

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<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Rydell, « La vue, l’ouïe et les autres sens: hiérarchies raciales dans les expositions universelles américaines », in *L’invention de la race*, pp. 233-246, see p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> John Conolly, *The Ethnological Exhibitions of London*, London, John Churchill, 1855, p. 8.

evolutionist vision of the human varieties, at the time denoted by the term 'race'. Ethno-anthropologists themselves, on the other hand, not rarely showed a deeply sympathetic or frankly appreciative attitude toward the exhibited subjects, mostly absent in common visitors. And not rarely they ended up by explicitly criticizing those shows from both a methodological and a humanitarian standpoint.

Methodization and standardization were two additional new characteristics. Starting from the Paris exposition in 1878, living human ethno-exhibitions properly speaking, with full village reconstructions, became a fundamental and recurrent component of the great international and universal expositions, staging Western progress and modernity, competing nationalisms and the hierarchy of civilizations. They were more and more frequently accommodated not only, as before, in specific exhibition halls (the Piccadilly Egyptian Hall opened in London in 1812 is a case in point), but mostly in the new urban public spaces devoted to popular entertainment such as parks and zoos<sup>6</sup>: typically, Hyde Park in London, the Parisian Jardin d'Acclimatation (or the Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale), and the Hamburg or Berlin zoos. Non-European ethnic groups were displayed in the latter side by side with wild, exotic animals, suggesting their closer proximity to the animal than to the human world.

Diversification: the organization and contents of the late-nineteenth century human ethnic expositions were enriched in terms of the variety, composition and dimension of the ethnic groups on display, which over several decades involved a long list of non-European peoples from all parts of Africa (from Egypt to the Cape, from Sudan and the Horn to the Western regions, including the inner regions more recently explored), the Near East, North and South America and the Caribbees, the Northern Polar regions, Lapland, Australia, New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, India, South-East Asia. Moreover, the ethno-exhibitions, while becoming a *genre* of itself, with its rules, canons and styles, at the same time shared the features of other forms

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<sup>6</sup> Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

of mass spectacle, such as theatrical performances, circuses, popular-scientific exhibits, commercial fairs, military shows and a variety of popular entertainment;

Commercialization was a distinct novelty in terms of entrepreneurship. Living human ethno-exhibitions entered into the scope of a specialized show business that helped confer upon them regularity and standardized forms but also increasing complexity, ambition and international circulation. To this regard, suffice it to mention names like the German *entrepreneur* Carl Hagenbeck, whose career as an organizer of proper ‘human zoos’ started in 1874 and continued well into the twentieth century. Other businessmen engaged in ethno-exhibitions of different sorts were the Americans Phineas Taylor Barnum – whose amazing career started in 1836 in New York as the manager of an ‘ethnic show’ consisting in the exhibition of the African American Joice Heth<sup>7</sup> – and William Cody, William Leonard Hunt (1838- 1929), better known as the “The Great Farini”, the Hungarian brothers Kiralfy, Imre (1845-1919) and Bolossy (1848-1932), the Chicago businessman Sol Bloom (1870-1949), in his early career before becoming a politician; and less famous persons active in France, the United States, Italy and elsewhere, like Ferdinand Gravier, Xavier de Pené, R. W. Lindsay and Mr. Paganini<sup>8</sup>. To these we should also add a host of less-known or

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Reiss, *Barnum, Joice Heth and Antebellum Spectacles of Race*, in “American Quarterly”, vol. 51, n. 1 (Mar. 1999), pp. 78-107, and Id., *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death and Memory in Barnum’s America*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> On these figures, see Eric Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck’s Empire of Entertainments*, London and Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008, Hilde Thode-Arora, “Hagenbeck et les tournées européennes: l’élaboration du zoo humain”, in *Zoos humains et Exhibitions coloniales*, sous la direction de P. Blanchard, N. Bancel, G. Boëtsch, E. Deroo et S. Lemaire, Paris, La Découverte, 2011, pp. 150-159; Hagenbeck wrote also an interesting autobiography that was translated into English as *Beasts and Men. Being Carl Hagenbeck’s Experiences for Half a Century among Wild Animals*, London & New York, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912. , Shane Peacock, “Le Grand Farini en Afrique”, *Ivi*, pp. 180-192. On the brothers Kiralfy see *Bolossy Kiralfy, Creator of Great Musical Spectacles: an Autobiography*, (ed.) Barbara Baker, UMI Research Press, 1988; on Sol Bloom, *The Autobiography of Sol Bloom*, New York, Putnam House, 1948. Bibliography on William Cody is overwhelming and we just quote Sam Maddra, “Les Amérindiens dans le *Buffalo Bill Wild West Show*”, in *Zoos humains*, pp. 142-149 and refer to the rich website of the “Buffalo Bill Center for the West”, [12/12/2014]: <<http://centerofthewest.org/>>. On lesser figure of early-nineteenth century impresarios see Francesca Bertino, *The exhibition of otherness. The travels of an Eskimo and her impresario in France, Italy and the Habsburg Empire in the first half of the 19th century*, in “Cromohs”, vol. 18, 2013, [12/12/2014] <DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/Cromohs-14114>>

unknown artists, set designers, painters, architects and photographers who cooperated in creating presentations that became increasingly complex, demanding and rich in figures, symbols and decoration.

Many of these ethno-exhibitions – typically those set up in urban zoos in the Hagenbeck's style and involving African groups closer to the stereotype of the 'savage' peoples – took on a brutal aspect of open dehumanization of the subjects on display, justifying the adoption of the relatively recent and now dominant definition of 'human zoos'. This definition – whose increasing popularity in current literature is well illustrated by NGram Viewer frequency graphs in English, French and even Italian – suitably emphasizes the fundamental and undeniable animalization, racialization and commercialization of the peoples on display. And it underlines the contribution that ethno-exhibitions gave to the stereotyping of cultural differences and the construction of essentialist ideas of racial inequalities. In addition, it should never be overlooked the bare fact that a considerable number of non-European human beings – either during their voyages from or back to their countries of origins or during the usually long period of their European stay – died (most frequently by typhoid fevers and pneumonia) in consequence of the pitiful and unacceptable hygienic conditions in which they were kept. In the light of this, the alternative and less crude expression of 'ethno-exhibition' reveals too detached and euphemistic a meaning. To speak of 'ethno-exhibitions' risks mitigating the real nature of certain exhibitionary performances and disguising their real content behind scientific or educational motives. And we know that, while certainly part of the exhibitionary impulse, scientific motivations were hardly ever the fundamental ones, as it was demonstrated *e contrario* by the English scientist John Conolly's exhortations to his colleagues for transforming the frequent London ethnological exhibitions of a commercial nature in more useful events from the standpoint of popular education<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Conolly, *The Ethnological Exhibitions of London*, 8-10.

If the idea of ‘human zoos’ seems to present a one-dimensional character and suggest an exclusive interpretation in terms of domination and racism, it is undeniable that the public display of alien humans were brutal practices inspired and inspiring racist behaviors, and that they strengthened in Western public opinion the sense of superiority toward black ‘races’, considered as belonging to lower rungs on the evolutionary ladder, thus reinforcing stereotyped representations especially of black Africans and other peoples belonging to particularly ‘primitive’ societies<sup>10</sup>. Such an effect was achieved by the integration of those human exhibitions inside the great expositions, thus ensuring they would be seen by a vast public, along with the use of printed drawings and photographs accompanying the newspaper reports and the illustrated magazine articles.

All this nonetheless, the research on ‘freak shows’, ethnic spectacles and human exhibitions of various kinds and in different epochs, going back to at least the fifteenth century and even earlier, suggests that the ‘human zoos’ represented not the prototype, but only a most repugnant variant of a much larger family of events; and that understanding the nature and meaning of ethno-exhibitions requires a greater historical contextualization and a more attentive study of temporal, national and typological variants. The ‘human zoos’ perspective, moreover, should not flatten the complexity of the ethnic show by reducing it to a direct and exclusive power relation between organizers/visitors located in a self-conscious dominating position and the exhibited peoples as just passive, unaware, un-responding victims. More refined investigative perspectives that valorize the entirety of the available sources can in fact convey the point of view, behavior and language of the variously implicated figures: impresarios, agent-recruiters *in loco*, organizers, public authorities, exponents from the religious world, general spectators, ‘professional’ observers (journalists, scientists, artists), and naturally – when possible – the subjects on display themselves. It is true that is extremely difficult to grasp the latter’s voices, but it should be considered that

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<sup>10</sup> Lindfors, *Early African Entertainments Abroad*, pp. 3-5.



no ethnic group was transported to Europe for exhibiting purposes without its consensus, that in many cases more or less clear, comprehensible and respected written contracts regulated the exhibitionary tours and that the actual conditions of the often long European stays of the ‘savages’ or ‘aliens’ provided matter for intense negotiation. It is just by considering the varieties of circumstances, occurrences, reactions and representations accompanying the living ethno-exhibitions that it becomes possible to extract from the sources a multiplicity and even an opposition of meanings according to the different sorts of observers, commentators, agents and protagonists on the one side and the other. Their significance as ‘cultural artefacts’ cannot be reduced to a programmed set of intentions, but was the result of a culturally determined and evolving complex of acts and utterances.

### III.

In order to explain more clearly my methodological point of view for interpreting the living ethno-exhibitions I would like to make some observations, the first of which concerns what I would call the ‘appropriative-visual-exhibitionary instinct’ driving the long story of the living ethno-exhibitions. By this expression I mean an a-historical particular mechanism of conquest, consisting not just in the attainment of material dominion over territories and subduing or enslavement of persons by physical force, but in the more sophisticated, immaterial and symbolic action of taking and exercising control on ‘other’ human beings – their physical bodies and outer appearances – through the power not only of words, images and knowledge, but also of the gaze and its sensorial capacity of supporting representations, imagination and emotions<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> As exemplified by the “naming frenzy” stressed by Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other*, New York, Harper & Row, 1984, pp. 27-28. On knowledge and empire, within a very large bibliography and confining ourselves to the Iberian Atlantic, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006, *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World*, (ed.) James Delbourgo,

Leaving aside the pathological, monstrous, liminal human phenomena and freaks of nature that populated fairs, scientific laboratories, princely courts and aristocratic salons – such an instinctive mechanism manifested itself in various forms in early modern European culture, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, toward the physical, material, iconographic and cognitive appropriation of human diversity, thus creating the presuppositions of the later phenomena of the living ethno-exhibitions proper<sup>12</sup>. Ancient history scholar Mary Beard has explicitly postulated a close relationship between the public exhibition of ‘barbarian’ captives in the Roman triumphs – with their processions, rituals, symbols, procedures – and the human exhibitions of the mid-nineteenth century<sup>13</sup>. In the early modern era, countless were the public presentations of alien and especially exotic humans with the explicit purpose to exhibit anthropological ‘otherness’ and to entertain different sorts of publics. Such practices spread starting from the late fifteenth century, when transatlantic and transmarine ‘European encounters’ with non-European peoples and cultures intensified to a striking extent. In some of my previous works and on the basis of a rich secondary literature<sup>14</sup> I sought to put into perspective multiple episodes that reveal the persistent working of an ‘exhibitionary impulse’, to paraphrase Tony Bennett’s well-known expression<sup>15</sup>. It was an impulse rooted in the possessive,

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Nicholas Dew, New York, Routledge, 2008, Gabriel B. Paquette, *Enlightenment, Governance, and Reform in Spain and its Empire 1759-1808*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); for an advanced online digital project of visualizing culture, see “An Intellectual Map of Science in the Spanish Empire, 1600-1810”, part of the “Mapping the Republic of Letters” project directed by Marcelo Aranda at Stanford University [12/12/2014]: <<http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/casestudies/spanishempire.html>>. As to the power of images, see Kathryn M. Mayers, *Visions of Empire in Colonial Spanish American Ekphrastic Writing*, Plymouth, Bucknell University Press, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> I developed this point in my “Trophying human otherness from Christopher Columbus to contemporary ethno-ecology fifteenth-twenty first centuries”, in *Encountering Otherness. Diversities and Transcultural Experiences in Early Modern European Culture*, (ed.) Guido Abbattista, Trieste, Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2011, pp. 19-41.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 328-329.

<sup>14</sup> In particular Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain, 1500-1776*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex”, in Id., *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, 59-88.

appropriative instinct of the European conquering, colonizing and trading intruders, that from newly discovered lands extended to the people inhabiting them and that should be distinguished from capture and enslavement practices. The act of transporting overseas often consenting representatives of ‘new’, exotic and ‘savage’ peoples for exhibiting them in courts and public processions falls within those “ceremonies of possession” of which has written Patricia Seed<sup>16</sup>. Such practices – variants of which were forms of displacement for education, evangelization, linguistic mediation, diplomacy, which invariably occasioned public exhibitions – amount to the exercise of a practical and symbolic discipline of the body ‘other’. It is a form of biopolitics that is both physical and sensory-based. It consists in the power to induce displacement and mobility of bodies ‘other’ and in the distinct power to submit them to an exoticizing gaze.

During the eighteenth century such an impulse – without losing its curiosity- and entertainment-driven manifestations – evolved in a more conscious scientific direction, with the declared need to ‘see’ peoples ‘other’ in order to describe and inscribe them within the encyclopedic and anthropological project of Enlightenment culture<sup>17</sup>. In the same period, the spectacularization of human diversity continued as an ‘unexpected consequence’ of the globalizing process underway, with the intermittent presence in European cities of oversea-coming individuals or small groups of students, neophytes, interpreters and ambassadors from American and Asian nations. But in not a few cases such spectacular and exoticizing outcomes were clearly intentional, if not premeditated: human ‘otherness’ was traded for the amount of money that public curiosity for the aliens was ready to pay. The event-symbol that inaugurated the nineteenth century – the unfortunate Sarah Baartman, better known as the ‘Hottentot Venus’, on show in London and Paris between 1810 and 1815 – revealed again the overlapping between business speculation, scientific interests,

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<sup>16</sup> Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> I dealt with this topics in my *Umanità in mostra*, pp. 68-81.

anthropological observation, exotic appeal and *voyeurism*, announcing the transition toward new forms of living ethno-exhibitions in an Europe more and more launched in a global colonial and imperialistic project.

Commercial and colonial expansion and globalization in the following decades continued to stimulate the power of the exoticizing gaze with new kinds of attractions relating not only to the African world but also to new geographical and cultural realities with which the Europeans had closer and closer relationships. It is the case of China.

The case of China is worth mentioning because it demonstrates that the exhibitionary impulse was ready to swallow new parts of the world, providing an example of private collecting transforming itself into public exhibits and travelling expositions where living representatives of Chinese culture and society soon found their place as human aliens side by side with objects, commodities, artefacts. Private collections of Chinese objects and curiosities, sketches and pictures, at the end of the eighteenth century, were gathered by the interests of diplomats or private traders, among which a prominent figure was the Dutch born and naturalized American citizen André Everard Van Braam Houckgeest, member of Dutch East India Company embassy to Peking in 1794 and 1795. Houckgeest was the collector of a remarkable amount of visual records of China later exhibited, between 1796 and 1797, in his Philadelphia mansion and then in travelling exhibitions: it is worth remarking that the Chinese servants he took with him to America were as much cherished protagonists of his exhibitions as his collection of pictures<sup>18</sup>. But the most famous of the early-nineteenth century Chinese collections was undoubtedly that of Nathan Dunn, a Philadelphian Quaker sinophile merchant (who abstained to trade in opium) who in 1838 set up his exhibit “Ten Thousands Chinese Things”, also known as *Dunn’s Chinese Collection* or *Chinese Museum*, that in later years was exported and exhibited in Europe. This was a complex cultural artefact aiming to offer the public a

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<sup>18</sup> Charles H. Carpenter, *The Chinese collection of A. E. van Braam Houckgeest*, in “Magazine Antiques”, vol. 105, no. 2, February 1974, pp. 338-345.

concentrated but realistic representation of Chinese society and culture<sup>19</sup>. Not just a traditional diorama, but an assemblage of authentic objects – “trade articles, household items, historical artifacts, costumes, agricultural tools, and specimens of zoological, botanical, and mineralogical interest”<sup>20</sup> – and a reenactment of real-life groups animating scenes and situations aimed at improving popular perceptions and countering the stereotyped “vision of Cathay”<sup>21</sup>. What has not been remarked before is that the maximum effect of authenticity was pursued by introducing physical human figures: first, by life-size waxen reproductions according to an existing practice<sup>22</sup>, and later by the exhibition of Chinese people in the flesh, thus partially giving the *Chinese Museum* the aspect of a living human exhibition<sup>23</sup>. I have recalled this case as an example of how the ‘exhibitionary impulse’ and the exoticizing gaze stimulated by the growing European acquaintance with (and very soon irruption in) China generated sorts of living human displays in forms, languages and codes for representing anthropological and cultural diversity rather hard to be interpreted in terms of ‘human zoos’.

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<sup>19</sup> Altick, *The Shows of London*, pp. 294-297.

<sup>20</sup> John R. Haddad, *The Romantic Collector in China: Nathan Dunn's Ten Thousand Chinese Things*, in “Journal of American Culture”, Vol. 21, no. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 7-26, see p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*, Harper & Row, 1961.

<sup>22</sup> For instance in Dr. Kahn's “Gallery of all Nations” in London, on which see *Catalogue of Dr. Kahn's Anatomical Museum*, London, 1853, and Bernth Lindfors, *Dr. Kahn and the Niam-Niams* (1988), now in *Early African Entertainments Abroad*, pp. 123-130.

<sup>23</sup> On Nathan Dunn's Chinese collection and exhibition, see first of all Enoch C. Wines and Nathan Dunn, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese collection*, in Philadelphia: With miscellaneous remarks upon the manners, customs, trade, and government of the Celestial Empire, Philadelphia, 1839, Id., *A Peep at China in Mr. Dunn's Chinese Collection: With Miscellaneous Notices Relating to the Institutions and Customs of the Chinese, and Our Commercial Intercourse with Them*, Philadelphia, 1839; William Langdon, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Collection now exhibiting at St. George's Place, Hyde Park Corner*, London: with condensed accounts of the genius, government, history, literature, agriculture, arts, trade, manners, customs and social life of the people of the celestial empire, London, 1842. See also John R. Haddad, *The Romance of China: Excursions to China in U.S. Culture: 1776-1876*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, [13/12/2014]: <<http://www.gutenberg-e.org/haj01/haj01.html>>; Nancy B. Wilkinson, *The Chinese Collection of Nathan Dunn: Its Origin, Travels and Influence on the Arts of Britain*, in “The International Journal of the Arts in Society”, vol. 3, n. 4, 2009, pp. 61-69; Anne Veronica Witchard, *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, pp. 42-43.

My second observation is that throughout the nineteenth century numerous variants occurred of what I have called the ‘public othering of the human body’, that is to say, visual (re)presentations of human aliens under the sway of the power of the gaze. Ethnic shows of individuals or small groups evolved into complex projects, often integrated within the great expositions for the benefit of ordinary people, to miniaturize distant and exotic realities, enriched in authenticity and attraction by the physical human presence. This led, under the same impulse, to a very rich case-record of ‘black’ and colonial villages – ‘villages noirs’, ‘villaggi coloniali’ or ‘barrios moros’ built within the exposition areas and populated by heterogeneous ethnic groups. The same search for the exotic led to realistic and ambitious reproductions of streets, buildings, markets, cafès and related social practices mainly from North-African and Near eastern cities. Inspired as they were by the orientalist and exoticist taste, they belonged to a phantasmagorical project intended to subject ‘cultural diversity’ to the transfiguring and exoticizing power of the Western gaze – it is not casual that most criticisms of this kind of cultural artifacts came from modernizing Arab visitors<sup>24</sup>.

If the phenomenon of the ‘human zoos’ was undoubtedly part of this vogue and inspired an approach to the African world that stimulated the development of popular forms of racism, however, two aspects are worth to point out. First, in countries like Spain and Italy, where many living ethno-exhibitions took place, the recorded examples hardly fit into the model of the ‘human zoos’ like those prevailing in France and Germany. Rather than trying to emphasize in an exclusive way extreme and repulsive racial diversity, most of those installations – even if sometimes inspiring racist comments by onlookers – were intended to present the public with peoples and cultures maybe hierarchically inferior but still well integrated into a process of civilization led by a modern form of progressive colonialism, engaged in collecting geographical-naturalistic, economic, demographic and anthropic data to serve an imperial governmentality.

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<sup>24</sup> See *Umanità in mostra*, pp. 370-371, and especially Cristiana Baldazzi’s contribution to this collection.

It is exactly within a discourse of this kind that a second nineteenth-century variant of the ‘public othering of the human body’ emerged: the missionary exhibition. In the Catholic world, in Spain and Italy above all, missionary propaganda set up documentary exhibitions within the spaces carved out within the great expositions, using the presence of converted natives from the Americas and North Africa in a systematic way. Here again the emphasis was on the idea of a shared human condition and a common path to salvation, not surely on the animalization and racialization of indigenous people<sup>25</sup>. As in the previous case, the exploration of the Italian experience has allowed aspects of the ‘public othering of the human body’ – which an interpretive logic centered on ‘human zoos’ might have disregarded – to be given due emphasis.

A third and final observation, concerning the need to rethink the category of ‘human zoos’, regards the topic of ‘agency’ and, more in general, the polysemic dimension of the living ethno-exhibitions. Far from possessing an unequivocal meaning referring back to domination and racism, the study of living ethno-exhibitions requires the consideration of a multiplicity of viewpoints, that are expressed by voices, interpretations, feelings and emotions emerging from a wide spectrum of written and iconographical sources: official programs, guides, newspapers articles, diaries, memoirs, stories, literary inventions, sketches, prints, photographs, posters and flyers. All these evidences provide glimpses of the everyday life of the exhibitionary events and the different roles of several different participating subjects. When, in the most fortunate cases, one can perceive a variety of voices, then the behaviors and emotions of a composite public of watchers and of the subjects on display themselves can be brought to the surface: from amazement, fear and repulse to interest and curiosity, sheer dislike and protest, from nostalgia and apathy to violent reactions, escape desire and self-mutilation, but also self-adaptation, shrewd ability to interact and exploit the circumstances. This way, it is the ‘negotiated’ nature of the

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<sup>25</sup> Luis A. Sánchez-Gómez, *Dominación, fe y espectáculo*, cit.

ethno-exhibition that becomes visible; and, with it, the 'agency' of people who, far from lending themselves passively to pre-established roles, tried to shape the events with their own initiative, adding a voluntaristic, unpredictable element to the exhibitionary project. In other words, the gaze and its power always work in opposite directions: not proceeding only from the displayer/visitor/public toward the displayed/actor, but also vice versa. The displayed subjects thus become reactive observers who are aware of and interact with the public, anticipating expectations, requirements and motivations. In cooperation with the public the exhibited subjects shape the course of an event, not just flatly reproducing a script, but cooperating to create a real performance. The ethno-exhibition, therefore, shows a performative dimension made of interpretation and improvisation modifying the intentions of the original planners. Of course the de-humanizing nature of the 'human zoos' and the actual captive, exploited, degrading condition of the exhibited subjects are out of question. But we should not neglect the actual, daily development of the human exhibition as plot, whose events are an integral part of its unfolding and its meaning. We should not neglect either the ambiguity and duplicity of situations in which the exhibited 'played' as "professional savages", actively collaborated as mediators between their own groups and the Western *impresarios* or even took on directly in their hands the exhibitionary business, self-exoticizing and self-zooing themselves, so to speak. Such was the famous case of John Calvett Nayo Bruce, a Togo native who, after having been an exhibited 'savage' himself in the late 1890s, became a successful manager of more than 200 exhibitions of his fellow-savages throughout Europe and the United States, thus earning today, with others like himself, the scornful definition of "Nègres de service: les traîtres de leurs peuples"<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Rea Brändle, *Nayo Bruce. Geschichte einer afrikanischer Familie in Europa*, Zürich, Chronos Verlag, 2007, Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages. Captive Lives and Western Spectacles*, Sidney, UNSW Press, 2004. On African collaboration, see *Déshumanisation: quand l'homme finit en cage*, [14/12/2014]: <<http://www.deshumanisation.com/phenomene/envers-du-decor>>.