
Everyday Strangeness: Robert Ripley's International Oddities as Documentary Attractions

Author(s): Jane M. Gaines

Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 33, No. 4, *Everyday Life* (Autumn, 2002), pp. 781-801

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057756>

Accessed: 12/07/2010 17:22

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=jhup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New Literary History*.

Everyday Strangeness: Robert Ripley's International Oddities as Documentary Attractions

Jane M. Gaines

MY ALTERNATIVE TITLE is "Everyday Estrangement," emphasizing a very particular aspect of everyday life theory having to do with the critical capacity of the strange. While most theorists of everyday life are concerned with the ordinary and its uses, not all visit the problem of critique; if, like Michel de Certeau, they are interested in critique from below, at the level of ordinary people and ordinary practices, this outburst is diffuse and often undetectable. For my purposes, I find in a combination of Bertolt Brecht and Henri Lefebvre an edge and a sharper definition. In both, the critique is spatialized as proximity or juxtaposition. Here, the problematic juxtaposition is that of the ordinary and the extraordinary, or the strange as it contributes to estrangement, where estrangement means distance and disillusionment. The reader will note my interest in suggesting that under some circumstances the ordinary verges on the extraordinary. Conversely, the odd thing can be made common or familiar. But what arises from this consideration is a new problem, the politics of determining what is strange, which carries with it a companion question: what is at stake in the separation of the ordinary from the extraordinary? Here, in my consideration of everyday life theory as it parallels documentary film theory, I suggest that although there is an ideological need for the separation between the norm and the aberration, in popular culture, since the early part of this century, there has been a fascination with the problem of the difference between ordinary and extraordinary.

Background

In 1930, world-famous syndicated cartoonist Robert Ripley produced twenty-four episodes of the *Believe It or Not* series as live action theatrical shorts for Warner Brothers/Vitaphone. The Ripley human interest snippets were not, however, called "documentaries," but rather "novelties" or "pictorials."¹ The black-and-white footage was shot and cut in the

straightforward informational news style, however, and would thus seem to belong to the larger documentary tradition.² Although it was short-lived, the Vitaphone series was not the only one of its kind. There was a revival at Fox, as well as rival series at both Universal and Columbia Pictures: an early attempt to use color in *Strange as It Seems*, and then the last gasp *Stranger than Fiction* in 1940.³

The connection between Ripley's *Believe It or Not* and the moving picture news media is further confirmed by a study of Fox Movietone News (1927).⁴ Both evidence a frank frontality (everything toward the camera) in the black-and-white image and the excited radio-style voice-over on the track. While the subject matter and presentation style is often similar in both, the Fox Movietone News mixes weird phenomena (especially human curiosities) with legitimate news, comprising what might be called "tabloid news" (T 99). Ripley's theatrical shorts, in contrast, were totally tabloid and comprised exclusively of weird stuff. However, whereas Fox Movietone subjects verged on the "freakish," justified as human interest or for their "news" value, Ripley overlooked famous freaks in favor of original and newly discovered phenomena, sometimes "freakish" and sometimes not so strange after all.⁵ Both, however, were precursors of the contemporary television news magazine in their unpredictable miscellany. To give some examples of the subjects the Fox Movietone News would have featured within their news roundup screened before the main feature in the 1920s: the world's largest banjo, a man eating glass, conjoined twins Margaret and Mary with their fiancé, a man calling hogs and imitating a donkey, bathing-suited women riding ice blocks pulled by cars, the wedding of tall man Robert Wadlow, a man blowing smoke through his ears, a man eating razor blades, and finally Robert Ripley playing golf on a rooftop in New York City.

Clearly, a talking and walking Robert Ripley is offered as one more amazing phenomenon in the Fox newsreel as well as in the Vitaphone shorts, both examples of early sound work from around 1927 to 1930. Here, the demonstration of the synchronization of voice to image is as much part of the "believe it or not" phenomenon as the surprising subject matter, particularly in the earliest Fox footage where the unusual subjects (hog-calling, giant banjo-playing, glass-chewing) are made stranger by virtue of the technological rendering of sounds by means of early recording devices. In the Vitaphone series, the sound, reminiscent of radio, is used over the images of miscellaneous oddities as the breathless voice of showman Robert Ripley urges us to share the excitement of his discoveries from travels in one hundred twenty-two countries. In the Vitaphone shorts, Ripley's "discoveries" might happen to be a man pulling a car attached to his hair, the largest chest of drawers

in the world, a community of veiled men in the Middle East, a champion tire-roller, a Chinese woman with two-and-a-half-inch eyelashes, or an outcropping of rock along the Wisconsin state highway in the shape of an Indian head. In Atlantic City we see a giant replica of an Underwood typewriter (weighing fourteen tons); in Brooklyn, the largest indoor rubber plant; in Hartsdale, New York, a cemetery for dogs; and in Atlanta, D. A. Pittman, a gardener who cuts hedges in the shape of animals. Ripley appears in one segment with a man who he claims will tear a deck of cards into eight pieces. We see the man tearing paper into smaller and smaller sections until it appears that the deck has been thus divided, at which point Ripley picks up the last eighth and delivers his trademark line and disclaimer: "There it is, believe it or not."

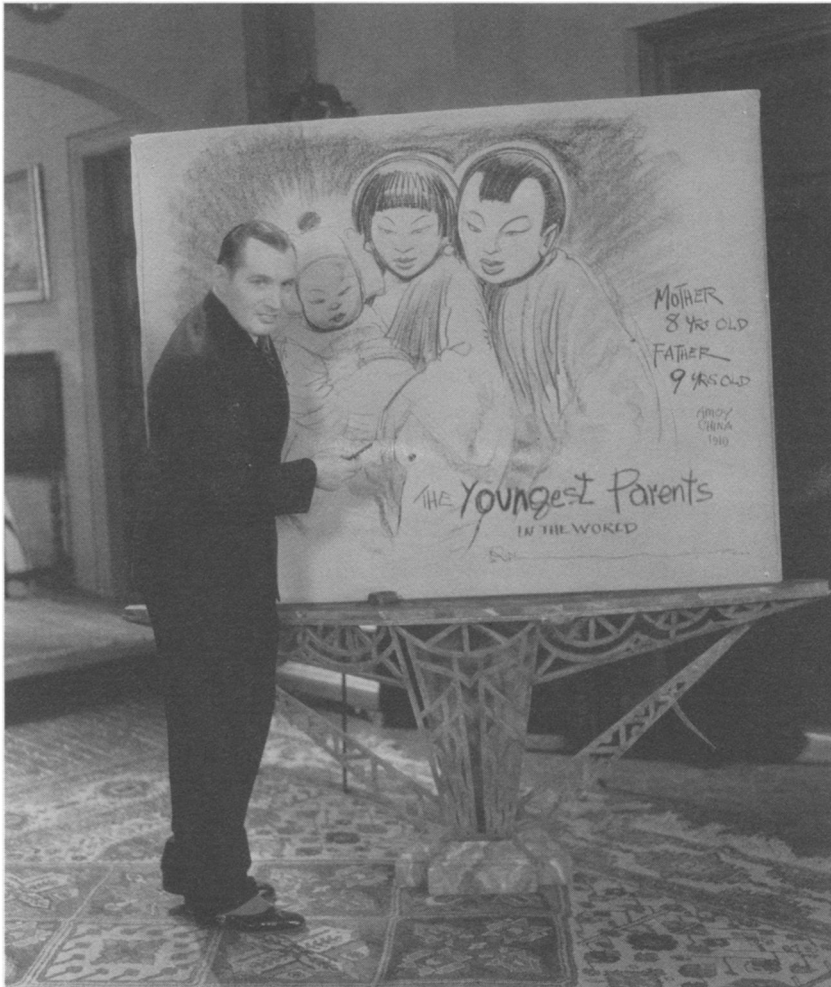
Documentary Theory and Everyday Life

My original interest was in the history of moving-image spectacles of actuality as a challenge to established documentary film tradition.⁶ There are implications here not only for the history that begins with Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1921), but for the most contemporary of media. There may be an echo of the "Believe It or Not" phenomenon in most reality-TV shows, magazine programs such as "Inside Edition" and "Real TV," "America's Funniest Home Video," and that everyday spectacle of factuality, the evening news. I initially wanted to demonstrate an affinity between the documentary mode of film and video, and subject matter that verges on the salacious, a move that has significance for documentary film theory in its current phase, a period marked by challenges to received histories along with the development of new paradigms.⁷ However, just as I confront the question of the affinity with oddity, the opposite asserts itself and I am obliged to deal at once with the affinity between documentary and the *ordinary*. It would seem, however, that I cannot just assume this connection to ordinari-ness, a connection rooted in the documentary legacy as ethnographic observation of customs as well as social scientific record of ordinary existence, people's struggles, inadvertent moves, and unguarded moments. I especially cannot overlook this tendency toward the unexceptional in a consideration of the *Believe It or Not* filmed subject matter which would appear, on the face of it, to be at times as *ordinary* as it is extraordinary. Indeed, the premise of Ripley's approach, at least in its cartoon manifestation, was that one culture's everyday life was another culture's exotic attraction. It is strange to us that others find these things to be ordinary. Objections might be raised to the neocolonial exoticization

except that Ripley's formula was never straightforwardly Orientalist, but was instead perhaps a kind of uneven Orientalism, a mix of the most extreme xenophobia and a genuine desire to know and understand.

To some degree, Ripley's formula for success was not in the inversion but in the mixture, the concoction, of the ordinary with the extraordinary, the familiar with the strange.⁸ If there is one operative principle that would explain the disparateness of the "believe it or not's" it must be that the natural, the freak of nature, and the obvious gaff or fake are presented together, straight-faced, as though they categorically belong together. The rubber plant and the not-so-strange Wisconsin rock formation throw us off. While we are wondering what these natural growths have in common with the giant typewriter, the card trick fools us (even though we know that card tricks are always clever deceptions). The typewriter and the rock formation are oddly paired unless one considers that they are both perhaps "remarkable." Consider further examples. The Ripley shorts present us with a visual catalogue of unusual items which would appear on the face of it to have absolutely nothing in common: a pair of one-hundred-nineteen-year-old men, the youngest parents in the world, a shop that caters to fat men, a gigantic Bible, a collapsible car, a duck who teaches chickens to swim, men who like to sew, and a chicken who raises puppies. The duck and the swimming chicken are ideological decoys. (If they occur in nature, we are encouraged to think, what else could also be found?) "Nature" naturalizes the unnatural. And thus, since "everything can be found in nature," we are prepared to swallow everything that *cannot* be found.

Notice here that we are talking about the content rather than form of the Vitaphone movie shorts. My concern, however, is with content *brought to you by form*, and I will want to know if Ripley's use of the film camera in 1930 contributed as much to the "believe it or not" effect as did his categorical ordering. Without a doubt, editing or cutting is crucial here, since in creating the extraordinary-ordinary mix, the daily-life stew, juxtaposition is everything. Most relevant to documentary film theory as well as everyday life theory, however, is the question of transparency, an issue that arises in the former in relation to camerawork as well as cutting.⁹ This transparency (or invisibility) that film theorists have since the 1970s discussed as a style that achieves the erasure of not only the labors and materials of filmmaking but the economic forces behind them, has its ideological effect. This I will want to distinguish from the "believe it or not" effect. The ideological effect results from the production of a view of things that are presented untouched and "as they are," the creation of a realm of things that will be "taken for granted." The effect is guaranteed when these aspects of culture produce the reaction, "naturally," or "that's it." Not surprisingly, this



Robert Ripley with his drawing of the youngest parents in the world. (©2002 Ripley Entertainment Inc.)

ideological effect produced by a cinematic style is, in the case of documentary, one and the same as the ideological effect produced by the things themselves in their grouping in this category of the everyday. One of the more interesting questions here is whether the cinematic style is more unseen and unremarkable than the stuff of daily life itself, either in its pro-filmic (before film production) state, or in what might be called its "post-filmic" state in which it is nothing more than the effluvia of the world. This is the stuff of things that continue to exist, to

grow (the tallest man), to eat (the fattest), and to age (the old men), even after the camera has come and gone. In a sense, it is this continuing on of life in the habituated mode that defines the subject of documentary as different from that of the live action fiction film, where the characters do not continue their lives lived before the camera in imagined towns on the false backdrop that will eventually be dismantled.

We learn something about documentary film theory from an understanding of the see-through-ness of the stuff of its traditional subject. Documentary film form has taken something from everyday life itself, one of its favorite subjects. What it has taken, however, is more illusory than concrete since it is a matter of the convergence of connotations (“actuality,” “reality,” “ordinariness,” “life”) rather than any material similarities or actual correspondences. We know that the realm of daily life before the documentary camera is as constructed and shaped as the recording of that world, whether filmed or taped. The *cinéma vérité* myth of nonintervention in the scene of the ordinary in its humdrum life before the camera is just that, a myth.¹⁰ It would seem, however, that the myths come together to reinforce each other. The idea of the obvious reality of daily life meets the idea of the “reality” of what it is that the camera so obviously retrieves. Thus it is that we have a kind of double transparency in the phenomenon of a documentary’s mechanical record of daily life.

In discussing these two transparencies (that are really two conventions), I am attempting to kill two theoretical birds with one stone. What first strikes me is the way in which the Marxist theory of ideology has been made to do double duty in these parallel fields on separate phenomena, the one concentrated on the problem of the signification of “reality” by unseen (transparent) forms, and the other the problem of existence itself—especially aspects of social life that are lived unknowingly. Two kinds of illusoriness are made one in the problem of documentary realism. In considering the naturalization of everything in the world (all custom, protocol, and gesture), a process that stands in the way of our seeing things as *what they are* (historically and politically contingent), we might be looking at different strategies of naturalization. These strategies—lived or represented—are difficult if not impossible to extricate from one another. We might in one breath be discussing a lived experience, a conceptual process, or a mechanical (filmmaking) or electronic process (videotaping). Interestingly, as the process of videotaping in the home mode becomes increasingly habitual and automatic, the act of taping becomes as transparent as the image produced and viewed.¹¹ It would appear that we have come full circle in the theorization of the everyday to a point where the stuff of the everyday becomes conjoined with the act of its own registration. It would

even seem, if we go back to Marx and Engels's *German Ideology*, that everyday life and photographic process are partners in the production of the defining metaphor for the function of mystification in daily life lived under capitalism. This can be seen if we think of the *camera obscura's* inverted image as explaining the wrong-headed, upside-down understanding of "men and their circumstances." In the end, though, it is the "historical life-process" that is the ultimate origin of the distorted misrepresentation and consequent misunderstanding of our real relations to production. Our daily existence is seen finally as having as much causality as the physiological processes involved in seeing.¹²

Documentary film theory and everyday life theory, although they have gone their separate ways, might now be seen as having continued on parallel tracks. Perhaps now we recognize the indebtedness of the critique of realism in cinema to the formulation of theories of everyday life (beginning with Marx and Engels) as well as to the realm of lived experience that is their object.¹³ This parallelism is especially evident in our understanding of the everyday—in its infinite ordinariness, its cycles of the same, and its insistent claim to be the realm of the real. If these two theories share a starting point, they also share the same felt impact of new theoretical developments, as, for instance, in the impact of post-structuralism and, more recently, what might be called the analysis of the "excesses of post-structuralism."¹⁴ The post-structuralist assertion that there is "no reality to know" outside signs could conceivably have impacted everyday life theory even more than it has impacted documentary film theory, where what evolved was a pragmatic double move. In documentary film theory there has been a contradictory "no reality to know" via the camera and a final "reality check" in the real historical event itself. Thus it could be said that while we can signify the realm of the real we have been unable to locate it. This problem arises dramatically in our understanding of the "believe it or not" approach to representations of the daily life of the entire world, and is first evident in our critical stance. How do we counter the highly ideological exoticization of daily life (the world over) if not with the assertion that "it is not that way but *this*"? Our antidote to ideology is the assertion that "*this* is how it really is," which has its corollary in the representation of things as *really there*.

In case we had forgotten, Brecht's political aesthetics has long provided a critical solution to the problem of the "really there" and the "really are" in its formulation of a realist standpoint, a formulation that comes attached to the alienation strategy that has, among its advantages (for us), an approach to the everyday that turns the ordinary into the extraordinary.¹⁵ In addition to employing a strategy that builds the concept of unnaturalness into the concept of the natural so that the one

appears automatically with the other, Brecht understands the alienation effect as the way in which we call attention to the habituated and conventional by qualifying them. The use of qualifiers such as “in fact” and “actually” are “in fact” modes of alienation or distancing (*BT* 145). They make us see what it is that we take for granted as part of our daily existence. Brecht’s example of the powers of alienation is appropriate here as it is seen to produce ethnographic distancing, or what Ben Highmore has called “cross-cultural estrangement” (*E* 22). The non-Western view of Western culture performs a critique of Western phenomena. For example, the Eskimo definition of “car” as a “wingless aircraft that crawls along the ground” is for us, Brecht says, a way of alienating or defamiliarizing our entirely too familiar use of the automobile. In this example, he continues, “we have taken a common, recurrent, universally-practiced operation and tried to draw attention to it by illuminating its peculiarity” (*BT* 145). Alienation is here effected through cultural contrast.¹⁶

While the defamiliarization of the automobile exemplifies something basic to everyday life theory, for documentary film theory it has much more significant implications. For as Brecht’s political aesthetics has been translated into film theory the approach has focussed exclusively on formal devices rather than the camera’s ethnographic subject. Very simply, to summarize several decades of criticism, as cinematic form called attention to itself it was able to counter the false obviousness and dangerous illusion of classical realism as a style and ideology. Political critique (the antidote to the ideological) was effected (and effective) almost exclusively at the level of form. Realism’s photographic subject, no matter how strange or subversive, could not, given this orthodoxy, produce critical distance.¹⁷ Only the techniques that called the techniques themselves into question could produce distance. Now consider the contribution of everyday life theory. What is opened up by a consideration of the subject of documentary from the vantage point of the critical capacity of everyday life is the possibility that if the form (given its transparency) does not perform the critique, the content will. Yet we still need to ask where the peculiarity in the content comes from. Ripley’s subjects (the child parents and the swimming chicken) although peculiar are not necessarily *made* peculiar. One might argue that Ripley’s miscellany is uncritical and complicit in a deeply hegemonic view of the world and that therefore this unfamiliarity serves no purpose other than to shore up existing power relations. Yet it stirs us. And because it sometimes troubles and often disturbs we need to ask, what exactly *is* the difference between the familiar that is *made* strange and the apparently always already strange? Perhaps the difference is less than one would think, for it is difficult to determine which comes first, the

strangeness of the child-parent or the way the child-as-parent makes parenting strange.

The Curious Spectator

The miscellany of Ripley's oddities immediately raises the question of the audience for the ordinary that verges on the weird. Already available is the explanation cultural historian Neil Harris offers in his classic study of showman P. T. Barnum (responsible for distant relatives of Robert Ripley such as the White Whale, the Feejee mermaid, Tom Thumb, and the Siamese twins, Chang and Eng).¹⁸ Harris justifies the fascination of the turn-of-the-century mass public in terms of curiosity. This was the public who not only attended world's fairs in droves but were taken in by newspaper hoaxes, and did not necessarily make distinctions between educational and entertaining diversions. The mass audience seriously engaged in investigating the exotic in terms of the philosophical problem of literal truth were, as Harris argues, "problem-solving" as they encountered the strange and inexplicable.¹⁹ This explanation has all the advantages of the new theories of reception that empower rather than denigrate the spectator. An audience that is drawn to oddities is an audience that is not duped but is rather intelligently engaged in philosophical questions as well as scientific inquiry. This is an audience, the theory goes, that is deeply interested in the powers of the new machine-made realities of the twentieth century, an audience engaged in thinking through modernity. So it would seem that the early cinema spectator was caught up as well in this investigation of things. Harris's argument addresses the lure and the draw, especially applicable to the cinema spectator who, as early film historian Tom Gunning says, was "curiously engaged."²⁰ The new class of people with an "appetite for the unknown" encounter unfamiliar customs, unnatural practices, and unusual objects. Everyday oddity could be seen here as fostering (on the part of the curious spectator) a new interpretation of culture, a reevaluation of the entire scheme of things, and even, possibly, a readjustment of a worldview.²¹

It remains for us to expand the work done on the turn-of-the-century spectator to later decades. Already the concept of the "cinema of attractions" referenced in my title has been extended beyond its original application to early spectacle to spectacularized developments appearing on screen throughout the rest of the century.²² While we might not want to consider either Fox Movietone News or Vitaphone shorts as aesthetically similar to early cinema, there is one important way in which they both could be said to feature new technology as attraction: they

made a spectacle out of the phenomenon of sound-on-film. For Fox Movietone (the talking newsreel) and for Warner's Vitaphone (the featured shorts), the lure and draw was the technological achievement but also the uniqueness of direct-recorded speech and sound.²³ Novelty is the key here, for as sound-film historian Rick Altman has said, every new technology will go through an "attractionist period" or "phase" at its inception.²⁴ In its broadest interpretation, a cinema attraction implies the draw itself, the drawing in, the technology that produces the draw as well as the viscosity of the spectator experience of that technology. In the case of the oddities of the Vitaphone shorts and the Fox Movietone News, there would be a double draw, the attraction of the talking picture itself not only "sounding" but "showing" us the strange and unusual made to seem, strangely enough, almost familiar. Here, the fascination is wrapped in a fascination.

The curious spectator, who wanted above all to be astonished, says Gunning, was also interested in the workings of the mechanism, interested in how the illusion of reality was actually produced. It is this spectator who craves the "pleasure of vacillation between doubt and belief," in Gunning's words (A 117). This is the spectator who thrills to the back and forth between possibility and impossibility, who at every moving frame is led to wonder if something is either real or unreal, to whom the moving picture is the most convincingly lifelike "fake" he or she has ever seen. For all its fraudulence it yet seems to be the "real thing." (Spectators, as we know, have been historically prone to describe the first "moving" pictures and the first "talking" pictures as more real than reality itself.)²⁵ Thus the motion picture machine, it could be said, satisfies a certain appetite for deceptions or a "taste for delusion" to quote Jean-Louis Comolli.²⁶ Further, I am taking my cue from Comolli who in theorizing the "fictioning machine" has thus explained the vacillating spectator: "We know, but we want something else: to believe. We want to be fooled, while still knowing a little that we are so being. We want the one and the other, to be both fooled and not fooled, to oscillate, to swing from knowledge to belief, from distance to adherence, from criticism to fascination" (M 139). So the vacillating, "believe it or not" spectator is tantalized by the probability of the improbable.

This spectator is prepared to believe that the motion picture machine can restore life to the inanimate object, that it can make cars speed and horses run. Is this not the magical mechanism that turned first for its subject matter to the shock of the electrocution of an elephant and would continue to find an ideal subject in the freak of nature?²⁷ (In the phenomenon that taxes our capacity for credulity? That exercises the function of disbelief that checks the belief that could carry us away, that would surrender us to the machine?) Presented with Ripley's visual

evidence of the freak of nature (the four-horned goat and the two-uddered cow, as well as the curiosity of the swimming chicken), the spectator stops in a proverbial head-scratching gesture. The problem intrigues. What to make of this? The fascination is wrapped in a fascination (form favoring the paradoxical everyday strangeness), all the better to say, "This is it" and "This is so." Thus it is finally a matter of what cinematic realism does for the fluke of nature. It would appear that realism puts it over. If there was any doubt about the authenticity of the swimming chicken in the mind of the spectator, the black-and-white camera footage settles the issue.

But that is not exactly what Comolli is saying in his theorization of the spectator. Explaining the unqualified success of realism in cinema, he suggests that, paradoxically, it is always an operation not of the form but of spectatorship: "However refined, analogy in the cinema is a deception, a lie, a fiction that must be straddled—in disavowing, knowing but not wanting to know—by the *will to believe* of the spectator, the spectator who expects to be fooled and wants to be fooled, thus becoming the agent of his or her own fooling" (M 139). The triumph of the realist representation then, is never its resolution of the question as to whether something is or is not but rather the spectator's much desired conundrum, the "I believe / I don't believe" conundrum. Here, the spectator takes pleasure in his or her imprisonment in this contradiction, in a contradictory space in which it is possible to enjoy both the "effects of the real" and the "effects of fiction" (M 140). While Comolli's theorization has been understood as describing classical narrative fiction, it might productively be expanded to documentary, which, as Bill Nichols has argued, is a fiction like any other. Nichols has also prodded us to see documentary as less aligned with proof and more engaged in questioning. In defining the documentary spectator as epistophilic, as wanting to know, Nichols has radically enlarged our view of the documentary mode. Rather than seeing documentary as declarative ("This is so"), he sees it as interrogative ("This is so, is it not?").²⁸ The spectator rides up and down on the possibilities of belief and disbelief. Caught between credulity and incredulity, he or she experiences the dizzying effects of wonder. The viewer who is the "agent of his or her own fooling" is not the subject seeking scientific certitude. For that, he or she would look to other institutions. The spectator controls the effects, and in so doing asks to be fooled or deceived—and not only for the sake of entertainment. If Harris and Gunning are right, the spectator also asks to be fooled *for the sake of edification*. Thus our definition: the spectator who wants to be fooled all the while knowing it, who "straddles the fiction," is the documentary "believe it or not" spectator. Documentary attractions are those attractions that automatically raise the question of "really?"

building the question into the attraction itself. The classic cinematic “reality effect” would seem then to be close here to the “believe it or not” effect. In fact, to invert Comolli, there is no “believe it or not” effect without some reality effect.

Subjects of the Questioning Machine

Now let’s think about this dance of credulity and incredulity, this conceptual balancing act that defines the cinema in terms of the subjects it goes in search of to inhabit “Believe It or Not Land.” Let’s consider the affinity with oddity in terms of the photographic machine rather than the spectator. It would seem that Robert Ripley’s transition from cartooning to motion picture photography would present new possibilities for fraud as well as enlightenment, marrying the question of “Do you believe it?” to the fictioning machine that I want to define as a questioning machine. This is the scientific machine that historically has played on its “truth” and “proof” reputation, that has wowed viewers with its exaggerated indexicalities, that has caused them to wonder “Is it or is it not?” This is the interrogative machine that prods viewers to ask “What?” It asks the imagination to rise like the intonation of the question. As another way of defining the documentary attraction, we can look at the semiotics of the sketch or drawing in contrast with the moving image produced by the questioning machine. We thus trace Ripley’s move from syndicated news and the cartoon format to the documentary-style quasi-news of the Vitaphone shorts. In the cartooning mode, Robert Ripley could almost be *seen* as a huckster and mythologist since both his copy and his sketches tended towards hyperbole. Keeping the hyperbole in check, however, his much publicized expeditions argued for the authenticity of the “believe it or not” phenomena. But Ripley’s world tours may finally have been insufficient to the task of scientific validation of the existence of this or that exotic specimen.²⁹ Science instead becomes the jumping-off point for visual puns and word play. In one Vitaphone short, for instance, he draws the Javanese walking fish with feet and shoes. (Says Ripley, “It is one of the strangest [fish] and has legs and walks about like you or I.”) We are amused, but the sketch may not trigger much wonder about the existence of such a fish. The sketch merely literalizes a play on the word “walking.” Ripley might as well be drawing a mythical creature. But it would be a mistake to assume automatically that Ripley’s drawings invited more skepticism than motion picture footage. The existence of the sketched fish just may not have been in question *in the same way* that it might have been had a photo of a walking fish been offered in evidence. Then again, this is to

assume that somewhere in the world there is a walking fish to photograph, and if we have no immediate recourse here to either science or sense testimony, we are in much the same position as the “believe it or not” spectator. We do not know.

My interest, however, is less in exposing Ripley than in investigating the duality of the motion picture machine, questioning whether its functions are reducible to deception or documentation. Here, some of the wonder is produced by a play on these apparently contradictory functions as exemplified by the generic poles of the trick film and the news documentary. The moving picture hoax raises the question of whether the deception is produced *by* the camera or *before* the camera. Inevitably, for this discussion, we must return to the much-maligned empiricism of the documentary camera, that inadvertent empiricism that for so many decades underwrote the scientific truth claims of the ethnographic film. For empiricism, here exploited for all it is worth, is essential to the production of photographic moving picture curiosities for profit. Curiosity is deeply empirical and enamored of reality tests. The empirical camera that asks “What?” wants to know if the referent exists in the verifiable world and proposes a test.³⁰ Accepting the test, the camera (in its evidentiary mode) guarantees the very limits (it is / it is not) that produce the fascination. Factuality is made more fascinating as it is tested and taxed.

To push this question of the photographic, the incredible, and the empirical further let me consider an example. This is from Fox Movietone News which, although a few years earlier than the Vitaphone shorts and still enamored with the new talking capacity of the moving picture (that fascination in and of itself on top of the featured fascination), exemplifies the empirical test. Both the “Siamese twins marry” and the “man eats glass” segments raise the issue of the faked referent, but the “man eats glass” segment raises a more interesting question as it relates to the sound aspect of the technology. For the “evidence” of glass chewing is acoustic: loud crunching in addition to wind noise seems to be “picked up” by the location microphone. We are perplexed here not with the question of the existence of the real world referent, but with the mechanics of glass chewing tied to the new capabilities of synchronized sound recording. It is a question of the existence of a deception *by* the camera conjoined with a deception *before* the camera. The *man* may exist although he may not exactly exist as a glass chewer.³¹ (Is he really swallowing?) We are drawn to the representation because the synchronous sound camera (including sound-recording apparatus) promises to know, even to know for sure, more than we know. But, interestingly, our conviction regarding the limits of the apparatus also contribute to the fascination. Herein lies the successful

logic of the contemporary faux documentary: the same camera that documents can just as easily deceive.

Paradoxically, it is these assumed limits to documentary truth-telling that overtax the Vitaphone series. In its search for oddities, the camera rewards the “believe it or not” viewer not with the mythical cartoon, and not with camera tricks, but with banal curiosities that have to have been collected by the black-and-white film. Forced by his premise to come up with visual evidence of international oddities on a weekly basis, Ripley is hard pressed, constrained as he is by photographic realism. It is only the documentary camera and its insistent empiricism that can produce as fascinating such ordinary and natural “attractions” as the spider that eats a lizard, the platypus, elephants getting a manicure, Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, a flag produced from colored corn kernels, a cigar-store Indian, and an automated restaurant. A form of literalness governs the early documentary camera: whatever it *captures* must be remarkable. Only nine years after *Nanook of the North*, photographic “taxidermy” is still the ruling principle.³² But are Ripley’s examples equally strange and



Asian child and two other men with motion picture camera. Robert Ripley on far right. (©2002 Ripley Entertainment Inc.)

interesting? What if the photographed oddities fail to stir the questioning mechanism? While we know that in principle new technologies produce new thresholds of belief and disbelief in and of themselves, we wonder who would be surprised by a platypus today. In truth, the contemporary spectator of the Ripley series is not engaged in the old sense of searching for knowledge in all the wrong places. If fascinated at all, the contemporary spectator is involved not with his or her own intellectual dilemma of belief or disbelief but with “*whether* or not,” that is, we are concerned with the belief or disbelief of others. We want to know “whether or not” spectators in 1930 actually found these “believe it or not”’s curious.

The Smug Worldview

Of course the “believe it or not” function has always been, to a degree, an Orientalizing one. First-world children are initiated into a smug point of view by means of images of long-nailed Asians, war-painted Native Americans, body-pierced Africans, and veiled Muslims. By association, the American fringe, the handicapped, hermits, small town or urban nonconformists, the too large and the too small, too young and too old are made into strange objects, a veritable parade of the odd. If there is a principle that governs the organization of “Believe It or Not Land,” it is the principle that everything in the world *could be* odd except for you and me. So in Ripley’s scheme of things, the unexpected turns out to be expected after all. The image of the rocky shore that illustrates the sultan who throws his wives off a cliff is brought back home with Ripley’s voice over comment that “Marriage is always a plunge into the unknown.” So it would seem that the “believe it or not” world deals with what I have discussed elsewhere as the ordinary weird and the familiar strange, a form that serves the construction of smugness.³³

What is finally most intriguing, then, is the way that the structure of hesitation between belief and disbelief can serve not investigation and curiosity but the affirmation of the narrowest of worldviews. It can confirm the most local versions of what is “out there” in the larger world beyond the tightly knit community and cozy family circle. I find an interesting theorization of the problem of what I am calling the smug worldview in phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who, although his interest is in the constitution of a world-knowledge that starts from bodily experience, seems to offer further ideas on the belief/disbelief conundrum. Admittedly, he discusses what he calls “perceptual faith,” and considers it in relation to a theory of perception, but since the blinders of perceptual faith are analogous to the blind-sidedness of

ideology, I take him to be attempting to understand consciousness in a somewhat political sense. First, he is suggestive insofar as he imagines a consciousness that is resistant to “proof,” perhaps a bull-headed “show me” consciousness that would not be swayed by the most compelling of rhetorical documentaries. This consciousness that relies on “perceptual faith” and is “beyond proof” is not necessarily a pure consciousness but rather a conflicted consciousness: “Belief and incredulity are here so closely bound up that we always find the one in the other, and in particular a germ of non-truth in the truth.”³⁴ Merleau-Ponty’s challenge to the platitudinous “seeing is believing” approach to knowing the world is that the look that believes so automatically is also susceptible to a “pseudo-world of phantasms,” perhaps a world of imagined terrors and monster images. Close on the heels of certitude is the uncertainty of the thoroughly imagined world. The phenomenologist’s test of this assertion is the example of refusing to see when confronted with danger because of the belief that there is no danger in the world. Interestingly, the case of “covering one’s eyes” (not looking) is used as an argument that it is never about seeing at all—it is *only about believing*. That realism is in the spectator’s mind’s eye is basic to film theory, where we have spent thirty years describing the ways in which seeing is ideological.³⁵ But here Merleau-Ponty tells us that perhaps the most ideological act is not seeing but rather shutting one’s eyes (to something) in the world. Belief and incredulity, he finally asserts in an Aristotelian move, are in the end impossible to hold simultaneously, and the vacillation between one and the other is finally terminated, the pendulum stopped, the question finally answered by the arbitration of not belief but bodily experience. In the end, this (perceptual) faith wins out over knowledge, the world being, in the end, “inseparable from our hold on it.” But finally—and here is where the notion of ideology would appear to explain much—this state of the world that is one with our grasp of it is none other than, in Merleau-Ponty, that which is “taken for granted” (V28).

So the “believe it or not” spectator is here looking for confirmation of what he or she really already believes to be true. Ripley’s oddities serve only a familiarizing function, whereby everything in the world is classified according to a preexistent scheme. Rather than expanding horizons, the new-media explorer confirms our most reactionary suspicions and reinforces the narrowest of views: old people are weird, animals are weird, Muslims are weird, Asians are weird, and “new-fangled” things don’t work.

Conclusion

With all due respect to Merleau-Ponty's intriguing argument about the impossibility of the coexistence of belief and incredulity, this is not where I want to end this discussion. While we would not want to miss the way in which non-Western "believe it or not"s were an invitation to cultural smugness and superiority, we still need a theoretical approach to mass culture curiosities that allows for genuine knowledge-seeking. In a sense, I have been borrowing without acknowledging a ghost paradigm here, encapsulated in what Stuart Hall has called the "double movement" of popular culture, a vacillation between the dominant and the oppositional. Everyday life theory with its emphasis on the critical possibilities within the most ordinary of things would seem here to be a variant on Marxist cultural studies within which the "utopian" stands as the "critical"—as a check on the tendency to ubiquity of cultural forms.³⁶ The utopian as the critical allows distance, the critical as the utopian is an antidote to the "taken for granted" world of objects and activities. And hence the unevenness of the Orientalism produced by "cross-cultural estrangement" (*E* 22). Genuine interest in the larger world is combined with misunderstanding and ethnocentrism.

Where I find the critical dimension in the "believe it or not" phenomena is in the vacillation encouraged by the open-ended frame. The spectator who in Comolli moves from "criticism to fascination" might be seen as moving back, that is, moving from "fascination to criticism," criticism here referring to skepticism about the documented phenomenon as well as the documentary photographic process itself, to a questioning process encouraged by the attraction (*M* 139). Yet we would be going too far to suggest that questioning the truth value of the popular curiosity is precisely the same as Brecht's "calling into question," that step in the production of the alienation effect that involves a more deep-seated interrogation as well as disillusionment, that in fact mounts a political challenge. Stopping far short of a politics, the "believe it or not" effect is hardly as thorough as the alienation effect and involves no serious cultural disaffection. Still, as I have argued, these oddities can disturb. What is most remarkable about the critical capacity of Ripley's strange findings, I would ultimately argue, is the economy of their instantaneous insight.

It is finally Henri Lefebvre, whose theory of everyday life gives us the "spontaneous critique," who gets us closer to seeing the possibilities of the inadvertent social insights of the "believe it or not"s.³⁷ (The insight of the one-armed boat rower [the handicapped], the country of the veiled men [gender relations], and the motorized garage [modernity

and domesticity].) Ostensibly drawn directly from daily life, Ripley's "strange, mysterious, and unbelievable" phenomena exemplify the assertion that this realm "contains" it all, in both senses of the word. The contradictions of daily life are spread out across the globe, multiplied, detailed, and defined. But in conclusion, I would add that much of the work is actually done for us *not* by the spontaneous criticality of the "found" phenomena but by the use of the vernacular "believe it or not." Like Brecht's qualifiers "in fact" and "actually," the vernacular phrase "believe it or not" reminds us that knowing is never a matter of straightforward sense testimony, but is always a matter of what you take to be true.³⁸ Or, "Things aren't always what they're cracked up to be." It is in the nature of belief to vacillate, and in the nature of things to elude our grasp on them. And in the most profound insight of the vernacular, "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

DUKE UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1 The *Believe It or Not* series was actually part of Vitaphone Varieties which featured the Warner Brothers sound cartoons, Looney Tunes. Ripley's Vitaphone series corresponded with the big break in his career. His first chance came around 1908 with the *San Francisco Bulletin*, and he soon moved to the *San Francisco Chronicle* but left in 1913. He made a name for himself as a sports cartoonist with the *New York Globe* where his cartoon work began to develop along different lines when he ran out of ideas for sports cartoons and on December 18, 1918, his column consisted of weird athletic stunts with the title "Believe It or Not." In 1929, the Hearst-owned King Features Syndicate picked it up, and his cartoon eventually had a circulation of three thousand newspapers appearing in fourteen languages. See Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (Berkeley, 1997), p. 396, hereafter cited in text as *T*; Bob Considine, *Robert Ripley: Modern Marco Polo* (Garden City, N.Y., 1961), pp. 13, 20–21, 23, 27, 34–35.

2 There is evidence of a line of descent. This series permutated into the 1936 *March of Time*, a precursor of contemporary television journalism. *March of Time* is given a significant place in one of the first textbooks on documentary film and television, but neither the *Believe It or Not* series nor the others that imitated it are mentioned. See Leonard Maltin, *The Great Movie Shorts: Selected Short Subjects from Spanky to the Three Stooges* (New York, 1972), p. 209; A. William Bluem, *Documentary in American Television* (New York, 1965), pp. 35–40.

3 After disappearing from the movie screens, Ripley's *Believe It or Not* appeared on television. In 1961 one hundred and four episodes were aired on Saturday morning television, comprised of three fifteen-minute segments. In 1979, two ABC pilots were shot. After a third ABC pilot in 1980, the 1981–84 series ran with Jack Palance as host and totaled seventy-nine episodes. Finally, in its most recent format on Turner Broadcasting system since 2000, Ripley's *Believe It or Not*, in its third season, airs on Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings. (Edward Meyer, interview by author, Durham, N.C., 24 June 2001.) See also Maltin, *The Great Movie Shorts*, pp. 208–9. The Vitaphone shorts are

archived in the Warner Brothers Collection at the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin. The Fox Movietone News segments analyzed here are from the collection at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, S.C.

4 The sound newsreel is generally understood as beginning with Lindbergh's transatlantic flight in May 1927. In October of that year, the first all-sound new film release would premiere at the Roxy Theatre in New York. See Crafton, *The Talkies*, pp. 96–98, and Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911–1967* (Norman, Okla., 1972), pp. 162–63.

5 Perhaps the most current discussion of the politics of the freak is Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago, 2001). She is interested in the performative aspect of freaks who put themselves on display but also their capacity to turn back on their audiences. This book is part of an important development in understanding freak shows in relation to the historical treatment of the handicapped, but it also sees freaks as subverting the idea of the normal. It is the proximity of the normal and the not-normal that produces the critique: "Freaks announce themselves as the antithesis of normality, and part of the sideshow's frisson arises from the audience's recognition of the ease with which freak and normal man slide unsteadily into one another" (9).

6 The origin of the concept "spectacle of actuality" is found in Elizabeth Cowie, "The Spectacle of Actuality," in *Collecting Visible Evidence: New Developments in Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis, 1999) where she challenges the preeminence of the "discourses of sobriety" in recent theorizations of documentary (19).

7 For overviews as well as the situation of new work in relation to the Visible Evidence Conferences, held yearly since 1993, see "Introduction: The Real Returns," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Gaines and Renov.

8 Actually, says Robert Bogdan (*Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* [Chicago, 1988], p. 11), the mixture of the natural with show business hype has historically been a basic principle of the freak show. Another principle is that every exhibit is a fraud.

9 The case for everyday life theory is made by Ben Highmore in his "Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life," *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London, 2002); hereafter cited in text as *E*.

10 Much new thinking on the history of *vérité* and its American counterpart, direct cinema, challenge the idea of the naïvete of the early advocates of the approach. See Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, Part 2, "The Legacy of Direct Cinema" (London, 2000).

11 See James M. Moran (*There's No Place Like Home Video* [Minneapolis, 2002]) for the most current and theoretically sophisticated work on the home video mode.

12 The passage I refer to here is well known: "if in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process" (47). Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York, 1970).

13 See *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Gaines and Renov, pp. 1–6. To suggest the flavor of the 1970s film theory that did so much to establish the connection between realism and ideology I would quote Comolli and Narboni: "Clearly cinema 'reproduces' reality: this is what a camera and film stock are for—so says the ideology. But the tools and techniques of film-making are a part of 'reality' themselves, and furthermore 'reality' is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology" ("Cinema/Criticism/Ideology," rpt. in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods* [Berkeley, 1976], p. 25).

14 For an example of this see Brian Massumi, *Parable for the Virtual: Movement, Affect,*

Sensation (Durham, N.C., 2002). Massumi speaks to these excesses in his introduction but finally does very little to rectify them in the chapters that follow.

15 It might be important here to recall Brecht's definition of *realist* as: "laying bare society's causal network/showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators/writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society/emphasizing the dynamics of development/concrete so as to encourage abstraction." See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, tr. and ed. John Willett (London, 1964), p. 109; hereafter cited in text as *BT*.

16 In a discussion of *Verfremdungseffekt*, Kaja Silverman notes that although the concept means "to render the familiar strange," in the application of Brecht's theory to the theater where the spectator is invited to view as if he or she were comfortably at home, the opposite meaning would seem to be in effect. Thus, "rather than making the familiar strange, the Brechtian aesthetic involves making the strange familiar." See *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York, 1996), p. 87.

17 An excellent overview of this position, especially in relation to feminist documentary work, can be found in Alexandra Juhasz, "They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality—All I Want to Show Is My Video: The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Gaines and Renov.

18 Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston, 1973).

19 In *Sideshow*, Rachel Adams relies on the premise of Neil Harris (*Humbug*) as well, but adds that in this period the distinction between showman, scientist, and amateur collection was not as clear as it would later become (46).

20 Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Cinema and the [In]Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995), p. 129; hereafter cited in text as *A*.

21 The most recent work on the history of curiosity finds the phenomenon in the marvel of early modern England, linking it up with the rise of consumer culture and class aspirations. It is a perfect coincidence between the appearance of the commodity and the "transgressive desire to improve one's place" in society that gives rise to curiosity. See Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago, 2001), p. 20.

22 Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London, 1990), pp. 56–62.

23 In *The Talkies*, Crafton refers to the popularity of Fox Movietone News as not only interest in current events but in the "attraction" provided by speech and sound (98). It is also interesting to note here that in the case of Warner's "Vitaphone," the name of the sound-reproducing and recording technology became the trademark name for a kind of line of sound film (104). The same could be said for Fox's "Movietone," where the name of the system became a brand name for the product.

24 Rick Altman, interview by author, Durham, N.C., 2 July 2002.

25 Academic interest in spectatorship and the reception of sound is at an early stage. Crafton reports some of the results of a 1990 survey that asked people to recall their first experience of sound film. Among the descriptive words used on the understandably limited survey were "more real" and "miraculous." See Crafton, *The Talkies*, p. 6.

26 Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa DeLauretis and Stephen Heath (New York, 1980), p. 124; hereafter cited in text as *M*.

27 The reference is to *Electrocuting an Elephant*, 35 mm. documentary film footage shot by the Edison Company in 1903.

28 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991).

29 “The truth was that Ripley literally believed everything,” argues Considine in *Robert Ripley*, p. 56. Since this may be as problematic an assertion as those found in the “believe it or not”’s themselves, we may as well resign ourselves to the difficulty of knowing in respect to the phenomena popularized by the newspaper columns as well as the moving picture footage. As interesting as Ripley’s loose methods of “authentication” is the suggestion that he used material from letters sent to him by his readers who mailed him what they thought were “odd facts” (55).

30 For an exclusively film studies audience, I would be more inclined to stress indexicality here, rather than speaking about the empirical camera. The question of indexicality, or the bond between the real world referent and the image, however, has been the subject of significant recent discussion, particularly within documentary film theory, owing largely to the ascendance of digital imaging where there is no indexical bond in the traditional sense. These issues take me too far afield here, but the interested reader is referred to Philip Rosen’s chapter “Old and New: Image, Indexicality, and Historicity in the Digital Utopia,” in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis, 2001), pp. 301–14.

31 The glass chewer first bites into a large sheet of glass then responds, “It’s a little bit stale. Guess I’ll try something else.” He picks up a wine glass and bites into it. “Crunch,” we hear on the track.

32 Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, N.C., 1996), pp. 100–104.

33 “Theorizing Salacious Fascination,” paper presented at Visible Evidence VI Conference, San Francisco State University, August 1998. It has been argued that Ripley’s particular appeal was to the “curiosity of the unlearned” (See Considine, *Robert Ripley*, p. 50). More needs to be done to consider how the curious turn-of-the-century spectator became the 1930s spectator. Also, what impact did the expansion of universal public education as well as the success of mass market books of facts for the home (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, the *World Book Encyclopedia*) have on the curiosity and the credulity of sources?

34 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill., 1968), p. 28; hereafter cited in text as *V*.

35 Relevant here is Rosen who says that “to downplay the knowledge pole in favor of the belief pole is a ‘realist’ tendency.” See *Change Mummified*, pp. 180–81.

36 I have elsewhere discussed the origins of Stuart Hall’s formulation in the German Frankfurt School theorists and Ernst Bloch in particular. See Jane M. Gaines, “Dream/Factory,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London, 2000), pp. 106–9.

37 Lefebvre’s fuller statement here is relevant. Speaking about the forms of social life studied by the sociologist, he writes: “Although he cannot describe or analyze them without criticizing them as being (partially) illusory, he must nevertheless start from the fact that they contain within themselves their own spontaneous critique of the everyday. They are that critique in so far as they are *other* than everyday life, and yet they are *in everyday life*, they are *alienation*. They can thus hold a real content, correspond to a real need, yet still retain an illusory form and a deceptive appearance.” See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, tr. John Moore (London, 1991), p. 40.

38 Brecht’s example of the use of “in fact” is illustrative here: “(He wasn’t in fact at home; he said he would be, but we didn’t believe him and had a look; or again, we didn’t think it possible for him not to be at home, but it was a fact.)” See *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 145.