Representations of the Freak in Horror Film

Media representations are an invaluable tool for changing how the public understands marginalized groups. While they have the potential to reinforce pre-existing biases, they can also give a voice to these groups that subvert stereotypes and incite societal change. In the case of disability representation, there is a long history of negative examples that support the marginalization and alienation of the group. Two media examples, created decades apart, *Freaks* and *American Horror Story: Freak Show,* illustrate that the way you represent disability is relevant and impactful to audiences. Unlike *Freaks*, which was a remarkably progressive example of disability representation for the time, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* recreated the dynamics of the circus freak show, and borrowed conventions from problematic early representations of disability in a clumsy and harmful attempt to represent people with disabilities on screen.

The history of horror films has strong ties to the representation of body difference and disability. Our earliest examples of horror, such as Frankenstein from 1910, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde from 1920, The Hunchback of Notre Dame from 1923, and The Phantom of the Opera from 1925 all had one thing in common: they capitalized on the audience's fear of the strange and unfamiliar depiction of the human form. Historically, disability was associated with moral corruption, as the physical form was thought to reflect one's proximity to God (Sutton). The audience, who is assumed to be able-bodied, is placed in a voyeuristic position of power, peering into the lives of those with disabilities. This creates a binary of difference and morality, with the audience in the good and able-bodied position, and the figures on screen in the evil and disabled position. Without alternative representations, body difference and disability in film are reduced

to a tool for indicating to viewers that a character is evil. Additionally, the binary is made more threatening by the unstable boundary between normal and abnormal bodies (Sutton). As Travis Sutton points out in his chapter "Avenging the Body: Disability in the Horror Film." in the book *A Companion to the Horror Film*, "the line also draws attention to the fluidity and mobility of the boundary between ability and disability; any individual on the tour (or in the viewing audience of the film for that matter) could have ended up on a carnival platform, laughed at or shuddered at by curious onlookers." The fear of becoming disabled, and therefore being exposed to the eyes of judgmental onlookers, incites fear in the able-bodied audience. This makes them more likely to mock and laugh at disability in an attempt to distance themselves from it.

This voyeuristic dynamic existed in Victorian freak shows and continued in horror films. In the freak show, those with disabilities were put on display for paying customers to gawk at (Ferguson). Observers were able to consume disabled bodies for pleasure and to feel better about their own situations, and never had to consider what the lives of people with disabilities were like outside of the freak show context. Ironically, sensationalizing body differences in popular culture allowed for some semblance of representation for people with disabilities, with some even becoming celebrities based either on their exotic appeal or their ability to conform despite their perceived abnormality (Larsen and Haller). Similarly, media that center people with disabilities has the potential to recreate the phenomenon of the freak show by displaying body differences for shock and pleasure. However, it also has the potential to provide a more holistic representation of the lives of people with disabilities than they are traditionally afforded. Two media texts, *Freaks* (1932) and *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2015), created more than eighty years apart, choose to represent the lives of people with disabilities in the complex setting

of the freak show. Choices in casting, plot and characterization differentiate these two examples despite their common setting, showing how traditional motifs in disability representation can be either subverted or reinforced in media to different effects. Whereas *Freaks* centered complex characters played by actors with disabilities to challenge the binary of difference and morality and subvert traditional horror motifs, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* painted a very different picture. Casting able-bodied actors to play characters with disabilities, representing their lives outside of the freakshow as full of violence and sexual deviance, and not allowing any of them to survive the full story recreates dynamics of the Victorian freakshow and pro-eugenicist ideology.

The 1932 film *Freaks,* produced and directed by Tod Browning of *Dracula* fame, told the story of a circus freak show being infiltrated by an able-bodied trapeze artist, Cleopatra who plots to marry and kill one of the performers, Hans, with the goal of inheriting his fortune. Although the marketing of the film centered around blatant sexualization of the characters and the shock factor of displaying body differences on screen, the film acted subversively in ways that were unprecedented at the time. *Freaks* was released in the transitional period where disability was beginning to be viewed as a medical issue rather than a moral one, leading audiences to react with pity when presented with representation of body differences (Sutton). This was due in part to the injuries that many sustained during World War I that muddied the line between able-bodied and disabled circles, and the rise of Eugenicist ideology in the United States. The medical explanation supported the idea that people with disabilities should be ‘cured’ of their differences, and public opinion of how to deal with the disability ‘problem’ shifted towards widespread institutionalization, where body difference could be tucked away and

ignored. This resulted in a decrease in the popularity of real-life freakshows, and the celebrity status of some people with disabilities was revoked, as the public had become uncomfortable with seeing them outside of a medical context (Larsen and Haller). Prior to the film's release, disability had always been portrayed on screen by able-bodied actors using prosthetics and special effects makeup. This provided a comforting level of fantasy to audiences as they were not confronted with the fact that body differences exist off screen (Bluth). Lon Chaney, a popular actor of the time who Browning had worked with many times before, made a career of portraying body difference on screen, and then presenting as a normal, able-bodied man to the public. The ability of actors like Chaney to remove the makeup and comfort audiences with their normalcy allowed the public to continue ignoring people with disabilities outside of a medical context. However, when producing *Freaks*, Browning made the bold decision to cast real actors with disabilities rather than using special effects makeup. Although this was likely an attempt on the behalf of the director to shock the audience with real 'freaks' rather than manufactured ones, it was a huge step towards real representation of disabilities (Larsen and Haller). While forcing the audience to confront the reality that body differences exist, it also allowed for actors with disabilities to occupy a space in popular culture again, after being forced into hiding for so long.

In addition to progressive casting choices in *Freaks*, the film used the setting of the freak show in subversive ways. The binary associations of ability/good and disability/bad are challenged by the film's choices in characterization.The freak show implies the comforting lack of context that audiences were accustomed to when it came to the presence of people with disabilities. However, rather than only showing the performances of the freak show, *Freaks* 'normalizes' the characters with disabilities by showing them performing domestic tasks, falling

into accepted gender roles, and expressing their sexuality (Smith). The characters within the freak show are presented as whole human beings who are able to exist in a space where their disability is not the most important thing about them. In contrast, the character of the beautiful able-bodied trapeze artist, Cleopatra, who infiltrates the community and acts cruelly to the performers with disabilities further forces the audience to realize that beauty does not always equal goodness, and disfigurement does not always equal evilness (Bluth).

The setting of the freak show also places the audience in a disability-dominated space, where the able-bodied characters are in the minority. Whether they identify with the few able-bodied outsiders, or the many characters with disabilities, the audience views the disabled community of the freak show through a non-dominant lens (Bluth). The symbolic act of Cleopatra crossing over from an able-bodied space to a disabled one further subverts the history of film which represented these spaces as entirely separate. The audience crosses this boundary just as Cleopatra does, and is afforded a perspective rarely seen in classic ‘us vs them’ film narratives. An often-referenced scene from *Freaks* depicts the wedding banquet where the performers accept Cleopatra into their group while chanting "We accept her, we accept her. One of us, one of us. Gooble-gobble, gooble-gobble." While this scene reinforces the existence of the two binary groups, it asserts that the boundary between them is flexible and allows people to travel between them (Sutton). This subverts the able-bodied audience's fear of becoming disabled by placing the disabled community in the desirable position of power that may accept able-bodied people if they are worthy. The horror of *Freaks* is not the threat of evil disfigured characters, which was utilized by nearly every horror film before it. It is the threat of someone

who has been accepted into a vulnerable community exploiting the good people within it and betraying their trust.

In 2014, the horror anthology show *American Horror Story* began its fourth season, entitled "Freak Show." In a very similar setting to *Freaks*, "Freak Show" tells the story of a carnival freak show attempting to keep their business during the 1950s, in a time when very few sideshows remained. At the time when "Freak Show" was released, popular culture had changed its ideology surrounding disability. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, which made discrimination against people with disabilities illegal (Carmel). Around this time, the phrase "Nothing About Us Without Us" began to be used by disability activists to refer to the need to include people with disabilities in media and legislation that affected their lives. Despite these advancements in disability rights, it was still common for able-bodied actors to portray characters with disabilities. "Freak Show" was no exception to this rule. *American Horror Story* adopts a new plot and characters each season, but maintains the same all-star cast who occupy the starring roles. In the case of "Freak Show", this meant that the able-bodied stars that fans knew and loved were transformed in the tradition of old-horror, using prosthetics and special effects to manufacture body differences on screen.

While it does portray the characters with disabilities outside of the context of the freak show, much of the *American Horror Story: Freak Show*'s plot centers around the characters' attempts to keep the freak show alive, and features almost constant violence amongst the characters with disabilities. In contrast to *Freaks* scenes of domestic life and relationships, "Freak Show" depicts the characters slowly killing each other off throughout the season, often in graphic and torturous ways. In addition, the show relies heavily on two stereotypes of people

with disabilities, the sweet innocent and the obsessive anger (Sutton). All of the main characters of the story look primarily like able-bodied people, but have some abnormal body part that differentiates them from 'normals'. While these characters are allowed more nuance, they are all grounded by an internal evilness and obsessive anger that makes them violent towards both 'freaks' and 'normals'. For example, the main character and ring leader of the freak show, Elsa Mars, is represented as an able-bodied character until the end of the first episode, where it is revealed that she is an amputee who uses prosthetic legs. Although she is given some redeeming qualities due to her painful past, Elsa constantly exploits, tortures and murders the freaks in her show in her attempts to find fame and success. In one episode, Elsa sells two of the main characters, a pair of conjoined twins, to an abusive home where it is implied that they will be sexually abused. In another, she purposefully injures a performer and refuses to get him medical help. In contrast, the characters with more body differences, including a character with dwarfism called Ma Petite, all fall into the sweet innocent category. They have very little agency and represent a pure, infantilized version of people with disabilities.

These characters are used as a plot device, being symbolically killed off to create an emotional response in both the audience and the more normal looking characters. For example, in one scene a fellow freak has Ma Petite try on a frilly dress, like a doll being dressed up, and then crushes her to death. This scene functions to demonstrate the evilness of the character in destroying pure innocence, and acts as an inciting action that leads Elsa to kill him. Ma Petite is never represented as a person fully capable of thinking for herself or living an average life, and is always having things done to her rather than having any agency. Reducing these characters to stereotypes does not allow them to be represented as full humans, echoing real-life circus

freakshows. Unlike in *Freaks*, the characters of *American Horror Story: Freak Show* constantly display their bodily and behavioral differences outside of their actual freak show performances, without being given any normality. Rather than showing a line between the freak show performances and the real-life positive and complex community outside of the freak show, the characters reinforce stereotypes about disability and moral associations, constantly performing as freaks to incite horror and body anxiety, or being mutilated on screen for the shock and awe of able-bodied audiences. The main role of the audience of this show is the consumption of disabled bodies through sexuality and violence, recreating the dynamics of the freakshow and the dominant lens.

Another common theme throughout the season is the graphic sexualization and fetishization of body differences. The displays of these faux body differences on screen, sometimes in extreme closeup, are borderline pornographic, contributing to the show's usage of body difference for the shock and pleasure of able-bodied audiences. Four of the main characters, both played by able-bodied actors, have body differences that seem to function only as objects of sexual desire. The most blatant of these examples is Jimmy Darling, a man with syndactyly whose hands form phallic claw-like shapes, that he uses to penetrate women on-screen in several scenes. Another is Desiree, a hermaphrodite woman who has three breasts and both female and male genitalia. Desiree's body is constantly discussed in detail, shown on screen, and made the punch line of jokes. The other two characters are a pair of conjoined twins named Bette and Dot who are portrayed as sex-obsessed, a major plot point being their attempts to lose their virginity. Instead of portraying the characters with disabilities as having normal sex lives, the show suggests that they are sexual deviants, for no other reason than their body

differences (Sutton). In contrast, despite the marketing of *Freaks* suggesting that it would display sexual content, the film portrays the freakshow preformers as following normal lines of monogamous heterosexuality. Although audiences may still have viewed this as deviant due to their body differences, the film makes no attempt to create this association. Love, sex and marriage are normal topics amongst the preformers as they are for able-bodied groups. The only time that this is disrupted is when the able-bodied Cleopatra steals Hans away from his wife in an act of non-monogamy.

American Horror Story: Freak Show is often defended by fans who bring up the fact that the season did cast some actors with disabilities in smaller roles, despite all of the main characters being portrayed by able-bodied actors in prosthetics. By centering able-bodied imitations of body difference, "Freak Show" reinforces the idea that people with disabilities are not star material. It also reinforces the "Us vs Them" boundary of classic freak shows, because fans know that the characters that they identify with the most are really 'normal' under the prosthetics and makeup. Additionally, almost all of the characters played by actors with disabilities are killed off early, their death being their primary purpose in the story. At the end of the show, all but four of the freak show performers are massacred by an able-bodied murderer. The surviving characters are Jimmy, Desiree and Bette and Dot, who had been portrayed as valuable throughout the season due to their more 'normal' looks and their blatant sexualization. While horror as a genre relies on killing for the audience's pleasure, this dynamic takes new meaning when a non-dominant group is the subject of the violence. The rest of the characters being picked off one by one is representative of able-bodied society's success at eliminating people with disabilities for their pleasure and comfort. In this way, "Freak Show" can be read as

a pro-eugenics text. Overall, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* disseminates ableist ideas in its casting and plot, recreating the spectacle of the real-life freak show and borrowing from problematic Classic Horror conventions.

Although *Freaks* centers around the classic freak show setting, it does not recreate the dynamics of the freak show. Rather than allowing the audience contextless consumption of body difference, it normalizes the characters with disabilities and shows their daily lives outside of the freak show. Instead of separating the disabled group from the able-bodied group with a comforting impervious boundary, it shows the flexible division between the groups. Instead of reinforcing the binary of able-bodied as good and disabled as bad, it shows the character's morality apart from their ability. In contrast, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* supports the idea that there is no 'normal' life for people with disabilities outside of the context of the freakshow. The show fails to challenge hegemonic representations of disabled people, instead adopting the culturally acceptable representation of their lives being rife with violence and deviant sexuality. In this way, the show recreates Victorian freak show dynamics by prioritizing the able-bodied audience's pleasure in displays of freakishness over an accurate view of disabled life.

There is a great deal of irony in the fact that a film from 1932 represents the lives of people with disabilities more completely than a show from 2015. *Freaks* acts as a subversive text that goes against classic horror conventions by casting actors with disabilities, placing the audience in a non-dominant position, and goes against real-life freak show conventions by representing characters with disabilities as full complex humans. In contrast, *American Horror Story: Freak Show* recreates these same traditions by using prosthetics and makeup rather than

casting actors with disabilities, putting body differences on display for pleasure, and killing off people with disabilities on screen in a way that echoes eugenicist efforts. As a genre, horror has great potential to make audiences question their previously held ideas of binaries of good and bad, and what is threatening to them. The dark past of the freak show can be used as a powerful stage to discuss the treatment of those with disabilities. However, if these issues are treated as spectacles for the pleasure of the able-bodied audience, the tradition of the freak show in marginalizing disabled people persists.

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