

Reclamation of the Disabled Body: A Textual Analysis of Browning's *Freaks* (1932) vs Modern Media's Sideshow Generation

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Abstract

This article introduces Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, in conversation with nineteenth century carnival and fair practices and further explains the creation and development of the freakshow. In tandem with theoretical work by authors such as Judith Butler, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Adrianna Cavarero and Lennard Davis, the article positions the freakshow within disability and trauma through the notions of 'staring', 'normal' and 'horrorism'. Using two contemporary texts such as *American Horror Story: Freakshow* and the reality television series *Freakshow*, this article firstly introduces these texts thematically before analysing all three in conversation with one another as a means of further contextualizing the role of the freakshow in contemporary cultural products, then connecting these texts to the notion of violence and the use of disability as a tool for horror. The article concludes that although the freakshow has been dismantled in the literal sense, the obvious bodily difference that predicates it still remains present in today's cultural sphere.

Keywords: *trauma, disability, carnival, circus, freakshow, abjection, American Gothic, film, media, television*

Freaks and the Marginalized Body

Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, its reception, and later revival can be considered as one of the most fascinating case studies for freakshow culture, trauma and disability studies in cinema. Not only does the film draw attention to one of the most controversial sides of 19th century carnival culture in North America, but it has also become a reference point from which disability, trauma, film and media studies can further explore the phenomenon of the freakshow and its manifestations in media today. While Tod Browning's film has influenced audiences and filmmakers for generations, the carnival, but most importantly the freakshow, has remained an integral part of American storytelling. Highlighting the marginalized bodies 'corporeal vulnerability'¹ in society, societal preoccupation with the 'grotesque body' and the consequent othering of these marginalized bodies; filmmakers such as Browning have used the American gothic mode to highlight the thematic links connecting these texts to trauma and disability studies. By using Judith Butler's term 'corporeal vulnerability,' I suggest the implied mortality, vulnerability and agency the human body experiences when exposed to the

¹ Judith Butler, 'Violence, Mourning Politics', in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 25. Hereafter cited as *VMP*, with page number in the text.

gaze, touch and violence of another (*VMP*, 26). The body, or in the context of this article, the marginalized body therefore has public dimension, further placing it under risk.

In relation to Browning's film, I will firstly use season four of the hit television series *American Horror Story*. Aptly titled *Freakshow*, the season depicts a fictional freakshow set in 1952 where the freaks must navigate external and internal threats to their community in a town in which they are clearly not welcome. The protagonists of the series confront both psychologically and physically violent spheres while mitigating past and present traumas they have endured due to their bodily differences. The series makes many allusions to Browning's work while also highlighting many arguments about the autonomy of the disabled body that disability studies has commonly attempted to resolve in addition to also highlighting the economy of the traveling freakshow.² I argue that the series reveals the politics behind the existence of freakshows as well as the treatment of the disabled body outside of the carnival space, as the body has an 'invariably public dimension' (*VMP*, 26). Additionally, the series reveals the financial implications attached to the decline of this carnival culture and its direct impact on the performers of the freakshow. My use of carnival in this context must not be confused for a circus, but instead a travelling form of entertainment popularized in America. Traced to the middle decades of the 19th century, the emergence of the carnival space in American culture can be attributed to an 'urge within the US to redefine its national and cultural identities in tandem with the period's burgeoning reform culture.'³ During this era the first American World Fairs began to emerge and with them so did a culture of exhibition and materialism in tandem with a strict focus on American cultural heritage (*NCC*, 21). Lastly, I will use *Freakshow*, a reality series set in one of the last remaining freakshows in America, in conversation with the previous texts. The series claims to 'truthfully' document the lives of the freakshow's owners and performers as they navigate their lives in contemporary society. Documenting the freakshow performers attempts to re-claim the word 'freak' through organizing parades and their 'say no to normal' campaign, as well as their capitalization of difference through the sale of merchandise during events and their regular show hours. The series follows the day-to-day lives of the self-proclaimed freaks, in tandem with the non-disabled owners of the freakshow. Simultaneously focusing on the interpersonal relationships between the performers themselves and the owners, the series positions itself as a champion of an 'alternative culture.'

By taking a multi-faceted approach, this article highlights the application of sideshow culture in modern media in order to further contextualize the trauma marginalized bodies face in contemporary culture. Firstly, I will present the social and economic history of the freakshow, the employment of disabled performers and the influence of Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932); then compare the film to Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story: Freakshow* (Season 4, 2014-2015) and AMC's *Freakshow* (2013-). By using these three distinct texts, this article will then dissect the reasoning

² Robert Bogdan, Martin Elks and James Knoll, *Critical Perspectives on Disability: Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen, and Other Photographic Rhetoric* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 6. Hereafter cited as *CPD*, with page numbers in the text.

³ Philip McGowan, 'Nineteenth Century Carnival', in *American Carnival: Seeing and Reading American Culture* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2001), 20. Hereafter cited as *NCC*, with page numbers in the text.

behind the recurring theme of sideshows and society's obsession with the disabled body and how the distinct format of reality television can potentially afford performers a sense of control and autonomy not presented in other media. In doing so, the article highlights the traumatic re-contextualization of the sideshow in the 21st century, how this re-contextualization functions within mass media and also identifies how individuals who have been presented as 'freaks' for decades are now attempting to reclaim their bodies as autonomous in a traumatic and hostile terrain. I use these texts in conversation with one another as a means of revealing an autonomous self-therapization by marginalized groups.

American World Fairs, Circuses and Freakshows

The aforementioned World Fairs were exhibitionary spaces that were specifically inclusive for the white, cisgender and non-disabled citizens, providing racially coded entertainment, specific to the social and political reality of American life (*NCC*, 21). Since these fairs already encompassed the ethos of museums and funfairs, they soon paved the way for the emergence of circuses and freak shows, mainly functioning through the carnivalization of such spaces. Far removed from the European meaning of fair, the American fairs operated within an 'inclusive political system for the nation's white race, providing it with an entertainment zone that doubled as a site of educational and cultural insemination,' reflecting white American theories regarding race and racial division (*NCC*, 21). It is important to note here that these stages were sanctioned and promoted by an array of federal, state and corporate interests with the purpose of presenting identities under the premise 'of education, information, and instruction' and predicated themselves upon a culture of 'carnival delineations and carnivalized seeing' that allowed for a consequent carnivalization of identity, race and otherness (*NCC*, 22).

This principle of a curated exhibition informed by the dynamics of earlier fairs was refocused by the 1890s (*NCC*, 24). As was the case in Chicago and other major cities at the time, 'renowned circus proprietor P.T. Barnum was consulted by the fair's designers Burnham and Bennett with regard to the architectural and entertainments planning,' transforming the fairs into fairgrounds (*NCC*, 24). Creating a circus atmosphere, specific methodologies for the display of ethnic identities or of other 'abnormalities' were consequently incorporated from 1893 onwards (*NCC*, 24).

In opposition to the strict confines of the World Fairs, circus culture freely manipulated cultural codes and systems through a restriction of its transgressive possibility (*NCC*, 30). Combining the three-ring format with the nation's sideshow culture, the circus became an alternative arena for interpreting reality, thus speaking to American culture in 'accentuated tones' (*NCC*, 31). Created in tandem with the emerging circuses, freakshows emerged as safe venues in which the audience could satisfy its obsession with fear and the curiosity of the unknown (*NCC*, 30). Bogdan defines the freakshow as 'a formally organized exhibition of people with alleged and real, physical, mental or behavioral anomalies for amusement and profit.'⁴ The operative term in this definition is the word 'anomaly', allowing for the body to be coded as 'other,' or to borrow from Judith Butler 'a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another' (*VMP*, 24). Attributed as the creative force behind both American

⁴ Robert Bogdan, *Freakshow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 10. Hereafter cited as *F*, with page numbers in the text.

circuses and freakshows, P.T. Barnum included horses, clowns and the exhibition of 'human curiosities' in his circus, 'The Greatest Show on Earth' (*NCC*, 31). After the destruction of his New York museum in 1868, where he exhibited 'world-famous specimens' of 'freakish' and 'abnormal' humans such as the Siamese Twins Chang and Eng, as well as Charles Stratton, known as Tom Thumb, Barnum took his oddities on the road (*NCC*, 31). In tandem with the display of individuals with varying disabilities, Barnum also displayed false spectacles such as 'the mermaid' and the famous 'Zip, the What-Is-It?.' Zip was alternately identified as 'an intelligent black man named William Henry Jackson who was born with a deformed skull . . . the size of a silver dollar and the shape of a cone' or as the mentally retarded William Henry Johnson, born in 1840, a sufferer from microcephaly and exhibited in the Barnum circuses and at Coney Island between 1860 and 1926 and was often displayed as the missing link between humans and apes (*F*, 134).

These sensationalized representations of identity, in tandem with the emerging fields of phrenology and eugenics,⁵ capitalized on the potential primacy and criminality of the othered people of the time. Myths of cannibal tribes from Africa were frequently used in Barnum's displays, when in fact the performers were simply citizens who were former slaves or individuals with disabilities (*NCC*, 33). As the freakshow is dependent on a spectacle of abnormality and exploitation, misrepresentation is then integral to the production of the freak in American culture. However, it is also important to note that exhibitions such as Barnum's were 'not simply seedy manifestations of American subcultural fascinations; at the time, his American Museum was a main tourist and visitor attraction' (*NCC*, 33). While these spaces functioned as spaces of exclusion and the sensationalized narratives contributed to the mistreatment and misrepresentation of those with disabilities, the freakshow also functioned as a space where the performers themselves could market and profit from their own differences.

Regardless of the problematic nature of the freakshow itself, by employing techniques such as the 'ten-in-one'⁶ and 'dings',⁷ the performers were able to capitalize on American society's obsessions with the grotesque body by creating a spectacle, or as defined by the performers of the Coney Island Freakshow – a 'theatre of guts'.⁸ Freakshows create an experience where the audiences' 'guts respond first' and 'afterwards their mind can reflect on what their eyes have seen' (*TG*, 110) and played on the themes of 'arousal, cancellation of skepticism and visceral empathy' (*TG*, 113). By doing so, the freakshow was transformed into a lucrative showcase of the marginalized body, simultaneously providing a safe space for its performers' resulting financial security. Some of these individuals have even become famous in their own right. Henry Johnson, or Zip, was noted to have colluded with his manager as a co-conspirator is quoted as saying 'well, we fooled 'em for a long time'.⁹ Similarly, Michael Wilson currently performs as a tattooed man at the Coney Island Freakshow as a part of a long-standing tradition in which individuals with multiple tattoos and facial

⁵ See Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995). See also Bogdan's and Kochanek's works cited in this article.

⁶ A sideshow in which ten acts would perform for one low admissions price.

⁷ A low price, non-advertised sale of memorabilia during shows.

⁸ Fred Siegel, 'Theater of Guts: An Exploration of the Sideshow Aesthetic', *TDR* 35.4 (1991): 110. Hereafter cited as *TG*, with page numbers in the text.

⁹ Mikita Brottman and David Brottman, 'Return of the Freakshow: Carnival (De)Formations in Contemporary Culture', *Studies in Popular Culture* 18.2 (1996): 89. Hereafter cited as *RF*, with page numbers in the text.

piercings were and are still exhibited. Otis Jordan, one of Michael's co-workers, also known as Otis the Frog Boy, in turn capitalized on his small stature and his highly ossified bones that severely limit his mobility, has been performing since an early age at the Coney Island Freakshow as the 'human cigarette factory' in which he rolls and lights a cigarette with nothing but his mouth (*TG*, 114).

Staring and the Politics of the Freakshow

While the ability to capitalize on difference and the aggrandized expositions used to describe the performers elevated their status, the use of mockery and parodic staged events, simultaneously demeaned the performers while making the audience feel more at ease in the presence of the freaks themselves (*RF*, 90). The thrust of this mode was 'to claim that the exhibit in the picture, in spite of his or her particular physical, mental or behavioral anomaly was an outstanding person', going as far as labelling citizens as 'above average' through titles of royalty (*CPD*, 6). While anthropological information on the structure of the freakshow and the placement of the either 'natural' or 'self-made' freaks as privileged or not continues, it is often discussed that an alternative counterculture had formed within carnival culture (*RF*, 90). Often portrayed on screen as both private and privileged spaces, where the 'normal's' are deemed unwelcome.

Despite the creation of an alternative carnival culture, the freakshow had become a space where the performers can celebrate their differences, consequently creating an even larger divide between the performers and the audience they perform for. Bogdan argues that the performers saw themselves as inherently superior and more worldly than the 'humdrum' audiences they performed for, going as far as using derogatory terms for those not within the culture (*CPD*, 7).

The feeling of mutual disgust fuelled by society's obsession with the grotesque body only furthered the othering of the performers. As Bogdan further argues, it is 'not simply, then, that there is a "discourse" of dehumanization that produces these effects, but rather that there is a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility' (*VMP*, 26). Freakshows in their essence then have very little to do with the person whose deformity was exhibited. Instead this person's physical abnormality became a starting point for the construction of difference (*F*, 267). These differences and the framing of the performers themselves as individuals with differences is what defined them as 'freaks' (*F*, 267). In tandem with the aggrandized mode of advertisement, such in the case of 'armless wonders',¹⁰ lead to fraudulent system of exploitation of both those with disabilities and their spectators (*CPD*, 9).

This, with the medicalization of 'monstrosities'¹¹ and concepts such as eugenics linking physical anomalies with violence (*CPD*, 122), consolidated individuals with both inferred and actual disabilities as the perpetrators of violence within many different genres in film, television and literature. While the last decade of the 19th century was deemed the 'era of eugenics,' many medical professionals focused their attention on 'describing, explaining, photographing, and controlling classes of people they thought were responsible for most social problems' (*CPD*, 75). Labelled as 'feble-minded', these individuals were considered the root cause of an array of crimes

¹⁰ Individuals, who by any means were ordinary in the sense that they accomplished the same tasks the non-disabled audiences could.

¹¹ Lisa A. Kochanek, 'Reframing the Freak: From Sideshow to Science', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 30.3 (1997): 227.

(*CPD*, 76). Through the association of disability with degeneracy, eugenicists sought out the ‘feble-minded’ in order to study them and control their reproduction, simultaneously popularizing theories about the dangers of such ‘feble-mindedness’ (*CPD*, 76). The individuals who were the object of study were often photographed and classified as scientific specimens, ‘mental defectives, carriers of particular diseases and conditions’ (*CPD*, 77-8). In her work on staring, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson introduces the association of visual observation as the source of truth in the scientific enterprise, as the ‘uneasy primacy of vision’.¹² Exposure of the body to the ‘clinical gaze’ allowed the body to be interpreted, in this case, with a medical authority (*SHWL*, 29). Such an interpretation takes place as a rationalization that abstracts and simplifies the body through various societal structures, allowing for pre-existing patterns of embodiment to exist and erase human particularity. The prescription of average, through medicalization associates a certain normality with certain bodies, a notion of normal consequently shaping our own and societal expectations (*SHWL*, 30). If we take the notion of normality itself to be both descriptive and prescriptive and in the context of Lennard Davis’s work, enforced, then individuals who deviate from norms are marginalized and reduced. Notions of normalcy dictate the way in which we regulate ourselves, how we are expected to act, and how we are received based on our perceived level of normalcy, ‘[W]e are obligated to act, feel, look, and be normal – at any cost’ (*SHWL*, 31). The ‘abnormal’ body deviates from the norm, allowing ‘medical science’s influential preference for normality and prejudice against abnormality’ to render the abject human form ‘repugnant to us’ (*SHWL*, 30-31).

Following the rise of the ‘era of eugenics’, early cinema frequently depicted individuals with both ‘feigned and actual disabilities’ as ‘central to horror and gangster genres as well as to other types of films featuring murderers and other perpetrators of violence’ (*CPD*, 115). In his work on the representation of disabled bodies in early cinema, Bogdan discusses associations with the word ‘monster’, not exclusively referring to a strange and frightening creature, but in scientific terminology meaning an animal with ‘a congenital deformity,’ and the medical term used to define a ‘fetus or infant with a severe disability’ (*CPD*, 115). The implications of such language were commonly utilized in popular imagination, and the consequent overlap allowed for the ‘dangerous’ characters of early cinema to commit violent acts, rationalized through their ‘deformed, maimed and mentally impaired’ or disabled bodies, linking physical and mental differences with violent crime (*CPD*, 116). Dating back to short-films exhibited at dime museums, freakshows and fairs, the association of disability and violence, openly plays on ‘age-old folk tales,’ and the era of eugenics. Therefore, early cinema frequently presented audiences with a disabled victim of violence who then turns to violence, irrational acts of violence, violence as a result of self-loathing or violence due to a propensity to sexual assault¹³ (*CPD*, 120-5). Commonly depicted by individuals

¹² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28. Hereafter cited as *SHWL*, with page numbers in the text.

¹³ Bogdan lists films such as: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Universal Pictures, 1923); *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Paramount Pictures, 1931), *Phantom of the Opera* (Universal Pictures, 1925); *Frankenstein* (Universal Pictures, 1931); *The Body Snatchers* (RKO Pictures, 1945); *The House of Wax* (Warner Brothers, 1933); *The Pearl of Death* (Universal Pictures, 1944); *The Penalty* (Goldwyn Pictures, 1920) and *West of Zanzibar* (MGM, 1928).

pretending to be disabled, the disabled body is either inherently violent or one that requires a sympathetic gaze (*CPD*, 120).

Hence, I argue that the depiction of the 'freak' as violent creates a doubly traumatic social sphere for these bodies. Literal violence is done onto a body by delineating it as abject; and the imagery of violence at the hand of the abject body consequently undoes social connections between 'normal' and abject bodies. As a result, a space of violent difference is created, which becomes evident in the 'othering' or 'derealization' of abject bodies, as those who are abject then by default have already suffered the inherent violence of the act of derealization. Butler attributes this act to a cyclical kind of cultural violence, attributing the negation of this violence to the 'inexhaustibility of its object' (*VMP*, 33).

Stuck in a seemingly infinite loop between voyeurism and a gaze unable to prescribe a normative understanding, the abject body must mitigate the socio-political sphere in its own unique manner. According to Butler, as each of us can be considered to be politically constituted, 'politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability [...],' the notions of loss and vulnerability are intertwined with our 'socially constituted bodies,' 'at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure (*VMP*, 20). This notion of exposure can be seen through what Garland-Thomson calls 'uncivil attention'; the awareness that is afforded the abject body therefore demands a type of 'attention,' as it disrupts expectation (*SHWL*, 37). The consequent social illegibility of the disabled body is what causes a discomfort in the non-disabled, it is not the disability itself that then creates a discomfort in the spectator, but the inability to read the disabled body as routine in the nature of social relations (*SHWL*, 38).

The placement of the body as abject can be further explained through Adriana Cavarero's work in trauma studies that looks at the way in which trauma is instilled in the audience/ viewer through horror. Citing Perseus, Cavarero notes the 'affinity' between horror and vision, one that exists between a 'scene that is unbearable to look at and the repugnance it arouses'.¹⁴ Unlike what occurs in the body in the face of terror, horror operates as a *stasis*, one that occurs when the ontological singularity of the body is threatened by violence. This implies that horror is less reactive to the active threat of death than it is to the 'instinctive disgust for a violence,' one that 'aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body,' a reminder of the body's 'constitutive vulnerability' (*HNCV*, 8). When faced with such vulnerability at the scene of horror, the body is placed in its singularity, an exposure of oneself to the other, an act of seeing or gazing then must take place for this singularity to be realized. It is through this process of realization that the individual is confronted with a visual difference, one that as an individual we are aware we do not possess but are not immune to. If indeed the 'face-to-face' aspect of horror cannot be avoided, a shared repugnance occurs when we are faced with the disabled body. The disabled body therefore becomes repugnant to the singularity of everybody, acting as a mirror (*HNCV*, 15-16). The very corporeality of this constitutive vulnerability acknowledges that through singularity we define ourselves as vulnerable as we cannot definitively argue that our bodies will never be regarded as such. As spectators of images, or in the case of the freakshow, bodies on display, what we witness does not necessarily signify material identification with suffering. We gaze

¹⁴ Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 8. Hereafter cited as *HNCV*, with page numbers in the text.

upon a body that we are now aware is different than our own, but the gaze is not one of empathy, instead one of voyeurism.

Staring at the Freak Staring Back at You

Garland-Thomson defines staring as an act that sets in motion an interpersonal relationship between a starrer and a staree, a visual engagement that holds consequences in the circuit of communication and meaning making (*SHWL*, 3). Staring at the abjected body allows us to challenge our own visual norms and shifting who we are into focus 'by staring at who we think we are not' (*SHWL*, 8). However, as culture regulates human behaviour overall, then visual behaviour, such as the urge to stare, is also associated with cultural history. Within this frame, Garland-Thomson classifies the act of staring into four parts. Firstly, a disturbance in the visual status quo draws us into a 'staring relationship'; secondly, the history of staring is specific to its culture, therefore shaping its meaning and practice, establishing a social relationship between the starrer and staree; lastly serving as a conduit of knowledge for the unknown that was incomprehensible at first glance (*SHWL*, 13-5).

The visual sorting process is what allots the act of staring, even dictating the way one looks, with attention or without, stigmatizing the ways in which we stare (*SHWL*, 40). This form of nonverbal behaviour is then used to enforce a social hierarchy privileging bodies visually coded as 'normal'. According to Garland-Thomson, when a person in an authoritative position stares 'staring functions as a form of domination, marking the staree as the exotic, outlaw, alien, or other' (*SHWL*, 43). Separating the starrer and the staree as legitimate and outside respectively, Garland attributes the colonizing gaze to collective social staring rituals such as World Fairs and Expositions, museums, freak shows, drag shows and the pages of National Geographic', fixing individuals within respective systems (*SHWL*, 43).

Staring similarly functions as a means of stigma assignment. If we predominantly consider the 'proto-ordinary' body as the authentic body, then forms of stigmatized distinctiveness that occur in comparison to the 'seen body' define any embodiment outside of the norm as abject (*SHWL*, 45). As those with abjected bodies cannot exist as inconspicuous, they are by default discriminated against, since to 'be a stareable sight is unseemly, then, in part because it outs the starrer for inappropriate looking' (*SHWL*, 46). Abjected bodies confront our visual landscape and therefore not only threaten our perceived notion of expected body but confront our understanding of our own embodiment, as the vulnerability of becoming a staree is a threat to our own conception of self.

Changing the scale of the ordinary or a visible lack or replacement to the body codes the body as 'visually novel' (*SHWL*, 162). This approach explains further the aggrandized mode in which freakshow performers were presented, as 'armless wonders', such as Charles Tripp and Anna Leake Thompson who performed with their toes rather than simply display themselves, presenting their bodies as a novelty to behold (*SHWL*, 133). While the display of the disabled body for amusement dates back centuries, 'freaks' 'were profitable performers in the developing commercial economy of the last several centuries,' and functioned as public displays of novelty (*SHWL*, 164).

The body of a freak could merit staring as these bodies were commonly abjected and freakshows capitalized on this by exaggerating the unusual body, a prominent example of this being the display of those with gigantism next to an individual with

dwarfism (*SHWL*, 162). As the unusual structure of the body can 'overwhelm the realities of the actual people,' their bodies often shape their stories, blurring the disabled or 'unusually shaped' body into monsters, inviting us to 'remap fantastic stories' about the people we are staring at (*SHWL*, 167). In her example regarding Robert Wadlow, the tallest man in recorded history, Garland-Thomson argues that while a medical condition had given Wadlow his size, the act of staring had made him into a Giant (*SHWL*, 168). Upon his death, Wadlow was buried in a concrete bunker in order to protect his remains, as these unusual bodies can be the recipient of stares even after death. His family took control over how his story was told (*SHWL*, 168).

The stare then does not only control how the individuals' story is structured but how the story itself takes shape. Altering our gaze then has the ability to significantly alter the way disability stories are told. Although the use of the freakshow in various forms of media have been suspect at best, Tod Browning's *Freaks* should be considered as one of the first attempts of a departure from standard disability narratives. The film's unique nature standing as a reference for the narrative re-working of not only the freakshow and the carnival space, but also a narrative re-adjustment of the depiction of the disabled performers who call these spaces home.

The First: *Freaks*

Tod Browning's *Freaks* counters the normalization of the display of the disabled body, attempting to use the 'aggrandized mode' as a means of creating a space of visual empathy. Juxtaposing the then upcoming medium of film with a 'residual form that threatened to drag film back to its unglamorous beginning,' Browning bases the film on an explicit formal and thematic link between the two media.¹⁵ Instead of following the overall freakshow aesthetic, Browning uses the film medium as a means of identification between the characters and the audience.

By utilizing the camera's ability to alter perception through the usage of angles, Browning creates a world in which the audience is forced to identify with the performers on their level, on their terms, thus evoking sympathy. This more sensitive viewing can be seen as an attempt to also decouple disability from freakishness (*SC*, 64). By placing the viewer as the implicit example of normality, Browning attempts to blur the lines of difference between the disabled performer and the non-disabled viewer by depicting their day-to-day lives as un-exceptional (*SC*, 69). However, it is evident from the film's negative reception that although Browning attempts to normalize the performers of the freakshow, the distinction between them and their 'normal' counterparts remains all too shocking. Not only did the film's negative reception effectively ruin Browning's career, leading him to become a recluse and renounce his career, but the contempt the actors faced during filming also indicated how the initial reception of the film mirrored sentiments on disabled bodies at the time. Adams not only cites asking the cast to eat outside at an assigned table, but also an incident involving F. Scott Fitzgerald sharing a table with conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton (*SC*, 60-1). The fact that the siblings discussed about what the other wanted to

¹⁵ Rachel Adams, 'Sideshow Cinema,' in *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 64. Hereafter cited as *SC*, with page numbers in the text.

eat became too much for the author who ran outside to vomit (SC, 60-1). Not only does it seem that this combination of high and low brow entertainment became too much for those on set, but the film grew as a stand-in for the freakshow itself.

Loosely based on a short story 'Spurs' by Tod Robbins, the film takes place behind the scenes of a travelling circus. Hans (Harry Earles), a man with dwarfism falls in love with a trapeze artist named Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova). However, Cleopatra plots to marry and poison Hans, inherit his money and run off with the circus strongman Hercules (Henry Victor). During a carnivalesque wedding feast celebrating the happy couple, Cleopatra refers to the performers as 'filthy, slimy freaks' when they attempt to chant their acceptance of her, singing and dancing 'one of us.' After Hans falls ill, his fellow freaks learn of her elaborate scheme. Following the circus code of justice, 'offend one and you offend them all,' the 'freaks' plot their revenge on the blissfully ignorant lovers. The film ends with the performers murdering Hercules and transforming Cleopatra into the 'chicken woman,' maiming her and covering her in feathers. Eventually Hans and Freida are re-united after Hans retires to a mansion to nurse his broken heart.

Inherently hybrid in form, the film utilizes authentic sideshow jargon, as well as the fact that 'freaks from sideshows all over America played principle roles and the setting and props were actual circus material handled by circus people.' (SC, 65) Similarly, the stage and screen identities of the performers are blurred as each character goes by the same name they use in their live performances, resulting in the film to function more as a re-production of the sideshow transformation of bodily difference into freakish spectacle (SC, 67). Browning also frequently plays with size, building sets to scale, filming from his actor's height as well as perspective and coupling his actors in groups that are seen as un-moved by the presence of these bodies.

This highlighted difference in 'normalcy', coupled with the violence the performers enact on Cleopatra and the Strong Man, are what arguably draw the audience away from the sympathetic intentions of the film. This fear of our potential to become marginalized like the performers, so easily objectified by the audience, connotes the very real possibility of a warped 'downwards mobility' for the non-disabled audience. In the words of Butler, '[o]ne speaks, and one speaks for another, to another, and yet there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself' (VMP, 25). In the end, we all have the potential to become freaks.

Using his film as a platform for societal commentary instead of a pathologizing of the performers, 'Browning accomplishes this goal by using dialogue and *mise-en-scene* to take the characters literally and figuratively off of the freakshow display platform, building a paradigm of reception into the narrative itself' (SC, 72). Linking violence to the gaze during the final scenes of the film, Browning inadvertently comments on the act of staring as the primal activity that produces the freak in the first place. As the camera lingers on Cleopatra's new form, the monstrosity of the actions taken at the hand of the freaks is not necessarily what frightens us. It is the level of identification we feel with the perpetrators of the crime, much like the mirror in the act of staring, 'the surfaces of the disabled body are not radically Other but reflect back the convolutions of our own tortured interiority' (SC, 83). In this sense, I argue that the film's ending provides a potent societal critique as opposed to a simple reading of an ableist horror narrative.

American Horror Story: Freakshow

Years after the release and even the re-release of *Freaks*, we can see clear parallels between the film and Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story: Freakshow* (*AHSF*). Both texts provide insight into how the performers of freakshows are not inherently violent due to their differences but are in many ways coerced into violent acts as a means of protecting themselves from society. The trauma enacted onto the freaks is met with a violent re-action, resulting in a cycle of violence based on difference.¹⁶ The violence seen throughout the series is only enacted by the members of the freakshow in terms of self-defence while the true instigators of violence are those outside of the freakshow community. The series therefore aligns itself with *Freaks* but presents a messy moral universe fuelled by bodily difference. Throughout the season, the show deals with the internal and external threats this community of 'freaks' face in 1950s America. An important side-note, however, is that the series is complacent in casting non-disabled actors as disabled, having their disability on screen be performative rather than informative as with the case of *Freaks* and *Freakshow*.¹⁷

The season begins with the 'discovery' of conjoined twins Bette and Dot (Sarah Paulson) who, due to their unique form, become the object of disgust in their community. Simultaneously, the performers must also deal with the external threats they face from the community upon their arrival and are even threatened by the police (*AHSF*). Soon Meep (Ben Woolf), also known as 'the wild thing,' is found murdered in front of the freakshow after being taken into custody for a crime he did not commit. He proves unable to survive the justice system that is meant to protect every individual. Although Meep's disability is not explicitly addressed in the series, his small stature, inability to speak, his assumed mental disability and disfigured head make him particularly vulnerable in the confines of a 1950s small town jail.

The second episode of the series becomes pivotal in defining the line between the performers and the audience as soon Dandy (Finn Wittrock), a representative of the era's rich and elite, attempts to proclaim himself as a self-made freak and tries to join the ranks of the company, eventually becoming the villain of the series (*AHSF*). Similarly, during the third episode a new external threat to the community is introduced, as a local conman begins his attack on the company, attempting to sell their bodies to oddity museums for profit. The show proceeds somewhat peacefully until we are given insight into the lives of the non-disabled performers. Penny (Grace Gummer), originally a candy stripper at the hospital where Elsa (Jessica Lange), the troop's leader, found Bette and Dot, is kidnapped by Elsa and forced to stay with the company. It is revealed in Episode 7 that Penny has begun a relationship with one of the performers and when she attempts to leave her normative world behind, her father mutilates her, tattooing her face with scales, giving her a lizard tongue and shaving off her hair, in essence making

¹⁶ An example of this can be seen in Frankenstein's monster. The creature is not inherently violent but is forced into committing violent acts as a means of protecting himself from societal backlash.

¹⁷ The debate surrounding the representation of disabled individuals by non-disabled actors is an area of contentious debate. In her work on cultural representations of disability in television, Elvira Psaila discusses this notion under the term 'crip-drag.' One end of the debate argues that these representations are just as offensive as black face, and denies disabled actors the ability to represent themselves on screen. See Elvira Psaila, 'Culture, Disability and Television', *Considering Disability Journal* 1.1-2 (2015); <https://cdjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/831-culture-disability-television> [accessed 19 July 2018].

her truly ‘one of them.’ In a reversal of form, instead of violence enacted on a person refusing to accept the freakshow performers, we see violent outer paternal force. Penny’s father uses physical disfigurement as punishment for wanting to be a part of and accepting a community of ‘Others,’ placing the violence in the film and the horror, much like with the conman hungry for body parts, in the hands of the non-disabled townspeople.

During Episode 8, the company covers Penny’s father in tar and feathers, transforming him into a ‘chicken’ man, while during one of the final episodes of the season the con-man responsible for much of the company’s deaths is murdered underneath a wagon and is fashioned into the male counterpart of Cleopatra’s final form. During the final moments of the episode, Elsa explicitly references *Freaks* stating that retribution for these interlopers’ crimes comes in the form of becoming one of them (*AHSF*). Although the aforementioned episodes directly associate themselves with the film, it can be said that Episode 10 is the one in which social commentary on the societal stance of the disfigured body is most underlined. Pepper (Naomi Grossman), a character also present in Season 3, is sent to live with her sister upon news of the company’s imminent separation. It is soon revealed that Pepper, who has microcephaly,¹⁸ is framed for a crime her sister committed and as punishment is sent to an asylum. The episode clearly speaks to the institutionalization of those with ‘deformities’ and also speaks to the abuse of disabled persons in the hands of the non-disabled members of society. The series goes a step further than *Freaks* and explicitly implicates upper class non-disabled citizens in crimes committed against the disabled performers. In this context – and throughout the series – although the freaks commit similar crimes, the audience is aligned for the freaks, rooting for them as opposed to villainizing them.

The Contemporary *Freakshow*

In stark contrast to Ryan Murphy’s television show, AMC’s reality show *Freakshow*¹⁹ places the audience in modern-day Venice beach while ‘truthfully’ depicting the lives of its performers. Similar to *Freaks*, the series uses actors who were part of freakshows during filming. Although the reasoning behind their use and the fact that the actors in *Freakshow* are social actors, i.e. acting for a documentary series as opposed to a film, the experience of their performances and their testimonies become all the more compelling and allow for an authenticity in understanding disability that is not present in *A.H.S.: Freakshow*. Throughout the series’ two seasons, the employees of the freakshow navigate their day-to-day lives in tandem with their placement in contemporary society. One of the main recurring themes of the show is the concept of the self-made freak. During both seasons, the non-disabled Asia, the daughter of the freakshow’s owner, explores her identity and place within the freakshow and ultimately identify as a ‘self-made’ freak by becoming a contortionist and performing other ‘death-defying’ stunts, eventually becoming one of the show’s headliners (*FN*). Although contortion or performing stunts does not classify an individual as a freak, Asia takes

¹⁸ A condition that effects the patient’s ability to learn, communicate and develop due to the irregular formation of the skull.

¹⁹ *Freakshow*, Netflix, 14 February 2013- 24 June 2014,

<http://www.netflix.com/watch/70286435?trackId=14277283&tctx=0%252C0%252C4f09320f-c662-4e7f-9447-98c54acd6c37-3949747> [accessed 30 June 2018]. Hereafter *FN* in the text.

pride in aligning herself with her fellow performers, often advocating for them in tense situations. As opposed to witnessing any adverse reaction from her parents, Asia is encouraged to explore her identity as a performer, after all her act is one of skill but does not display an overt physical 'abnormality'. While Asia attempts to align herself with her disabled counterparts, her choice highlights the reversal of norms that take place in the freakshow space. While being a freak is the norm in this space, being non-disabled places the 'self-made' freaks either as frauds or as 'unremarkable' a theme congruent in the three aforementioned works.

In tandem with Asia's transformation, Creature, another self-made freak and title holder of 'the man with the most facial piercings,' attempt to reconcile his family life with his life at the freakshow (*FN*). Creature faces blatant discrimination as his appearance inhibits him from finding a new apartment, his looks often frightening potential roommates and landlords (*FN*). During one of the final episodes of the season, Creature reconciles with his estranged wife and gains acceptance from her and their daughter, who still proclaims that he is scary (*FN*). Creature's wife is unable to understand and accept his choice to make himself into a freak. Tattooed men and women who commonly operated outside of the confines of societal norms and wanted to capitalize on their difference, chose to modify their bodies into 'freakish' forms.²⁰ Another performer faced with the reconciliation of his status as self-made freak is Morgue, a fellow headliner who-usually performs dangerous and sometimes consciously grotesque stunts. Morgue has chosen his stage name and persona based on his interest in Goth culture and argues that this allows him to express his individuality as a counter example to the societal norm. In this sense, an observable trend of seeking refuge from societal norms seems to be taking place in freakshows, where disenfranchised individuals who do not necessarily have 'extraordinary' bodies commit to a different form of embodying difference as a means of asylum.

A second recurring theme in the show is the reclamation and reconciliation of the performers' status as 'freak.' During the first season, the show's smallest performers stage a wedding that is an exact replica of the famous freakshow personality Tom Thumb's wedding, imitating the publicity event originally orchestrated by P.T. Barnum (See *CPD*, 15). By appropriating their past freakshow counterparts, the couple both acknowledge past performers' legacies while also transforming their special day into a public spectacle (*FN*). In similar fashion to the re-created wedding, the company takes a trip to Gibsonton, Florida, a city that once served as a safe communal space for performers during the heyday of the famous Florida Freakshow. The sixth episode of the second season however, centres around a guest performer, the son of the famous 'Lobster Boy' and his reconciliation with the freakshow culture

One of the clearest examples of reclamation however comes in the first season, as the company decides to ban the word 'normal'. The show and its performers then travel through Venice beach selling memorabilia during a large and elaborate parade (*FN*). Their campaign is especially powerful in an increasingly 'diverse' sphere as they highlight the hypocritical nature of contemporary society. If in fact 'diversity is the new normality'²¹, then progress made for the sake of diversity has commonly excluded disability. In this context, disability is then filtered through a normative window that

²⁰ See Amelia Klem, 'A Life of Her Own Choosing: Anna Gibbons' Fifty Years as a Tattooed Lady', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* (2006): 28-39.

²¹ Leonard J Davis, *The End of Normal Identity in a Biocultural Era* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 1.

either allows for an optimistic agenda that is carefully arranged in a manner that doesn't offend viewers. The disabled body is fixed and confined to a medical paradigm, the choice to be a self-made freak may exist but the choice to be disabled does not exist.²² In a social sphere that perpetuates ableism the work done by the Venice Beach Freakshow, is in line with Browning's humble intentions. Departing from the notion of disability as abnormal, the performers, freaks and 'self-made' freaks alike, stand together in opposition to the notion of normal. Refusing the umbrella of diversity, the members of the Freakshow simply wish to exist, without terms that define them as either or.

Contemporary Freakshows

Although the idea of presenting marginalized individuals for profit seems rather unacceptable in modern day society, Brottman and Brottman argue that due to our ongoing obsession with the grotesque body, the freakshow has simply re-appropriated itself within a modern context such as television shows, talk shows and other sensational media. They also argue that disability for profit is still very much a part of our modern media content (*RF*, 90). The implication of their argument is that although the display of bodily difference may no longer be seen as acceptable, as newer methodologies of exploiting the disabled body have emerged to take the freakshows place. Brottman and Brottman explicitly reference television talk shows as perpetrators of a fragmentary approach in situating the body in postmodern culture (*RF*, 95). By aiming to place the body as a mode of defining and exploring difference, these programmes play on the basic principle of the freakshow and the resulting exhibition of the disabled body for profit, blurring the notions of voyeurism and the gaze further. In this light, it is easier to identify the forces which these media outlets operate by. By remaining under the guise of 'informative' talk shows, news segments and even tabloids consciously exploit physical and even emotional differences. I argue further that this placement of the self in the unknown implies that one is not exempt from the 'particular vulnerability' as in any given moment, one's body may be considered outside of the norm and labelled as 'freak'. The body that is stared at is vulnerable by default as it rests upon its intelligibility to the other, placing the body at risk of exposure.

The notion of intelligibility then finally brings in the question of the reclamation of the autonomous body. If the performers on AMC's *Freakshow* are truly able to reclaim their status as 'freaks', then shouldn't they be able to continue their lives free of gaze and objectification or is this not possible due to the status they still hold within media texts today? The unlikely answer comes from comedian Lee Ridley, self-named Lost Voice Guy. Ridley has cerebral palsy and has not been able to speak for 37 years. During this time, however, his nuanced sense of humour translates over the computerized voice and his sarcastic T-shirts. Ridley took *Britain's Got Talent* by storm with his performances, eventually winning the 2018 competition.²³ During his first appearance he refers to himself as lost voice guy for 'obvious reasons', pointing at his computer. His work self-reflexively both attacks ableist notions of disability and the emotionality attached to disability throughout his time on *Britain's Got Talent*. During

²² Davis, 8.

²³ See for a compilation of all three performances: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyTC3tRBo4s> [accessed 30 September 2018].

his final appearance, Ridley addresses the issue of disability and staring. When asked why he put himself in such a position, he argues that he is simply seeking the agency of determining how his 'extraordinary' body is looked at and coded, his success, moving him to the elevated position of artist.

Disability studies has in some ways provided an answer to these questions through the work of disability performance artists, although critical trauma studies has taken a different approach focusing more so on disability issues surrounding disfigurement rather than the reception of the disabled body itself. What differentiates these individuals from the performers in the freakshows is that the former, unable to live their day-to-day lives without scrutiny, are attempting to reclaim their autonomy by confronting society rather than seeking reclamation and understanding while simultaneously appeasing society's need to look. Eisenhauer states that the act of looking transforms individuals into property,²⁴ and that in order for reclamation to occur, these artists must critically appropriate sideshow culture in a way that subverts the gaze back to the audience.²⁵ By confronting the audience-directly with what sets them apart, these artists have begun to re-gain their bodies' autonomous status. Although it is evident that the difference between the non-disabled and disabled body will perpetually fascinate audiences, it is important to recognize the damage that this causes for the individuals in search of reclamation and, for lack of a better word, 'normalcy.'

Although visual activism and individuals such as Ridley, have begun to normalize our visual sphere with what I suggest are 'extraordinary' bodies (following Garland-Thomson), modern medicine, media, and even charitable institutions continue to exploit this antagonism. With a historical precedent of monsters and freakshows of all kinds and a human propensity for staring, will we eventually move beyond a staged encounter with the disabled body and allow starees full reclamation? Although I do not think it is possible to answer this question just yet, the intersection between trauma and disability has become clearer. While the era of the freakshows could be marked as clearly traumatic spheres, the post-modern freakshow remains equally traumatic. Although labelled and presented differently, the intelligible gaze and the unintelligible body remain at odds, and as long as there is an antagonism present, there remains a means to exploit this antagonism.

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Recuperarea corpului cu dizabilități. O analiză textuală a filmului lui Browning *Freaks* (1932) și a versiunii de mâna a doua din mass-media modernă

Rezumat

Acest articol prezintă filmul lui Tod Browning intitulat *Freaks* (1932) în conversație cu spectacolele de carnaval și din târguri din secolul al nouăsprezecelea și explică ulterior crearea și dezvoltarea genului de freak show. Prin intermediul operei teoretice a unor autori precum Judith Butler, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Adrianna Cavarero și Lennard Davis, articolul poziționează freak show-ul în cadrul studiilor dizabilității și ale traumei prin noțiunile de „holbare”, „normal” și „oroare”. Folosind două tipuri de text contemporan precum *American Horror Story: Freakshow* și seria de Reality TV intitulată *Freakshow*, acest articol prezintă, în primul rând, aceste texte din punct de vedere tematic, pentru a le analiza apoi pe toate trei în conversație unul cu celălalt, ca mijloc de a contextualiza rolul acestui freak show în producții culturale contemporane. În final, articolul conectează aceste texte cu noțiunea de violență și folosirea dizabilității ca unealtă a ororii. Concluzia articolului este că, deși freakshow-ul a fost abandonat în sensul literal, diferența care îl afirmă rămâne prezentă în sfera culturală a zilelor noastre.