Panel III: Medical Hauntings

Freaks and Freakery in Film and History

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MY focus here is on representations of disability and freakery in the media and within history. My wider research is focused on the representation of disability and, within this paper, I will consider how museums can use the ongoing interest in stories of freaks and freakery to tackle stereotypes and stigmas surrounding disability for their audiences. Initially examining the wide range of disability stereotypes that exist within the media, I will move on to consider the history of freak shows and freakery, before ending by examining how museums can make use of this.

Images of disability are widespread within Western popular culture, but disability is often presented in such cases as a source of stereotypes or as a narrative device in which the disabled are "blessed or damned but never wholly human" (Gartner and Joe, 2). Throughout history, disabled people have been cast in various roles: often that of the villain, the object of pity, or else as an inspirational innocent, rather than a person.

Characters such as Shakespeare's Richard III, driven by vengeance and fury, and the disfigured Batman villains Two-Face and the Joker are archetypes for Western culture. The romantic drama *Me Before You* depicts a disabled man choosing to die rather than continue with his life, whilst the *X-Files* presents disabled teenagers as "not meant to be" and deserving of mercy killing. Depictions of mental illness and physical disfigurement dominate in the horror genre. Young people growing up with disability are faced with images that present them as monsters.

With the very point of cinema being its spectacle, physically disabled bodies are often featured within film—in particular, cult films and exploitation films that use freakery to show images that are taboo, aiming to shock, horrify, and titillate audiences—and, in doing so, further marking out the disabled body as other (Church). This presentation can have harmful consequences. Much criticism of this type of film, however, like criticism of the freak show before them, centres around the idea of outraging public decency rather than concern for those who are shown. Fans of such shows can indeed find themselves accused of mental illness or insanity, separated by their interest in such "unnatural" images.

Disabled bodies can become props in fantasy settings, presenting an image of otherness, often relegated to the background, as in the recent hit *The Greatest Showman*. One fantasy

film which deals directly with the idea of disability is *Edward Scissorhands*—Tim Burton's gothic tale in which the protagonist is an unfinished creation, who has scissors for hands. His story is one about the importance of looking past appearance, yet his disability is "symbolic of an inner emotional deficit—feelings of exclusion and an inability to be understood and loved" (Church). We see the reactions he faces as he ventures into society, with some people repulsed by him, others wanting to cure him, and others wanting to use him only as a tool. In this, he experiences a number of reactions common to people with disabilities. The story humanises the monster, but in the end it is his monstrous nature which overwhelms him as he accidentally kills someone, and he finds himself retreating back into the darkness that previously defined him. Therefore he is again removed from society, and while the narrator shows her sympathy for him, it is clear that he is neither welcome in, nor suited for, society. In this way, a film which shows a disabled individual in a mainly positive light again ends up condemning them to solitude.

Having examined the range of stereotypes that are depicted in the media and the isolation and dehumanisation that it causes, I now move on to a more historical understanding of freakery. Despite the negative connotations of the word "freak" today, freak studies scholars (Bogdan; Chemers) have argued that enfreakment was a socially constructed performance, based not on an inherent quality within the individual but on a manner of presentation. Bogdan argues, for example, that while Robert Wadlow was very tall, he wasn't a giant, as he did not cultivate the performance and persona necessary to be considered as such (272-274). Chemers argues that freakery consists of the "intentional performance of constructed abnormality as entertainment" (24), exaggerating perceived deviance for monetary gain. Framed as "wonders" and "marvels," the disabled performers within freak shows were seen not as objects of pity, but as entertainment. This sense of wonder can be seen within the *carte d'visites* that many performers sold—these functioned as a visual resume, highlighting their difference and advertising their performances (Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disable," 351). Within the freak show, the difference of the individual is highlighted, but framed as something unique and valuable—at least within the context of the performance itself and the money it could create. Such framing also set disabled people apart, however, implying that they were better off with their own kind rather than being included within the social environment of the world as a whole (Bogdan, 279). Freak shows faded from popularity in the early 20th century, as they were targeted for outraging "social decency" (Church).

Displays of disabled bodies have not gone away, however, nor have they faded from the public consciousness, even when medicalisation has meant that any celebration of disability was viewed as "a perverse celebration of disease" (Chermers). Individuals with disabilities have responded to this lack of representation in a number of ways—with Garland Thomson

considering the work of several disabled artists who present their bodies on their own terms. Such performances are not without controversy, both within the disabled community and from outside. The statue of the artist Alison Lapper faced criticism for being a "drab monument to the backward pieties of the age" (O'Neil), with the commentator contrasting his admiration for Alison Lapper—who has "overcome great challenges"—to his revulsion at the statue itself. Here he shows a response of pity, rather than seeing the image as a celebration of disabled women's sexuality, a topic often ignored. Similarly, the inclusion of a disabled presenter on the show Cbeebies led to unpleasant comments online, with the woman in question told she would give children nightmares (Dowell). However, Cerrie Bernell, the woman involved, used this hatred as an opportunity to start a discussion on the media's focus on the perfect body, and was therefore able to reclaim her image.

This reclamation of identity can also be seen within the work of historic freaks. They were people who would find themselves stared at, and who chose to use this curiosity as a way of earning a living, expressing their agency, and travelling the world. This is not to say that people who worked in freak shows were not exploited—many were, with some trapped in conditions of slavery. However, for some the ability to control their own image enabled them to live out a life that would have been unimaginable had they been non-disabled. Simply because attitudes towards acceptability have changed is no reason to ignore what was achieved by these disabled pioneers, especially when modern understandings of disabled history can often be limited.

Questions remain over the limits of acceptability, especially when it conflicts with modern sensibilities. Bogdan (279-281) examines the case of Otis Jordan, a disabled man who performed as "Otis the Frog Boy" in the 1970s. He was proud of his job, publicly saying that to him the circus showing up was "the best thing that ever happened." However, he was temporarily put out of a job due to the complaints of another individual who felt his work was a symbol of the degradation of disabled people. He fought back against this, stating, "I can't understand it. How can she say I'm being taken advantage of? Hell, what does she want for me—to be on welfare?" His protests were successful, and he was able to resume work until his death in 1990.

Here, conflict arises as to what is an acceptable role for a disabled person within society, and who is best placed to make such judgements. Within a modern context, such exhibition for profit is seen as distasteful and dehumanising, however this denies the historical work, and cultural impact of, those who made their living by performing as freaks.

It is clear, therefore, that our initial conceptions of freakery as exploitation are in some ways a misunderstanding. Exploitation has undeniably occurred, but it has also brought with it opportunities that would be beyond the reach of many others who lived during that

time. This is a topic that I feel museums should approach, as it shows agency in the lives of those who performed and acknowledges that they were able to make decisions rather than simply being acted upon.

Museums are seen as influential and to be treated with respect, with the messages they give out likely to be believed. When attention first turns to the concept of displaying disability, the shadow of the freak show looms large—with Sandell (161) discovering that curators "invoked the freak show, and a desire to avoid freak show-style approaches" as a reason to avoid displaying the lives of people who had disability within their collections. When people with disabilities face widespread discrimination and prejudice, however, it is important that their stories are told and that this happens with respect. Care must be taken to avoid encouraging further discrimination for disabled individuals, and to prevent dehumanising them. Whether the individuals discussed are historical or present-day, they need to be shown in a way that acknowledges their individuality and agency.

There are numerous ways that these stories could be told and objects related to these lives displayed. The method that museums choose will provide a signal of the value that they attach to disabled lives, and the meanings that they give them. Simply ignoring disabled individuals treats them as unworthy of attention. Instead, museums should present historic freaks as people, celebrating their achievements in a world that was working against them, while also acknowledging the hardships that they faced. People are interested in freaks—but beyond that, they are interested in stories. Sharing information about people who travelled the globe, putting on performances and showcasing their talents, is something that museums should see as an opportunity to increase understanding, rather than as a threat.

This can be seen in an interview conducted with David Hevey:

> I want people to come away thinking "Wow. Disabled people changed the paradigm, changed the world. And have fought for kind of justice." And not, you know, sitting in back rooms in a kind of non-agency pity way. They claimed back their agency, you know. So that's what I want. And I… the fundament is I want people to think "Yeah, I hope they win. I hope that lot win." Which is always the essence of a good story.

By seeking out these stories full of agency, whenever they occurred in history, new understandings can be given to audiences.

I hope that this paper has given you another way of looking at these stories, and considering how they can be told in new ways, in order to increase understanding and empathy for visitors who may have little prior knowledge of disability history. Whilst any such presentation is an oversimplification, it may enable non-disabled audiences a view of agency that they would not otherwise have considered.

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