

ABSTRACT

The Afterlife of the Freak Show: Representations of Disability in Contemporary Film

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This project is an excavation of the ways in which cinema has relied on a one-dimensional approach to its representations of disability. I argue that the way disability is represented becomes a modern instantiation of the Freak Show. I explore these issues through three different films, all of which come from distinct genres. I discuss the way *The Greatest Showman* is instructive toward ways cinema engages in sanitization and de-historization of the freak shows pre-modern origins. I show how *The Shape of Water* gestures toward concerns at the very idea of authentic representation. The final film I use is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* which gestures toward the possibility of how the narrative structure in films regarding disability could possibly be changed. My conclusion argues that the solution to these representational concerns is caught up in is to change the types of stories that films are choosing to tell about disability.

Representations of Disability in Contemporary Film: The Afterlife of the Freak Show

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CHAPTER ONE

Representations of Disability in Contemporary Film: The Afterlife of the Freak Show

Introduction

There is an extensive history when it comes to the ways in which disability has been represented on film. The first film to feature a disabled character was a 50-second short film by the Thomas Edison Co. in 1898 called *The Blind Beggar*, which features an individual pretending to have a disability in order to garner sympathy from passersby to give him money. When a coin misses his cup, he stands up, revealing that he is not, in fact, legless, which prompts a local policeman to chase him down.¹ It is important to note that *The Blind Beggar* was produced shortly after Edison invented his version of the motion picture camera.² In less than a decade between the invention of the motion picture camera and the production of the first film to feature disability shows the close connection between film and disability since the onset of motion pictures. While at the time, *The Blind Beggar* was considered to be a comedy, the value-laden nature of its plot and the way in which it equates disability with criminality inaugurates a number of negative tropes about disability that have been normalized over the ensuing decades.

In the early twentieth century there were a number of films that depicted characters with disabilities, including early films by D.W. Griffith, who directed “at least 14 films on physical and sensory impairments.”³ This time period also included the first instances of a storyline based around the wonders of medicine being able to cure a disability.⁴ In contrast to Edison’s *The Blind Beggar*, several of these films included

actors with physical disabilities, a practice that continued through the beginning of World War I.⁵ The decades following World War I involved a number of changes in the ways that film studios in the United States chose to represent disability. The first change was largely spurred by two major events, the first being the stock market crash of 1929 and the second being the rise of horror as a genre.⁶ Universal's *Frankenstein* (1931) is emblematic of the shift in the way that disability came to be represented during this period, with disability becoming increasingly associated with characteristics like brain abnormalities and facial disfigurement as a way to invoke fear in audiences. The stock market crash motivated this turn in representation because of disability being viewed as a somewhat risky topic by film studios, so the route that horror films took preserved profitability, which was of paramount concern.⁷

Post-World War II marked a return to a slightly more sensitive approach to representations of physical disability, as there were a number of films about rehabilitation, several with plot lines having to do with veterans going through the rehabilitation process.⁸ The next fifty years featured a wide variety of films with differing approaches to representation. There were films such as *Tell Me that You Love Me Junie Moon* (1970) about disabled individuals' struggles for independence, as well as the "cynical madman" trope that appeared in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). This evolved to a seemingly more "positive approach" to representation with *My Left Foot* (1989) and *Gaby: A True Story* (1987), a pair of films about cerebral palsy.⁹ This did not stop the more villainous representational approaches to disability, with films like *The Fugitive* which engaged in the trope of the villainous one armed man which evoked Captain Hook imagery. (1993).¹⁰

Scholars like Martin Norden contend that the positive trend in representation has continued as more disabled actors and consultants have been hired to work on various films. However, while films like *My Left Foot* may appear to offer benign or even positive representational strategies, they still rely on a pleasure economy that rewards non-disabled actors for disability mimesis. This thesis will offer insight into this important, yet long undertheorized aspect of film. One only has to look at the history of films that have won Academy Awards over the last several decades to see that there is a deep attachment between films that feature a disabled character and critical success. Psychoanalytic criticism allows for an understanding of what it is that makes films featuring narratives of disability to be so popular and to have achieved such wide acclaim. To ignore the insights that can be provided by psychoanalytic analysis would be to dismiss a valuable source of insight into this unique cultural phenomena. While it did not start the trend, since *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988) the connection between films that feature representations of disability in some form and critical acclaim is one that has only accelerated. The core question is why or what causes a phenomenon such as this to take place.

To this end, my thesis begins with a number of research questions that inform how I go about unpacking representations of disability in film through a psychoanalytic disability studies approach. The first set of questions guiding my research has already been, are what insights on filmic depictions of disability can be gained through a psychoanalytic lens. While the “freak show” in its pre-modern form is no longer in existence, certain filmic depictions of disability have and continue to feature a spectacle of freakery. The goal of this thesis is to investigate the import of these representations

and to ask whether this display of freakery is an inevitable result of the process of depicting disabled characters within film, or if there is a solution available to filmmakers to continue to tell the stories that revolve around disability and disabled characters. Related to this is an investigation of the role played by depictions of disability in the narrative structure of specific films—whether disability is ancillary to the narrative or if, as Laura Mulvey discussed vis-à-vis the role of women in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” whether disability is the ideological lynchpin, the narrative glue upon which a film rests. Finally, I use psychoanalytic disability studies to provide insight into the ways in which particular filmic depictions of disability are involved in the production of ableism and disableism, both within the film narratives and as a reflection of the production of ableist and disableist tropes of culture and society. There is a strong connection between the enjoyment film viewers experience and filmic depictions of disability. While my thesis will seek to offer an explanation as to how and why this type of enjoyment occurs, just as importantly it will seek to explicate that this type of enjoyment is complicit in the production of both ableism and disableism. Jay Dolmage offers a succinct definition of both of these terms. Describing ableism as the positive valuation of ability, ability as that which should be the norm or the standard.¹¹ This exists in contradistinction to disableism which is the negative valuation of disability, i.e. someone with a disability is somehow “less” solely because they happen to have a disability.¹²

The final question that has guided my research in this thesis involves its theoretical stakes upon both film studies and rhetorical criticism. There will be a number of aspects of both fields—historical and ideological assumptions about disability and

representations of disability—that are implicated through the work I am doing in this thesis. Rhetorical critics laud how cross-disciplinary the field is; however, its engagement with disability studies as a source of insight has been sporadic at best. This lack of engagement with disability studies, particularly for scholars of rhetorical criticism, has created an epistemological absence within the field.

Psychoanalysis, Film Studies, and Rhetorical Criticism

Psychoanalytic methods have long been used by film studies, at least since the publication in 1975 in the French journal *Screen* of Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which Mulvey introduced psychoanalytic thought and analysis to the purview of film studies.¹³ Since then, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has been re-published dozens of times and has become one of the most cited articles in the entirety of film studies. It began a psychoanalytic turn within the discipline that flourished through the 1970s and '80s.

Mulvey's essay argues for an interpretation of what happens when a male subject views cinematic works, particularly films produced by Hollywood:

Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combined spectacle and narrative. . . . The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative.¹⁴

There have been a number of substantial criticisms of the way Mulvey describes the process of scopophilic pleasure in cinema. These includes E. Ann Kaplan's "Is the Gaze Male?," in which she proposes that there is a type of scopophilic pleasure experienced by women when they watch Hollywood films, specifically melodramas.¹⁵ bell hooks goes

further in her chapter “The Oppositional Gaze” and describes how the paradigm does not work at all when it comes to black female viewers. hooks describes how black women are never going to identify with and gain pleasure through the process of viewing white women; instead, they view those figures as oppositional and therefore must engage with an oppositional gaze.¹⁶

Since the 1990s, film studies has moved away from its focus on psychoanalysis; however, when it comes to uncovering what is at work in the viewing process for those who watch films, I contend that the approach is still critical, a point I will elaborate further in the next section. Furthermore, while there have been a few instances of engaging in psychoanalytic thought in the context of disability or, more specifically, of representations of disability, there has been comparatively little work done in analyzing the role of representations of disability in film. If one were to add using psychoanalytic thought to this hypothetical Venn diagram, then the amount of work done analyzing filmic representations of disability is reduced to nearly zero. My thesis will intervene into this epistemological lacuna in both film studies and rhetorical criticism by revealing what insights can be gained about the ways in which disability is represented on film through the application of a psychoanalytic disability studies approach to the realm of film.

Beyond the import of film studies, the field of rhetoric has much to offer in the way of psychoanalytic insight. In 1998, Barbara A. Biesecker wrote an essay that has become the impetus for a generation of students to uncover the connection between psychoanalysis and rhetorical criticism as a discipline.¹⁷ Joshua Gunn’s academic career has focused largely on incorporating the work of Jacques Lacan into the corpus of rhetorical scholarship, including an essay on how to incorporate the Lacanian concept of

fantasy within a discussion of imagination when it comes to textual criticism.¹⁸ Christian Lundberg quite literally wrote the book on the incorporation of Lacanian psychoanalysis into rhetoric; his work on tropes is instructive not only to the field of rhetoric, but to the analysis I will be performing throughout this thesis.¹⁹

Justification and Guiding Questions

The psychoanalytic approach I have taken in this project is not without its detractors. Since psychoanalytic approaches in film studies reached ubiquity in the 1970s, there have been a number of critics across multiple disciplines who have taken issue with this approach. In film studies, Kristen Thompson (*Breaking the Glass Armor* 1988) and David Bordwell (*Making Meaning* 1986) have forwarded the neoformalist approach to film criticism, arguing against a “grand theory” approach, especially the Marxist and psychoanalytic theories that had been dominating the discipline. Thompson and Bordwell have lodged a number of arguments against the psychoanalytic method, one of the primary being that psychoanalytic criticism brings too much theoretical baggage to the process of film criticism. They argue that this shoehorns the critic into producing the same analysis regardless of the film being analyzed, in contrast to one’s method being uniquely geared toward the properties of the film being analyzed. A second overarching criticism is that psychoanalysis tends to sideline history and culture in the pursuit of its grand theoretical enterprise.

Christian Lundberg also posits a criticism of the psychoanalytic approach to “screen theory” when he argues that the form of interpretive psychoanalysis in screen theory treats structure as automatic, which traded off with analysis of the empirical specificity of viewership.²⁰ In addition to treating structure as automatic, Lundberg

contends that “screen theory” has failed to fully theorize the misfirings of structure in the context of the spectator.²¹ However, Lundberg offers a solution to these concerns, as well as the concerns of neoformalist critics, when he writes that, by filtering the Lacanian concepts of structure, failure, and situation through a rhetorical account of the work of Lacan, one can avoid the problem of psychoanalysis not being unique or contextualized to individual films, as well as psychoanalysis being dismissive of the roles of politics and culture because rhetoric is able to more robustly take up the question of the audience.²² This is precisely why I will be drawing upon both film studies and the field of rhetoric: They complement one another when it comes to the type of interpretive work I will be doing in this project.

A second set of criticisms of the psychoanalytic approach comes from the scholarship around disability, which is perhaps the most important criticism to resolve given the types of arguments and films with which I will be working. The argument is twofold. First is the argument that one should not ignore the legacy of clinical testing that was integral to the very creation of psychoanalysis in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This clinical testing formed at least part of the basis for a criminalization of the neuro-diverse.²³ The second criticism from this perspective is that Freudian psychoanalytic approaches make a series of assumptions about the mind that become problematic when it comes to theorizing about those who experience cognitive impairments. In response to the first criticism, I do not intend to ignore the history of psychoanalysis, but instead I will be attentive to it, and through the utilization of psychoanalysis against filmic depictions of disability which engage in tropes about individuals with disabilities at least has the potential to show how psychoanalysis can be

positively utilized. To the second argument, I respond with the utilization of Lacanian psychoanalysis as opposed to the more Freudian approach. Lacan moved the discipline away from the clinical and into the realm of semiotics, which is why the utilization of rhetoric is also critical to my project.

A film that makes the connection between ableism and disableism and filmic representations of disability is *The Theory of Everything* (James Marsh, 2014), which is based on the life of world famous physicist Stephen Hawking. The following response to the movie describes what the author found to be so dangerous about its critical acclaim:

The ultimate ambition of David Oyelowo's performance as Martin Luther King, Jr. is to express the reality of black life and black history in a way that resonates with those within the black community and educates those outside it. The ultimate ambition of Eddie Redmayne's performance as Stephen Hawking is to contort his body convincingly enough to make other able-bodied people think "Wow! By the end I really believed he was a cripple!" Our attitudes to disability should have evolved past the stage when this mimicry is considered worthy of our most famous award for acting.²⁴

This is just one example of the myriad ways in which films that depict disability and the enjoyment that moviegoers experience from them not only is the result of ableism and disableism, but also aids in the continual production of them.

Critical Approach

As a corrective to this potential pitfall of relying upon psychoanalytic criticism my approach will be to force attention to the particularities of the texts that I have chosen to analyze. These texts will be three different films, all of which fall within (mostly) distinct genres, but also all happen to feature a major emphasis both narratively and visually on representations of disability. However, given the nature of psychoanalytic criticism as well as the potential danger of "painting with too broad a brush" when it comes to pointing out the connections that occur between film and cultural ideology, I

will be following the approach that Barbara Biesecker forwarded in favor of a psychoanalytic approach to rhetorical criticism.²⁵

Biesecker denotes that an important element of the turn from Freudian psychoanalytic approaches to that of Jacques Lacan was the work Lacan did to describe the nature of subjectivity.²⁶ For Lacan, it is the mirror stage (i.e., the stage of a child's development when they can look at themselves in a mirror and note the existence of an "I" that is distinct from other entities in the world, this moment of self-alienation) that becomes a determining factor in the creation of subjectivity.²⁷ The important theoretical move Lacan makes is to locate the "mirror-stage" entirely within the semiotic realm: the world of signs, symbols, and language.²⁸ For Lacan, the subject is only a subject when it is acted upon through the semiotic realm or, as Lacan puts it and how I will continually refer back to it, the realm of the symbolic.

Lacan's theorization of the symbolic points to why the psychoanalytic method is so useful for rhetorical criticism. A Lacanian understanding of the symbolic necessitates an understanding of two other Lacanian terms: the real and the lack. Lacan defines the real as that which becomes covered over by the symbolic. Due to language's inability to touch on a specific aspect of reality, language or the symbolic necessarily covers over the real, making it something beyond the realm of the symbolic and therefore unknowable and unreachable to subjects. As was described previously, one only acquires subjectivity through the mirror-stage or the process of entering into language.²⁹ Because of this covering over of the real by the symbolic, Lacan contends the lack of the real results in the instantiation of lack in the subject, where subjects come to desire that which is other, other in this sense being that knowledge which is barred from the subject due to being

barred from access to the real. This is a lack in the subject that can't ever be resolved; it is always going to exist, and yet the subject will continually desire this lack. It is from this perspective that I argue for why the psychoanalytic approach is useful to my overall project: First, due to Lacan's positioning of the symbolic as the world as created by language, it lends legitimacy to rhetorical criticism as a discipline due to rhetoric's emphasis on the importance of language and the ways language is both used and understood. Furthermore, concepts of both the real and lack will be crucial for delving into the relationship between a subject viewing a film and a disabled individual. Lack, especially through *jouissance* (pleasure), allows for a theorization of what it is about a disabled subject that a non-disabled or *normate* individual finds so fascinating. Disability here for the normative individual is a *jouissance* inducing lack because it is a type of human variation which can theoretically happen to anyone at any time.

In order to fully illustrate my key ideas, it is necessary to familiarize the reader with the particular vocabulary that I will use to describe disability. First, in order to refer to non-disabled individuals, I will be using the term *normate*. Normate, as defined by Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, is a constructed identity understood by way of bodily characteristics and the ways they are positioned in culture to gain authority and power.³⁰ Because the normate operates from a position of presumed authority, it is valuable to engage in an analysis of the types of fantasies, anxieties, lacks, and fears that the normate has in response to filmic representations of disability. Furthermore, Garland-Thompson's justification for this move from non-disabled to normate is to avoid any binary between disabled and non-disabled. While this binary is problematic as Garland-Thompson points out, the presumption of this binary is false according to disability theorist Tobin Siebers.

Siebers forwards an analytic that one should not understand non-disabled individuals to be operating from a place absent disability, but instead operating from a position of temporary ability.³¹ While I will still employ the linguistic designation of normate, the implications of Siebers' work here is valuable because it situates disability as something that operates on a continuum. When someone is a newborn they are dependent in order to avoid death. As a person grows older, they might be lucky enough to be relatively autonomous for a time, but if they were to progress toward a natural death, they would once again be in need of care. So, instead of the binary opposition between disabled and non-disabled the designation of temporarily-abled-bodies (TAB's) is one that allows for an understanding of disability that exists as an encounter that is mediated through both space and time.

The methodological usefulness of viewing disability as operating on a continuum toward death can be seen through some of the recent work of Julia Kristeva. She writes that "the disabled person opens a narcissistic identity wound in the person who is not disabled; he inflicts a threat of physical or psychical death, fear of collapse, and, beyond that, the anxiety of seeing the very borders of the human species explode."³² Extending Siebers's work on disability as a continuum into conversation with Kristeva helps to explain why certain representations of disability can represent a source of anxiety or fear for normate individuals. As Siebers explains, disability is "coming" for everyone; normate individuals view disabled subjects as a stand-in for their coming death. Closely related is the extension of Kristeva's work done by Barbara Creed in "The Powers of Horror" (Kristeva 1980). Creed contends that Kristeva's work on abjection is also applicable to an analysis of horror films.

When it comes to horror, given the later work Kristeva does on anxiety produced for normate individuals by disabled subjects, a portion of my method will be an extension of Kristeva's theorization of and Creed's application to film studies for the purpose of theorizing through the ways disability comes to be represented within horror film. The abject complicates the previously articulated notion of subjectivity forwarded by Lacan, for the abject is a place where meaning collapses. The abject is an integral part of a subject, but at the same time the subject seeks to violently expel the abject. The abject is where boundaries become more porous or even disappear. A helpful example to understand the abject is that of bodily fluids: bodily fluids are necessary to the continued physiological processes of maintaining the life of a subject, however when the boundary keeping those fluids inside the subject are removed such as in the case of blood or vomit, a subject wants nothing more than to expel these "disgusting" fluids and remove all traces of them. Applying an analytic of abject to the way representations of disability appear to normate individuals is not a large leap. While normate individuals can accept that disability is something that exists and may even be a part of themselves, when faced with these particular representations, an affect of disgust and revulsion is generated in part because of what Kristeva coins "the narcissistic identity wound" of disability, which causes the normate subject to seek nothing less than the expulsion of disability. This concept of the abject as it relates to depictions of disability will be applied across a number of genres and distinct filmic representations of disability.

The above has been one aspect of my methodological concerns about language, specifically language around the word *disability*. However, there is a second set of concerns regarding language that also must be addressed. This concern has to do with an

ongoing debate within disability studies about the best language to use to refer to a disabled individual—the debate between “person-first” and “identity-first.” “Person-first” refers to language like “person with a disability” or “person with autism,” “person with blindness,” etc. Juxtaposed to this is the “identity-first” language, which says that the best language to use is “disabled person,” “autistic person,” “blind person,” etc. I have chosen to use identity-first language; given the current state of this debate within disability studies, I purport that “identity-first” language to be the preferable language choice especially given the subject matter of this particular project.

Tanya Titchkosky engages in a robust examination of the debate between person-first and identity-first linguistic choices,³³ explaining how the person-first designation first arose out of a move to avoid what she calls the “parade of insults” that results from linguistic choices like “the disabled,” “the crippled,” “the spastic,” “the retarded,” “the blind,” “the handicapped,” etc.³⁴ However, her work argues that, even though person-first language arose to avoid objectification of disabled individuals, any linguistic choice engages in a “re-presentation” of the meaning of people. Given how much I am attempting to be attentive to the world created by the symbolic, this charge by Titchkosky cannot be ignored. A problem with the person-first approach is that this linguistic choice is an apolitical expression of disability someone could “feel” as if they were not disabled, yet still fall into the category of a person with a disability. Thus, this designation makes it possible for someone to be counted as a person with a disability without an understanding of the cultural significance that being disabled can actually have on an individual. More importantly, this makes these individuals persons first and disability second; disability

becomes a type of baggage that is attached to a person (i.e., having a disability becomes detached from the idea of being a person).³⁵

This idea of disability as a type of incidental baggage attached is one crucial justification for why, when doing work to analyze filmic depictions of disability, the person-first model becomes analytically weak. I argue that, when analyzing representations in film, a critic in the preponderance of circumstances will view the choices made by filmmakers as intentional. When introducing this standard of intentionality, the person-first model holds very little water, as elaborated above in my explanation of Titchkosky's argument. The person-first model holds as a central tenant that an individual with a disability is a person first and disability is only a secondary characteristic. However, film directors and writers make very specific choices about the types of characters they are portraying; disability is not an "accident," but instead a very intentional choice. Given the criticism of person-first language outlined by Titchkosky, as well as its seeming inapplicability to the realm of film criticism, the conclusion that is most easily drawn is that using an identity-first approach generates the best set of terms for analysis given the parameters of my project.

This focus on the linguistic choices I have made is necessary to explain what they will be able to effect, or why this psychoanalytic method in the context of rhetoric, film, and disability is able to accomplish the telos of the project. Biesecker writes that psychoanalysis has as its objective to press its insights to the goal of ideological critique and progressive social change.³⁶ Following this, my thesis is not just relegated to a realm of pure abstraction, but will produce meaningful gains about how representations of disability affect the material conditions that affect people. Biesecker explains how this

vein of psychoanalysis largely popularized by Slavoj Žižek is able to be pressed into the service of ideological critique because of an understanding of how the Lacanian real operates. The real is that which the lack for the entirety of the symbolic is. While this seems to not be useful, it opens a wealth of possibilities for social ideological critique. Biesecker explains this is how particular “social ensembles” are able to emerge, these antagonisms which drive a number of the sources of conflict and violence in the symbolic. There are a few important aspects of this new understanding of the real that are useful for this form of ideological critique. The first is the role of fantasy; instead of fantasy being disavowed as it traditionally is, this theorization allows for an understanding of how fantasy makes possible the way individuals come to understand their reality, that is, the symbolic. The second is that, given the way the symbolic becomes structured by this “hard kernel” of the real, it means that these ideologies are continually working to conceal the lack for which they exist in the first place.

As a way of situating the theoretical work I have described previously, Christian Lundberg’s application of the concept of failed unicity to the realm of rhetoric is particularly instructive. Failed unicity means “there is no coherent totality underwriting the subject, sign, and the act of communication or of discourse that unites speaker, speech, and speech act in a coherent transhistorical whole.”³⁷ While there is an attempt for subjects to understand themselves and the social world (symbolic) they inhabit to be “whole,” the social world, discourse, and subjects are really just accidents of contingency and it is this “scandalous lie” of failed unicity that organizes the symbolic.³⁸ Lundberg explains this isn’t incidental, but instead subjects “call forth our investment in the supplements, fantasies, and imagined totalities that work to cover over failed unity.”³⁹

This becomes a way of situating the telos of rhetorical practice for Lundberg; he explains that rhetoric interacts with failed unicity in two ways: First, it is an act of signifying given the condition of failed unicity, and second, it works to feign unicity given the aforementioned condition of failed unicity.

The understanding of rhetoric through failed unicity is an important part of my methodological approach because it offers an explanation through Lacan of the way that trope functions:

there is a world of things, forces, and relations that lie beyond the limits of rhetoric's ability to encode or capture them without remainder. If there is no ultimate point of unicity—if there is no transparent reciprocal intersubjective bond that unites subjects in communication and no natural correspondence between signs and the world—there are at least tropes and practices of investment that sustain subjects and their discourses.⁴⁰

Analyzing these forces and relations that lie beyond the ability of rhetoric to accurately capture is a way one can understand the way the “hard kernel” of the real comes to exist within the symbolic. Trope becomes a way that ideology comes to produce certain sets of social relations, such as the one I am primarily concerned with throughout this project: the social relations or tropes that emerge from representations of disability to produce the ideologies of ableism and disableism. Furthermore, according to Lundberg, tropes offer an explanation for how certain habituated accidental connections come to elicit investment for the subjects who deploy these repeated habituated connections (i.e., tropes). This shows how certain repeated representations of disability through trope come to influence the symbolic.⁴¹

According to Lundberg, the American study of rhetoric has largely sidelined this tropological approach to rhetorical criticism. The work of Lacan acts as a corrective in this way, for it showcases that not only does this understanding of trope come to inform

rhetoric, but also acts as a condition of possibility for the very act of rhetoric to take place. Lundberg contends that a conception of trope needs to be centered within rhetorical criticism for it is where any function of discourse comes to be understood. The Lacanian conception of trope affords an opportunity to expand rhetoric's work on trope for it creates the ability to position tropes within a general economy of discourse.⁴²

The significance of this form of tropological approach to rhetoric is that it allows for insights gained through my analysis of films to be understood as part of a number of rhetorical tropes around which disability is constituted within the social imaginary. As Lundberg indicates, there are specific ontological and discursive operations that underpin particular rhetorical moves, meaning an excavation of particular tropes that appear within the representation of disability can explain the connection between the way disability is represented and the effect that these representations have on disabled people outside of their filmic representations, as well as the way normative individuals come to know and interact with disabled individuals.

The final methodological concern that must be dealt with is that of how the role of the critic must be situated. As I am writing a project that centers on the way film is understood within the social imaginary, it is all but impossible to claim that I myself have no investment in the analysis of films. It is the case that I choose this thesis because I have a type of investment in the ways that film influences and shapes the social imaginary. However, in order for this project of criticizing the way particular films represent disability and the import of these representations, it is necessary to find a way to negotiate my own position in relation to them. To that end, I look to Christian Metz, one of the most influential writers on the question of psychoanalysis and film. Metz aptly

describes the danger faced by film theoreticians when he argues that too often critical discourse about the institution of film becomes part of the very institution it is criticizing.⁴³ By still being part of the institution of film, the theoretician extends the object of analysis, doing little if anything to work against the film or films' particular ideological apparatus.

Metz also offers a solution to the problem of the film critic who is also clearly invested in the ideological apparatus that the study of film appears to necessitate. While his approach seems either paradoxical or impossible to follow, it will be the way I attempt to situate myself through the writing of this thesis. He writes:

To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it: have loved it a lot and only have detached oneself from it by taking it up again from the other end, taking it as the target for the very same scopophilic drive which had made one love it. Have broken with it, as certain relationships are broken, not in order to move on to something else, but in order to return to it at the next bend in the spiral. Carry the institution inside one still so that it is in a place accessible to self analysis, but carry it there as a distinct instance which does not over-infiltrate the rest of the ego with the thousand paralysing bonds of a tender unconditionality. Not have forgotten what the cinephile one used to be was like, in all the details of his affective inflections, in the three dimensions of his living being, and yet no longer be invaded by him: not have lost sight of him, but be keeping an eye on him. Finally, be him and not be him, since all in all these are the two conditions on which one can speak of him.⁴⁴

Metz's position, is one that also describes my role: While I came to this project in large part because of my love for the cinema, the mark of this project being successful will ultimately be if I cannot just separate myself from my love for the cinema, but use it to properly excavate exactly what it is that is going on with particular representations of disability. For my project to not exist as a love-letter to film that happens to incidentally discuss the import of filmic depictions of disability, I instead will be critically thinking through the impact of disability within the representational schema of film.

Structure of Thesis

This thesis will be composed of five chapters. The next three chapters will feature a psychoanalytic approach to the analysis of a different film, each of which will be chosen from a distinct genre to show the relationship that exists between representations of disability and the role it plays in the maintenance of certain genres. The final chapter will synthesize the insights gained from the three films and what the import of the analysis in this thesis ultimately is.

The second chapter will focus on *The Greatest Showman* (Michael Gracey, 2017). This musical drama depicts P. T. Barnum and his development of the circus. There a number of reasons to analyze this film, not the least of which are the ways it attempts to sanitize the inhumane practices Barnum deployed in the development of the freak show. The freak show and whether or it has in fact disappeared or simply taken new forms will be a central point of analysis. Additionally, the film focuses heavily on ideas of “fantasy,” a term that offers rich opportunities for analysis from a psychoanalytic perspective, especially considering that these fantasies exist largely in relation to Barnum’s attempts within the film to establish a successful “freak show.”

The third chapter looks at *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo del Toro, 2017), a science-fiction film that won the 2018 Oscars for Best Picture and Best Director. This film interests me for a number of reasons; chiefly among them is that the protagonist of the film is a mute woman portrayed by a non-disabled actor. In addition, it offers the opportunity to investigate the history of science fiction as a genre, which exemplifies the ableist approach to disability of cure or kill more than perhaps any other genre. This is due to the ways that science fiction either portrays disabled individuals as monsters that

need to be killed or as something that must be cured. This film does play with the primacy of the cure-or-kill trope to some degree; however, it also connects questions of sex, disability, and death in a number of ways that offer excellent opportunity for analysis.

The fourth chapter will focus on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), which primarily allows an investigation of the ways in which disability is portrayed as monstrous both through one of the film's main characters, but also through the cannibal family that operates as the film's primary antagonist. This film also offers the opportunity to explore the connection between Kirsteva's account of abjection and the nature of disability, as well as offering an additional path to investigate the relationship that occurs between specific representations of disability and death. This film, like *The Greatest Showman*, also professes to be based on a true story. The idea of truth as an originating point for a film is worthy of analysis to explore the relationship between understandings of history and the type of symbolic investments individuals gain through the supposed truth of a story.

The final chapter synthesizes the ground that has been covered in the previous three chapters of analysis. I will explain the significance of what my analysis has uncovered about representations of disability. This chapter will also work to explain the connections that occur between the representations of disability that I have analyzed and the effect of these on the types of violence experienced by actual disabled individuals. This is not to say my thesis will end on a note of pessimism, but rather to say that the conclusion will offer opportunities for how scholars of rhetoric and film can better engage the question of disability and perhaps work against this particular “hard kernel” of the real.⁴⁵

Notes

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⁴⁵

CHAPTER TWO

The Greatest Freakshow: Fantasy, Phantasmagoria, and the Afterlife of the Freak Show

Introduction

The Greatest Showman premiered on December 20, 2017, just in time for Christmas. The film purports to be inspired by the life of renowned (perhaps infamous) 19th-century showman P.T. Barnum. The story follows Barnum (Hugh Jackman) from the beginnings of his life, to meeting his wife, to his establishment of the Barnum Museum, a “collection of oddities and people of interest” that became one of the most profitable instantiations of the freak show within the United States. Promotional materials around the film emphasized two major themes. The first focuses on the transformation of dreams into reality. Several of the film’s posters show “off the various acts in Barnum’s circus, including Barnum himself. The posters are also meant to highlight the spectacle of the film and the grandiose design and costumes.”¹ A second theme is the film’s uplifting and inspiring message, showcased by the way Jackman’s Barnum created a home and community for outcasts, even positioning Barnum as an outcast in his own right.

Billed as uplifting and empowering for the downtrodden of society, *The Greatest Showman* reframed historical narratives to position the Barnum story as one of outcasts finding personal agency and community. Popular reception on the review aggregator web site *Rotten Tomatoes* seemingly appreciated the narrative, rating the film at nearly ninety percent approval.² Yet, *Vanity Fair*’s chief critic, Richard Lawson, had a particularly poignant criticism of the film, specifically of the highly publicized musical number “This is Me.” While initially describing the song as “rousing and triumphant and brought a tear

to my eye,”³ in the next line of the review Lawson also identifies “This is Me” as “the best example of this movie’s more sinister, calculating aspects.”⁴ P.T. Barnum, a historical figure known for the popularization of the freak show in North America, was sold as another outcast of society. Beyond the way the film obscures Barnum’s sadistic history, the “oddities” of the film (those that the real Barnum would have called “freaks”) are presented in an incredibly one-dimensional manner. Even though the film purports to be about those individuals’ autonomy and self-worth, the characters themselves are still located within the periphery of the film. Lawson expertly identifies this paradox when he elaborates on “This is Me,” writing, “I couldn’t tell you a single one of these people’s names. None of them have any kind of character arc to speak of.”⁵

However, despite a number of critics who identified the ways the film repeated problematic understandings of disability or difference, it still earned numerous awards and accolades. “This is Me” was nominated for an Academy Award and won the Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song. Jackman was nominated for the Best Actor Oscar, and the film itself was nominated for Best Motion Picture at the Golden Globes. These accolades suggest that the story and representations within the film have been sanctioned by the mainstream arbiters of film taste and value. I argue that it reflects an ever-increasing trend in the valuation of filmic representations of oddities, freaks, or to be more direct, disabled individuals. The history of the Academy Award for Best Actor reflects how deep audience fascination and investment in filmic depictions of disability runs. As of 2018, fourteen of the last thirty Best Actor Oscar have gone to actors representing disability on screen. These statistics may suggest that the only thing that stopped Jackman from receiving more critical acclaim was that he was merely *in* a film

that featured supporting actors depicting disability, rather than playing the role of a disabled character himself.⁶ These accolades echo the freak shows established by showmen like Barnum in the nineteenth century. The American cultural imaginary has a nearly unshakeable investment in what I term *spectacles of freakery*. My argument is that *The Greatest Showman*, far from being an outlier of this paradigm, is representative of the way that freak shows like the ones established by the real P.T. Barnum did not end, but evolved. That evolution has taken the form of spectacles of freakery on film.

This essay will be divided into three sections to show the ways that *The Greatest Showman* is invested within a spectacle of freakery that is part of a broader trend within filmic depictions of disability as a contemporary instantiation of the freak show. I will first discuss the history of the freak show within North America and the way that *The Greatest Showman* omits both the violent relationship disabled individuals had to pre-modern iterations of the freak show, as well as the appropriative relationship that P.T. Barnum had to disabled individuals. The second section will focus on the relationship that exists between disability and fantasy within the film specifically, given how a number of its musical numbers, its promotional materials, and its overall messaging are about both Barnum's fantasy of the creation of the freak show and the types of fantasies non-disabled individuals have about disability. The final section will analyze how disability is framed within the film, including the way disability is flattened through the phantasmagorical presentation of disability in the freak show.

The Greatest Showman and Historical Revisionism

The Greatest Showman's marketing campaign when describing the film was careful to emphasize that the film was *inspired* by the life of P.T. Barnum, not *based on*

his life. The admission was a tactical choice, given the already dubious proposition of Barnum as a working-class hero would be all but impossible to depict if the screenwriters chose to present Barnum closer to his real persona. One only needs to look as far as the song of the film's first act, "A Million Dreams," to see the ways that the film recasts Barnum's origins. "A Million Dreams" provides a montage of P.T. Barnum's early life, from his adolescent years where he met his wife Charity (Michelle Williams), to the hardships he experienced living on the streets after the death of his father, to him returning from spending the early part of his life working on the railroad to make enough money to come back to New York and marry Charity. In the middle of this sequence, after young Barnum attempts to steal a loaf of bread to feed himself, he is left looking beaten and sitting against a wall in New York. The viewer then can see a hand reaching out with an apple, attempting to hand it to him. At this point, the camera slowly pans to reveal the figure that is handing young Barnum the apple: a woman in a green with some form of facial deformity, smiling warmly at him. This is the first time the audience is shown one of the film's "freaks."

The importance of this woman's act of kindness toward young Barnum becomes clear a few scenes later. Barnum, having purchased the building and turned it into a museum consisting solely of wax figures and stuffed animals like elephants and zebras, is having trouble attracting patrons. After a number of scenes showing the museum's dearth of paying customers, Barnum's two young daughters tell him he needs something alive in his museum, something "astonishing." Reflecting on this conversation, Barnum sits at a desk in his home holding the book *Tom Thumb*. The camera slowly pans to the left, landing upon an apple sitting on his desk, which causes Barnum to stop. The audience

sees Barnum reflecting on this apple, which harkens back to the earlier scene. This recollection in addition to the book *Tom Thumb* causes Barnum to track down a man he met when acquiring a loan from the bank. The man was presented with some form of dwarfism, and he becomes the first of the freaks for Barnum's show. Barnum is shown trying to convince this man, Charles Stratton (Sam Humphrey), to perform for people, and while Charles does push back at Barnum, insisting that people only want to stare at him, he eventually gives in when Barnum says he can ride around the stage like a general (after noticing a number of toy soldiers around Charles's room). These initial scenes frame Barnum as a working-class hero, someone born into poverty and struggling to make it against the odds of the world who, through hard work, determination, and a dream, is able to create his museum out of nothing. He is, in essence, the quintessential American bootstraps dream.

While the historical Barnum did indeed have a museum, there was never a pretension about its primary use being for anything but his displays of freaks.⁷ Additionally, the freaks used by the historical Barnum would not have been nearly as palatable as the ones showcased by *The Greatest Showman*. While presented as scandalous within the text of the film, they are comparatively innocuous. The film's Barnum collects Charles to be "General Tom Thumb" ; Lettie Lutz (Keala Settle), a bearded lady who is also a phenomenal singer, Anne and W.D. Wheeler (Zendaya and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II), black trapeze artists; a tall Irishman; a fat man; a wolf man; and a man covered in tattoos, just to name a few. The historical Barnum, by contrast, included exhibits such as "an albino family," "The Living Aztecs" (two siblings with microcephaly (a smaller than usual head size)), and "What Is It?" (Henry Johnson, a

black man with developmental disabilities).⁸ Furthermore, the historical Barnum inaugurated his collection of freaks with Joice Heth, a black woman whom Barnum claimed was the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington. And, when she died, Barnum had a live autopsy performed of her to prove to his audiences that she was in fact the age that Barnum had claimed she was.⁹ The starkness between the filmic depiction of Barnum and the actual historical accounts is illustrative of the ways that *The Greatest Showman* erases and replaces the appropriative relationship that Barnum had to his freaks within the archive of history for the audience that is consuming the film. For this then creates a deliberately misleading portrait for the general audience member who will not look up the historical facts..

The rhetorical tracing between the filmic depictions of Barnum with his historical one can be situated within Ron Greene's account of materialist rhetoric.¹⁰ Greene's conception of rhetoric is one that critics should use to "focus on how rhetorical practices create the conditions of possibility for a governing apparatus to judge and program reality."¹¹ Following Greene, I contend that the filmic depiction of both Barnum and its "softer," more palatable spectacle of the freak show is a rhetorical maneuver to quiet criticisms of the freak show. My tracing of the historical Barnum, showing the connections between the way Jackman portrays Barnum and the actual historical figure, reveals how the rhetoric of the freak show materially locates racialized and disabled subjects. The goal of this form of rhetorical criticism is one of "unmasking this form of domination."¹² To be clear, this is not to say that the representations of disability and of Barnum are simply problematic, but rather that they constitute an *active* deception. They inform and work upon the very material and symbolic relations in which disabled

subjects are enmeshed. At stake within that rhetoric of the film is a distribution of “different elements on a terrain of a governing apparatus.”¹³ Grasping the ways continued filmic representations impact disability within this apparatus. The apparatus in question is referring to the conventional Hollywood film of which *The Greatest Showman* is a representative sample. This then requires critics to interrogate popular narratives about disability as rubrics for perception and action.

Given Greene’s argument of the manner in which rhetoric moves in particular ways, it is also necessary to situate what is meant by the rhetorical designation “freak” and its rhetorical movements. Bogdan writes that “‘Freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people”.¹⁴ This speaks to the ways that freak shows do not have to be located within a specific set of geographical or temporal locations, but instead refers to a set of rhetorical practices. Filmic depictions of disability, specifically the representations that occur in *The Greatest Showman*, adopt a specific way of representing people. Thus, while the individuals I point to as instantiations of freakery within the film are not locked into that designation in the abstract, the specific representational practices in which the film engages situate these individuals as freaks. The 19th-century designation of these individuals as freaks, curiosities, oddities, wonders, and marvels, differs in content, but not form from the way this list might materialize today with slurs around disability such as crippled, handicapped, differentially abled, deformed, incomplete, special, or retarded.¹⁵

To clarify, Rachel Adams argues that, instead of simply articulating the freak as an object confined to theatrical performances, it might be better situated within the framework constructed by Judith Butler. As Butler suggests *vis a vis* iterability, *freak*

might also be conceived as “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”¹⁶

“Repetition serves both to reinforce that identity and to destabilize it through the introduction of slight, potentially consequential differences.”¹⁷ Adams argues that this situating of performance allows for a restoration of agency for both the 19th-century freaks and contemporary disabled actors who in their own rights are engaging in performances of freakery for it becomes a defying of the very “logic of the sideshow.” Adams grounds this argument within psychoanalytic analysis, claiming that “encountering freaks, we contemplate the potential dissolution of our own corporeal and psychic boundaries, the terror and excitement of monstrous fusion with the surrounding world.”¹⁸ However, it is in this encounter that Adams finds the opportunity for agency because “admission buys permission to gaze at another’s body with the expectation that the look of curiosity will be met by the ‘blank, unseeing stare’ ... But spectators may be disconcerted to find their gazes returned, often laden with resentment or hostility.”¹⁹

It is this question of the gaze where the difference between cinematic and sideshow iterations of the freak show become important to parse out. While Adams may be correct that the disabled actor or “real” freak may return the gaze with hostility, thus restoring some agency, cinema often operates differently. Instead of generating agency, some filmic representations iterate a particular ideology around disability and freakery. Within most popular cinema, the gaze is not a dialectic encounter between representations on screen and the audience encountering this gaze. This 1:1 relationship does not “work” within the vast majority of popular films. As McGowan explains, the gaze is not a subjective encounter, but an objective one that serves as a visual triggering of a subject’s desire.²⁰ Within cinema, the gaze is not returned by the representations seen

on screen, for the subject (the audience) is not gazing at an object (the screen image); rather, the gaze is a moment of gap in which the subject's omnipotence disappears. Instead of a dialectic between freak and viewer, the viewer becomes part of the filmic image.²¹

In this way, the relationship between this theorization of the gaze as object and filmic instantiations of the freak show mean that the deployment of these depictions in contexts such as *The Greatest Showman* allow normate subjects to shore up their own anxiety around disability. Julia Kristeva explains that “the disabled person opens a narcissistic identity wound in the person who is not disabled; he inflicts a threat of physical or psychical death, fear of collapse, and, beyond that, the anxiety of seeing the very borders of the human species explode. And so the disabled person is inevitably exposed to a discrimination that cannot be shared.”²² The presence of this anxiety around freakery within the safe confines of cinema means that the production of the cinematic freak show, far from providing agency for freaks, becomes a means for spectacles of freakery to be instituted within the American cultural imaginary in such a way as to continually repeat this anxiety, this repetition then becomes used to resolve this anxiety in a non-threatening encounter with the gaze.

Disability is The Greatest Show

A central theme in *The Greatest Showman* is that of fantasy. The film constructs the freak show as a dream or fantasy that Barnum is working to actualize. A number of the songs in the film gesture toward the centrality of fantasy as far as what Barnum is building with his freak show. None of these songs is as representative of this point as “The Greatest Show,” which is performed during the opening scene. “The Greatest

Show” is about the fantasy of the creation of the freak show, about leaving reality behind. The song identifies the fantasy of gazing upon the freak, making it a way to both assuage the terror of the freak show and to justify and even demand its repetition.

Grappling with this gaze shows the productive nature of a Lacanian understanding of the way that the gaze operates within filmic encounters. For Lacan the gaze is the *objet petit a* (which Lacan and contemporaries insist remain untranslated from the French) or “little object” of the scopic drive. The *objet petit a* is that which a subject must separate from themselves in order to become a full subject.²³ Central to the theorization of the *objet petit a* is that this is a type of “lost object” that is “lost in the process of signification and ideological interpellation.”²⁴ Returning to the gaze, the *objet petit a* is the way a visual field organizes itself, in this case the visual field of the screen. If a given image compels the desire of a subject it is because it “offer[s] access to the unseen, to the reverse side of the visible.”²⁵ This theorization of the gaze guides our understanding of the ways the very process of spectatorship is not insulated from the ideology of a film, but is bound up within it.

Desire to witness the unseen is part of what it means to understand the relationship between the gaze and disability. Since disability is a point of narcissistic terror for the normate subject, disability is the *objet petit a*, that which normate subject has to separate from themselves because disability represents death, loss, vulnerability, monstrosity, anxiety. Disability is what the subject has to separate from themselves in order to become a subject. However, disability is also more than this, an excess that threatens the subject. Disability is always “waiting” for the normate subject, which is what situates disability as a unique form of identity because it can be thrust upon a

subject at any moment; disability is always waiting in the wings for the normate subject. Being both separated from but also terrified of some future disability is both constitutive of and the response to the anxiety around disability, which is where my analysis of the freak show and its cinematic depictions enter.

The cinematic freak show offers a safe outlet for the normate subject's anxiety around disability. While disability remains the *objet petit a* for the normate subject, freakery decisively is not. Thus, freakery in film "marks the point at which the visual field takes the subject's desire into account."²⁶ Joan Copjec argues that there is something more that emerges in the encounter between the object of film and the *objet petit a*. The encounter between the two "types" of objects is peculiar in that the two objects do not collide with one another, but offer a way to "satisfy" the scopic drive. In the case of *The Greatest Showman*, the film's depiction of freakery becomes a way for a partial object to fulfill the lack toward which the scopic drive gestures. Freakery is "a 'shattered' object that exceeds itself and renders jouissance accessible."²⁷ This *is* what fantasy opens up to the subject, "an opening to the impossible object [that] thereby allows the subject to glimpse an otherwise inaccessible enjoyment"—the creation of a moment of possibility out of what was previously a structural impossibility.²⁸

Returning once more to "The Greatest Show," this song sets the stage for the film's fantasy of freakery. The song opens with flashes of Barnum in his full showman regalia interspersed with the film's opening title cards. The opening line of the song begins "Ladies and Gents this is the moment you've waited for. You been searchin' in the dark. Your sweat soakin' through the floor." The line prepares the audience for the perspective on disability rendered in the film: freakery offers viewers the ability to

control a source of anxiety. In a strictly literal sense, Barnum is speaking to the diegetic audience of the freak show; however due to the way that the cinematic field operates, any distinction that might exist between the represented audience and the audience viewing the film evaporates. The lyrics continue: “And buried in your bones. There’s an ache that you can’t ignore. Takin’ your breath. Stealin’ your mind. And all that was real is left behind. Don’t fight it. It’s comin’ for you, runnin’ atcha.” When read in the broader context of the film, these lines situate the film’s freak show fantasy as all consuming, but also points to the ways disability is a threat for the normate subject. That disability or freakery that is going to be “comin’ for you, runnin’ atcha,” as Barnum croons, the terror of film freakery is rendered a safe space for toying with jouissance.

This song also situates the film as an encounter with the fantasy of disability, which will be an all-consuming encounter with the gaze for its audience. The song continues: “Don’t care what comes after. Your fever dream can’t you see. Getting’ closer. Just surrender cause you feel the feeling takin’ over.” The lyrics narrativize the type of desire that is at play for the normate subject gazing upon the film, suggesting that audiences members can and should reject any hesitation about giving over to their desire to overcome and find pleasure in their anxiety about disability. Instead, the audience should “surrender cause you feel the feeling takin’ over.” The film is instructing its audience to open the floodgates of their desire for this spectacle: “It’s fire, it’s freedom, it’s floodin’ open.” The related use of “fire” and “freedom” in this line is of particular interest given that fire is something an individual should be afraid of, gesturing toward the anxiety experienced in regards to disability. As Kristeva indicated, disability is pain, it is death.²⁹ However, the lyrics insist on the subject’s desire; through fire or pain comes

freedom. The terror of disability is juxtaposed with freedom from that terror. The film's fantasy offers to its audience an invitation, a gesturing toward terror that can offer the subject a way to work through that terror in a way that is pleasurable.

If the relationship between this song, the ideological investments of the film, and the psychoanalytic nature of the film's spectacle has not been made clear at this point, the next lines of the song should eviscerate this doubt: "It's the preacher in the pulpit and your blind devotion. There's somethin' breakin' at the brick of ev'ry wall that's holdin'. All that you know. So tell me do you wanna go?" The viewer sees Barnum running across the stage, spotlights circling around him creating anticipation for either what Barnum is running toward or what he is running away from and what the response will be. At this point the film has directed the gaze from the audience and shown how and where their anxiety should be directed; the film is the "preacher in the pulpit," the authorial figure delivering a message of liberation, and his demand is nothing other than "blind devotion" to ideological investment in the freak show. All that is left for the audience is to let themselves be guided by the film's fantastic spectacle. This is also where the significance of how the camera has been following Barnum from the side and the rear, but never in front is established. At "So tell me do you wanna go?," a spotlight suddenly ignites, revealing in full the stage where the song has been taking place, at the center of which is Barnum, arms outstretched in all of his ringmaster glory. The accoutrements of the circus are laid out behind him—all of the performers, the animals—in a final illustration of the film's spectacle that Barnum will be guiding the viewers around and toward. While there may be residual terror, Barnum will guide the audience through that terror in a way that will be pleasurable.

The Greatest Showman Freak Shows and Phantasmagoria

The final section of this essay examines the significance of “This is Me,” one of the songs *The Greatest Showman* was marketed around most heavily. The song’s narrative backdrop has Barnum hosting a party for the upper class of New York after his grand introduction of “the Swedish nightingale,” the singer Jenny Lind (Rebecca Ferguson), whom Barnum was using as a way to expand his notoriety among New York’s aristocracy. At this point, Barnum has grown frustrated with the way he and his family have been ostracized by the elite of New York because his attractions were viewed as a form of entertainment fit only for the lower classes. Jenny Lind is his solution to this obstacle, a form of entertainment that will get him and his family the respect he feels they rightfully deserve.

Barnum’s performers decide they want to go to the party in order to meet Jenny Lind and all the members of New York’s upper society. However, when they try to enter, Barnum shuts the door on them, making it clear that he doesn’t want to be seen associating with them in the context of this party. Lettie, the bearded lady, leads Barnum’s performers in the rousing anthem “This is Me,” a song about the value the performers have, their self-worth, their continuing to strive forward regardless of the feelings of stigma directed at them by Barnum and the other members of New York’s high society.

The trouble with “This is Me,” as many of the reviews noted, is that, while it is true that it is a great moment of self-empowerment for the performers, it fails narratively and emotionally because the audience has no reason to be invested in these characters beyond their particularized performances of freakery. Inability to identify with these

figures is a result of their minimal character development for the vast majority of the film. The characters have no life, no texture, outside the confines of their performances within Barnum's museum. Even some of the actor and actress credits in the end credits of the film refer to their roles within the film solely through their particular performance of freakery, such as actor Sam Humphrey being credited as Tom Thumb rather than Charles Stratton. As far as the archive of the film is concerned, a number of these characters only exist through their performance of freakery. There is no other relevant detail to their characterization. The paradox, of course, is that the film—and Barnum—could not exist without these characters. They are vital in every sense despite their characterological underdevelopment.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder explicate the ways this paradoxical presentation of disability impacts filmic depictions of disability through their theorization of narrative prosthesis. They describe the way representational practices of disability (of which film is one form) operate on an “unsteady rhetorical stance.” Prosthesis is the attempt to situate disabled individuals in a text (such as film or literature) within a regime of “tolerable difference.”³⁰ Disability exists within the narrative structure of film only so far as to accomplish a specific end; disability operates through a type of pure use value when it comes to its cinematic representational practices. The prosthesis that gets used in the context of *The Greatest Showman* is one that understands disability quintessentially as freak, one that is used to position disability as one more part of a spectacle of freakery.

This means that there are specific representational ways in which freakery circulates via film. These do not exist in a vacuum, but instead become the way normative individuals treat disability. They take a trope, a set of representational practices

surrounding disability, and that becomes the way normative individuals relate to disability generally. Christian Lundberg explains the utility of a rhetorical account of economies of trope when he writes that certain subjects become “troped” into existence via representational practices.³¹ First, there is a signifier that is exchanged for an original nothingness. For instance, there is no prior history to the representation of the disabled characters within *The Greatest Showman*; they are produced via a form of narrative prosthesis where a bare simulation of disability comes to stand in for what disability “actually” is.³² The disabled characters in the film have no depth to them; disability is the beginning and end of their existence, making them nothing more and nothing less than disability. The final step of this account of tropes is that a subject becomes positioned via this empty signifier and enters into exchanges within discourse (i.e., the exchange that happens with the gaze). It is this troping of disability that orients the types of narratives that come to cohere around the question of disability.

In the instance of *The Greatest Showman* (or, more generally, any film that features representations of disability), this results in the type of narrative flatness that comes to characterize disability.³³ Lundberg situates this within an economy of tropological exchanges where “subjects invest in texts and narratives about their relation to other subjects, where public discourses circulate, and where a subject takes on specific imagined modes of relation to others.”³⁴ Furthermore, these understandings of disability can then circulate and inform a particular rhetorical instantiation of disability. This then explains how a performance of disability becomes rhetorically transformed into a performance of freakery. Situating this circulation within an economy of tropes is useful because they can explicate the relationship between a given rhetorical framing of

disability and the differential ways certain texts can categorize disability. In the case of *The Greatest Showman*, tropes explain how disability is transformed into freak through the spectacularization, or spectacle of freakery that is at play.³⁵

Within *The Greatest Showman*, the transformation of representation of disability into spectacle of freak is best understood through a theorization of phantasmagoria. Kevin Hetherington writes about phantasmagoria in terms of the pre-modern freak show, describing it as an interest with the anomalous, the freakish.³⁶ Historically, “phantasmagoria was a form of popular spectacle that emphasized the principle of deception or concealment, in its mode of display, particularly through its association with the presentation of the figure of the ghost.”³⁷ Phantasmagoria was about the production of spectacular images and not concealing them or the forces behind their creation. Instead, audiences are urged toward a consumption of these images by spurring their imaginations as they engaged in these consumptive practices.³⁸ Phantasmagoria is not only part of the process of creating the freak show, but attracting audiences to the freak show. With films such as *The Greatest Showman*, phantasmagoria is employed to encourage subjects to believe that the only thing that matters is the power of imagination to “construct an understanding of the world that mattered most.”³⁹ Phantasmagoria uses fantasy not for the transformation of reality into illusion, but the crafting of illusion into reality. These tropes become the reason certain utterances around disability become so repetitive. If one looks at the ways disability comes to be represented in film, the same narratives repeat themselves, showing how there is a certain repetitive compulsion to orient viewers toward consumption when certain filmic understandings of disability come to the fore. Phantasmagorical tropes use fantasy to enable certain subjects to consume a particular

narrative and then uses the consumed narratives to construct a type of reality, in this case a reality that has a particular subjectivity as its orientation. Phantasmagoria does not have as its telos the creation of illusion, but the creation of particular subjectivities.⁴⁰

It is through phantasmagoria that “This is Me” is most usefully understood, for it takes the fantasy of *The Greatest Showman* and orients it in a very particular way, encouraging viewers to believe that the representational practices being employed should be consumed because of the song’s veneer of empowerment. Audiences consume this because of phantasmagoria’s transformation of illusion and fantasy into subjectivity. These moments create an obfuscation of the complete lack of characterization that all of the film’s freaks experience. Most of the freaks are nameless and one-dimensional, which makes normate audiences experience not a moment of recognition, but a misrecognition. Within the film, disability becomes only defined as freakery—nothing more, nothing less, a creation of a set of rhetorical practices oriented toward a compulsive repetition of the consumption of disability.

Conclusion

The Greatest Showman is part of a carrying forward of the pre-modern instantiations of the freak show into the present. This chapter has shown how filmic depictions of disability operate within an economy of desire. When normate audiences view filmic depictions of disability, it is through a type of fantasy that seeks the transformation of the disabled subject into freak. This transformation of disability into freak forces a type of consumption that is then used to alleviate the viewer’s anxieties about the death that disability represents.

This rhetorical tracing is instructive toward an uncovering of the kind of investments that a fantasy of disability operates within the context of the west or western culture. I have traced the ways that film is only currently capable of understanding disability as freak and that the only utility disability has is to be consumed as a type of commodity by normative audiences. As Bogdan has written,

The Freak show is to disabled people as the striptease show is to women, as “Amos ‘n’ Andy” is to blacks. Individuals who exhibit themselves on the sideshow platform present a message to the world that disabled people are freaks, freaks in the most pejorative sense of the word. Their exhibition presents the disabled as so different that they have to be set apart, so incapable that exhibiting is the only way they can make a living.⁴¹

Bogdan’s conclusion elucidates the importance of this project. The carrying forward of the freak show into modern film results in a flattening of the way disability is represented in the minds of normate audience members. The spectacle of freakery is used to make it so that disability, while being “troped” into existence, is also troped out of existence. Any texture to disabled life becomes eviscerated in the name of consumption. While there are ever increasing numbers of narratives about disability, they are *only* about disability in that these narratives feature a one-dimensional view of disability, which serves the purpose of assuaging normate audience members’ anxiety about the fact that disability is something always on the horizon, something that will be coming for them.

Notes

¹ Chris Thilk “THE GREATEST SHOWMAN – MARKETING RECAP”, December 20th 2017 <https://cinematicslant.com/2017/12/20/the-greatest-showman-marketing-recap/> .

² Rotten Tomatoes ,“The Greatest Showman” , n.d., https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_greatest_showman_2017/ .

³ Richard Lawson “The Greatest Showman Review: A Faux-Inspiring Musical That Earns an Uneasy Smile” , December 20th 2017 https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/12/the-greatest-showman-review_December_20th_2017 .

⁴ Richard Lawson “The Greatest Showman Review: A Faux-Inspiring Musical That Earns an Uneasy Smile” , December 20th 2017 https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/12/the-greatest-showman-review_December_20th_2017 .

⁵ Richard Lawson “The Greatest Showman Review: A Faux-Inspiring Musical That Earns an Uneasy Smile” , December 20th 2017 https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/12/the-greatest-showman-review_December_20th_2017 .

⁶ Justin WM. Moyer “Welcome, Eddie Redmayne: Since ‘Rain Man,’ majority of Best Actor Oscar winners played sick or disabled” , February 23rd 2015 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/02/23/since-rain-man-majority-of-best-actor-winners-played-sick-or-disabled/?utm_term=.8af245aca70a .

⁷ Robert Bogdan “Freak Show” (Chicago, Illinois University of Chicago Press 1988), 32.

⁸ Robert Bogdan “Freak Show” (Chicago, Illinois University of Chicago Press 1988), 33.

⁹ Rachel Adams “Sideshow U.S.A. (Chicago, Illinois University of Chicago Press 2001) 11.

¹⁰ Ron Greene “Materialist Rhetoric” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998) 21-40.

¹¹ Ron Greene “Materialist Rhetoric” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998) 21-40.

¹² Ron Greene “Materialist Rhetoric” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998) 21-40.

¹³ Ron Greene “Materialist Rhetoric” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998) 21-40.

¹⁴ Robert Bogdan “Freak Show” (Chicago, Illinois University of Chicago Press 1988), 3.

¹⁵ Robert Bogdan “Freak Show” (Chicago, Illinois University of Chicago Press 1988), 4.

¹⁶ Judith Butler “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” , *Theatre Journal* 40, (1988): 519-531

¹⁷ Rachel Adams “Sideshow U.S.A. (Chicago, Illinois University of Chicago Press 2001) 6,

¹⁸ Rachel Adams “Sideshow U.S.A. (Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press 2001) 6-7.

¹⁹ Rachel Adams “Sideshow U.S.A. (Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press 2001) 7.

²⁰ Todd McGowan “The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan” (Albany, NY State University of New York Press 2007) 5.

²¹ Todd McGowan “The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan” (Albany, NY State University of New York Press 2007) 6.

²² Julia Kristeva and Jeanine Herman “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and ... Vulnerability”, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, (2010): 251-268.

²³ Todd McGowan “The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan” (Albany, NY State University of New York Press 2007) 6.

²⁴ Todd McGowan “The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan” (Albany, NY State University of New York Press 2007) 6.

²⁵ Todd McGowan “The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan” (Albany, NY State University of New York Press 2007) 6.

²⁶ Todd McGowan “The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan” (Albany, NY State University of New York Press 2007) 6.

- ²⁷ Joan Copjec “Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation” (Cambridge, MA Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2002) 59.
- ²⁸ Todd McGowan “The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan” (Albany, NY State University of New York Press 2007) 24-25.
- ²⁹ Julia Kristeva and Jeanine Herman “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and ... Vulnerability”, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, (2010), 251-268.
- ³⁰ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder “Corporealities: Discourses of Disability: Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse” (Ann Arbor, Michigan University of Michigan Press 2014) 6.
- ³¹ Christian Lundberg “Lacan In Public” (Birmingham, Alabama University of Alabama Press 2012) 73.
- ³² Christian Lundberg “Lacan In Public” Birmingham, Alabama University of Alabama Press 2012) 73.
- ³³ Christian Lundberg “Lacan In Public” (Birmingham, Alabama University of Alabama Press 2012) 73.
- ³⁴ Christian Lundberg Lacan In Public Birmingham, Alabama University of Alabama Press 2012) 74.
- ³⁵ Leslie Hahner “To Become an American: Immigrants and Americanization Campaigns of the Early Twentieth Century” (East Lansing, Michigan Michigan State University Press 2017) 23.
- ³⁶ Kevin Heatherington “Capitalism’s Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity” (Cambridge, MA Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 66.
- ³⁷ Kevin Heatherington “Capitalism’s Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity” (Cambridge, MA Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 61.
- ³⁸ Kevin Heatherington “Capitalism’s Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity” (Cambridge, MA Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 67.
- ³⁹ Kevin Heatherington “Capitalism’s Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity” (Cambridge, MA Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 67.
- ⁴⁰ Kevin Heatherington “Capitalism’s Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity” (Cambridge, MA Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 67.
- ⁴¹ Robert Bogdan “Freak Show” (Chicago, Illinois University of Chicago Press 1988) 280-281.

CHAPTER THREE

Authenticity Traps: Shape of Water and the Cruel Optimism of Representation

Introduction

In December 2017, *The Shape of Water*, the most recent film by “phantasmagoric auteur” Guillermo del Toro, was released to widespread critical acclaim.¹ One critic described it as “an otherworldly fairy tale that flips ‘The Little Mermaid’ on its head.”² The film tells the story of a mute woman named Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) who works at a military base in Maryland during the 1960s, where she meets and falls in love with an amphibian humanoid creature that has been extracted from the Amazon rainforest.

Its 13 Academy Award nominations and four wins (including Best Picture and Best Director) underscore the time-tested Hollywood method of guaranteeing Oscar nominations of (1) finding a storyline that prominently features a character with a disability; (2) casting a non-disabled actor to play the role; and (3) reaping widespread critical acclaim. This formulaic approach to achieve its success was recognized by critics, who noted that it appeared to be the “safe choice” to win the Best Picture Oscar in 2018 because it checked all of the “boxes” that it needed to checked: responsiveness to current political climate, following the cultural zeitgeist of the #metoo movement, as well as featuring representation of a number of minority populations, including disability with Elisa, black women with Elisa’s co-worker Zelda (Octavia Spencer), and homosexuality with Elisa’s neighbor Giles (Richard Jenkins), and all of this with a non-white director at the helm both directing and being involved with the writing process.³

The film raises a number of issues with the way it approaches questions of disability and sexuality, as well as the casting of Sally Hawkins, who is only emulating having a disability instead of having an “authentic” relationship to muteness. Elsa Sjunneson-Henry, a writer and disability activist, notes the ways in which the film cements the idea that women with disabilities are intrinsically unlovable and Elisa must turn to an actual monster in order to be able to find love, and in fact has to go so far as to leave the world of “real humans” behind in order to experience love.⁴ Sjunneson-Henry explains how Elisa cements a major cultural stereotype that those with a disability are less than whole and that is why Elisa needs to love the creature because it is the only one that doesn’t understand Elisa as less than whole. This also speaks to the type of “desire trap” that exists for disabled women in society. As Sjunneson-Henry writes,

If desired disabled heroines were common, then I wouldn’t have a problem with them being partnered with Hot Monster Boys. But we don’t live in that world yet. Able-bodied heroes can have all the Hot Monster Boys they want—to go along with all their able-bodied human lovers. Until disabled heroines and their bodies are desired by the same frequency of able-bodied to monster lovers, I’m not going to be comfortable with Only Monster Lovers For Disabled Women.

Elisa’s sexuality plays a primary role in the narrative development of the film, established through repeated scenes of her masturbating in her bathtub, as well as in scenes where she undresses herself in front of the creature from the lab, which precedes them having a sexual encounter in two subsequent scenes. While the film does not explicitly draw the connections between Elisa’s “death” in the climax of the film with her sexual encounters with the creature from the lab, I will argue in this chapter that not only are sexuality and death tied to one another, but both are bound up in the question of disability.

To explain the ways in which disability is caught up within discourses of sexuality and death, this chapter will be divided into two sections. The first section will

be a historical analysis of the types of representations of disability that occur within science fiction, as well as the tropes around disability that reveal themselves in filmic instantiations of science fiction and how both the time period, as well as presentation of characters like Elisa, the film's villain, and Elisa's love interest the monster from the laboratory, are caught up within a continuation of problematic representational practices of science fiction when it comes to dealing with questions of disability. The second section will interrogate the representational issues in regards to Elisa being portrayed by a non-disabled actor. This section will also deal with whether "authentic" representation is even possible within these types of filmic depictions of disability and whether the demand that representations become more authentic is nothing more than a form of cruel optimism. Related to this question of authentic representations are the connections between disability and sex/sexuality as they occur both within the film and in the cultural imaginary writ large. As part of this second section, I will also interrogate the role that desire and desirability plays in the construction of disabled women.

Science Fiction and Nostalgia Within The Shape of Water

When undertaking an analysis of *The Shape of Water*, it is important to interrogate the underpinnings of science fiction, the genre in which the film is most commonly located by critics and viewers. There are a number of sub-categories located within science fiction. When one thinks of the ways the genre was formulated in the 1950s, the most common instantiation was those films that featured extra-terrestrial outsiders invading and making the extermination of humanity a real possibility.⁵ Almost, equal in size to these extermination films was a selection of films that had a much more intimate connection to humanity. According to M. Keith Booker,

science fiction films that featured anthropomorphic monsters of a terrestrial origin demonstrates that some of the fears of the decade arise, not because Americans are afraid of living in a world where everyone is different from them, but because they are afraid it will turn out that all those inhabitants of the dark places of the earth do not, in the final analysis, turn out to be very different from Americans, after all.

This is significant in the context of *The Shape of Water* for it takes place during the 1960s at the height of Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. These tensions are not just the backdrop of the film but are devices used to carry the narrative arc. The film's primary antagonist has superiors instructing him to vivisect the creature in order to glean information about the way the creature breathes both in and out of water in the hopes that the knowledge could be used for astronauts and help the U.S. win the space race. This same antagonist, Colonel Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), also spends a great deal of the movie trying to ferret out Russian spies, which were a triggering event within the climax of the film.

The time period in which *The Shape of Water* is set is important not only for what it means in terms of the film's positioning within the science fiction genre, but the ways it points to the film being illustrative of postmodernism. Postmodernism, as described by Fredric Jameson, is the "cultural logic of late capitalism."⁶ Deborah Tudor, writing about the AMC television show *Mad Men* (2007–2015), describes how time period plays a crucial role in constructing a piece of media as postmodern.⁷ Setting the story in an earlier time allows audiences to experience a version of the United States that is only available to them via film and television.⁸ This results in the vanishing of the historical world into the realm of images; "the postmodernist aesthetic reduces the past simply to image/style, to a costume party that encourages a media-derived nostalgia".⁹ This also speaks to a secondary characteristic closely related to nostalgia within the postmodern

condition: that of fragmentation.¹⁰ Fragmentation emerges from the dissonance that occurs from the temporal relations between the viewer and the world being represented within the screen image. A viewer's understanding of the present comes to inform the way the past is being represented, which produces a type of fragmentation of reality. Tudor explains this fragmentation process as being "especially dangerous for justice, as issues like class and gender structures become only discourse, separated from the daily conditions of life."¹¹ An extension of Tudor's framework to questions of ability within the nostalgia film is instructive for the purposes of my argument in this chapter. As Tudor explains, the representational practices in the nostalgia film are ones that serve to displace to displace the real in such a way that the conditions of the present moment are not reflected upon.¹² In the case of *The Shape of Water*, the dangerous discourses around disability both from science fiction generally and with the specific representational issues at play in the film become legitimated, even celebrated, as can be seen with the number of critical accolades the film received and its multiple Academy Awards.

The history of the science fiction film is value-laden when it comes to the ways it has represented a number of different minoritarian positions. Of particular interest to my argument are the ways science fiction has approached questions of ability and gender. The character of Elisa in *Shape of Water* is a paradigmatic instance of the ways ability (or, more accurately, disability) comes to inform narratives within the science fiction film for several of the reasons that have been mentioned throughout the opening of this chapter. Gender also plays a role in the formation of these narratives due to Elisa's positioning as a disabled woman in *The Shape of Water*. *The Shape of Water* does, however, play with some of the traditional ways in which women have been represented

within the science fiction film, with the appearance of agency being given to Elisa. This exists in contradistinction to the ways in which women have traditionally been represented within this “type” of science fiction film (i.e., the monster movie). In science fiction monster movies that were produced during the 1950s and 1960s, there was usually a female scientist among the film’s archetypical cast of characters.¹³ Booker writes that this character was instructive of the ways this particular role destabilized gender within American society, going so far as to argue that the Others in science fiction films extended beyond monsters and aliens to women in new roles such as scientists.¹⁴

Containment of some capacity was frequently the solution to the Others that appeared within science fiction films.¹⁵ For the antagonistic monsters and aliens in the film, the method of containment was typically death or return to their original home.¹⁶ Women in science fiction films (and most other genres) were also contained through being in a romantic relationship, which made them decisively less Other.¹⁷ Some of the science fiction films of this decade showcased a type of double containment of the female scientist character. Booker describes *Them!* (1954) as being an instance of this type of double containment.¹⁸ In *Them!* the female scientist is the daughter of a more established scientist and she is then also contained via the romantic relationship she has with an FBI agent.¹⁹

The Shape of Water repeats this idea of double containment for women with the character of Elisa. However, with Elisa, there is a multitude of layers to her characterization. First, she is doubly other for she is a disabled woman in a time in American history when women were given little to no respect and disability was something to be castigated, something to be cured, an aspect of disability that certainly

remains within our own contemporary moment. Disability plays a curious role for Elisa in this way, for it is her muteness that contains Elisa; she is contained by her disability. Additionally, her containment from disability is what leads her to fall in love with the creature from the lab she works for. Thus, the creature (which also represents a type of monstrous disability) who becomes Elisa's love interest allows her to be contained by enmeshing her disabledness and her womanness. In the climax Elisa is apparently killed and subsequently resurrected by the creature and taken below the water with him, thus completing her containment and effectively banishing her from the world of normal humans. Elisa returns to where the film suggests she belongs.

The fragmentation thesis associated with the film's postmodern nostalgia becomes critical when thinking through the importance of the ways in which Elisa becomes contained. While the ending comes across as romantic, the way disabled individuals and specifically disabled women become contained in our current political moment is much less romantic. Disabled women are positioned precariously as having been physically contained by carceral institutions such as asylums and being contained in medical institutions through regimes of forced sterilization, which is still ongoing. This is how fragmentation becomes dangerous through nostalgia: The world outside the film screen is displaced by the screen image, and the romanticization of this containment in the screen image displaces the non-romantic ways containment occurs to disabled women in reality. This helps explain why the film was so widely acclaimed by non-disabled individuals, but was nearly universally criticized by the disability rights community, particularly its female members. Those individuals saw the discourses of containment at play in the film and the dangers associated with them.

Authentic Representations?

A frequent criticism levied against Hollywood films has been the ways in which such films have approached the question of accurate representation when it comes to non-disabled actors portraying disabled characters. While films built around “disability stories” are still relatively infrequent compared to other films, their ability to earn a litany of Academy Awards has been proven again and again.²⁰ *The Shape of Water* is instructive in understanding the magnitude of this trend given it was nominated for 13 Oscars, including Best Picture (which it won) and Best Actress for Sally Hawkins for her role of Elisa.²¹ One critic wrote that, while there are issues of such films that are problematic from a perspective of authentic representations of disability, their existence within the mainstream of cultural discourse is at least somewhat productive because they do the work of “humanizing” disability.²² This same author wrote that the first step toward social change for disabled individuals is creating empathy through these “humanizing” discourses; a necessary second step is expanding representations (i.e., expanding the number of disabled actors who are hired to play the roles in films such as *The Shape of Water*).²³

Throughout this section of my discussion of *The Shape of Water*, I argue that the initial reaction to encourage more authentic representation of disability within Hollywood films is a practice fraught with a number of pitfalls. The drive to have more authentic representation first participates in what I identify as an authenticity trap. The idea that authentic filmic representations of disability are even possible should be viewed with a high degree of skepticism. Similar to my argument that there is a romanticization of containment within the narrative of *The Shape of Water* that results in an obfuscation of

the violence done to disabled women within the “real” world, a focus on working toward more authentic representation and hoping social change for disabled individuals will naturally follow is a focus invested in what Lauren Berlant identifies as cruelly optimistic. This focus also presumes that an authentic representation of disability within film is even possible. Finally, this also raises questions about the types of stories about disability that are being told; even if one were to put aside the idea that stories and representations of disability could change the types of social relations within which disabled individuals find themselves imbricated, it seems naïve to suggest that the implications of the types of stories Hollywood films tell about disability have no implications for how disabled individuals are received by the social.

First, there is the question of authenticity within *The Shape of Water* and how that relates more broadly to a question of authenticity within filmic depictions of disability. One critic writes about how Sally Hawkins’s version of American Sign Language (ASL) in the film is one that does a gross injustice to deaf and hearing-impaired individuals who regularly rely on ASL. The background for Elisa is explained as she is someone who experienced some sort of traumatic event as a child that left her vocal box scarred, indicated in the film by several scars Elisa has on her throat. The problem arises out of the way that Elisa uses ASL and not something like Pidgin Signed English (PSE). PSE can be similarly approximated to the “Spanglish” frequently used by Latinx communities within the United States. PSE is neither wholly ASL nor wholly a direct translation into English, but lies somewhere between the two. The reason that Elisa would be using PSE is because she is mute and not deaf. Because she has the ability to hear, it would make sense that she would know how certain words sound, so using an analog to English like

PSE would make more sense given the film's time period, as well as the specific set of impairments she experiences. The film also chooses to use subtitles in an interesting way. Elisa's signing is not translated via subtitles all the time; instead, her signing is frequently translated by one of the characters around her, most often Zelda, her janitorial co-worker in the research facility, even though the film offers no explanation for how or why Zelda is completely fluent in ASL. The inconsistency regarding subtitles is significant because a common misconception about ASL is that it has a 1:1 correspondence with spoken English. That is not the case, as it has its own grammar, syntax, and language structure. The closer analog is PSE, which is why it would be much more likely, especially given Elisa's sets of impairments, that she would be speaking English. However, they have her speak ASL, and she communicates very slowly and brokenly according to some experts on the language.²⁴ We are to take the word of various characters that they are accurately translating Elisa's ASL, with subtitles only being used in one instance during a confrontation in the office of Colonel Strickland. Elisa signs "fuck you," and the Colonel, not understanding ASL, demands Elisa translate what she said, to which Elisa responds by once again slowly signing "fuck you," the second instance being one of the few scenes where *The Shape of Water* chooses to use subtitles to translate Elisa's signing, thus making "fuck you" a joke to the audience.²⁵ The issue of ASL versus PSE is just one of the many ways *The Shape of Water* sparked a backlash from many critics on the grounds of authenticity. As one critic wrote, "Guillermo del Toro must know in his bones that the inauthenticity of the 'mute' janitor in his movie creates more pity than empathy and more loathing than terror."²⁶ However, the unspoken premise with this criticism, as well as the general criticisms that Hawkins received for her portrayal of Elisa due to her not being

disabled, is that the film would be better, that the message would have more significance, if only the performance were more authentic, if only the performance was just a little more real.

Authenticity in relation to disability is not only difficult to achieve, but also carries with it a number of unforeseen consequences. Michael Albrecht, writing in the context of hip-hop performances, explains how authenticity is something that is entirely constructed by the nature of the specific performances that are in question²⁷ Albrecht explains that the only distinctions generated between the artificial and the authentic are ones that have nothing to do with the performance, but instead have everything to do with the audience; it is the audience that designates a specific performance as authentic or artificial.²⁸ The audience's power to determine the authentic-ness of a given performance in *The Shape of Water* offers an explanation of why certain types of stories of disability are successful and critically well received: It is those types of performances that the viewer codes as authentic.

..only by meeting certain requisites can a story with disabled characters be considered worthy of recognition. The disabled protagonist can only a) be a real, successful figure (*Ray*, *The Theory of Everything*) or b) inspire its non-disabled audience (*Forrest Gump*, *My Left Foot*).²⁹

Recalling the analysis done in the first section of this chapter, we would likely classify *The Shape of Water* within that second category, those films that have the ability to inspire their non-disabled audience. However, both categories have something in common in that both are performances that are likely to get coded as authentic by a non-disabled audience. The first category is coded as such because it contains films about “real” characters, which then equates to the authentic. The second is perhaps more sinister, as it achieves success because inspiration is the affective response a non-disabled

audience expects to receive when consuming a performance of disability. The arguments made by Tom Shakespeare about representations of disabled individuals in charity advertisements is particularly instructive in describing the ways particular representations of disabled individuals result in a type of fetishism.³⁰ Shakespeare uses fetishism in the Marxist tradition, which is to say that fetishism is the “transformation of sexual drives into objects.”³¹ Shakespeare contends that, within the cultural imaginary, disabled individuals are objects artists (such as directors) can use to represent specific values or emotions.³²

This type of fetishism can be seen through the investment *The Shape of Water*’s narrative structure causes the audience to have in both Elisa’s romantic relationship with the creature from the lab, as well as paradoxically Elisa’s attempt to overcome or escape from a perceived lack; or, to be more precise, she shows an orientation that is fleeing from disability, which frames disability as a type of *le objet petit a* that her position as a disabled woman produces. This scene in question occurs 48 minutes into the film, where Elisa has decided that she needs to break the creature out of the lab because Colonel Strickland is going to vivisect it under orders from his superior officers. Elisa beseeches her neighbor Giles for assistance in her plan to break the creature out of the government facility where she works. The scene begins with Elisa and Giles apparently in mid-conversation; presumably, Elisa has broached the initial subject of helping the creature to escape, for in the scene directly previous the audience sees Elisa distraught when she overhears what Colonel Strickland is going to do to the creature. Giles is expressing that under no circumstances will he help Elisa free the creature and that she should give up her attempts to orchestrate this breakout. Elisa explains that the creature is all alone, to

which Giles retorts, “Does that mean every time we go to a Chinese restaurant you want to save every fish in the tank?,” a statement that is instructive in understanding how Giles sees the creature in the lab as just that: a creature, someone (or, more accurately, something) about which Elisa should have such deep feelings.

In response, Elisa communicates that the creature is the loneliest *thing* she has ever seen. Giles, attempting to prove a point to Elisa, latches onto the word *thing* to explain that, even within her own understanding, she does not see the creature as possessing personhood or autonomy in any capacity; instead, the creature is just a thing. This is where Elisa engages in what is widely considered to be one of the most significant moments in her budding relationship with the creature. Elisa instructs Giles to say out loud what she is signing to him because she is frustrated with the ways in which he appears to be ignoring the depths of her feelings toward the creature. Elisa asks Giles to first ask the rhetorical question, “What am I?” Elisa continues, “I move my mouth like him. I make no sound like him. All that I am, all that I have ever been brought me here, to him.” Giles becomes dismissive of Elisa, latching onto her use of *him* to suggest that the way Elisa understands this creature is changing from moment to moment. First, it was a thing, and now it has some level of personhood, for the creature is a *him* instead of an *it*. Elisa becomes frustrated with Giles’s dismissive reactions and repeatedly signs “Look, look, look” as Giles tries to leave, even resorting to hitting him and grabbing him by the jacket. Giles, in turn, is surprised and saddened by the way Elisa is acting, repeatedly asking her why she hit him and exclaiming that hitting is something that she had never done before. After recovering from the shock, Giles continues repeating what Elisa is

signing: “When he looks at me, the way he looks at me. He does not know what I lack, or how, I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am as I am.”

This scene, in addition to one other that will be explored below, forms the basis of the film’s treatment of disability as a fetish. In a single dialogue scene, the film is able to position Elisa’s disability as something that is simultaneously exotic and the reason for her loving the creature, as well as the basis for how the audience comes to identify with Elisa. However, in this same moment, the film says this disability is something to be moved away from by positioning it as a deficit, a loss, something that creates a denial of personhood. The issue isn’t that Elisa treats the creature from the lab as a thing, it is that Elisa is also that *thing*. The film places her in that same position of object-ness. This is in line with the ways Hughes describes the disabled body as existing within a realm of abjection

We hold ourselves ransom to the myth of the ‘clean and proper’ body; the perfect body of ableist culture is a myth that we use to screen ourselves from the visceral realities of our own lives. The ableist body ‘helps’ non-disabled people cope with their fears about their own corporeal vulnerability. It does so by invoking its opposite, the disabled body, a foreign entity that is anomalous, chaotic and disgusting.³³

When we read Hughes articulations of this understanding of disability through the earlier arguments I was making with Tom Shakespeare’s articulation of disability as a fetishized object, the conclusion that I draw is that when disability is positioned in the way it is in these moments of the film, this becomes the way disability is fetishized. Elisa’s disability becomes a moment of connection; however, disability is this abject, gross, object, so there is a need in that same moment to move past disability or move through disability. The move beyond disability is completed when in the very same scene Elisa’s disability is very clearly explained to be nothing more than pure loss, or lack, and thus something

that if it can't be overcome then the best thing to be done for Elisa is to be with someone or *something* which is at least as gross and abject as her.

There is a second scene that further explicates the ways in which disability comes to be understood as something to be overcome: a dancing scene that occurs near the end of the film. Before the series of events that leads to the film's intense conclusion, Elisa is at home with the creature, whom she has rescued from the lab. Elisa and Giles intend to take the creature to the Baltimore docks since it is too dangerous to continue keeping him at Elisa's apartment. The significant portion of this scene begins with Elisa sitting down at a kitchen table with the creature after changing the day on her calendar, which makes her realize that this is the day that she will have to take the creature into the docks. Elisa's body language and facial expressions make it clear how heartbroken she is over having to be separated from the creature after having grown so close to him. While sitting at the table with the creature, the scene starts to slowly change, transitioning from a full range of color to the entire scene being shrouded in darkness with a spotlight on Elisa, as well as the windows turning a turquoise green, which serves to emphasize how much it is raining in the city at that time. At this point, Elisa lifts her head up from the table just as sounds that had been in the background—the heavy raindrops outside and a record playing Vera Lynn's 1943 song "You'll Never Know"—become much more pronounced,

At this point the lighting changes once again, shifting the scene to black and white while still keeping the spotlight on Elisa as the song continues to play both the song and the choice to film this in black and white are tools that very clearly invoke feelings of nostalgia for an audience member. Right as the song reaches the lines "You will never know," Elisa begins vocalizing the words "how much I love you." This is noteworthy

because this is the first time the audience has heard Elisa's voice, since to our knowledge she is completely mute. At this point, Elisa stands up, arms outstretched, and belts out "You'll never know how much I care." The setting suddenly changes to a black-and-white ballroom surrounded by a live orchestra. Elisa is now in a classic white ball gown and begins to dance with the creature as she continues to sing.³⁴

This scene harkens back to the earlier scene in which Elisa talks about the creature being the only one who doesn't see her as lacking and takes that idea a step further by suggesting that, due to Elisa's love with the creature, she is no longer disabled/mute; her relationship with him has "cured" her and her disability has been overcome. Even though this scene is obviously a fantasy in Elisa's mind, the fact she sees herself in her imagination as someone who can communicate through spoken word necessarily draws upon tropes that individuals with disabilities seek to be "cured" and "made whole." This trope of cure creates an interesting juxtaposition between Elisa and Colonel Strickland. The narrative moves Elisa further and further away from disability, eventually having her disability (or at least what makes her disabled) be completely gone by the end. However, in order to make Colonel Strickland more villainous, early in the film one of his fingers is bitten off by the creature while he is torturing it in the lab. At first, he tries to have the finger sewn back on, but it ends up becoming more infected and he ends up ripping it off right before he goes after Elisa and the creature. Dismemberment as part of a process of turning someone into a villain is one of the oldest literary and filmic tropes, going back to characters like Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, who has a central part of their character cut off and replaced with a prosthetic (in that case, a hand replaced a hook). This can also be seen as far back as ancient Greek and Roman mythology such

as the story of Medusa who was a beautiful maiden that was turned into a villain after being raped by Poseidon, and the way of signifying this villainy was having her face be too ugly to behold and have her hair replaced with snakes. This also occurs in early American literature with Captain Ahab in “Moby Dick” portrayed as being driven mad by the whale which was responsible for him losing his leg (this is potentially an early analogue to the Captain Hook example). There are also several examples of this in the work of William Shakespeare, such as the character of Caliban in “The Tempest” or the way Richard III has a “sinister” hump on his back.

To return to the connection between the dancing scene and Elisa’s earlier conversation with Giles, both show the ways disability becomes fetishized. In the first scene, Elisa’s disability reduces her to the status of object—something to be pitied—while the dancing scene completes the circle, revealing how the only solution to such disability is its removal or overcoming, in the case of this film. This fetishization has dangerous implications for disabled women, as it has some very real parallels in the “real world,” if particularly the fetish of devoteeism, in which heterosexual men are attracted to disabled women because of their disability. While this is frequently isolated to amputees, there is no reason it cannot revolve around other impairment.³⁵ Colonel Strickland shows desire for Elisa, at one point suggesting he can make her scream, which aligns with the ways an individual’s disability can be turned into a fetishized object for another. Kafer writes of the ways in which the women who participate in devotee communities do so because of both desire and disgust.

Devotees typically define themselves not simply as people sexually attracted to amputees but as the only people sexually attracted to amputees. “Unlike everyone else,” they claim, “we find you not disgusting but desirable.” In so doing, they

establish the groundwork for a devotee exceptionalism, according to which only devotees are capable of desiring amputees.³⁶

The Shape of Water performs both sides of this disgust/desire binary, however not in exactly the same way Kafer describes it, due to the ways the audience figures into the question. It is not just the relationship between characters that figure desire and disgust, but the ways in which a normate audience member interprets relationships between characters within the film. The conversation scene between Giles and Elisa relies on the audience coming to desire the relationship between Elisa and the creature because of her disability, which is reinforced by Elisa's explanation that she needs him because no one else would ever be with her. Yet, the scene simultaneously shows the disgust of disability in the ways that Elisa seeks to escape from it, to cover over the disgust that comes to characterize disability as abject. It is not enough to move toward disability as desire or disability as disgust because Kafer describes the ways in which this particular binary becomes a Gordian knot in which the desire for disability is the means by which disability becomes closer associated with disgust (e.g., devotees say the world finds disabled women disgusting and they are the only people who can find desire for them). If one focuses on how this type of desire is only a type of disgust, then disabled women are forced to see themselves as non-desirable; either way, each strand of the knot reinforces the other, making this binary even more insidious.

Anna Mollow's theorization of the death drive offers a useful way of thinking through these complicated understandings of disabled sexuality.³⁷ For Mollow, disability is that which is "fantasized in terms of a loss of self, of mastery, integrity, and control, a loss that, both desired and feared, is indissociable from sexuality."³⁸ The death drive does not mean disability becomes literally associated with death, but instead speaks to the

ways in which disability represents the life within death or, more accurately, the death that occurs within life (i.e., disability comes to be understood as life that is not worth living).³⁹

Critics have suggested that the issue with *The Shape of Water* is in how it tells disabled individuals that the only place they should go in order to find love is away from the world, away from the rest of humanity. *The Shape of Water* is a paradigmatic text, particularly in its where Elisa is killed and subsequently resurrected by the creature. This conclusion seems to tell audiences that disabled individuals must leave the human world behind to be happy; they are so different, so aberrant that they must banish themselves from human society. When Elisa is resurrected, she is not in the same form she was before: She grows gills and goes to live with the creature under the water. In this way, she has embraced the death that is intrinsic to disability and leaves the living world behind.

Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I return once again to the question of representation. One of the most common criticisms of *The Shape of Water* is that Elisa should have been played by a disabled woman. The hidden premise is that the film is not invested in problematic discourses of disability; or, if it is, that all of those discourses are somehow resolved if only the film were to feature more accurate representations of disability. However, my argument is that there is zero conceptual change that happens if the film were to feature a more accurate type of representation of disability. The film's narrative would still rely on the desire/disgust binary that is so connected to disability; the film would still tell disabled individuals that, if they want to find love, they should exile

themselves from society; the film would still connect disability as an identity with deathliness; and it would still rely on disability as a trope to enhance or amplify villainy. Essentially, there would be no change to the narrative structure other than that a disabled person was inserted into the leading role.

The problem with this approach is that it is cruelly optimistic. Cruel optimism, originally coined by Lauren Berlant, is defined by Kolarova as when that which you desire becomes the obstacle to one's own flourishing.⁴⁰ If the telos of the criticism of representation of disability in a film is who is playing the role instead of what the role communicates, then this is a type of attachment that can only be cruelly optimistic. The focus of criticism against the representations of Hollywood films that feature questions of disability needs to be in the types of stories that are being told about disability. While the representational issues in films like *The Shape of Water* are a very real concern, an exclusive focus upon them—as if a number of the ableist ideologies that exist within the film will dissipate as long as the representational issues are resolved—can only end in disappointment.

Notes

¹ Annlee Ellingson “Flick Picks: ‘The Shape of Water’ refreshes ‘Little Mermaid’ fairy tale with otherworldly romance. November 30th 2017 <https://www.bizjournals.com/losangeles/news/2017/11/30/shape-of-water-refreshes-little-mermaid-review.html>

² Annlee Ellingson “Flick Picks: ‘The Shape of Water’ refreshes ‘Little Mermaid’ fairy tale with otherworldly romance. November 30th 2017 <https://www.bizjournals.com/losangeles/news/2017/11/30/shape-of-water-refreshes-little-mermaid-review.html>

³ Aisha Harris “The Fish-Monster Sex Movie Was a Dissapointingly Safe Choice for Best Picture” March 5th 2018 <https://slate.com/culture/2018/03/the-shape-of-waters-best-picture-win-is-middle-of-the-road.html>

⁴ Elsa Sjunneson-Henry “I Belong Where the People Are: Disability and *The Shape of Water* January 16th 2018 <https://www.tor.com/2018/01/16/i-belong-where-the-people-are-disability-and-the-shape-of-water/>

⁵ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 139.

⁶ Deborah Tudor "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism", *Soc* 49 (2012):333–338.

⁷ Deborah Tudor "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism", *Soc* 49 (2012):333–338.

⁸ Deborah Tudor "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism", *Soc* 49 (2012):333–338.

⁹ Deborah Tudor "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism", *Soc* 49 (2012):333–338.

¹⁰ Deborah Tudor "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism", *Soc* 49 (2012):333–338.

¹¹ Deborah Tudor "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism", *Soc* 49 (2012):333–338.

¹² Deborah Tudor "Selling Nostalgia: Mad Men, Postmodernism and Neoliberalism", *Soc* (2012) 49:333–338

¹³ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 142.

¹⁴ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 143.

¹⁵ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 143.

¹⁶ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 143.

¹⁷ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 143.

¹⁸ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 143.

¹⁹ M. Keith Booker “Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964” (Westport, CT Greenwood Press 2001) 143.

²⁰ Sophia Stewart “The Oscars Love Movies About Disability, Not Disabled Actors” January 30th 2018 <https://filmschoolrejects.com/oscars-love-movies-disability-not-disabled-actors/>

²¹ Sophia Stewart “The Oscars Love Movies About Disability, Not Disabled Actors” January 30th 2018 <https://filmschoolrejects.com/oscars-love-movies-disability-not-disabled-actors/>

²² Sophia Stewart “The Oscars Love Movies About Disability, Not Disabled Actors” January 30th 2018 <https://filmschoolrejects.com/oscars-love-movies-disability-not-disabled-actors/>

²³ Sophia Stewart “The Oscars Love Movies About Disability, Not Disabled Actors” January 30th 2018 <https://filmschoolrejects.com/oscars-love-movies-disability-not-disabled-actors/>

²⁴ David Boles “The Shape of Water: Guillermo del Toro and the Failure to Consecrate” December 1st 2017 <https://bolesblogs.com/2017/12/01/the-shape-of-water-guillermo-del-toro-and-the-failure-to-consecrate/>

²⁵ David Boles “The Shape of Water: Guillermo del Toro and the Failure to Consecrate December 1st 2017 <https://bolesblogs.com/2017/12/01/the-shape-of-water-guillermo-del-toro-and-the-failure-to-consecrate/>

²⁶ David Boles “The Shape of Water: Guillermo del Toro and the Failure to Consecrate” December 1st 2017 <https://bolesblogs.com/2017/12/01/the-shape-of-water-guillermo-del-toro-and-the-failure-to-consecrate/>

²⁷ Michael Mario Albrecht “Acting Naturally Unnaturally: The performative nature of authenticity in contemporary popular music” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28: 379 – 395.

²⁸ Michael Mario Albrecht “Acting Naturally Unnaturally: The performative nature of authenticity in contemporary popular music” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28: 379 – 395.

²⁹ Sophia Stewart “The Oscars Love Movies About Disability, Not Disabled Actors” January 30th 2018 <https://filmschoolrejects.com/oscars-love-movies-disability-not-disabled-actors/>

³⁰ Tom Shakespeare “Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?” *Disability & Society* 9 (1994): 283-299.

³¹ Tom Shakespeare “Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?” *Disability & Society* 9 (1994): 283-299.

³² Tom Shakespeare “Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?” *Disability & Society* 9 (1994): 283-299.

³³ Bill Hughes. *Disability and Social Theory New Developments and Directions* (New York, NY Palgrave MacMillan 2012) 17-32.

³⁴ There is some debate about whether this is actually Elisa singing or if she is supposed to be lip-synching there is no clear answer, so for the purposes of my argument, I have made an interpretive choice given the context of the rest of the film.

³⁵ Allison Kafer "Desire and Disgust: My Ambivalent Adventures in Devoteeism", in *Sex and Disability* eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC Duke University Press 2013) 332.

³⁶ Allison Kafer "Desire and Disgust: My Ambivalent Adventures in Devoteeism", in *Sex and Disability* eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC Duke University Press 2013) 335.

³⁷ Anna Mollow "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive" in *Sex and Disability* eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC Duke University Press 2013) 286.

³⁸ Anna Mollow "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive" in *Sex and Disability* eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC Duke University Press 2013) 297.

³⁹ Anna Mollow "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive" in *Sex and Disability* eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC Duke University Press 2013) 298.

⁴⁰ Kateřina Kolářová *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*; Vol. 8, (2014): 257-274.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hacking the Body (To Pieces): Anxiety and Abjection in Texas Chainsaw Massacre

Introduction

Released in 1974, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was one of several films, including *Bay of Blood* (1971) and *Black Christmas* (1974), that jumpstarted the slasher sub-genre, one of the most popular iterations of the horror film. While *Halloween* (1978) most clearly laid the foundation for the narrative elements of the slasher film, the genre's roots certainly lie partly in Hooper's 1974 classic. In attempting to define a genre that seems to exist by virtue of a number of paradoxes stacked on top of one another, Noel Carroll asks what it is about the horror film that makes it appealing to audiences.¹ He writes of the ways horror attracts its viewers through repulsion, with viewers of horror finding pleasure by "trafficking in the very sorts of things that cause disquiet, distress, and displeasure."²

The process of attraction is intimately connected with a question of disability, as the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that occurs within horror has to do with the ways normative individuals both think about disability and then attempt to secure themselves against it. Since its onset in the early 20th century, horror has been inextricably linked with repulsion. In 1931, the administrator of Hollywood's Production Code, Jason S. Joy, wrote a letter to a Paramount executive expressing concerns about several films that had been released and were planned to be released in the next several years, films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), *Almost Married* (1932), and *Freaks* (1932) were

all part of a cycle of films that may be too alarming to audiences and asking whether this was “the beginning of a cycle that ought to be retarded or killed?”³ This letter from Joy was reflective of a eugenic imperative that existed within the United States at this time regarding these films and if their representations of “disturbing” bodily differences represented a threat to the country’s social body.⁴ Writing in the context of the classic horror films of the 1930s, Angela Smith contends that scholars such as Carroll and Robin Wood are known for their work on the horror genre have obfuscated the question of disability when it comes to horror cinema.⁵ Smith explains that, when Wood deliberately writes “we must resist the tendency to normality as synonymous with health,” he inadvertently shuts down one of the most important aspects of discussions of normality, for it is “precisely by investigating how the discursive struggle over health and deviance plays out in the monstrous bodies of the horror film that we can glimpse how eugenic discourse mapped biological health onto conceptions of national and racial health.”⁶

In this chapter, I will extend Smith’s argument, and discuss what it reveals about understandings of the cultural imaginary in the 1930s to the ways the horror film exists in our current political moment. While the institutionalization of eugenics in the 1930s was reflected in the films of that era, this does not mean these eugenic impulses have been eradicated within the cultural imaginary. More postmodern instantiations of the horror film such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are also instructive in understanding the ways in which disability vis-à-vis monstrosity is understood even now, and how these aspects of the cultural imaginary inform a number of practices that continue, such as the way the medical industrial complex still forces disabled women to be sterilized.⁷

In this chapter, I will argue that the representational approaches in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* position disability as monstrosity. I will analyze *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a paradigmatic instance that reveals the ways in which discourses of disability are bound up with representations of monstrosity and excess in the horror film. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is but one example of horror films in the seventies and eighties that rely upon physical disability as a way of doing narrative work. One only has to look at films such as *Monkey Shines* (1988), which is about a quadriplegic man who has a monkey that can sense his thoughts and begins murdering people. There are others, as well, including *Silver Bullet* (1985), *Misery* (1990), and the more recent *Hush* (2016), just to name a few. The ubiquity of disabled individuals appearing on-screen in all of these horror films suggests a phenomenon that is deserving of further investigation.

To say that disability moves the narrative in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* would be a gross understatement. Whether you take the scenes that depict Franklin (Paul A. Partain) as a burden or the way Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) appears to have some form of developmental impairment that prevents him from being able to speak, it is clear that this is a narrative where all the heavy lifting is being done with disability. This aligns with arguments I have made in previous chapters about disability operating as a form of narrative prosthesis, which is to say that disability becomes that which gives certain narratives their coherence; disability is not additive within certain narrative structures, but

instead provides the means by which entire narratives have any form of coherency whatsoever.

Two of the film's major characters are a brother and sister, Sally (Marilyn Burns) and Franklin, the latter of whom is especially important for not only his death as a triggering event that sets into motion what will be the conclusion of the film, but his being the only visibly disabled character. Thus, he will be a clear focus of my analysis throughout this film. The film also features three friends of Sally and Franklin as they journey to see if their grandfather's body had been exhumed from a rural cemetery. The film consists of these five characters being slowly killed off by a family of what the audience is led to believe are cannibals that kill tourists and cook and eat them because they have no other method of survival. Sally is the lone survivor and spends the second half of the movie running from and escaping, and being captured, and then escaping again, members of this cannibal family before she drives off screaming into the sunrise.

Establishing the way disability relates to the uncanny and the abject is critical to the argument in this chapter, for disability's psychoanalytic relationship with horror is essential to explicating what happens in the process of viewership. For several decades, film studies have been concerned with what happens in the consumption of narrative cinema, with no work being more critical than Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"⁸ where she sought to explicate what happens for male viewers during the consumptive process of filmic representations of women. Similarly, in this chapter I am seeking to explicate what happens for normate individuals when confronted

with representations of disability and how these representations often fulfill a consumptive purpose in a different, but parallel trajectory to that of the male consumption of feminine representations. This consumptive purpose in both Mulvey's original work and the analysis I am doing here seeks to explain a power dynamic that exists outside of filmic representations that is replicated in the consumptive process of viewing horror films.

The Uncanny: Castration Anxiety and Disability

One of Carroll's concerns with the psychoanalytic approach to horror was that it was too reductive, that it simply reduces every point of analysis to anxiety about castration, and that there are "clearly" aspects of horror film that individuals find themselves connected with that have nothing to do with such supposed anxieties. Preston presents a counter-narrative, contending that some groundbreaking work by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva on the nature of disability in psychoanalytic thought can productively work through exactly this problem.⁹ Citing Kristeva, Preston explains the way that, for the normate body, disability functions as a "narcissistic identity wound." It is a recognition of vulnerability where, for the normate individual, disability comes to metonymically stand in for the inevitability of death.¹⁰ It reminds the normate of a time when they had to rely on caregivers, and this threat becomes a type of castration anxiety:

...a direct threat on life and, by extension, a loss of power to create life. In an attempt to dispel these primal fears and anxieties, the unwanted emotions and fantasies are then expelled from the self and projected onto the disabled subject. In this book, I contend that it is in this confrontation ...representations of physical disability in the media do not speak to the lived experience of disability, but to this complex interrogation and subsequent repression of anxieties around the body, subjectivity, and vulnerability.¹¹

This is what makes my analysis of Kristeva through the work Preston relevant to the question of identification within the horror film. As previously discussed, for Carroll the horror film is made up of both affect and a mysterious unknown that is unresolvable. Disability exists at the epicenter of both these concerns; even Carroll's discussion of monstrosity that attempts to scope out the boundaries of the horror film is ultimately just describing a number of ways that disability is the absent center of the genre.

Franklin's character in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is instructive in understanding the vulnerability produced by disability. The first scene in which the main characters interact shows Kirk (William Vail), one of Sally and Franklin's friends, helping Franklin in his wheelchair down from the van and guiding him to a secluded area off the road where Franklin can urinate into a can. The scene produces a sense of anxiety for normate viewers because they are already anxious about Franklin representing a form of life they would not want to live. Anna Mollow, writing about the application of the death drive for the purpose of disability theory, explains that, when seeking to avoid disability, there is something beyond pleasure and health that an individual wishes to avoid. In this way, disability represents an uncontainable excess, which is instructive toward understanding the interpersonal interactions other characters in the scene have with Franklin. The scene emphasizes how someone has to help Franklin do the most

basic of normal human activities, including urinating. When a large gust of wind blows Franklin down the dirt hill he was urinating near, it illustrates how even the slightest of changes in the area around him—a gust of wind—can radically impact Franklin to the point where all the characters in the van fear for his life as he tumbles down the hill. Thus, the scenes suggests that disabled individuals like Franklin must expect death at any time, for a disabled person is never far from it.

Freud's theory of the uncanny is central to the management of this castration anxiety. Freud drew on the German word *das heimlich*, which means “the homely” or “the familiar.” The uncanny is that which is *das unheimliche*—quite literally unhomely.¹² The uncanny is tied to repression, for the uncanny is not just that which is unfamiliar, but that which is actually quite familiar to the psyche, but only through a long process of repression.¹³ Disability is uncanny because, for the normate, it is a repressed form of vulnerability, one that all individuals experienced during dependency at childhood.¹⁴

It is here that is possible to understand how disabled individuals come to represent the uncanny for the normate. As the analysis of the opening scene shows, those with disabilities comes to represent a repressed vulnerability, and it is through this repressed vulnerability that ideas of discomfort and uncanniness come to the surface.¹⁵ The uncanny is the pivotal point around which a number of psychoanalytic theories converge, for Freud, the name given is the uncanny, the name Lacan gives to this concept is *le objet petit a*.¹⁶ This is where my previous argument about disability comes to operate as significant; for there are ways in which Lacan and Freud theorize the question of anxiety

then it would also follow that this theorization would have to change with the question of disability for it would necessitate a change in how the type of anxiety that is produced by disability would come to be understood. For Freud, the anxiety of disability comes about from the ways disability represents a loss of what makes us human, such as autonomy. However, for Lacan, anxiety is when one gains something too much. The “loss” of anxiety is the loss of the ability to deal with a version of reality.¹⁷ Essentially, interactions with disability, such as the characters interacting with Franklin in the opening scene or the audience identifying with Franklin, removes their ability to deal with disability because disability comes to be so much more, so excessive, that it removes the ability for a normate subject to come to terms with it, which results in anxiety.

Freud’s original conception of castration anxiety also applies in the context of disability. However, disability also complicates this type of anxiety, not because there is anxiety from a fear of some kind of loss, but because disability represents something that is already loss and is an identity category that should be seeking to mourn their lack of a “whole” body. In other words, disability produces anxiety for the normate subject because the disabled subject should be mourning for their prior plenitude or wholeness, and when this mourning doesn’t occur, the normate subject becomes anxious in their questioning of why other subjects don’t presume the whole body as their ideal.¹⁸ Anxiety over castration occurs due to a subject’s desire to maintain a sense of wholeness; this anxiety applies to the normate via disability since the normate individual both fears becoming disabled when they see a disabled individual on screen and, at the same time,

celebrates how they are for they are able to see a disabled subject on screen and take comfort in how they are not like that representation. In other words, disability becomes the antithesis of how normate subjects defines themselves.¹⁹

Even the background of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* evokes these feelings of anxiety for the normate subject. In a scene near the beginning of the film, as the group is driving through central Texas, one of the characters notices a smell, leading all of the characters to react, with some acting as if they will vomit if the smell doesn't go away soon. Being that the film positions Franklin as the source of all things creepy and weird at every turn, Franklin explains that they just passed the meat-packing plant where their father used to sell cattle to be slaughtered, going into great detail about the slaughter process. At first, they would be slaughtered by hand, where individuals would smash the cows' heads with a sledgehammer, but now that job had been replaced by an automated air-rifle that fires bullets into the animals' skulls. Right as this conversation is concluding, the group picks up a character known only as the Hitchhiker (Edwin Neal). The group debates picking him up because he has a number of facial deformities and a "weird look." Franklin even goes so far as to say he looks like Dracula, and when the Hitchhiker mentions his family, Franklin talks about how there is now a whole family of Draculas. In case the audience has forgotten the uncanny relationship with physical deformities and the anxiety that comes from viewing vulnerable subjects, the Hitchhiker doubly produces anxiety, first from his physical deformities and secondarily from his precarious economic positioning, as I will explain.

When the group of travelers picks up the Hitchhiker, Franklin is excited to ask him about his experience working at the meat-packing plant. Franklin asks about the air-rifle that is used to slaughter the cattle, and the Hitchhiker reacts with horror, arguing that it was much better when the sledgehammer was used to kill the cattle. This current way, he claims, takes away the jobs of people in the community because automation has replaced the need for multiple people to be involved in the process of slaughter, intimating that there was something “better” about the way things used to be. Besides the obvious implication about the longing for a previous time that is so exemplary of the post-modern condition,²⁰ this scene points to the relationship among labor, disability, and the uncanny as explained by disability theorists. Part of the reason there is such anxiety around the possibility of disability for normative individuals is because disability represents a lack of productivity. In a culture that is defined by how productive one is under the conditions of capitalism, a lack of productivity that is signaled by the presence of a disability is no different from death, for this lack of productivity is no different from death.²¹ This can be seen in the ways that disability come to signify that which is unproductive under the conditions of capital. This is especially true, given the way there has been an uptick in neoliberal austerity measures in the past decades, even though *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was released in 1974, the anxiety about lack of productivity and the idea of non-productivity is perhaps more worthy of analysis now than it was 45 years ago. As Robert McRuer writes,

[T]he economic strategy of austerity in many ways requires a cultural politics that I will describe here as an austerity of representation. What Tobin Siebers calls an “ideology of ability” has long vouchsafed fattened, nonthreatening representations of disability (7); my contention is that such deadened representations are newly put to use, in crisp times, to obscure the workings of austerity²²

It is simple to extend McRuer’s analysis here to the type of economic representations in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which offer another form of the uncanny. Although it seems as if these economic representations are ubiquitous, many individuals will attempt to repress their knowledge about the state of current economic crises. Since these economic representations occur within a context of disability, the uncanny is performing double duty: First, it represents a normative subject’s anxiety about losing their wholeness, fearing a return to vulnerability where, secondly, disability then comes to represent the lack of economic stability that defines the status quo. This second tier of repression can easily be understood through what Robin Wood identifies as “surplus repression,” or those aspects of culture that allows individuals to take on particular roles within the cultures into which they were born.²³ Wood writes of how horror attempts to reproduce “the Other” to displace certain anxieties; he explains how, for the bourgeoisie, there is an obsession with health and cleanliness and that those that don’t possess those attributes are part of a proletariat “Other.” Wood even cites *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as examples of films that play on these particular economic anxieties.²⁴

Abjecting Disability

The relationship between the abject as first theorized by Julia Kristeva and horror films is nothing new.²⁵ Barbara Creed first popularized the application of Kristeva’s work to horror,²⁶ arguing that the abject treats horror as an absence of meaning, where a

normate subject has difficulty accepting who they are and the “I” collapses in the place of the abject.²⁷ It is explained in terms of proper boundaries, which collapse around the abject. In order to resolve this lack of boundaries, the subject must expel the abject even though the abject is still, nevertheless, an indispensable part of the normate subject; it is both the antithesis of life and that which coheres life through the symbolic.

Disability’s relationship with the abject goes back hundreds of years. While it hasn’t always been known in the same way, disability has gone by other names throughout history: *freak*, *monster*, *aberration*, etc. The discourses of freakery are especially important here since, up until very recently, freak shows or putting the freakery of disability on display for all to see, were a commonplace occurrence; a display which is replicated across a variety of filmic forms as my discussion on *The Greatest Showman* in chapter two elucidated. The real secret of the freak show is that they never actually left, but rather, were displaced and put into different forms. Williams writes of the relationship between freakery disability and horror within *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, describing how the film positions disability in a site of horror by positioning disability as evil.²⁸ Being portrayed as evil (or as a physical manifestation of evil) is one way disability comes to be understood as abject; the vast majority of contemporary horror films use disability to position the villain as evil, such as slasher films, which invariably involve some aspect of sociopathy such as Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

Disability is the ultimate in abject, for the disabled body is everything the normative body is trying to expel, trying to contain within its proper boundaries. Through this, the disabled body comes to represent disorder, chaos, and mayhem.²⁹ Horror exemplifies the way disability comes to represent the abject because it is in horror where the normative individual can stare at the disabled subject without fear of a response; it is in the horror cinema tradition that we are encouraged to celebrate the freakiness of disability.³⁰ However, the gaze applied to disabled individuals on screen is markedly different from the gaze male individuals direct at cinematic representations for women.³¹ The way disabled people are stared at isn't taking in what is pleasurable about the body; instead, bodies are stared at as sources of disgust, showing how closely related pleasure and pain, life and death are when it comes to the ways the gaze operates within these films.³²

Both of these phenomena take place in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. First, to see how these representations function for women, note the ways that the camera focuses on the forms of the two female characters; making sure the audience is aware of their traditional beauty, and has plentiful opportunities to appreciate it. In the scene when Kirk and Pam find the home of the cannibals, the camera follows Pam walking from a low angle that emphasizes the revealing nature of her clothing. However, this functions very differently for Franklin, as well as for the villains of the film who are located within the abject. While there are few shots that show the entirety of Franklin's body, one aspect that is almost always visible is his wheelchair. The wheelchair is that which clearly marks Franklin as freakish, so the camera position and framing ensures that the audience never

forgets the ways that Franklin operates within that position of freak. However, more than just marking Franklin as a freak, the visual focus on his wheelchair executes an ableist trope on camera: Wheelchair-bound individuals often criticize people for staring at the chair instead of making eye contact with them. This is accomplished in the first scene, as the camera focuses just as much on his wheelchair as him when he is rolling down the hill. There are also a number of scenes such as the one at the gas station or the arrival at the old family home that emphasize how Franklin has to stay still because it is too difficult to get the wheelchair down from the van. Or, in the scene when they first arrive at the old family home, Franklin has to scream for people to help him and eventually has to struggle through on his own, just making his way into the ground level of the house. This is before he notices that everyone is upstairs, once again reminding the audience of the limitations Franklin experiences by being in a wheelchair. This scene clearly establishes that Franklin is not the sum of his parts; rather, his sum is his one part.

As discussed earlier in this section, part of what constitutes the abject is not just disability in general, but the lack of maintaining proper boundaries. Examples of types of boundaries that are commonly broken include skin, which prevents us from seeing our own blood (bodily fluids of any kind outside the body are a way the abject can be represented). The Hitchhiker shows the breakdown of these boundaries in the scene in the van when he takes Franklin's pocket knife and, for seemingly no known reason, slices his palm open. After he is forced to leave the van, he wipes his bleeding palm on the side of the van, which is noticed by the other characters with disgust when they stop at a gas

station in the next scene. Notable is the approach that Franklin has to the blood left by the Hitchhiker. Franklin is still interested in the event after the Hitchhiker leaves, curiously looking at the knife he used and becoming fascinated with the remnants of the blood on it. The fact that Franklin is the only one interested in the only other freak the audience had seen at that point in the film further cements his positioning as some kind of freak himself.

The opening scene of the film offers one of the most interesting connections with disability as abject. We hear a radio news broadcast talking about how a number of bodies have been exhumed in a cemetery that the audience is led to believe exists near where the rest of the events of the film take place. As we hear the radio news broadcast, we see brief flashes of close-ups of various corpses manipulated into grotesque shapes, providing some of the best representations of the abject in the film. The corpse is one of the clearest signifiers of the abject because of the way the corpse embodies the failure of boundaries between life and death in a manner that is more than a little similar to the ways that disability itself represents the lack of a boundary between life and death. In the previous section I argued for the ways that the presentation of disabled individuals produces a type of anxiety toward death due to the ways disability stands in for death; the corpse does this exact same work and produces these same anxieties for remarkably similar reason, to the point that, when it comes to how a normate subject would respond to disability or respond to death, there is such a small distinction that it holds no real conceptual difference for our purposes.

The corpse, more than just being representative of the abject, is also a representation of disability as abject. The corpses at the beginning of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* offer an exemplary instance of this representation. These corpses are neither a corpse of someone who has just died (so it still looks like it could be a human being), nor are they corpses of individuals who have long been dead. Instead, they exist at a disturbing place somewhere between the two. In fact, the place they exist happens to be an intersection of two areas that have been explored at length thus far in this essay. They are abject due to the way that all corpses function as abject, yet they are also a representation of the uncanny, for nothing is more *unheimliche* than a corpse that is not a corpse, but is somehow more than a corpse. Accentuating these corpses' positioning as abject is the way they are positioned to make them look human, engaging in some kind of activity. Due to their nature as corpses, it is not quite clear what that activity could be, illustrating what Creed means when she talks about the abject as a place where boundaries fail.

Disability, I contend, is the analytic that explains exactly what is going on with these corpses. There is another word that could, perhaps, explain the state of these corpses: decay, which also represents the anxiety that normative individuals experience when confronted with representations of vulnerability. There are two sides to vulnerability. The first is the vulnerability that all human beings experience when they are first born and thus reliant on other individuals for their protection, feeding—for life itself. The second side of vulnerability approaches as an individual gets closer to death,

that is, the vulnerability experienced as the body quite literally decays. Disability at this point comes to represent that exact process of decay, and it is in this place that disability becomes both abject through its being decay, but also uncanny, for all normate subjects know that decay is coming for them.

Bill Hughes offers an excellent explanation of the depths to which disability comes to be understood as abject:

[D]isability is the epitome of 'what not to be'. As a consequence, the disabled body can be easily excluded from the mainstream 'psychic habitus' (Elias, 2000: 167). The 'clean and proper'—a normative body of delicacy, refinement, and self-discipline—has powerful social consequences most manifest in its normalizing dynamics. . . . It apportions the shame and repugnance that underwrite the civilizing process (Elias, 2000: 114–19, 414–21).³³

Hughes's arguments complement my own, for they also show the ways that anything that finds itself not just other to the normate, but actively opposed to the normate body should be understood as part of disability, and the depth to which what Hughes identifies as the civilizing project of the contemporary era is one that just seeks to civilize disability. This provides a useful analytic to understand possibly one of the most interesting scenes in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where Sally is captured and tied up at a dinner table with the Hitchhiker, the Cook, and Leatherface (the member of the family who had killed everyone up to this point). This scene confirms what the viewer had only suspected up to this point: that everyone had been killed for the family to eat. People are hunted down by the Hitchhiker and Leatherface and then cooked by the third member of the family, which offers another uncomfortable aspect of the abject. The family's process of consumption doesn't fall within the proper boundary of things that should be consumed by humans for

sustenance. Even the grandfather of this murderous clan, whom we are initially led to believe is just a mummified corpse, participates in these strange eating rituals. The rest of the family holds Sally, who is bleeding at this point, up to the grandfather's mouth so he can consume her blood. Though he is too weak to eat, there is still a need for him to participate in these abject, uncivilized rituals of eating. Gruson-Wood goes further and explains how one's humanity is in part defined by what they consume, and similarly one's monstrosity is determined by what one eats that is different from what "normal" people eat. Gruson-Wood goes on to explain that those who eat things outside what a normative subject would eat designates them as having some form of disability, illustrating once again that even the monstrous elements of the film are best understood within a framework of disability.³⁴

Conclusion

My analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* shows the depth to which representations of disability are embedded in the modern horror film. Nearly all aspects of what constitutes a horror film comes back to a notion of disability. To return to the opening discussion of Carroll, I argued that disability informs both the way horror is defined by an irresolvable mystery and the way these films produce an affect of horror. However, beyond this, I contend that Freud's theories of the uncanny and Kristeva's theory of the abject actually show that horror is inseparable from a conception of disability. As to the other concern Carroll has about psychoanalytic theories being too reductive, I have illustrated the way these theories, instead of removing layers of analysis

from film, add to it. Recalling the discussion using Mitchell and Snyder's concept of a narrative prosthesis, the work to explicate the psychoanalytic relationship between horror and disability reveals the ruse of prosthesis for what it is and uncovers what is really happening in these films.

However, it is not enough to uncover this ruse, for as I gestured toward in the opening of this chapter, there is a type of work that is being done in the horror form that isn't readily available within other instantiations of disability film. Horror is distinct from the melodrama of films like *The Greatest Showman* or even the science fiction of a film like *The Shape of Water*. While *The Greatest Showman* uses fantasy and fantastical approaches to disability, the showmanship of Barnum it is still grounded within a type of historicism. The case is similar for *The Shape of Water*, which is invested in a humanizing approach to disability, but still uses a narrative development that has some incredibly concerning implications for disability. My argument is not that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is more radical than either of these other two films; however, as scholars such as Robin Wood and Adam Lowenstein suggest, there is a potentiality within the horror film that is unique to the genre. Given the eugenic impulses that are still a very real part of our current cultural moment, the potential for films to do something, to do anything either positive or negative, is deserving of more attention. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson describes the pervasiveness of this newgenics when she writes:

Eugenics uses modern technologies to supposedly improve the human race through selective reproduction, genetic manipulation, so-called enhancement, selective abortion, and medical normalization, all of which aim to eliminate disability. Early eugenics gave the Western world an identified, sanctioned population enforced by compulsory sterilization, the human classification of feeble-minded, a vast archive of ostensibly inferior hereditary lines, mass institutionalization of people judged as inferior, and the eugenic euthanasia

project we call the Holocaust. Although today we have a network of egalitarian agreements that arose to guard against enterprises like the Holocaust, communities are now actively shaped by a velvet eugenics enacted through biomedical technologies that select and support some lives according to criteria assumed to be reasonable and incontrovertible.³⁵

My choice to focus not just on film, but on one of the “lowest” genres with a film like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, may appear to be dismissive of the pervasiveness of eugenic logics as described by Garland-Thompson. However, innocuous genre movies have the ability to “address the unresolved tensions of our lives.” To go further, the modern horror film is “engaged with rather than estranged from traumatic history”, suggests that the horror film is an instantiation of Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* which is a defamiliarizing of teleological historicism (such as the types of history associated with *The Greatest Showman* and *The Shape of Water*).³⁶ However the *Jetztzeit* of horror films can be used for unproductive ends just as well, which is why, in concluding this chapter, I also want to return to the conclusion of my discussion of *The Shape of Water*, where I argued that, instead of the telos of anti-eugenic or anti-ableist approaches to film, we should not rest solely on the question of representation, but instead we need to grapple with the types of stories that are being told about disability.³⁷ Angela Smith argued that the classic horror film questioned the eugenic impulse of the time and shattered some of the most widely held beliefs of eugenicists in the 1930s and 1940s by frustrating the eugenic desire of the time period.³⁸

The classic horror film frustrated this eugenic impulse even while positioning disability as monstrosity. For instance, in *The Island of Lost Souls* the villain of the film is a scientist whose experiments are an attempt to perfect the human species, which is framed as violent and unacceptable. Even though monstrosity still plays a narrative role in the ways I have discussed, that monstrosity also frustrates this eugenic impulse. There

are even contemporary films that hold the potential to frustrate manifestations of this eugenic impulse; one only has to look to films such as *Get Out* (2017), which situates the family and the type of scientific procedures they are doing as villainous and explicitly racist. The value of positioning these practices as monstrous is that, even though disability is still frequently monstrous in the film, it is the eugenic practices that becomes the *real* antagonist. This positioning of eugenic practices as ones invested in racism and ableism highlight the ways horror films still have the potential to be radical in content in ways similar to the classic horror films of the early twentieth century. My argument with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in regards to the horror genre is that there is a potentiality in positioning disability as monstrous, but the film does nothing with that potential. Early horror films, as well as more recent films such as *Get Out*, show that the monstrosity of disability can be mobilized as criticism of dominant ideologies.

This frustration is important and is a potential that the genre still holds. Instead of stories focusing on disability as loss, as abject, as monster and the need to exterminate said creatures, perhaps there are other stories that can be told. Take *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), a film where actual eugenicists were consulted during the production. While featuring a number of elements of monstrosity, at no point does the film suggest the monsters are the antagonists of the film; instead, it is the scientist torturing and experimenting on them. While maybe not radical in content, there is a kernel of radicality within the film, making it a type of story that has the potential to frustrate the eugenic impulse.

The horror film's potential to frustrate is also why I find the psychoanalytic lens I have used in my analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to be one that has the

potential to reveal what can frustrate in filmic depictions of disability and perhaps offers a series of tools that, moving forward, can further explicate ways to frustrate these newgenic impulses that Garland-Thompson speaks of. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* may not be radical and it may indeed contain troublesome representations of disability, but it is part of a genre that has the potential to do so much.

Notes

¹ Noël Carroll, "Why Horror" edited by Mark Jancovich *Horror, The Film Reader*. (London [u.a.] Routledge 2009).

² Noël Carroll, "Why Horror" edited by Mark Jancovich *Horror, The Film Reader*. (London [u.a.] Routledge 2009).

³ Angela M. Smith 2011 "Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema", Columbia University Press pp 1

⁴ Angela M. Smith 2011 "Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema", Columbia University Press pp. 2

⁵ Angela M. Smith 2011 "Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema", Columbia University Press pp. 29

⁶ Angela M. Smith 2011 "Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema", Columbia University Press pp. 29

⁷ Eugene Volokh "Sterilization of the 'Intellectually Disabled'" April 18th 2014 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/04/18/sterilization-of-the-intellectually-disabled/>

⁸ Mulvey, L. 1975. "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema". *Screen* 16 (3): 6-18.

⁹ Jeffrey Preston. *The Fantasy Of Disability: Images of Loss in Popular Culture* (New York, NY Routledge 2014) 14.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Preston. *The Fantasy Of Disability: Images of Loss in Popular Culture* (New York, NY Routledge 2014) 14.

¹¹ Jeffrey Preston. *The Fantasy Of Disability: Images of Loss in Popular Culture* (New York, NY Routledge 2014) 14.

¹² Robert D. Wilton "Locating physical disability in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis: problems and prospects", *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 4 (2003): 369-389

¹³ Robert D. Wilton "Locating physical disability in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis: problems and prospects", *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 4 (2003): 369-389

¹⁴ Robert D. Wilton “Locating physical disability in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis: problems and prospects”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 4 (2003): 369-389

¹⁵ Jeffrey Preston. *The Fantasy Of Disability: Images of Loss in Popular Culture* (New York, NY Routledge 2014) 14.

¹⁶ Mladen Dolar "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny", *Rendering the Real* Vol. 58, (1991): 5-23.

¹⁷ Mladen Dolar "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny", *Rendering the Real* Vol. 58, (1991): 5-23.

¹⁸ Robert D. Wilton “Locating physical disability in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis: problems and prospects”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 4 (2003): 369-389

¹⁹ Robert D. Wilton “Locating physical disability in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis: problems and prospects”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 4 (2003): 369-389

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²¹ Lennard J. Davis, “Nude Venuses, Medusa’s Body, and Phantom Limbs: Disability and Visuality” Edited by Mitchell, David T, Sharon L Snyder, and James I Porter. *The Body And Physical Difference*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan. University of Michigan Press 2004) 54

²² Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability Globalization, Resistance* (New York, NY New York University Press 2018) 56.

²³ Robin Wood “American Nightmare” edited by Mark Jancovich. *Horror, The Film Reader*. (London [u.a.]: Routledge 2009).

²⁴ Robin Wood “American Nightmare” edited by Mark Jancovich. *Horror, The Film Reader*. (London [u.a.]: Routledge 2009).

²⁵ Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S Roudiez.. *Powers Of Horror*. (New York, NY Columbia University Press 1982).

²⁶ Barbara Creed. *The Monstrous-Feminine*. (London Routledge 1993).

²⁷ Barbara Creed. *The Monstrous-Feminine*. (London Routledge 1993) 9.

- ²⁸ Jessica L. Williams *Media, Performative Identity, And The New American Freak Show* (Springer International Publishing 2017) 62
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- ³³ Bill Hughes “Civilizing Modernity and the Ontological Invalidation of Disabled People” *Disability And Social Theory* .Edited by Dan Goodley, Bill Hughes, and Lennard J Davis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012).
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- ³⁵ Rosemarie Garland-Thompson “Eugenic World Building and Disability: The Strange World of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*” *J Med Humanit* 38 (2017): 133–145
- ³⁶ Angela M. Smith *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (New York, NY Columbia University Press 2011) 241.
- ³⁷ Angela M. Smith *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (New York, NY Columbia University Press 2011) 241.
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CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This thesis has begun an exploration of representational practices that have become commonplace in depicting disability cinematically. Each of the films I have analyzed has its own approach to representing disability. However, there are common threads that run throughout many of them. I analyzed the ways discourses of overcoming, monstrosity, pity, and inspiration are nearly universal when it comes to representing disability. Although not always in the same way, these discourses are connected to and imbricated within one another. While *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* uses disability to illustrate monstrosity and cause audiences to be afraid of or even root for the death of the “freaks” within the film, *The Greatest Showman* uses discourses of freakery to cause audience members to at first feel pity for the performers in Barnum’s circus and then feel inspired by them. *The Shape of Water* takes elements of both of these representational strategies by having the audience feel pity for Elisa and the creature from the lab and then feel inspired by their forbidden love story, while simultaneously emphasizing Colonel Strickland’s monstrosity through the severing of several fingers.

My conclusion to this thesis will be divided into two sections: In the first part, I will summarize the developments gleaned through my analysis of the three films and expand on my arguments about the reasons the stories told in these film about disability are a prior consideration to the question of representational approaches. The second part

will indicate future directions for the research, as well as limitations to the approach I have taken in the development of this project.

The Stories We Tell

The chapter analyzing *The Greatest Showman* showcases several narrative elements constitute a recurring theme in all three films: the reliance on positioning disability as a type of “freakery.” While this chapter primarily focused on *The Greatest Showman* as a film that specifically worked to produce disability as a type of spectacle of freakery, this spectacle is also contained within the other films discussed in this thesis. *The Greatest Showman* reveals the ways history can be utilized by filmmakers and, more specifically, the way history comes to be interpellated by audience members. History isn’t neutral, but is rather a device that is used in the service of characterization. In the context of *The Greatest Showman*, history was used to sanitize the racist, eugenic background of the historical Barnum. I argued that this sanitization of Barnum resulted in a subsequent sanitization of the historical instances of freakery or, more specifically, the freak show. Such a sanitization of the freak show allows and enables it to enter into a more postmodern instantiation of it through the medium of film. Films such as *The Greatest Showman* do not come about solely on the basis of the representational choices made, but through a concert between the representational choices and the stories that are articulated about disability. By “types of stories,” I mean both the sanitization of Barnum (the story of the freak show is very much a story of disability), as well as the characterization or distinct lack thereof within the film. *The Greatest Showman* was very much advertised as a film of empowerment for the outcast and downtrodden; however,

the individuals it purported to uplift were so one-dimensional that many reviewers had no idea what their names even were.

This question of the types of stories that are told about disability was also central to the chapter on *The Shape of Water*. There was a significant backlash to the film from activists who saw it as an example of the lack of representation for disabled actors/actresses par excellence. However, the vast majority of critics focused their concerns of the film on this question of representation instead of what kind of stories the film was telling about disability. The film tells disabled women that they are simultaneously a fetishized object and someone who has to quite literally go outside their own species to find love and then, for them to live safely, must banish themselves from the world of humanity because disabled individuals are so far outside the norm that there couldn't ever be a place for them in the human world. This is related to the type of inspirational story found within *The Greatest Showman*, although this time, instead of an inspirational story of inclusion, it is an inspirational story of exclusion (both instantiations come about through casting disability within these spectacles of freakery). The film comes to represent a type of "cruel optimism," in which critics of the film contend that a number of social issues experienced by disabled individuals might somehow be solved if the representational concerns were to be addressed. However, these representational concerns become a contributing factor to the ways certain disabled individuals can experience violence as a result of representational approaches, chief among these being the casting of disability as a fetishized object, which has implications for interpersonal relationships of disabled individuals, as my arguments about devoteeism suggest.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, the subject of the third chapter, differed from the other two for a few distinct reasons. Firstly, both *The Shape of Water* and *The Greatest Showman* are both big, traditional Hollywood productions, while *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is an independent production cast with unknown actors from central Texas and filmed on a low budget. It had trouble getting distributed, although it did eventually receive substantial critical acclaim and is now credited as being hugely influential on the modern horror film. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* also differs in that it is squarely located within the horror genre, while the other films discussed are located within genres that, unlike horror, don't necessitate a particularized understanding of disability. Horror is a genre that almost certainly couldn't exist without drawing upon some form of disability-based tropes, as evidenced by the first clearly defined horror films, the 1930s Universal cycle of Gothic films. *Frankenstein* (1931), for example, uses eugenicist talking points about certain brain types being more susceptible to criminality when trying to find a brain to use for the construction of Frankenstein's creature. My analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* focused on the way certain representational tactics in relation to characters like Franklin, the Hitchhiker, and Leatherface position disability as monstrosity. However, the difference (with the exception of Franklin) is that these monsters aren't really redeemed or positioned in a way to make the viewer feel sympathy. In essence, while this is a film that very much still positions disability within a spectacle of freakery, it does so without a redeeming narrative arc. This is what allows horror to have more potential as a genre when it comes to representing disability because it forces a confrontation with the ways the cultural imaginary positions disability, a confrontation that I argue has within it a kernel of radical potential.

What my analysis of these three films points to is that current ways of representing disability within film reproduces disability as a spectacle of freakery, which results in a continuation of the (post)modern freak show. I argue that the stories that film chooses to tell about disability need to be interrogated for the implications they have on “real” disabled subjects. Scholarship that analyzes the representations of disability in film needs to take up the issues I have outlined in this thesis at the forefront.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

The limitations of the research I have undertaken in this thesis are interconnected with what I intend to point to as the direction future research can take. The primary limitation is how the project’s small scope, which is due to its being a thesis project. Given the arguments I have made about the nature of filmic representations of disability, the number of other potential films to which one could apply a similar lens of analysis is immense. A more substantive development of this project would necessitate not only historical work being done on each of the film genres discussed, but also a more comprehensive account of the history of disability within film.

A separate question that this project raises is, what should the role of filmmakers be when faced with criticisms about how disability is portrayed on film? This is the direction I would be most intrigued to see in future research. My account of the way disability is represented in film is one that even the most generous of critics would certainly designate as extremely pessimistic, which is why the discussion about the horror genre in relation to disability is so important. Because my analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is largely pessimistic, it is ironic that I see the horror genre as one that offers the most hope for future stories and representational approaches to disability.

As I explained in my discussion of that genre, due to the ways horror forces a confrontation with social and cultural issues in a way that almost no other genre can really do, there is a radicality—or at least radical potential—within horror. While it may not produce widespread social change, the types of confrontations encouraged by horror can force normative individuals to experience frustration, and in this frustration possibly produce new ways of relating to and with disabled subjects.

The pessimistic account I have generated about the way filmic structures currently position disability and disabled subjects should be more forcefully taken up by filmmakers. I am not suggesting that filmmakers should have a cessation of representing disability—erasure in that sense would likely exacerbate a number of the very real issues I have discussed within this thesis as being a basis for the continued violences experienced by a number of disabled individuals. Instead, filmmakers need to take seriously the question of what stories they are choosing to tell about disability and, related to that question, what the telos of the stories being told about disability have. If even one of the films I described were to more seriously deal with the types of narratives that are produced with disability, there would certainly be a potential for such a film to at least cut against the dangers of other representational approaches.

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