Freakery, Cult Films, and the Problem of Ambivalence

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CULT FILMS ACQUIRE A SELECT BUT DEVOTED group of fans who engage in repeated screenings, ritual behaviors, and specific reading strategies. These fans, or "cultists," gain subcultural capital by championing their object choices as more unique and supposedly less accessible than mass-marketed cinema. This sense of "uniqueness" is reflected by the films' perceived *difference* from "mainstream," non-cult movies. Yet, seldom discussed by cult film scholars is the significance of disability in the conceptualization of cult cinema, which I discuss in this article through two intertwined premises. The first premise explores how representations of disability as "freakish" spectacle, inspired by a long and problematic history of unequal viewing relations, are a common feature in many films taken up as cult objects. In this respect, I focus on cult films that feature performers with visible physical disabilities. These films, such as Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932), exemplify the freak show atmosphere that developed around the midnight movie and its cultish kin. My second premise argues that in order to support a subcultural attitude of difference, cult film reception often uses signifiers culturally associated with the stigmatization of disabled bodies. This specifically includes the portioning off of cult films as freakish anomalies, a distinction echoing socially prevalent attitudes that separate "abnormal" bodies from "normal" ones. Ableist perceptions of disability as abnormal and deviant thereby form a context for asserting the alleged abnormalcy and deviance of cult films themselves.

Cultists may use disability as a metaphor for their perceived sense of rebellion, but this temporary identification does little to challenge the social inequalities still faced by those traditionally linked to freakery: people with disabilities. Although cultists viewing freakery can ritualistically find pleasure in a bodily ambivalence that may potentially serve "transgressive" purposes in other contexts, said ambivalence facilitates a conservative response to freakery when set within the context of cult reception. The "oppositional" sense of aesthetic/subcultural difference through which cultists champion their object choices as mainstream cinema's "other" encourages the reception of abnormality as a socially deviant otherness. Although this binary logic seemingly allows few avenues for escape, a greater cultural awareness of the fluidity and variation within broad categories such as "disability" and "cult" may provide a productive alternate view.

Freakery and Ambivalence

In normative society, freakery is premised on unequal viewing and social relations. A non-disabled audience retains the power to subject a non-normative body (traditionally, that of a person with disabilities) to the ableist gaze as entertaining spectacle, enjoying a mixture of shock, horror, wonder, and pity. Although it has taken many different cultural forms

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throughout history, freakery's viewing dynamic is still very much with us in contemporary society, allowing non-normative bodies to remain largely inseparable from the specter of freakery in the popular consciousness. People with disabilities are frequently silenced, placed on display, curiously examined, and subjected to hostile, embarrassed, or pitying reactions from non-disabled people. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note that the unequal viewing relations associated with the freak show can thus be considered, in many ways, an exaggerated form of the more subtle, everyday stigmatization endured by people with disabilities ("Exploitations"). The connotation of spectacular objectification surrounding the term "freak" emphasizes the body's precedence over all other aspects of the enfreaked individual's identity. This possibly explains why few people with disabilities have attempted to reclaim the term as a label of pride in the same way that the terms "crip" and "cripple" (which arguably connote spectacle to a lesser degree) have been reappropriated for political empowerment. Mitchell and Snyder continue,

> The contemporary disabled body exists by virtue of a visual residue from the freak show past through a contrast that continues to conjure up the freak as potent image in our interpretive reservoir. Our [i.e., disabled people's] "humanization" is trapped in the necessity of referencing dehumanizing representations of prior histories. ("Exploitations")

Without a greater social acceptance of disability that could help despectacularize "abnormal" bodies, freakery thus continues to have potentially harmful consequences for people with disabilities.

Disability historians and scholars most often read the freak show as a twofold process of corporeal negotiation for nondisabled viewers, structured on two overlapping reactions to the spectacle of bodily abjection that the freak represents (Garland-Thomson 66; Adams 6–7; Chemers). On one hand, the freak is objectified through a voyeuristic gaze that explores the "abnormal" body. This reinforces the viewer's perceived sense of normalcy as essentially different—both literally and figuratively distanced—from the abject other. The threat of the freak is safely contained within one side of a normal/abnormal binary opposition. On the other hand, the freakish body is seen as too excessive to be contained by such a simple opposition. This reminds the viewer that freakishness is already at the center of one's being—that which must be abjected to form bodily and social boundaries. When those boundaries are rendered unstable, the freak cannot simply be contained as a monstrous other (Grosz 64–65; Shildrick 25; Adams 7). Composed of these simultaneous but paradoxical responses to the abjectness of freakery, freak show spectatorship exhibits a deep sense of ambivalence about the non-normative body. As Margrit Shildrick says, the freak "cannot be defined to the place of the other; it is not simply alien, but always arouses the contradictory responses of denial *and* recognition, disgust *and* empathy, exclusion *and* identification" (17).

If the spectacle of freakish bodily abjection yields a strong sense of ambivalence, then the cultural functions served by that ambivalence rest largely on certain reception contexts into which the freak is (re)inscribed. Ambivalence notwithstanding, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes that the most prevalent context for interpreting the freak in an ableist society is a conservative one that "eradicate[s] distinctions among a wide variety of [disabled] bodies, conflating them under the single sign of the freak-as-other" (62). Although disability is a fluidly shifting condition, when it is spectacularized as freakish, it is most often treated as a static social category. Freakery consequently disseminates the easily identifiable sign of disability as abnormal and otherly. This is emphasized by the fact that "born" (or congenital) freaks and "self-made" freaks (e.g., sword swallowers, tattooed people) are not seen as equals by a nondisabled audience. Unlike the nondisabled person who becomes a self-made freak by voluntarily relinquishing his or her "normal" social status, Andrea Stulman Dennett notes that the born freak is often seen

as possessing some measure of essential, authentic otherness (138). The otherness of disability seems more threatening than such "seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities" because disability transcends and supersedes those other marginalized social categories in its capacity to afflict anyone at any time (Garland-Thomson 14). Although certain types of bodily excess are, for example, often ascribed to women or nonwhites, visible physical disabilities can seem especially excessive, shocking, and socially "out of place" because disability has not yet achieved cultural currency comparable to gender and race as an accepted minority status. Moreover, the disabled body has historically remained at the margins of social acceptability because of the enduring stigma that visible physical difference equals social deviance. Disability becomes seen not as a form of physical variation, argues Garland-Thomson, but as "a personal flaw, and disabled people are the 'able-bodied' gone wrong" (49). Deviance from "normalcy" is attributed to the disabled individual, who is often figured as a morally corrupt (and potentially corrupting) element.[1]

These attributes have long made freakery a site of contestation over the boundaries of cultural taste. Freak show impresarios, for example, frequently appealed to educational, ethnographic, or medical discourses to justify the culturally "low" spectacle on display. Yet, according to Michael M. Chemers, some critics were apparently unconvinced by this huckster-like bid for legitimacy. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century protests against freak shows were "primarily founded in a sense of 'social decency' . . . offended not by the nature of the freak performance but by the very sight of persons with unusual bodies or behaviors."[2] These ableist calls for freakish bodies to be removed from public view may have inadvertently made freak shows seem "even naughtier and more abnormal" (Chemers), but these calls for removal were eventually bolstered by the rise of medicalization, which moved the now-pathologized body from the sideshow to medical institutions. As Garland-Thomson explains, the disabled body "shifted from its earlier visible, public position as strange, awful, and lurid spectacle to its later, private position as sick, hidden, and shameful," initiating the decline of the traditional freak show in the early twentieth century (78). When the disabled body is removed from public view, however, it becomes exoticized spectacle by virtue of its rarity, as Snyder and Mitchell remind us (158). If a disabled body does not "engage in public 'masquerades' of its own normalcy," then it will seem all the more abject for deviating from the bounds of "respectable" appearance or behavior, offending normative standards of "good" or "healthy" taste (163).

Overall, then, cultural forms that sensationally exhibit the disabled body, though fostering ambivalent sensations in the viewer, are commonly (re)contextualized as deviant themselves, as catering to "bad" or "unhealthy" tastes. Like disabled bodies, cultural forms emphasizing the abjectness of disability are considered "discordant in their unwillingness to replicate a more normative appearance." In Mitchell and Snyder's words, "[t]hat which breaks with the conventions of desirability at any historical moment garners an unseemly attention for itself as the very product of its deviance" (*Narrative* 9). As such, the ambivalent disabled body is most often reinscribed in conservative terms. A prominent example of this tendency can be seen in the othering faced by one of the institutions that replaced the traditional freak show: classical exploitation cinema.

Freakery and Classical Exploitation Cinema

The social histories of cinema and the traditional freak show overlapped in the early twentieth century as the newer form of entertainment replaced the older one but retained many of the same unequal viewing dynamics. Echoing the freak show, an economic capitalization on the public's desire to see and know more about the possibilities of the body

underlies the invention of cinema (Watson 72). The body-as-cinematic-spectacle soon came to occupy a social space once held by the freak show, appealing to viewers who frequented the same lower cultural stratum (carnivals, amusement parks, dime museums, etc.). The early "cinema of attractions" described by Tom Gunning, with its emphasis on frontal presentationality and spectacle over narrative, was an aesthetic mode especially attuned to displaying the body as spectacle. Spectacle, however, slowly became subsumed by narrative during the normalization of classical Hollywood cinema in the 1910s. During this period, performers with physical disabilities were increasingly made to "pass" as nondisabled characters in mainstream Hollywood films, obscuring their impairments behind clothing or prosthetics. Meanwhile, critics attacked films that seemed to revel too strongly in freakish spectacle (Norden 68, 71).

Consequently, the exhibitionism inherent in the earlier cinema of attractions came to dominate a parallel, distinct, and viable market that Eric Schaefer describes as classical exploitation cinema. These were independently produced and distributed films that flouted the self-censorship standards adopted by Hollywood's largest production and distribution organizations. Exploitation films existed to deliver sensationalistic spectacles that were forbidden or taboo in Hollywood films—any subject "considered at that time to be in bad taste" (5, 77–78). Lacking the continuity and causal motivation of Hollywood narratives, these films became notorious cinematic outlets for freakery during the first half of the twentieth century, capitalizing on the supposed deviance of the "abnormal" body. Physical difference, then, remained a strong source of spectacle at the edges of acceptability, but its deployment for shock value and titillation (instead of more "respectable" narrative purposes) fell into exploitation territory. For instance, non-normative bodies are framed in medium shots or close-ups that abruptly break classical continuity, with a film's typically slipshod construction resulting in awkward cuts to the inserted spectacle. As Snyder and Mitchell observe, this recurring trope worked in many exploitation genres under the assumption that "an audience will be simultaneously repulsed and riveted by the display of *any* disability on screen" (170). Actual people with disabilities are not always shown in exploitation films,[3] but simulated or not, "abnormal" bodies remain exhibited as deviant others, generating spectacle in deliberately bad taste.

Like the freak show, the reception of exploitation films metaphorically figured the non-normative body's place at the edges of normative society by playing in culturally low venues, such as urban grind houses. They were also sold by traveling showmen using many of the same ballyhoo techniques as freak show impresarios—including the use of lectures, pamphlets, exhibits, and other extra-filmic content (Schaefer 100, 103, 127). For example, when *Freaks* (1932) appeared on the exploitation circuit—often luridly retitled *Forbidden Love* or *Nature's Mistakes*—it toured with a hired crew of circus freaks, according to David F. Friedman (172). Likewise, the film's conjoined twins, Daisy and Violet Hilton, made promotional appearances at midnight showings of the drug film *Marihuana* (1936) (Schaefer 7). Also like freak shows, the films themselves attempted to justify their supposed social value by adopting an ersatz educational tone, often in the form of a "square-up": a prefatory message defending the film's moralistic examination of a particular social problem. However, the films were typically billed as "adults-only" shows, not only playing up the taboo nature of the spectacle but also "drawing a distinct line between exploitation and Hollywood product." As Schaefer explains, the practice of scheduling special midnight screenings of exploitation films emphasized this sense of the taboo (124–25) and would be a precursor to midnight screenings of cult films. Meanwhile, as a byproduct of these lines of differentiation cast between Hollywood and exploitation films, the seeming "respectability" and "innocence" of Hollywood films became an inadvertent cover for more insidious prejudicial disability representations within mainstream cinema.[4]

Perhaps the most well-known classical exploitation film is *Freaks* (1932), the story of a tight-knit community of sideshow denizens taking revenge on their nondisabled oppressors. It began as a mainstream Hollywood horror film, produced by MGM to compete with Universal's gothic horror cycle, but because it featured a cast populated by born freaks (most of whom appeared under their regular stage names, effectively playing themselves), critics deemed it "immoral," "perverse," and offensive to common standards of decency (Skal and Savada 176–81). Seen by both critics and moral watchdogs as a disreputably "low" product, the film failed at the box office in most areas and was quickly withdrawn from circulation by MGM amid calls for increased movie censorship. Attempting to recoup lost profits, the studio later licensed *Freaks* to exploitation filmmaker and distributor Dwain Esper, who added a square-up to the beginning of the film before road-showing it on the exploitation circuit. The film was also banned in a number of nations, adding to its notoriety and eventual cult reputation. In its alternately sympathetic and shocking depiction of disabled characters, *Freaks* has since become a major influence on other politically ambiguous cult films, including the work of Alejandro Jodorowsky (*Santa Sangre* [1989]), Werner Herzog (*Even Dwarfs Started Small* [1970]), and David Lynch (*Wild at Heart* [1990]). These filmmakers have all affectionately portrayed freaks as metaphors for social or psychic forces other than disability itself, implicitly using freakish physical difference to mark their films as more "transgressive" than others.

Although considerably more willing to humanize its disabled characters than classical exploitation films with a more straightforward genesis, Browning's film *Freaks* clearly emphasizes the distinctive and taboo spectacle of born freaks. This is illustrated by the fact that the few self-made freaks in the film (a sword-swallower and a fire-breather) are featured onscreen for only a few seconds in the wedding feast scene. Critics perceived the use of born freaks as a shocking and exploitative affront to good taste—a perception that would later descend to cultists who instead champion the film for those same reasons. Initial reviews complained that the film veered too closely to the traditional freak show's most disreputable qualities. For example, echoing the growing medicalization of disability, a *New York Times* reviewer wondered if the film should open "at the Rialto . . . or in, say, the Medical Centre" (qtd. in Hawkins 142). As Rachel Adams points out, such complaints were not unfounded, for the film is ultimately "structured to reproduce, not counteract, the sideshow's transformation of bodily difference into freakish spectacle." Its flimsy narrative offers little more than an excuse to assemble a series of short vignettes that exhibit each freak as he or she goes through the motions of daily life (66–67). The narrative freezes, for instance, as "Human Torso" Prince Randian lights a cigarette using only his mouth or when armless Frances O'Connor uses her feet to sip from a glass. Nondisabled people often engage in mundane conversation with the freaks in these scenes, but the speaker is typically off-screen, leaving the lone freak framed front and center in a stationary shot. Despite the film's sympathies with its titular characters, *Freaks*' stylistic emphasis on "abnormal" bodily spectacle over narrative more closely resembles the formal tenets of classical exploitation films than those of classical Hollywood cinema, arguably contributing to the hostile public and critical reception that marginalized it as a cinematic oddity. Indeed, the contiguity between *Freaks* and other exploitation films can be seen in *Tomorrow's Children* (1934), a sex hygiene film about the forced sterilization of a whole family with disabilities. The film includes a scene featuring Schlitzie, a man with microcephaly who previously appeared as one of the "pinheads" in *Freaks,* being sentenced in court to a vasectomy as the camera lingers on him excessively. Likewise, *Chained for Life* (1950) is built around the spectacle of the conjoined Hilton sisters, who were prominently featured in *Freaks*.

Like the cult films of later years, classical exploitation films use the visceral affect associated with the "body genres" theorized by Linda

Photo 1: Close-up of Prince Randian lighting his cigarette in *Freaks* (1932).

Williams, evoking reactions like those of freak show viewers (disgust, shock, horror, pity). This is especially possible because, as Snyder and Mitchell argue, the supposed abjectness of disability is "as crucial as gender" to delivering the "extreme sensation" of body genres (162–63). Exploitation films encourage the twofold, ambivalent response that nondisabled viewers have long had to freakery. The abnormal body is distanced and rejected as abject other, voyeuristically gazed upon as essentially different from that of "normal" viewers—a position encouraged by the moralistic tone of the films themselves. However, the films also prompt the abject body to be read as excessive, paradoxically entering the space of the viewer's identity through affective appeals that foreshorten the distance between spectator and spectacle by activating almost involuntary visceral responses to the corporeal abjection onscreen.

Because of their ambivalent qualities, Schaefer argues that exploitation films "often gave the impression of resistant or alternative positions to mainstream films," becoming "constructed as 'renegade' movies by the mainstream picture industry and, to some extent, by the exploiteers themselves" (39, 340). During the 1930s, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America viewed exploitation films as the other by which Hollywood should define itself in the public eye. To both elevate public taste and dominate the market by constructing the idea of the "better film," "narrative coherence, plausibility, and realism" were prescribed as "the hallmarks of acceptable screen fare," not excessive spectacle, discontinuity, and a pseudo-educational tenor (156). Narrative wholeness and continuity served a normalizing function by subjecting the "partiality" and "incompleteness" of bodily spectacle to its demands (which exploitation films categorically refused to meet). Consequently, the polarizing discourses of cleanliness and health espoused within exploitation films became applied to the films themselves by Hollywood's industrial organizations (144). Inadvertently or not, exploitation filmmakers assisted in this process of distinction by promoting exploitation films as unique and shocking oddities, as though the films themselves were "freakish" in both form and content. A sense of otherness, linked to excessive images of bodily difference, therefore perpetuated signifiers of health (and by proxy, disability) around which to structure oppositions between different taste cultures.

Schaefer explains that classical exploitation films ceased to be marketable in the late 1950s as censorship restrictions were loosened and

Hollywood's vertical integration crumbled. This allowed taboo subjects to be addressed more openly and distributed more widely, such as in teen-pics and European art films. Adults-only restrictions were less often enforced, allowing younger viewers to access previously forbidden sights, and pedagogical appeals were no longer needed to justify the viewing of exploitative spectacle (327–37). In the years that followed, however, the "renegade," otherly qualities associated with "unhealthy" spectacles of bad taste began being associated with cult films, which took up many of the bodily taboos formerly the domain of classical exploitation.

Freakery and Cult Films

Cult cinema is most often associated today with the "midnight movie" phenomenon that J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum explain emerged in the early 1970s as an outgrowth of 1960s underground film culture. Its development was also linked to the proliferation of a camp aesthetic that ironically privileges excessive forms of bad taste associated with cultural debris (39–76).[5] The burgeoning bohemian counterculture was a considerable impetus behind cult cinema's emergence, bespeaking a generational shift away from the bourgeois conformity and respectability associated with Hollywood fare. The cult-viewer demographic was and is primarily white, male, middle-class, moderately to well-educated, and roughly between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Unlike some working-class members of the counterculture, cultists typically have enough economic and cultural capital to consume and appreciate films as aesthetically "discerning" viewers, albeit channeling their capital for subcultural purposes. As Mark Jancovich observes, the high cultural reading strategies (irony, camp, excess) adopted by art film aficionados overlap with the reading strategies employed by cultists. This allows cultists to draw on bourgeois cultural competencies (e.g., knowledge of film history, form, and style), even as they attempt to distinguish themselves from middle-class conformity and highbrow aestheticism by privileging culturally low content as a source of subcultural capital (310–12). This process of distinction has led cult films to be "specifically defined according to a subcultural ideology in which it is their supposed difference from the 'mainstream' which is significant, rather than any other unifying feature" (308). This oppositional sense of aesthetic/cultural difference reflects a particular social narrative—the subculture's rebellion from an older generation—that arguably reproduces the stigmatization of corporeal difference through signifiers culled from wider social narratives about the taboo nature of "freakish" abnormalcy.

Before discussing how those signifiers inform cult reception, I must first mention how freakery typically operates within cult films themselves. Often portrayed in the form of minor characters or human elements of a film's mise en scène, disability has become a recurring trope in cult cinema because it falls outside normative ordering systems. Freakish characters are usually displayed in close-up or medium shots, occupying a central position in the frame, with other (nondisabled) characters' looks sometimes guiding our gaze toward them as the narrative momentarily pauses to allow contemplation of their "shocking" corporeal difference. *The Holy Mountain* (1973), for example, visually depicts a dwarf with incomplete limbs befriending the film's protagonist. The camera zooms in to a two-shot as the protagonist curiously watches the dwarf light a cigarette using his partial arms, reminiscent of the scene in *Freaks* when the narrative stops to watch limbless Prince Randian lighting a cigarette. In a more obvious case, *The Freakmaker* (1974) features a scene in which several college students visit a traveling sideshow exhibiting born freaks. The camera is positioned from the freak show audience's perspective while watching the freaks perform for several minutes, replicating the traditional freak show's unequal viewing dynamic. It may not necessarily be a conscious effort on a filmmaker's part to depict the freak in a potentially detrimental manner, but the framing of freaks as spectacle nevertheless reproduces culturally ingrained viewing

Photo 2: A disabled man (Basilio González) lights a cigarette with The Thief (Horácio Salinas) in *The Holy Mountain* (1973).

relations that isolate non-normative bodies as sites onto which social anxieties about otherness and deviance are projected.

Despite the ambivalent reactions they provoke, the disabilities of these characters are commonly portrayed as totalizing markers of difference, and physically normative characters are almost always present to provide a stark contrast between "normal" and "abnormal." This contrast figures both sides of the binary as descending into caricature (Grant 134), with disabled characters remaining figured as abnormal by virtue of their appearance. Although some cult films attempt to portray freaks sympathetically, they frequently do so by showing them as social outsiders or threats to conformity. In films such as *El Topo* (1970) and *I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse* (1973), for example, clear distinctions are drawn between the freaks (deformed underground dwellers and a mystical dwarf, respectively) and the able-bodied cultures that will not accept them. In order to prevent social undesirables from entering their midst, the corrupt townspeople in *El Topo* slaughter the innocent freaks as they escape their subterranean prison and descend on the settlement. Similarly, in *Crazy Horse,* the short-statured Marvel (Hachemi Marzouk) neither understands nor conforms to the unspoken mores of French bourgeois society and is consequently whisked away to perform in a circus sideshow.

According to Mitchell and Snyder, the disabled body is often used as a metaphor for nondisabled people's concerns because, unlike the "unmarked" normative body, disability "offers narrative the illusion of grounding abstract knowledge within a bodily materiality" (*Narrative* 64). Because people with disabilities already occupy a marginalized position within society, the freakish body operates in cult films as tautological justification for the abnormalcy and deviance conveyed in such metaphors, naturalizing the ableism that allows disability to remain a signifier of otherness. Certainly, some directors may metaphorically identify with their disabled characters by using freakery for more politically ambiguous purposes than shock value alone. Still, I would argue that freakish spectacle is ultimately reinterpreted in more traditional terms through its subcultural reception. For many spectators, it serves as a visual shorthand for "strangeness" or "weirdness," making the films seem less accessible to "normal" tastes. Assuming that freakery will offend normative tastes and thereby transgress middle-class conformity, many cultists therefore champion freakish imag-

ery to symbolize their subcultural differentiation from "normal" cinemagoers.

Although non-cult films, such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) or *Mask* (1985), may use images of disabilities or deformities that can initially seem shocking, the affect of such imagery typically dissipates as it becomes subordinated to normalizing narrative demands.[6] In cult films, however, freakery is used excessively and in "bad taste," spawning celebration by fans. Fairly representative is an appreciative review of *Freaks* from the *Mutant Reviewers from Hell* Web site that, despite noting the film's attempts to humanize the freaks, warns that it is unfit for viewers with more delicate, mainstream tastes; Justin writes,

> *Freaks* is a film with *actual* circus sideshow freaks . . . one of the main reasons why it is so scary (and why it was banned in the US for so many years). You are simultaneously repulsed, attracted, and fascinated (kinda like the way you pick at a scab) by the inhabitants of this film. . . . It's handled with a delicate touch; the freaks are portrayed with sympathy and humanity. But . . . there are scenes in here that will haunt you till the day you die—doesn't that sound like your grandpa talking? In fact, don't see this movie. You couldn't handle it at all. Go rent the placid *Scream* for a nice, calm evening.

Cult cinema's spectacular emphasis on corporeal difference encourages ambivalent pleasures (leaving viewers "simultaneously repulsed, attracted, and fascinated"), but the "partiality" of spectacle visually reinscribes non-normative bodies as deviant others. This bolsters the cultist's rebellious cultivation of "deviant" tastes and "taboo" object choices. What separates the portrayal of freakery in cult films from freakery in non-cult films is therefore primarily a matter of stylistic excess, which is subsequently taken up by a subculture attempting to differentiate itself from a perceived paradigm of normalcy. Although viewing freakish imagery may ostensibly abject the borders between self/other and normal/abnormal, those blurred boundaries are re-solidified by the overarching reception of cult films themselves as otherly and abnormal.

Indeed, cult film reception recalls the major ways that society deals with the physically anomalous, as identified by Garland-Thomson. Cult films are assigned to totalizing social categories, removed or segregated into places set apart from normative society, labeled as "dan-

Photo 3: In *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), director Werner Herzog uses people of short stature as a metaphor for the 1960s counterculture.

gerous" or out of control, and incorporated into social rituals (33–37). For example, like in the freak shows and exploitation films that came before, cult viewing is separated into a different time and space associated with a lower social stratum than "normal" entertainment, such as the consumption of cult movies at midnight in impoverished urban areas. Although the spectacular qualities of cult cinema may prolong corporeal ambivalence, they also contain that ambivalence as safely set apart from mainstream cinema within an otherly cinematic niche.

Cult films are often "freakish" in form as well, marked by hybridity as cross-generic products eluding easy classification. Likewise, they are typically filled with deviations from classical cinematic standards in both form and content. For example, *Freaks*—a film whose reception historically bridges the eras of classical exploitation and midnight movies—has been called "a hybrid monster that yokes together elements of the live performance of circus and carnival, early cinema, as well as later innovations in editing and camera work" (Adams 64–65). Mikita Brottman deems it "*formally* monstrous," not only falling between short subject and feature-length duration, but also containing an uneasy blend of horror, documentary, and melodrama (19). In addition, the square-up added during the film's exploitation run has been described by Oliver Gaycken as "a kind of monstrous appendage" that marks the film as different from classical Hollywood cinema (78). Because of such peculiarities in the makeup of many cult films, it is perhaps little surprise that cultists obsessively analyze and dissect the details of their object choices, much like the disabled body is subjected to control via the clinical gaze.

Disabled bodies can, however, also be perceived as particularly abnormal by virtue of being displayed within cult films contextualized as such. *Forbidden Zone* (1980), for example, features short-statured actor Hervé Villechaize as its villain. Although this casting choice may intentionally add to the film's outlandish atmosphere, his disability is framed as especially "abnormal" through its exhibition in a film that already fosters a strong sense of strangeness through its formal eccentricities. (These include a disorienting blend of live-action and animation, fantasy and slapstick, musical numbers, and low-budget artifice.) The metaphoric relationship between "freakish" films and "freakish" bodies thus becomes mutually reinforcing on an audience-reception level.

Cultists may construct their own identities around the spectacle of difference in order to achieve subcultural capital, but they often do so without critically engaging the politics of disability representation. Although most cultists are themselves nondisabled, their opposition to middle-class conformity and "good taste" derives from what was originally a countercultural stance based on superficial stereotypes of freakishness. During the midnight movie era, cultists were often middle-class members of the youth counterculture who prized "weirdness" and honorifically self-identified as "freaks." They both shouldered and celebrated the stigmas attached to socially marginalized people (though not specifically people with disabilities) as a source of opposition. The rediscovery and longstanding popularity of *Freaks,* for example, is often attributed to the allegiances of countercultural audiences who identified as "freaks" themselves (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 306; Hawkins 164; Brottman 21; Adams 140–45). Non-normative dress, appearance, or behavior became associated with countercultural "freaks" and, in the cult context, sometimes found expression in cultists dressing up like film characters or participating in unruly viewing behavior. A *New York Times* review of *El Topo,* for example, describes the film's fans as "the kids in capes and wide-brimmed hats, the *El Topo* freaks" (qtd. in Hoberman and Rosenbaum 96). Common social narratives about youth subcultures rebelling against conformist parent generations here intersect with broader social narratives, inadvertently encouraging the disabled body's stigmatization by linking "transgressive" physical difference to social deviance and marginalization.

As is a potential problem when a minority group or subculture appropriates a derogatory term for its own uses, cultists are sometimes

Photo 4: An armless man (Ignacio Martínez España) and legless man (Eliseo Gardea Saucedo) join forces as one gunfighter in *El Topo* (1970).

pejoratively deemed "freaks" by non-cultists. This indicates a disjunction between cultists' use of the term to connote rebellious nonconformity and non-cultists' use connoting a pitiable or punishable failure to conform. The disjunction persists because, as Henry Jenkins argues, "[t]he fan, whose cultural preferences and interpretive practices seem so antithetical to dominant aesthetic logic, must be represented as 'other,' must be held at a distance so that fannish taste does not pollute sanctioned culture" (19). Evoking the treatment of people with disabilities, cultists are frequently regarded paternalistically by non-cultists and even pathologized as neurotic or psychotic because of their "strange" rituals and stranger object choices. For example, cultists are sometimes perceived as abnormally sensitive to shocking imagery, occasionally leading to moral panics over the "unhealthy" psychological impact of media effects. Cultural biases evolve into a medical imperative under the assumption that fans are susceptible to becoming addicts or psychopaths (Bragg 90, 97).

In order to resist these stigmatizing notions that come from outside the subculture, cultists can reassert the countercultural (i.e., oppositional, not disempowered) connotation of "freak" by appealing to ironic reading strategies. With irony, they can effectively distance themselves, as privileged (nondisabled) possessors of the ableist gaze, from the freakish objects of that gaze—even if they still identify on some level with the freak's marginalization. Although the spectacle of freakish difference was (and, in some respects, still remains) considered an affront to social decency, Chemers notes that mainstream society's opposition to freakery has, since the 1960s liberation period, also become "critical of the freak show on the grounds that it is an exploitation of disabled individuals." The exploitation of freaks therefore remains *especially* taboo in a climate of increased political correctness. Consequently, cult films that employ freakish spectacle can seem, in the eyes of cultists, all the more oppositional to mainstream society's mores. The shockingly "bad" taste exhibited in many cult films is, according to Jeffrey Sconce, "precisely why such films are so vociferously championed by certain segments of the paracinematic audience, which then attempts to 'redeem' the often suspect pleasures of these films through appeals to ironic detachment" (383–84).

Following Jacinda Read's discussion of misogyny and a backlash against feminism in cult cinema reception, I would argue that cultists are among a middle-class, moderately edu-

cated demographic who recognize that freakery is politically incorrect but still take pleasure in such otherwise disreputable spectacle. They do this even as they deflect potential accusations of prejudice by invoking their ironic distance from the films, viewing political correctness as a sort of mainstream/majority viewpoint that is playfully rejected in order to gain subcultural capital. This assertion of bad taste becomes seen within the subculture as an active and empowering show of oppositionality, allowing cultists to resist the external suggestion that their subcultural difference marks them as pitiable and disempowered (62–63). In this light, the bodily ambivalence provoked by viewing freakish abjection may be especially pleasurable for cultists, spurring repeated viewings, because it speaks to their own anxieties as a socially privileged demographic temporarily occupying a liminal position between high and low culture, on the margins of social acceptability. By asserting their active, discerning taste for spectacles that posit disability as threateningly otherly, cultists reassert their authority to subject "real" (born) freaks to their knowing gaze, even at the risk of betraying their metaphoric identification with freakishness. Ironic distance therefore allows cultists to happily acknowledge freakery as deliberately provocative or the product of a less "enlightened" time. This acknowledgement, however, does not absolve them of the ableist biases that they disavow on the one hand yet still reinforce as a point of subcultural pride. For example, cultists can read *Freaks*' depiction of murderous freaks taking revenge on their nondisabled oppressors as a ridiculously excessive put-on intended to shock "normal" viewers, knowing full well that Browning's film plays on cultural fears about disability as it turns squarely toward the horror genre in its final scenes. However, even while recognizing the film as excessive, quaint, and politically incorrect in its portrayal of disabled characters, cultists can simultaneously prize the horrific revenge fantasy—especially its continued ability to unnerve audiences—as a reflection of their own subcultural aesthetic.

Consequently, invoking ironic distance from the freakish content of many cult films does not eliminate their visceral effect on the viewer or render that lurid content progressive by virtue of being read ironically. In contemporary incarnations of the freak show, politically "enlightened" viewers may find it difficult to maintain a purely objectifying gaze in the face of such apparent appeals to bad taste. However, as Mitchell and Snyder argue, this awareness of one's own gaze does not subvert freakery's unequal viewing relations; it merely shifts them into a different register ("Exploitations"). In other words, ironic distance does not fundamentally challenge the premises of freakery itself but instead renews the freak's power to shock and fascinate. In camp readings, for example, normalcy may be parodied, but camp (like cult) can also mock and re-objectify the freak by virtue of his or her inclusion within the text being ridiculed. *The Crippled Masters* (1979), for example, is a Taiwanese kung-fu film that has acquired a cult reputation for its sensationalistic premise of two disabled outcasts (one armless, one legless) who learn kung fu and fight back against the cruel warlord who disabled them. It is easy to mock the text's "badness" through a camp reading, from its minimal narrative and constant use of freakish spectacle to the dubious dialogue, poor dubbing, exaggerated sound effects, and wildly implausible fight scenes. Yet, in doing so, one risks also mocking the disabled actors through their presence in such a deliberately exploitative picture. The film seems especially campy because its use of freakery is in such obvious bad taste, but the ironic distance implied in camp does not supplant the feelings of ambivalence associated with freakish spectacle. An enthusiastic review at the cult movie Web site Badmovies.org, for example, celebrates it precisely for its campy qualities and outlandish premise, concluding that "[a]ll of this makes for a great deal of mindless fun which should offend your sensibilities, but be impossible not to chuckle during." Reader responses similarly suggest the ironic sense of bad taste shared by the film's fans, such as "within seconds you will both laugh at the stupidity and be utterly

[ashamed] of this [spectacle]," or "[My friends] thought it kicked ass, as I do. . . . I recommend this movie to anyone who wants to laugh at the less fortunate," or "The first time I watched it, riveted, I thought, 'This is some sick shit!' The second time, I thought it a work of genius. I was right both times" (Borntreger).

As Chuck Kleinhans observes, camp always "operates within the larger boundaries of a racist, patriarchal, bourgeois [and ableist] culture," so although it may "define itself in difference to the dominant culture," only certain reception contexts can complete camp's potential for subversion (195). Yet, in the overlapping context of cult reception, the freakish body remains read as a deviant and "transgressive" marker of otherness through which viewers can assert their oppositional aesthetic in a bid for subcultural cachet. Furthermore, following the binary logic of cult subcultures, actual social change that could gradually remove essentialist stigmas from the visually "abnormal" body would also remove the taboo and supposedly oppositional connotations of those bodies. Consequently, there would be little incentive for cultists to actively champion political change for people with disabilities without imperiling a major source of subcultural distinction.

Even if many cult films contain disability imagery that challenges normative ordering systems, such imagery is not present to specifically address disabled viewers, instead remaining a site on which nondisabled viewers project social and cultural anxieties. As Carrie Sandahl notes,

> [p]eople with disabilities find it especially frustrating when other marginalized groups use disability metaphors to signify their own "otherness" without an accompanying consideration of actual people with disabilities. . . . Whether used as a negative or positive metaphor, the use of disability as a dramaturgical device tends to erase the particularities of lived disability experiences. (15)

Despite reading freakish spectacle as a source of ambivalent pleasures, cultists have no actual desire to be born freaks, nor do they wish to permanently assume the stigmas traditionally attached to people with disabilities. Nondisabled people who identify with or as freaks, such as the middle-class segments of the counterculture who popularized cult cinema, therefore "conveniently erase the privilege that they continue to wield" (Adams 140). Despite dabbling in otherness, they can reassert their socially prescribed normalcy at any time, unlike many of the actual people with disabilities exhibited in cult films. Essentialist perceptions of disability may thus help explain the appeal of cult films that display freakish bodies, but the use of those perceptions for furthering subcultural capital ultimately does little to challenge the social inequalities that engender those prejudices.

If, however, those inequalities are addressed through a wider social recognition that disability is not merely a static and otherly category, but rather a fluidly shifting and fully acceptable social identity, then a small opening for (sub) culturally rethinking freakery in cult cinema can develop. In a society more conscious of its own ableist biases, the ambivalence provoked by viewing bodily abjection may be increasingly read as highlighting the physical variation shared by both spectators and spectacle, not just the ostensibly polarizing differences. Although the "freakish" body would still remain exhibited as spectacle, its unruly and excessive qualities could point toward the openness and indeterminacy of all bodies. It would thereby remain capable of violating the established boundaries of "good taste," retaining its justification for subcultural celebration. The challenge for cultists is to rethink disability as a defiant and transgressive trait without routinely typing it as a stigmatizing signifier of otherness.

Because "cult" is commonly figured as the other of "mainstream" cinema, a less binary view of the cult subculture is also required. Although cultists broadly posit their difference as a sort of communal opposition to all things non-cult, Jancovich argues that they less often acknowledge the intra-subcultural struggles for distinction and the cultural competencies drawn from non-cult culture (312–15). Complicating the binaries prevalent in cult reception thus requires

that cultists accept not only the internal diversity of their subculture(s) but also the influences of "high" and "mainstream" culture on their reading strategies and chosen films. Although this rethinking of disability and cult is not a comprehensive solution to the problematic uses of freakery in cult cinema, it may foster a more inclusive cultism that allows us to reconceive cultists' attraction to freakery in ways that exceed easy condemnation. As disability slowly gains greater social acceptance, it remains to be seen whether cultists will opt for this more nuanced, perhaps less confrontational way of viewing their professed difference, but it may provide one option for questioning the ableism prevalent within much cult reception.

NOTES

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1. The supposedly corrupting nature of freaks can be seen in the case of Julia Pastrana (1834–60), an excessively hairy Mexican dancer billed as a "bear woman" and a "nondescript" during her career in freakery. According to Jan Bondeson, during her tour of Germany, obstetricians objected to Pastrana's public exhibition "for fear that pregnant women might miscarry at the sight of her, or even have children exactly like her through a 'maternal impression'" (225).

2. The early-twentieth-century establishment of municipal "ugly laws" was another manifestation of this ableist sense of decency, banning physically "unsightly" or "disgusting" people from appearing in public.

3. For example, drug films such as *Marihuana* (1936) and *Assassin of Youth* (1937) usually have nondisabled actors playing insane addicts, whereas sex hygiene films such as *The Black Stork* (1917) and *The Naked Truth* (1925) more likely show actual people with deformities or developmental disabilities (the alleged result of venereal disease).

4. Classical Hollywood films often depicted disabled characters as tragic victims, villainous avengers, comic bumblers, desexualized innocents, noble cripples, or various mixtures of these broad stereotypes. Because these portrayals appeared in more verisimilar contexts than outlandish or fantastic premises, they were more likely to be naturalized than the blatantly sensationalistic disability portrayals found in exploitation films. Martin F. Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation* provides the most comprehensive history of Hollywood's disability representations.

5. As Greg Taylor notes, cultism is focused on "the identification and isolation of marginal artworks, or aspects and qualities of marginal artworks, that (though sorely neglected by others) meet the critic's privileged aesthetic criteria" (15). With camp, however, the spectator "revels in the interpretation/transformation process while often placing little stake in the initial selection of mass objects" (16). Camp and cult overlap considerably, especially when camp value becomes one reading strategy used by cultists in redeeming "bad taste" objects.

6. In *The Best Years of Our Lives,* for example, Homer Parrish (Harold Russell) returns home from World War II as a bilateral amputee equipped with hooks, but the film gradually introduces viewers to his disability by showing how other characters react to it. As Stephen Tropiano argues, the film trained viewers in how to react to returning veterans during their rehabilitation process (25). The narrative may halt as Homer performs everyday tasks such as lighting a cigarette or drinking a beer, but rather than being played for shock value (as in *Freaks* and exploitation films), these moments of spectacle serve to reintegrate Homer into society instead of segregating him and leaving him standing outside society like a freak.

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