

Public
Reception
of Real
Disability

The Case of



Tod Browning, center, with cast members of *Freaks*.

Prince Randian, the "Living Torso," in a scene from *Freaks*.



The thirty-year ban on the 1932 circus horror film *Freaks* illustrates how deeply we share cultural notions about the disabled body and people with disabilities. The film's documentary-style exposé of images of "abnormal" bodies enjoying daily life behind the scenes of a circus sideshow greatly engaged movie audiences, but they were simultaneously outraged by its horror-genre treatment of the same bodies collectively avenging themselves upon "normal" bodies. Ultimately, viewers were engaged through revulsion, not empathy. Contradictory and shifting notions about what constituted "normalcy," especially normal sexuality, were reinforced. The construction of "freak" was in transition. No longer a celebrated exotic attraction, it was becoming a pathological, scientific specimen. Many audience members were moved to action to protest the film.

The movie's unusual social construction of "freaks" eating, joking, proposing marriage, even giving birth—in short, behaving as humans capable of "normal" embodied actions and desires—defied commercial circus conventions. People were accustomed to promotions of "real" sideshows through amusing stories about their exotic origins. They expected to see them on display like museum pieces or popular performers. The film's subsequent violent construction—of the same "abnormal" characters engaging "abnormally" in the maiming of a body of a female star—also broke with circus conventions.

By the early 1930s, society had moved concretely into the age of movies and away from live attractions such as circuses and vaudeville

shows. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, circuses and carnival sideshows had given people with disabilities a slight amount of honored status and celebrity, according to freak-show scholar Robert Bogdan. When freak shows were in their heyday, well-to-do citizens frequently collected pictures and postcards of famous people, including famous carnival "freaks" such as celebrity Siamese twins.

However, that bit of celebrity status had changed as carnivals and sideshows lost their appeal. The public began to revile, not revere, representations of people with different disabilities, as evidenced in their response to

FREAKS

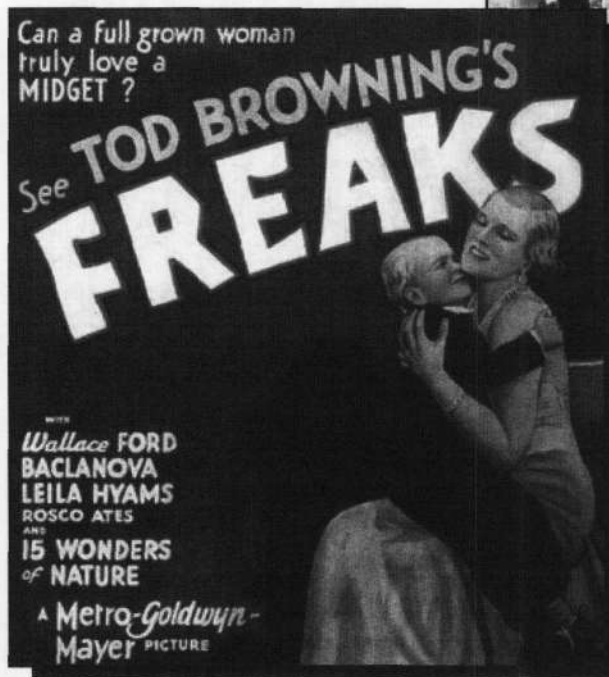
By ROBIN LARSEN and BETH A. HALLER

A promotional poster from *Freaks*.

the movie *Freaks*. Circus advertising protected audiences from realizing that people with different bodies had the same sensual bodily experiences as everyone else, Bogdan has observed. The freak show institution allowed circusgoers the pleasures of looking at freaks and being fascinated with them, but they were also protected from feeling guilty about it.

Freaks was perhaps the first Hollywood movie to assemble a full cast of real sideshow people and expose audiences to their "normal" sensual desires. Also affecting the reception of the movie was the fact that *Freaks* was a commercial paradox, a mixture of genres caught between poorly understood changes in formulae. Circus cycle movies were becoming passé, and the sound horror cycle was too new in 1931 and 1932 for producers to predict the differences between profitable "shocks" and "thrills" and money-losing revulsion and terror (Meehan).

In this article, we explore the public rejection of *Freaks*, a film in which almost all of the major characters were people with disabilities. We seek to tie that public reaction to American cultural notions of the physical body and theories about fears of disability, as well as to describe the movie's interplay with shifts in the social construction of disability.



The Making of *Freaks*

Why did MGM, the glamour studio, decide to make *Freaks*? Why did it misjudge the movie's capacity to offend? The most often cited reason is commercial ambition. Producer Irving Thalberg is said to have wanted to make a full-scale horror movie to compete with the successes of Universal's new horror cycle. He is reported to have allowed *Freaks* director Tod Browning free rein because his direction of *Dracula* had reaped Universal such high profits. In an MGM sales memo, Thalberg predicted during production that he had a sure hit: "Get the boss started on the subject of Tod



The banquet scene from *Freaks*.

Browning's 'Freaks' and he'll keep it up for hours. We don't remember when he has been more enthusiastic about anything than he is right now about this one. Which, so far as we're concerned, is a one hundred percent

guarantee that in *Freaks* we have one of our standard box office properties for 1932" ("A Weird One" 2).

Browning adapted the movie from a 1923 *Munsey's Magazine* story "Spurs" that MGM had bought in the mid-1920s and initially rejected as too peculiar. The fact that the studio let Browning dust it off for a rewrite in the spring of 1931 shows that Thalberg cherished his power over a broader range of sexual bodily representations than the studio usually depicted, even to the point of picking previously unsuitable material. In the print story, a "dwarf" marries a gold-digging European trapeze artist and terrorizes her into a state of slavery; but for the

film, Browning cast a stereotypical blonde sex goddess and a perfectly proportioned miniature star and made the vengeance collective. Studio editors increased the shock value further by changing the beginning and the end of the movie script to stress the freaks' violence, at the same time making sure they excised all direct depictions of it. These changes from the original story are more evidence of the studio's use of *Freaks* to shock the censors of the time but to stay technically within the rules. The decision to produce *Freaks* can also be interpreted as the studio's reaction, conscious or unconscious, against the increasingly moral mood of reformers and the Studio Relations Committee's tightening Code enforcement (Schumach).

Browning and Thalberg made decisions about how to modify the story to make the production profitable just as they had in their other productions, according to research on their work styles. Thomas Schatz has stated that Browning did not like MGM's success formula of stars and glamour, and that Thalberg liked to "try an offbeat project now and then, and some of them hit, as did 'Tarzan the Ape Man,' and some, like Tod Browning's bizarre circus story, 'Freaks,' did not" (120).

Schatz explains that *Freaks* director Browning interpreted the screenplay on an elite level as a clever fable about the cruelty of "normal" people confronted with the humanity of "abnormal" people and on a naive level as a backstage circus movie thriller, drawing on his years with the circus in his youth and his MGM silent circus movies with Lon Chaney during the 1920s.

A short-stature "star" was also instrumental in getting *Freaks* to the screen. The popular diminutive actor Harry Earles had urged MGM to purchase the original magazine story (Brosnan). He became the male lead of *Freaks*. The plot focuses on the obsessive love of Earles's character Hans for the statuesque blonde trapeze artist Venus, played by Russian-born Olga Baclanova. The movie also features such myriad disabilities as people with dwarfism, undersized heads,

or missing extremities. In fact, Browning cast internationally to find people with disabilities for *Freaks*, including a New Guinea man without limbs named Prince Randian, who performed as the "Living Torso" (Schulberg).

The love story in the circus setting quickly turns menacing. After a lively, naturalistic opening backstage, where real sideshow performers cheerfully do their rehearsing and socializing, the second half of the film is taken up with sinister plots and counterplots, culminating in a seemingly endless slithering crawl through sheets of rain and mud, during which the same characters hunt down the nondisabled female star with knives.

The film's centerpiece is a horrifying wedding banquet for Hans and Venus, from which she flees in terror and disgust after the guests begin chanting ritualistically, "You're one of us, one of us, one of us." The epilogue shows Venus indeed to be "one of us" as she performs her own sideshow act as the "Hen Woman" after she is disabled by the freaks' attack. The banquet in *Freaks* is one of the three most frequently mentioned terror-evoking scenes. Luis Bunuel is said to have used it to derive his wedding banquet scene in *Viridiana*, and Robert Altman has a detective utter the chant during a police interrogation in *The Player*.

Producers of the time assumed that salacious and sensationally shot sequences and racy language were sure draws for some audiences, and often inserted forbidden items to test their allure by whether censors would demand their deletion (Schumach). For instance, Hans stresses his "abnormal" sexual desire by insisting to Venus that he may be small but he has feelings like any other man. This dialogue may not have been too explicit to delete but it undoubtedly disturbed some viewers.

After Browning finished *Freaks* in late December 1931, it underwent a series of cuts and changes. Only a partial public record of these changes remains. Studio chief Thalberg hired script editor Leonard Praskins to make the first extensive changes to

prepare the movie for its preview in Hollywood in early January 1932 (Wood). Nonetheless, the preview was a debacle. "Spectators got up from their seats and ran . . . to the nearest exit" ("Freaks Rouse Ire" 9). MGM had to declare *Freaks* unreleasable on its original date, January 20. Even earlier, exhibitors' trade magazines advised managers not to rent *Freaks* unless they viewed it first ("Looking Ahead"). From January 8 to February 13, Thalberg subjected the film to a second round of cuts and substitutions. Meanwhile, its Hollywood preview version premiered in mid-January in San Diego, sparking angry letters to MGM ("Freaks Rouse Ire"). The movie's release was not publicly rescheduled to February 20 until one week beforehand. The final version was shortened by thirty minutes, so the studio could save on shipping and theaters could economize on running costs by running it as a double-billing. Its repackaging at a sixty-minute length was intended to avoid further rejection.

A record of dialogue cuts containing changes that Thalberg helped script editor Praskins make is at the Library of Congress. Film scholar Bret Wood compared Thalberg's version with Browning's original shooting script in a chapter on *Freaks* in his biography about the director. Wood observes that the revised version added a barker's spiel at the beginning and end, which sensationalizes the freaks and their violence. In the original script Browning directed, the freaks accidentally maim Venus in the dark melee. They mutilate her lover Hercules offstage so that his voice changes from bass to falsetto. Today, these original outcomes seem more humane than having Venus intentionally maimed, but many viewers at that time would have considered even the hint of castration to be in bad taste, vulgar, and immoral. The revisions also used a "happy ending" to regulate "appropriate" sexual pairings. The final "cleaned up" version has the "midget" Hans marrying his old "midget" sweetheart, Frieda, and moving with the circus to Australia, along

with Venus and Hercules, who also become sideshow performers and continue to be lovers (Wood).

Overall, Wood considers Browning's version of *Freaks* a humane text that explained why sideshow people adopt an all-for-one and one-for-all morality code. However, he has noted that most reviewers had very paradoxical reactions. They considered the movie a sophisticated fable with symbolic nuances for insiders, but they frequently stressed the movie's abundance of real, abnormal bodily representations and its scarcity of images of nondisabled stars. They also noted the perversity of Hans's sexual obsession about Venus, of the freaks' sexual repartee and innuendo, and of the "shock" ending that turned a star into a "freak" (Wood 27).

The reaction of the film crewmembers to working with the cast of actors with disabilities should have been a major clue to studio executives that the public might recoil from the film.

If Thalberg and Browning misjudged the production's potential for audience revulsion, others at MGM did not. Scriptwriter Samuel Marx said later that "a protest against making the movie was discussed, but director Jack Conway shot down a march on the producer's office when he said, 'Irving's (Thalberg) right so often he's earned the right to be wrong'" (132). Articles appeared in the trade press during December 1931 about how MGM studio personnel were so repelled by the sideshow cast that the studio set aside a special lunchroom for some of the performers. To avoid the press exposing internal conflicts about the film, the studio put the cast up in an apartment instead of a hotel and promoted its comings and goings by stills of Earles, Baclanova, and other "normal proportioned" actors in limousines ("News and Gos-

sip at the Studios," "Hollywood in Person," "Queerest Hollywood Cast Turns Out to Be All 'Stars,'" Parsons).² The reaction of the film crewmembers to working with the cast of actors with disabilities should have been a major clue to studio executives that the public might recoil from the film. One *Freaks* editor succinctly illustrated the prejudice against disabled people and their bodies: "It was bad enough to see them during the day when you went down to the set, but when you had to look at it on the movieola for eighteen hours a day, it drove you up the walls" (Brosnan 66).

Public Reception

All the changes to *Freaks* were to no avail. The film was received disastrously in major cities on February 20,

1932 (*Variety*). It reaped the lowest grosses of the month at first-run theaters in nine cities and was replaced by other features the following week. According to *Variety*, *Freaks* was released in at least twelve good-sized cities. It did well in Cleveland, Houston, and Providence but disastrously in the rest. Atlanta's censor board took it off the screen on its first day.

The studio further damaged chances for profitability by the ways it framed *Freaks* in its advertising and promotion. Trade writer Leo Meehan, who represented the Catholic lobby for a stronger self-regulatory enforcement of the Production Code, concluded that the advertising for *Freaks* probably caused more of the censorship furor than the movie itself did. Even forty years later, British government censor John Trevelyan noted the callous tastelessness of exploitation slo-

gans used to promote the movie: "Can a midget marry a full-grown woman?" "How do Siamese twins make love?" (183).

The tradition of previewing without any framing at all exacerbated its reputation with exhibitors. Wood, for example, argues that the preview version of *Freaks* failed largely because the audience needed prior knowledge of title, phrases, and images describing the film, advertising messages, and a brief scenario, so that they could better prepare themselves for "the candid and unflinching depiction of physical abnormality" (9-10). Wood offers proof that San Diego audiences viewing *Freaks* a few weeks later at a regular showing turned up in record numbers for two weeks.

The mainstream press fed the sensational revulsion of the film in contradictory ways, simultaneously praising and disparaging its unique cast. Articles and reviews were headlined "Queerest Hollywood Cast Turns Out to Be All 'Stars'" in the *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express* and "Sideshow Folk Very Exclusive" in the *Los Angeles Examiner*. And Louella Parsons of the *Los Angeles Examiner* wrote an article titled "'Freaks' Picture Grotesque and Sensational."

On March 15, *Variety* announced that MGM had withdrawn *Freaks* because of bad box office—it had lost \$141,000 on its total cost of \$316,000—bad press, and reform group pressure. A letter campaign to MGM was orchestrated by women's film committees affiliated with the industry's lobbyist, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA). Since the mid-1920s, Will Hays, head of MPPDA, had met regularly with leaders of women's committees and clubs concerned about standards of movie content. His office had organized their leaders into the "Open Door Coalition" and encouraged these women to preview new movies routinely and widely disseminate reviews approving or rejecting them for family viewing.

Apparently, the Open Door reviewers previewed the first revised version, but judging from the following review,

either one would have deeply upset those guardians. Frances Diehl, the leader of the coalition, enclosed the review clip with an outraged personal note to Hays:

At a time when every effort is being made to raise audience standards, a company is attempting to foist on the public the lowest form of amusement—a circus side show where one may peep at the deformities and abnormalities of human beings. It is a cruel and revolting thing and we enter our protest. We would like to see as many protests as possible sent to the company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Culver City, California. We believe that the public at large has good taste and an innate decency that will resent a production that is essentially unkind and ill bred. It is incomprehensible that a producer with the vision that offers an "Emma" with its thought of service will stoop to the disgrace of making dollars out of hurt, disfigured and suffering humanity. (Diehl letter)

The MPPDA's public strategy in response to *Freaks*'s reception was silence. However, its private strategy was quarantine. After removing it with fanfare from first-run theaters, MGM quietly reintroduced it at third-run, small-town locations throughout May and at a third-run Manhattan theater in early July. The *Motion Picture Herald* charts show that *Freaks* continued to play in smaller cities and towns throughout the spring and into the summer, garnering mostly low revenues. Most likely, MPPDA collaborated with the Open Door Coalition to pressure MGM into withdrawing the film. Will Hays later reflected in his autobiography that restrictions on illicit or immoral sex themes was the control problem facing Production Code enforcers. He viewed them as genuinely adverse influences. Particularly for young moviegoers, he said, sex was a "special and singular" instinct, a "TNT" that could "well prove the most dangerous if left unregulated" (emphasis added) (431).

Quarantine measures prolonged the film's screen life but probably did not make it profitable. Drawing equally negative reviews during its brief Manhattan release in mid-summer, it was completely pulled from circulation by

MGM after Great Britain censors banned the movie in early August. Its successful reissue did not occur until the Cannes Film Festival of 1962, where it earned permanent status as a cult film, but as Norden says, unfortunately, in the horror category. Ironically, the year that *Freaks* was rediscovered was the year that Tod Browning died.

Most critics noted that *Freaks* offended audiences and exhibitors in a uniquely vivid way by introducing body shapes that were "real" rather than "made up" and by having people with physical differences act out their frustrations by collectively maiming a glamorous star.

Bill Nichols has argued that arresting images of "real" death and deformity offer moviegoers an emotional, experiential, and visceral state of "vivification," a noncognitive state like "a felt sense of contradiction, dilemma or existential paradox" (233–39). Nichols has also noted that photographic

1932, circus cycle films, even MGM's peculiar circus horror series, which had been directed by Browning and acted by Lon Chaney, had gone out of fashion. Chaney, who had died in 1931, worked within the Hollywood tradition of simulating deformity. Chaney's make-up, masks, limb-binding, and contortionism had been conventions that yielded great promotion during the 1920s. Norden calls Chaney a "man of a thousand disabilities" for roles such as Quasimodo and the phantom of the opera (91–92). During the early sound period, the more elegant *Dracula*, which was directed by Browning for Universal in 1931, typified the style of the newer horror cycle. It was drawing large audiences and superseding the popularity of the much-criticized gangster and fallen woman genres. *Dracula*'s vampire Bela Lugosi offered a new brand of horror that was unnatural yet sophisticated and erotic, in contrast to the savagely grotesque Chaney or the

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bodily images more powerfully reinforce attitudes and guide audiences to take action when they make moviegoers encounter the unknown and enact rituals that "work." *Freaks* had both elements: offstage scenes of sideshow people eating, drinking, courting, giving birth, and a ritual wedding chant as prelude to collective murder.

Probably another reason why the film incurred severe censorship measures and public rejection was that, although MGM billed it as a horror movie, audiences would have considered the film a generic anomaly. By

real circus characters Browning cast in *Freaks*.

Real sideshows were now "rube" affairs. Popularization of eugenics theories after World War I fostered fears that misshapen humans would inherit violent or degenerate tendencies and led to the institutionalization of many Americans who lacked "normal" characteristics, according to Bogdan. By the end of the 1920s the rationale for quarantining bodily anomalies made traveling sideshow publicity glorifying their exotic origins lose credibility and appeal. Only the more traditional

or "backward" areas, where hospitals and asylums had not yet penetrated, still welcomed vaudeville, circus, and carnival "freak" attractions (Bogdan).

Contradictions over their representation reflect the contrasting urban and rural receptions to sideshows in American culture. In articles and correspondence about *Freaks*, sexual pairings between humans of vastly different shapes were viewed repressively or salaciously, or even both ways at once. Studio ads and posters primed audiences to expect shocking sexuality in *Freaks*. In the opening scene with Hans and Venus, the audience would have had their anticipations confirmed.

Social Construction of Disability

One must consider the shifting status of the disabled body and people with disabilities in U.S. culture when discussing public response to *Freaks*. The overriding reaction to *Freaks* was one of repulsion from the physical difference pictured. The bodies of the actors in *Freaks* did not fit with how the dominant U.S. culture defined what a body should look like or be able to do. Their bodies were seen as inferior when compared with people who were considered "nondisabled" or "normal."

That definition has grave implications for the level of humanity afforded to people with disabilities. When the body becomes the focus of humanness, its inferiority means that disabled people become inferior as social beings as well, according to Claire Liachowitz. David Hevey explains how even modern photographs of people with disabilities use their bodies to position them as having either meaningful or meaningless representations. He calls this "two sides of a segregated coin"—they are "brave but tragic":

The use of disabled people is the anchor of the weird, that is, the fear within. They are used as the symbol of enfreakment or the surrealism of all society. . . . The impaired body is the site and symbol of all alienation. It is psychic alienation made physical. The "contorted" body is the final process and statement of a painful mind. . . . The impairment of the disabled person became the mark, the target for a disavowal, a ridding of

existential fears and fantasies of non-disabled people. (Hevey 72)

Hevey explains that representations of the disabled body become "the voyeuristic property of the non-disabled gaze" (72). With this in mind, it is easy to see how the audience of *Freaks* perceived the disabled actors as inferior or subordinate to people without disabilities. Most disabled people have been relegated to this inferior role because of their bodies, according to political scientist Harlan Hahn. They deviate from what he calls the "moral order of the body":

The human body is a powerful symbol conveying messages that have massive social, economic, and political implications. In order to perpetuate their hegemony, ruling elites have attempted to impose what might be termed a moral order of the body, providing images that subjects are encouraged to emulate. (Hahn, "Can Disability" 29)

Hahn argues that western society promotes a certain moral order of the body that can be tied in modern times to mass media. In selling products, for example, mass media as an adjunct to capitalism have been most successful at selling an image of what the perfect body is. This, in turn, has strengthened the social and economic undesirability of people with disabilities and others who are physically different, Hahn says ("Advertising").

Thomas agrees that how the culture categorizes people with disabilities illustrates some of the dominant values in society—power, prestige, influence, and attractiveness:

The disabled person represents some kind of challenge to the taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be human. The disabled person is seen as a "problem" at the level of everyday intercourse and makes for uncertainty about moral worth as judged by the criteria that provide certainty about position, prestige, and power. (17)

Therefore, at the sociocultural and aesthetic level, the disabled person's body may not conform to standards of beauty and wholeness emphasized in a culture, according to William Gellman and Beatrice Wright. Hahn argues that the value placed by twentieth-century

western society on personal appearance affects the treatment of disabled people in that society ("The Politics of Physical Differences"). He relies on a theoretical perspective that grows from Hanoch Linveh, which he terms *aesthetic anxiety*. These are the fears caused by someone who diverges from the typical human form and may have physical characteristics considered unappealing. The culture reflects this anxiety through its rejection of people with physical differences and through its pursuit of superhuman bodily perfection. People who attended the film *Freaks* probably were jarred with confrontation of their aesthetic anxiety, and they even took action based on their discomfort with imperfect bodies.

This overwhelming aesthetic anxiety in U.S. culture may send people who are seen as physically different into an inferior role in society (Hahn, "The Politics of Physical Differences"). Even level of general attractiveness can affect one's place in a culture. After studying the influence of attractiveness in all types of relationships, Leonard Saxe deduced that unattractive people can be victims of injustice, whereas attractive people may be expected to perform at a superior level.

Tied to this notion of aesthetic anxiety is the psychological dimension at which humans respond to other humans who are physically different. Some theorize that humans are uncomfortable with sickness or impairment because they symbolize the uncertainty of life, that life is not controllable, and that the randomness of nature has the last word, according to M. Kidel. Also, the body is seen as "other," separated from the soul or mind. The body may be interpreted as a sometimes dysfunctional vessel for the soul. Based on the Christian tradition of sin residing in the "flesh," health becomes associated with virtue and illness with sin. "'Falling ill' is perceived as a falling down into the physical, a kind of giving way to the lower (bodily) forces beyond the reach of the superior control of mind or spirit" (Kidel 8).

This notion of physical impairment's representing sin, evil, or weak-

ness is often used in historical studies of medieval artists' renderings of "monsters" (Freidman), sideshow "freaks," and others throughout history who are born with a physical deformity (Fiedler). Linveh theorizes that people fear disability because it represents a closer state to death. According to Linveh, Freud's ideas on religion and the notion of totemism are germane to human discomfort with disability. At the sociocultural level, Freud drew connections between ancestral totem animals and future Judeo-Christian beliefs about the superiority of humans over animals or animal-like beings. According to Linveh,

It is, therefore, this latent content with its threatening images of common past between man and animal that is surfacing and breaking through the barrier of repression when confronted with a person having animal-like skin, excessive facial hair, and contorted facial and bodily features. And it is not difficult to venture and assume that through the process of association the less severely disfigured individual is attributed with similar characteristics. ("Disability" 282)

This notion fits with W. D. Hand's analysis of deformity and disease in folk legends. He found that many societies, both primitive and civilized, view sickness and disease as punishment handed down from God or ruling spirits or deities for the breaking of religious or moral codes. "The gods mete out punishment in the form of physical malady" (Hand 58).

Ideas of good and evil and their relationship to disability permeated *Freaks*. The characters with disabilities turned into a mob of murderers by the end of the film, as they slid through the mud and rain to enact vengeance on the nondisabled star. Although the reaction of the 1932 audience to *Freaks* has psychological dimensions, the response also represented both a shifting and a continuation of previous cultural notions about people with disabilities.

Sarason and Doris argue that how humans see people who are different is not about who they are physically but about how people organize themselves culturally. Bogdan relies on this notion

in his study of freak shows in the United States. He says that being defined as a freak is not a function a specific physical difference but of social categorization. "'Freak' is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation" (Bogdan 3). It becomes a social institution, not a physical characteristic. The movie *Freaks* helped perpetuate this social institution at the same time as it allowed viewers to shift their gaze on people with disabilities.

Bogdan has argued that seven major genres of representation of people with disabilities existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: freak show, begging, charity, captured, medical, honored, and disability without special focus. He calls the freak show "the pornography of disability." It was a dominant representation before disability became "medicalized" (Bogdan).

Conclusions

Freaks hit theaters at a time when society was shifting from seeing the person with a disability as "freak" to seeing the person as having a "medical problem." We have argued that a film such as *Freaks* and the public reaction to it contributed to the social construction of people with disabilities at that time. Berger and Luckmann's seminal work has theorized that human reality is a socially constructed reality. They rely on the Marxian notion of "a dialectic between social reality and individual existence in history" (187). Thomas explains how Berger and Luckmann's notion of marginality applies to people with disabilities:

A person whose normality of social identity is fragile and negotiable may occupy a position which is uncertain, ambiguous and not fully institutionalized, being at a distance from what most people would regard as society's core institutions and values. To some extent this is the position of disabled people, for though they are not separate from society they appear to occupy a marginal position, uneasily situated between a rigid dichotomous social classification and undifferentiated "normality." (4-5)

Even though they may have little interpersonal contact with people with disabilities, much of society is exposed to these views of disability through various mass media (Thomas).

As mentioned, real sideshows by the time *Freaks* was released had become associated with "backward" ways and were not favored by the urban set, who saw movies as "sophisticated" entertainment. Also, new eugenics theories permeated the culture and fed fears that "abnormal" humans were also violent or degenerate. The film *Freaks* heightened these cultural notions with its confirming narrative that people with "misshapen" bodies would turn violent, killing and maiming nondisabled people.

In addition, U.S. culture was not yet ready to look on people with disabilities within the full context of humanness, so the "sexual" theme of a romance between a diminutive man and an average-size woman made audiences uncomfortable rather than titillating them. Although producers of the time assumed sensual sequences would draw audiences, they failed to understand that audiences did not consider sideshow "freaks" fully human and were disturbed by what they may have seen as the "abnormality" of the romance.

The comments from the women's group that attacked *Freaks* illustrate how disability as a "medical problem" began to be used as way to discredit representations of people with disability. It was no longer just "disgusting" to exploit people with disabilities, pity became a tool to prevent the "abuse" of people with disabilities from unsettling media representations. Frances Diehl, the national representative for MPPDA's Open Door Coalition of women's film committees, called *Freaks* "the lowest form of amusement—a circus sideshow where one may peep at the deformities and abnormalities of human beings." But she used the "pity" narrative, calling it "cruel" and "unkind," "making dollars out of hurt, disfigured and suffering humanity" (Diehl). Her comments illustrate how the rejection of images of people with disabilities shifted from

sideshows as unsophisticated and common to one of supposed "concern" for "disfigured and suffering" people.

The social construction of disability was beginning to shift as seen in the audience response to *Freaks*, not to a more positive representation, but to another stereotype that was taking on cultural power. Claire Liachowitz illustrated a similar phenomenon in her study of the development of disability legislation in the United States. Within a theory of disability as a social construct, she showed how eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century laws dealing with disability reflected how a

ing disabled people. The film used the actors' disabled bodies to construct a horror narrative. But studio executives misunderstood that using real physical difference, instead of the made-up, costumed Lon Chaney version, would not just enhance the horror genre, but instead the reality of the body difference would cause aesthetic anxiety among moviegoers. In addition, the waning popularity of freak shows in the early twentieth century led movie audiences to no longer see freaks as exotic celebrities, but instead as "abnormal" humans, who needed to be hidden in institutions rather than dis-

led viewers to a better understanding of disability discrimination and experiencing less negative emotions when meeting people with disabilities. In a similar fashion, Sue Ralph confirmed that a documentary on a woman with neurofibromatosis, which showed her in a positive, yet realistic, way, helped viewers "reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward people with physical disabilities" (334). Based on the positive changes in people's perceptions due to high-quality, disability-related films, it can be speculated that the opposite was true for *Freaks*. Historically, disability has been used in many narratives to represent evil or sin, and according to Norden and Cahill, although ostensibly challenging it, *Freaks* reinforced the cultural link between evil and disability/ugliness (99). The film confirmed the 1932 audience's notion that people with disabilities should be locked away. The movie reinforced the public's perception that the actors in *Freaks* were truly freaks.

Freaks was interpreted not only as being filled with disgusting images but as exploitative of "pitiable" people.

physiological defect was transferred into a social deficiency. Her research assumes that "disability exemplifies a continuous relationship between physically impaired individuals and their social environments, so that they are disabled at some times and under some conditions, and able to function as ordinary citizens at other times and conditions" (2).

Freaks exemplifies how a mass media artifact also contributes to the relationship between society and people with disabilities. As Victor Finkelstein says, disability is not the "attribute of an individual but the outcome of an oppressive relationship between people with physical impairments and the rest of society" (47). In the case of *Freaks*, moviegoers were not yet ready to see people with disabilities within the context of equal humanness to nondisabled people. Instead, the actors' real physical differences evoked revulsion and disgust. Norden has confirmed *Freaks* as one of the handful of films that has used actors with actual physical disabilities rather than nondisabled actors portray-

played. Therefore, *Freaks* was interpreted not only as being filled with disgusting images but as exploitative of "pitiable" people. MGM had unknowingly miscalculated the early twentieth century's social construction of disability. As science took hold, America moved into an era in which seeing real people with disabilities was no longer acceptable because it was an affront to the "moral order of the body" and the curative power of science and medicine.

Finally, what did *Freaks* mean in terms of public attitudes toward people with disabilities? Our analysis confirmed that many 1932 moviegoers were repulsed by the film, but whether that translated to even more negative attitudes toward people with disabilities is unclear. What is clear from an understanding of the current media environment is that movies and television have great power to define and socially construct disability for their audiences. Farnall and Smith report that positive portrayals of disability in more recent films such as *Children of a Lesser God* and *My Left Foot* have

NOTES

1. This inconsistency indicates either indecision, confusion, or multiple and interrelated conflicts between the Hays Office and the studios. January 1932 brought the eight major studios adverse publicity about an excessive salary, several stars' salary cuts, studio cutbacks, collective labor disputes, according to memos from the MGM Studio Relations Committee staff to the New York office.

2. The Los Angeles newspaper clips are courtesy of Bret Wood.

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