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Avenging the Body

Disability in the Horror Film

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"But for the accident of birth," the sideshow barker warns his tour at the opening of the movie *Freaks* (1932), "you might be even as they are." The barker's line relies upon an us-versus-them construction between the curious spectators and the freaks on display, yet the line also draws attention to the fluidity and mobility of the boundary between ability and disability; any individual on the tour (or in the viewing audience of the film for that matter) could have ended up on a carnival platform, laughed at or shuddered at by curious onlookers. In fact, horror movies often offer the possibility that their characters may end up on such a platform, or at least have a body that attracts attention in that way. With such possibilities of fate, identity categories that are measured against standards of human abilities and body types appear to be unreliable indeed, but such categories persist in spite of the growing, aging, and mutating nature of the human body.

As a genre, horror emphasizes the body. The body suffers. It dies. It changes. And it horrifies. On the set of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), Lon Chaney famously pulled his nose back with wire to capture the skeletal-like features of the villain behind the mask. His handiwork appears the moment Christine surreptitiously removes the phantom's mask while he plays the organ. The unexpected reveal of the phantom's face, along with his cry—"Feast your eyes—glut your soul on my accursed ugliness!"—reveals the capacity for the human body itself to generate fear and horror. Other notorious bodies include Frankenstein's monster, a creation of body parts that harness the life force; Dr. Jekyll who is powerless when forces inside his body turn violent; the werewolf's body that instantaneously transforms; and Dracula's body that never dies as long as he replenishes it with the blood of human victims. Accordingly, horror films persist in drawing upon and adapting these manifestations of the body: the bizarre, the fascinating, and the frightening. In this

A Companion to the Horror Film, First Edition. Edited by Harry M. Benshoff.
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other. Consequently, the sexuality of disabled people is culturally marginalized as queer, even when the sexual activity between disabled persons might involve heteronormative (monogamous, reproductive) practices. In truth, dominant notions prefer to understand disabled bodies as non-sexual; if a disabled person is sexual with his or her body, then the sexuality is generally marginalized as perhaps curious or gratuitous but most certainly unusual/queer. Compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness work in tandem as ideals that ultimately mark the Other. Historically and even today, the horror film is fundamentally "about" such considerations of normality and monstrosity, and works to reinscribe (or much more rarely critique) the allegedly heteronormative and able-bodied nature of human beings and human cultures.

Disabilities on the Movie Screen

In *The Cinema of Isolation*, Martin F. Norden describes movies that include images of disability as a cinema that isolates "disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other" (1994: 1). This isolation can appear not only in the content of the story and the ideology behind it but also in the design of the mise-en-scène, as in how disabled characters are positioned in the frame. Isolation is a consequence of able-bodied perceptions, a perception that Norden summarizes in this way: "You're different because one or more of your physical attributes doesn't work properly, and that difference makes me uncomfortable but intrigues me at the same time" (1994: xii). This combination of discomfort and intrigue does a couple of things. First, the perception of discomfort motivates distance and isolation, and the isolation of the disabled character can make him or her appear as wholly Other. Second, with the separation of Otherness intact, able-bodied perceptions are free to objectify, usually with "objectifications of pity, fear, scorn, and so on—in short, objects of spectacle" (Norden, 1994: 1). Spectacle is what made possible the carnival freak show as a form of mass entertainment, and Gaylyn Studlar notes how the decline of sideshows by the mid-twentieth century owing to social pressures would prompt the movie industry to provide for this market of curious carnival goers (Studlar, 1996: 200).

Much of the way disability is represented on the movie screen is inherited from literature. Most notably, William Shakespeare's *Richard III* relies upon the title character's physical deformity to signal his inner depravity. "And while it might strike us as cruel and unjust to equate physical deformity with character or moral deformity," one literary guide explains, "Shakespeare is very much a product of his time in suggesting that one's proximity to or distance from God is manifested in external signs" (Foster, 2003: 194). While the medical and social models of disability have since challenged this cultural idea, the strategy to figuratively convey spiritual or moral weakness through physical difference in film and literature persists centuries after Shakespeare's time, especially in the horror film. When villainous characters with a disability are given little motivation for their evil behavior, then the horror film seems to fall back on these earlier notions of sin and disability. This appears to

be the case with the original *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), about a group of wilderness survivors who violently attack a family stranded with their camper van. Few reasons are given for the attackers' brutal behavior, aside from sadistic delight and their physical appearance. *Wrong Turn* (2003) similarly depicts a small group of people in the mountains of West Virginia who are severely deformed, apparently through generations of inbreeding. They howl and grunt as they entrap unsuspecting travelers, perhaps for sport or to satisfy their cannibalistic appetites; the motive is not clear, yet depravity is implied by their physical bodies.

Some horror films follow this pattern of linking disability with inner depravity by displacing the disability onto a character associated with the immoral endeavor of another character. This often appears in movies with disabled laboratory assistants and emphasizes the lab project itself as morally corrupt. The relationship of the assistant to his master is defined by the power of the able-bodied professional, so oftentimes a hunched back serves visually as a posture of subservience: the professional is the mind of the evil operation while the disabled figure is the doer of the deed, an extension of the professional's inner demons. In Tod Browning's *The Unknown* (1927), Cojo, a hunchbacked dwarf played by John George, assists the main character "Alonzo the Armless" (Lon Chaney), an able-bodied circus performer who passes as an armless knife thrower until he commits murder and decides to have his arms surgically removed. Alonzo's persistent deception as a performer and murderer relies upon Cojo's aid, so Cojo's disabled body, at least in part, embodies Alonzo's moral underhandedness. Once Alonzo is surgically altered and permanently disabled, however, his own body takes on the symbolic role, and Cojo disappears from the film. Gaylyn Studlar's work on masculine performance in classical Hollywood chronicles how Lon Chaney's star image relied upon the transformation of his body, not only attracting audiences accustomed to the carnival freak show but also signaling the cultural anxieties of ideal masculinity after the trauma of World War I (1996: 210).

Frankenstein might be the locus classicus of the hunchbacked assistant trope (even though the character type does not appear in Mary Shelley's novel). In *Frankenstein* (1931), Fritz (Dwight Frye) assists Dr. Frankenstein in gathering body parts and bringing the creature to life. However, Fritz is inept, and mistakenly steals an "abnormal" brain to be used for the monster. This raises the question of whether Frankenstein's experiment would have turned out differently had Fritz selected a normal brain. Since Fritz dies in the first film, he does not appear again in the Frankenstein franchise, although Dwight Frye plays a similar character in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).

Another kind of disabled assistant who appears in horror films is the "deaf-mute," a dated and misleading term used in these movies that assumes either a physical connection between the anatomy of the ear and the vocal chords or that deaf individuals are incapable of producing sounds (Schuchman, 1988: 30). (In reality, the condition of one individual being both mute and deaf is quite rare.) This process appears in *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933) and its remake *House of Wax* (1953). In the first film, a wax sculptor becomes trapped in a museum fire set by his former investor who

is intent on acquiring funds from the insurance. As the fire disables the sculptor's use of his hands, he relies on assistants such as Hugo, identified as a "deaf-mute." As the assistants are not as skilled with wax as the sculptor was prior to the fire, they resort to using dead bodies as molds for the wax figures. The 1953 remake follows a similar plot, including the participation of a deaf assistant, now identified as Igor. As assistants, Hugo and Igor are denied voices, and their silent persona not only function as their "hunched back" to enhance their subservience but they also appear to have silent hearts, devoid of volition, passion, or any spark of human kindness.

The appearance of disabled individuals as assistants also points to perhaps the most pervasive use of characters with disabilities in horror films: supporting characters who contribute little to the narrative but a lot to the ominous tone a horror film frequently demands. At one point in *Mystery of the Wax Museum*, Hugo gestures to the heroine, Ms. Dempsey, only to moan as if he were a menacing animal. The effect serves its purpose, as it prompts Ms. Dempsey to run away. *The Old Dark House* (1932) does this as well with the performance of Boris Karloff as Morgan, the mute butler, who drifts through the house as a mysterious and ultimately threatening presence. Characters who aid in developing the mood of a horror film need not be dangerous characters. In *Poltergeist* (1982), a family tormented by ghostly hauntings calls upon a spirit medium for assistance, played by Zelda Rubinstein, a prominent activist for little people. In *The Others* (2001), a mother and her two children are haunted by the apparition of a blind old woman. Though her image is designed to be frightening at first, the figure also turns out to be a harmless spirit medium.

Horror films also make regular use of the various stereotypes of the disabled identified by Martin F. Norden in *The Cinema of Isolation*. Many of these stereotypes appear as far back as the silent film era, especially the stereotype of the Sweet Innocent, a regular feature of D. W. Griffith's films. The iconic Sweet Innocent of literature is Tiny Tim, the disabled boy who softens the bitter heart of Ebeneezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. When this stereotype appears in the horror film, it is often used to show the depths of a villain's cruelty. In *Eyes of a Stranger* (1981), for example, a serial killer terrorizes women in gruesome ways, catching the attention of an up-and-coming news reporter. As the reporter singles out a possible suspect, she realizes that she is not only putting herself at risk but also her young sister, who is deaf and blind. When the serial killer catches on to the reporter's trail and invades the apartment, he attempts to attack the Sweet Innocent, emphasizing his utter depravity. One of the many problems with this persistent stereotype is the way it denies disabled characters full moral agency. As innocents, they are also denied any kind of desire—sexual or otherwise –other than the hope to be supported and protected by able-bodied people. Another of Norden's common stereotypes, the Saintly Sage, is similar to the Sweet Innocent in the way that he or she is figured as pure and angelic. However, the Saintly Sage is usually older, and his or her disability, which is most often blindness, allegedly grants this character access to higher levels of wisdom, foresight, and morality. One of the most prominent Saintly Sages in the horror film is the blind hermit in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935); because of his blindness, he cannot see the monstrosity of the creature, so he takes pity on him, inviting him

inside and treating him as a friend. At this moment the viewer sees the monster's vulnerability as a lonely figure in a world he does not understand.

Opposite to the Sweet Innocent and the Saintly Sage stereotypes is the Obsessive Avenger. A good example of this stereotype is Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, "an egomaniacal sort, almost always an adult male, who does not rest until he has had his revenge on those he holds responsible for his disablement and/or violating his moral code in some other way" (Norden, 1994: 52). Revenge is a theme in all kinds of genres and is particularly useful in the horror film to justify monstrous behavior; however, when the revenge itself is tied to a disability, as it is with the Obsessive Avenger, then such stories draw upon able-bodied assumptions that people in the disabled community are usually bitter and angry about their disabilities. Media scholar Paul Longmore summarizes the prejudicial attitude that fuels this stereotype: "Disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them" (quoted in Norden, 1994: 28). This assumption—that people in the disabled community resent their disabilities and are jealous of able-bodied people—reveals more about the cultural hierarchy of dis/abilities and the insecurity of dominant positions rather than the wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives of those people who have a disability.

Nevertheless, the Obsessive Avenger is a character that permeates the horror genre from its inception till today. *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) and *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942) introduce the character of Ygor (Bela Lugosi), a man with a crooked back as a consequence of surviving his hanging for the conviction of grave robbing. Though not precisely the lab assistant often associated with the name, Ygor assumes the role of the mad scientist by taking control of Frankenstein's monster. The man with the crooked back is now the monster's master—an Obsessive Avenger figure forcing the monster to commit a series of revenge murders, which include the authorities who brought about his hanging and subsequent disfigurement. A rare female Obsessive Avenger appears in *The Hypnotic Eye* (1960), wherein the disfigured Justine (Allison Hayes) uses hypnosis to make other women mutilate their "normal" faces in spectacular ways. In the 2006 remake of the film *The Hills Have Eyes*, the radioactive fallout of the wilderness setting from decades of military testing, a point mentioned only in passing in the original film, allows for the depiction of sensational disabilities within the villainous clan, making them Obsessive Avengers. They attack the travelers who represent the modern, civilized world that brought about the damage done by military testing. "You made us what we've become!" one vengefully yells from his wheelchair.

Vincent Price's entire cinematic career is peppered with Obsessive Avenger roles, even down to playing a vengeful Richard III in *Tower of London* (1962) and *Theatre of Blood* (1973). He plays the wax sculptor in *House of Wax* who, with the aid of the "deaf-mute," seeks vengeance for the destruction of his original museum in the fire that disfigured his body. Price appears to play a similar role as the title character in *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971), but Phibes does not entirely fit a single character type. In fact, the movie seems to break down the Obsessive Avenger trope. Phibes, who has been severely disfigured in a car accident, admits to being on a "quest

for vengeance," but his revenge is against the medical professionals he believes are responsible for his wife's botched surgery and subsequent death. His disfigurement seems to figure insignificantly in his plotting as the movie repeatedly dramatizes his sorrow for his wife. Furthermore, it is predominantly the doctors and their assistants (rather than Phibes) who come across as arrogant, unsympathetic, and monstrous. Though his vengeance might be obsessive and carefully calculated, it is depicted for the most part as justifiable, particularly in the way his actions are modeled after God's systematic attack against the Egyptians in the Old Testament. Still, Phibes hides his disfigurement behind a mask for much of the film, only to reveal it for shock effect near the story's climax, which implies some level of shame with his disfigurement.

A few other horror movies introduce characters who have a disability, yet play against expected types. One of the victims in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) happens to be in a wheelchair, but he is far from a Sweet Innocent. At times affectionate and at other times crass, Franklin freely swings from being amiable to obnoxious, complaining for much of his time on screen. George Romero's *Monkey Shines* (1988) presents a more thoughtful and complicated take on issues of ability. It follows the story of a young athlete, Alan, who becomes a quadriplegic after an automobile accident. Alan works to adjust to his new way of life and remains a complex character with the inner conflicts and emotional range associated with being human. The movie includes a rare scene in movie history that acknowledges sexual desire (and activity) among people with disabilities as Alan and a young female scientist, Melanie, make love. The crux of the story, however, is not centered upon the romance or even the quadriplegia itself but Alan's relationship with a monkey assistant that turns dangerous. After Alan defeats the monstrous monkey in the end, the movie concludes with the trope of a miracle surgery that restores Alan's able-bodiedness, a scene that seems forced onto the narrative—and was apparently forced upon Romero by his studio bosses (Norden, 1994: 298).

Of course, the most (in)famous horror film to feature characters with disabilities is Tod Browning's *Freaks*, about a trapeze artist named Cleopatra who pretends to fall in love with Hans, a little person in the sideshow, because she hears he is set to inherit a fortune. After Cleopatra and Hans marry, the other freaks discover Cleopatra trying to poison Hans. The freaks retaliate against her one stormy night, physically mutilating her body to the point of Cleopatra becoming an attraction in the sideshow herself. A central concern audiences and critics have with the movie *Freaks* is its depiction of deviant bodies, and whether the movie characterizes such bodies as monstrous or human. Even after the studio added a final scene with a repentant Hans finding comfort with another performer in the sideshow, *Freaks* continued to shock and horrify audiences at a level MGM did not anticipate. One female viewer threatened a lawsuit against MGM claiming the film had induced a miscarriage (Skal and Savada, 1995: 174). British censors banned the movie, and MGM pulled it from circulation after its dismal performance in New York (Skal and Savada, 1995: 180). The film was subsequently purchased by Dwain Esper, an exploitation filmmaker known for advertising his films as educational but with the intent to lure curious audiences with the promise of nudity or sex. "Can a full grown woman truly love a midget?" his advertisements asked about *Freaks*. "Do Siamese twins make love?" (Skal and

Savada, 1995: 222). While perhaps exploiting a fascination with sex and the unusual body, Esper drew attention to the capacity for queerness that critics find in the film today. For example, in her study of sideshows in American culture, Rachel Adams argues that *Freaks* is not about the abnormal but rather the questioning of normality altogether, particularly in matters of sex: an array of bodies demonstrating erotic possibilities (2001: 76).

In many ways, then, what the story of *Freaks* is about is the division between a dominant group and a marginal (disabled and queer) group. The groups delicately hang side by side in the carnival setting; members of the marginal group are invited in front of the gaze of the dominant group as performers and objects of spectacle, only to retreat again to the carnival back lot. Much of the conflict in *Freaks* occurs when the dominant group intrudes upon the marginal group and vice versa. The opening title card of the film can be seen as a metaphor of the boundary that separates the two groups. In a sense, the audience is positioned by the camera as looking from a dominant perspective, having purchased a ticket to the film, to peer into the queer space of the film. The word *Freaks* is written in bold letters; around each letter are caricatured drawings of many of the freaks who will appear on screen. This artistic rendition alludes to the ways the freaks appear when entering the dominant space: as caricature. Their image is constructed and performed. And while the title card fills the screen, a hand breaks through and tears it away. The boundary is breached, though the viewer cannot see how and by whom (Figure 5.1). Thus, this initial collision

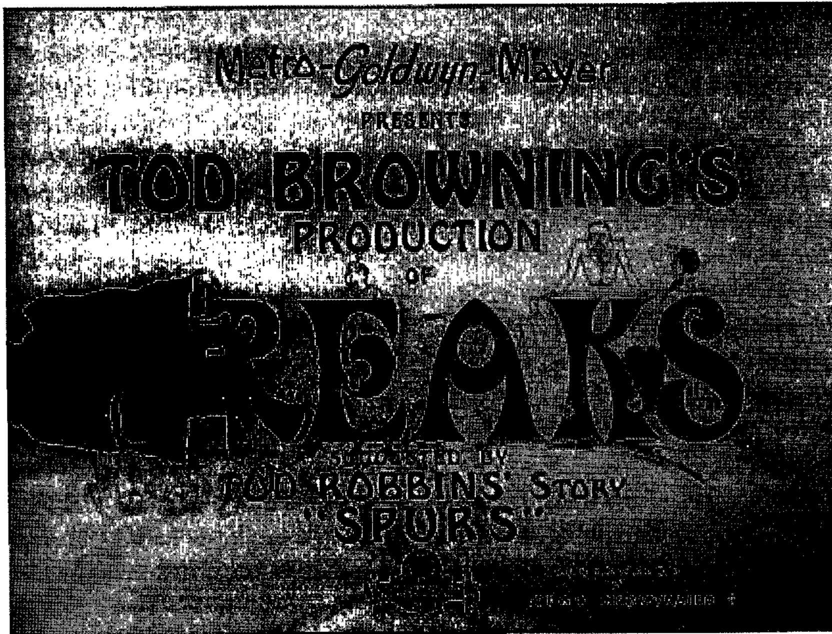

Figure 5.1 In *Freaks* (1932), the title sequence alludes to the ways the freaks appear when entering the dominant space (as caricature), as well as their startling potential to breach the boundary between "them" and "us." Directed by Tod Browning. Produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).

between dominant and marginal spaces stylistically attempts a moment of terror and unease, but as the movie continues, the viewer is immediately returned to the dominant space with the barker as their guide. Oddities might pervade the background of the shot, but the sideshow is a dominant space where "monstrosities" (as the barker calls them) are invited to stay on the condition that they take on the role of performer. The freaks appear to be looked at, never to return the gaze.

It is when a freak returns the gaze that trouble begins. Hans gazes upon Cleopatra as she performs her trapeze act. As any protagonist with a goal, Hans decides to venture (intrude) into the dominant group, claim his love for Cleopatra, and return with her to his marginal group. One notable scene in which Hans appears as an outsider in a dominant environment occurs in the main circus tent. Hans stands perched on the circus ring as if waiting at a territorial border, watching Cleopatra inside. While Hans is transfixed by Cleopatra, Hercules and the Rollo brothers play cards nearby, talking suggestively about Cleopatra, and this angers the jealous Hans to the delight of the card players. Cleopatra sustains the humor of the three able-bodied men by feigning muscle pain and sitting upon the structure of the circus ring, figuratively meeting Hans on the border between marginal and dominant worlds. Though played for laughs at Hans's expense, the little man and big woman engage in a queer encounter as she lowers her shirt off her shoulder for him to reach down her back and rub her muscles.

The circus tent itself is a useful, transient structure in the film that constantly moves between dominant and marginal spaces. The notorious wedding feast at the latter part of the film is the most pronounced marginal space as the group gathers to celebrate. "One of us, one of us," the freaks chant in unison. Hans successfully pulls Cleopatra into this marginal environment where she is horrified and does not intend to stay. It is doubtful she anticipated leaving the dominant position at all, given that her intentions for marrying Hans were underhanded. When Hercules, the able-bodied strong man in the show, laughs at Cleopatra from his dominant position, Cleopatra's performance of taking an interest in Hans begins to wane. "They're going to make you one of them," Hercules mocks, and the thought of her pretended desire for Hans potentially marking her as freakish or queer makes Cleopatra thunderously condemn the group of festive freaks. It is after her emotional outburst that Cleopatra and Hercules reclaim the tent as a dominant space. The other freaks are removed from the recaptured territory, and Hans is shamed as he returns to being the queer figure held up in mockery by Cleopatra. This reclamation of the feast by the dominant group with Hans as a prisoner becomes a call to war, and the freaks take up the fight.

The final scenes of the freaks' violent retaliation against Cleopatra and Hercules are designed to be horrifying, particularly the high angle shot into the sideshow display that reveals the aftermath of Cleopatra's mutilation. Viewers of the film still question whether the film is simply isolating the characters as monstrous Others or whether it affirms the humanity of the sideshow performers with the theme that maintaining oppressive divisions risks damage to all within the system. Most horror

films that include images of disability are produced and/or distributed by an entertainment system that routinely acquiesces to dominant notions of able-bodiedness. That the movie *Freaks* is open enough to allow for various readings of the film in terms of its ideological position is rare indeed, particularly as it is a product of the Studio System. The following section examines *Deafula* (1975), a much more obscure film produced by members of (what might be called) a disabled community, especially for its marginalized members, yet perhaps surprisingly, it ends up reaffirming the heteronormative binaries that *Freaks* potentially deconstructs.

"Blindness separates a person from things," Helen Keller once described, "but deafness separates him from people" (quoted in Gargiulo, 2012: 490). Keller's summation has a flipside: deafness might separate a person from the dominant hearing world, but it also creates a world all its own, what many in the community identify as the DEAF-WORLD. (Capitalized letters are the conventional way to refer to signed concepts in American Sign Language as the language has no written form.) "DEAF-WORLD" as a concept refers not only to the Deaf community but also to the physical spaces, such as residential schools or silent clubs, where members of the community gather (Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, 1996: 125). Writers on Deaf culture explain that when Deaf people meet one another, they are quick to exchange personal histories, revealing their connection to the DEAF-WORLD. "For unlike other cultures, Deaf culture is not associated with a single place, a 'native land'; rather, it is a culture based on relationships" (Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, 1996: 5).

As one of the first feature-length movies filmed entirely in American Sign Language, *Deafula* presents an imaginative rendering of the DEAF-WORLD: everyone in the diegesis uses sign language, doorbells connected to blinking lights, and teletypewriters. As an independent film, the movie was a collaborative endeavor among members of the Deaf community for distribution predominantly within the Deaf community, although the videotape release of the movie includes an audio track with music and spoken English translations of the sign language on the screen. The closing credits of the film specify the participants who identify as Deaf, including Peter Wolf (also known as Peter Wechsberg) who is credited as the writer, director, and star of *Deafula*. He studied at Gallaudet University and in 1967 was selected as part of a group of performers to inaugurate the National Theater of the Deaf (Baldwin, 1994: 31). Wolf also participated in a news show intended for Deaf audiences, for which he received two Emmy awards (McNally and Florescue, 1979: 296). Wolf's reinterpretation of the character Dracula through the lens of his own culture was not new. For example, *Blacula* (1972) exploits the sex, violence, and power of the vampire myth to dramatize tensions found in racial difference.

Deafula reimagines the vampire narrative for the DEAF-WORLD, and in so doing, it reaffirms compulsory heterosexuality through its depiction of monstrosity-as-queerness. This is striking, particularly in light of McRuer's argument about the discursive links between queerness and the cultural status of those people dominant culture marks as disabled. Furthermore, although *Deafula* dramatizes an

entirely non-normative world (absent hearing/able-bodied characters), it succeeds not only in demonizing queerness but also disability itself. Because of its reliance upon Hollywood's narrative style, horror film iconography, and the imperatives of vampire mythology, *Deafula* ends up reaffirming and upholding the desirability of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, despite having been made by Deaf filmmakers.

Deafula follows the story of Steve, a preacher's son who is studying to become a preacher himself; however, the movie opens with Steve murdering a man and a woman. As the victims' bodies exhibit telltale bite marks, two detectives investigating the crimes contemplate that a vampire is in their midst. When Steve is later attacked by a couple of robbers, the confrontation visually reveals that Steve can physically transform into Deafula, a vampire who in this moment uses hypnotic powers to coerce the attackers into driving off a cliff. The detectives meet with Steve at a restaurant, revealing that Steve is a good friend of one of the detectives. Afterward, Steve's father dies of a heart attack, prompting Steve to meet with Amy, an old friend of his mother, who reveals not only that Steve's mother had died giving birth to him, but also that she had an encounter with Dracula during her pregnancy. Amy then directs Steve to a museum where Dracula is sleeping. Dracula awakens, and he makes Steve's mother appear as well. She helps Steve kill Dracula, but she inadvertently turns to dust after the fact. After Steve becomes a preacher, the detectives confront him with the evidence that they know he is a vampire. Having been found out, Steve returns to the chapel, pleads for redemption from the Lord, and falls dead. Steve, whose vampirism is marked with queerness and disability, is destroyed by the power of traditional Christian morality, reaffirming heteronormative and able-bodied ideals.

The narrative of *Deafula* comes across as very Freudian, particularly as it combines popular conceptions of *Dracula* with elements from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Steve can be linked with the good-natured Dr. Jekyll, the conscious individual (Ego) who functions according to the dictates of his preacher-father and religious law (Superego), but in moments of thirst and rage (Id) he transforms into Deafula to control and devour other humans, which is reminiscent of the violent behavior of Mr. Hyde. The divided nature of this central character is depicted visually as well: Steve has blonde hair and wears conventional clothing while Deafula has dark hair, a large nose, and a dark suit complete with a cape. As a cosmetic device, Deafula's enlarged nose is distractingly artificial on screen, but the way the nose draws attention to itself does serve to sexualize Deafula's persona, particularly as his nose is depicted as an organ that grows when Steve succumbs to his desire for other human bodies (Figure 5.2).

The sexual connotations of Deafula's attacks are instantly made clear. In the opening scene, the camera shows a close-up of Steve's hand gripping a doorframe with intensity, followed by Steve exiting the doorway and wiping his mouth, satisfied and exhausted. His first victim remains inside the room, motionless and slumped over on his knees. In the following scene, Steve sits in the park enjoying what could easily be interpreted as a post-orgasmic cigarette, considering that his second victim

Figure 5.2 Steve transforms into Deafula, complete with cape, dark goatee, and a large false nose. *Deafula* (1975). Directed by Peter Wolf (as Peter Wechsberg). Produced by Sign Scope/Holstrom.

is lying motionless on her back in front of him, her legs bound and strung up in the air. Both of these victims, male and female, appear in sexually submissive positions, suggesting the conflation of Steve's sexual appetites with his thirst for blood, repressed drives that conflict with the religious rule of his father. As Steve sits with cigarette in hand and he thinks back on his relationship with his father, it is clear that he feels some degree of remorse for his behavior. In flashback, Steve sits as a child watching his father's sermon in sign language. This flashback also reveals that Steve's father had been providing his own blood for Steve since childhood to sustain Steve's life and, presumably, to prevent the emergence of Deafula and his evil behavior. Like some forms of deafness, Steve's thirst for blood appears to be some sort of inherited condition.

Curiously, there are few successful heterosexual pairings in the imagined DEAF-WORLD of *Deafula*, or pairings of any kind for that matter. The detectives never speak of having wives or partners, though one mentions a granddaughter. Many of Deafula's victims are depicted as home alone when he appears. This absence of human relationships in the setting of the film enhances Deafula's need for human contact as well as emphasizing what few couplings do make it into the story, even as all of these heterosexual relationships are demolished by the end of the narrative. The robbers who witness Steve's transformation into Deafula are a romantic male–female duo, at least until Deafula forces them off a cliff. Deafula also encounters two young heterosexual lovers in the woods, only to murder them in

his bloodlust. Steve's parents appear to be a model heterosexual pairing, but Steve's mother dies giving birth to him and only appears in flashback or as a ghostly image. Any and all heteronormative pairings that Steve touches become threatened, and this destruction of normative human relationships by a queer monster serves to intensify his villainy, as per usual generic conventions.

As a patriarch, preacher, and widower, Steve's father becomes the film's clear voice for heteronormative ideals. While on a drive in the mountains, Steve's father asks him if he is continuing with his studies to become a preacher, which Steve affirms. Then his father asks the inevitable question of a heteronormative parent with an aging, single son: "Why aren't you married?" Steve struggles to answer, confessing that he would like to marry. Unconvinced, the father persists with pressure: "I hope to have some grandchildren before I die!" The conversation is upsetting to Steve, and he stops the vehicle to vomit, a rather pointed response to his father's philosophy. While Steve is vomiting, his father collapses into a heart attack, which might be interpreted as the father's breaking heart over a son who resists marriage and children. In this moment of sickness and heartbreak, Steve's repressed urges again surface as he notices a young couple in the forest about to become intimate. Steve watches as they strip to enter a nearby lake, whereupon Steve transforms into Deafula and feeds on both of them, perhaps in lustful retaliation against his father's urgings to settle down and conform to the dominant order.

Compulsory heterosexuality thus plays out in the narrative by demonizing Deafula as a queer figure or embodiment of queer desire that must be repressed. The films' use of traditional horror iconography also links queerness to disability. For example, when Steve goes to visit his mother's friend Amy (who is a witch), he is waited upon by her disabled assistant who has no hands. Curiously, this assistant embodies both of the physical characteristics of subservience seen in previous horror films: the assistant has a hunched back, and his inability to sign (because he has no hands) renders him "mute" in the DEAF-WORLD (Figure 5.3). "The devil has his hands now," Amy explains about her assistant's physical condition, his hands having been taken as punishment for evil behavior. Amy's line, which is communicated through sign language, harkens back to previous era's assumptions about the links between sin and disability, a surprising theme in a film prepared by and distributed within a disabled community. The connection between physical difference and deviltry is also emphasized in the end of the film. For reasons that are not fully explained in the narrative, Amy gives Steve a ring and when he later touches it to a Christian cross in the church, the ring is destroyed and Amy, who is located elsewhere, dies in that moment as well. Amy's death restores her assistant's hands, and he no longer has his hunched back; thus, the assistant's disability is finally revealed to be a devilish curse that imprisoned him and necessitated divine correction and restoration.

Compulsory able-bodiedness in this dramatization of the DEAF-WORLD not only appears with the disabled assistant but also with the title character. Curiously, the condition of deafness is never commented upon in the narrative. Sign language is always appropriate and expected among the characters in the movie, and in the film there is a wide array of characterizations that show how the DEAF-WORLD

Figure 5.3 Amy and her disabled assistant in *Deafula* (1975), a play on the horror film cliché of the "deaf-mute"? Directed by Peter Wolf (as Peter Wechsberg). Produced by Sign Scope/Holstrom.

can be just as varied as the hearing world. A Deaf identity becomes the assumed norm in the world of the film. That said, the word "Deaf" appears only in connection with Steve's alter-ego, Deafula. He spells this out (literally, through fingerspelling) to Dracula, who is also Deaf, at the climax of the film. This father-son dynamic between Dracula and Deafula differs from traditional vampire mythology. Usually vampires create other vampires through the transfer of blood or some other kind of bodily fluid. In *Deafula*, Dracula seduces Steve's already pregnant mother. Because Dracula does not extract her blood or transform her into a vampire, Dracula's influence on Steve's mother seems explicitly sexual, and the only character permanently affected by this encounter is the unborn Steve. Steve, then, is divided between two fathers: one good (the preacher) and the other evil (Dracula). The iconic title of the film that marks Steve's deafness is thus the name tied to his evil father.

The hereditary nature of many forms of deafness has historically frightened the dominant hearing world. Prominent figures such as Alexander Graham Bell pushed for legislation to prevent deaf people from marrying and reproducing for fear of creating more instances of deafness. That the monstrous Dracula creates Deafula through sexual intercourse with a pregnant woman seems to mirror these fears of deafness and heredity. Therefore, even in a diegesis where deafness is the invisible norm, the only instance where deafness is commented upon is through a character's name in relation to being the offspring of a monstrous figure. Deafness, vampirism,

and queerness are all figured as one interrelated and inherited curse. Paradoxically, this isolates deafness as Other and as something to be feared in a film that otherwise affirms d/Deaf identities and experience. As Steve/Deafula is marked as a monstrous Other by the compulsory heterosexual and able-bodied systems at work in the film (and the horror genre itself), his eventual demise is to be expected.

Conclusion

In the movie *Freaks*, queerness and disability appear to meld together within the marginal group, and the marginal figures appear to accept it to the point of celebrating it at the wedding feast. In contrast, *Deafula* relies upon the conventions of the Hollywood film, the horror genre, and the vampire myth; thus, this rare film that was mostly produced and distributed on the margins of able-bodied culture still recirculates the mutually dominant systems of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality. Heteronormative ideals are not separated from able-bodied assumptions in this movie, a story that includes the stereotype of a disabled assistant along with a central character whose inability to conform to the dominant order and control his repressed self leads to his destruction. As the barker in *Freaks* laments, "They did not ask to be brought into the world," a world that centralizes able-bodiedness as the standard, leaving those who are different to remain on the margins: disabled and queer. But this boundary between the dominant and the marginal is unstable, and the horror genre reveals that this instability can be used as a device to incite fear. Anxiety about disability typically reduces characters in the horror genre to objects of pity, spectacle, or rage, oftentimes returning to old cultural notions that link disabled bodies with sin and depravity. In spite of this, McRuer reminds his readers that "Everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are 'intrinsically impossible to embody' fully and in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough" (2006: 30).

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