

The Changing Face of ‘Freak’: Analyzing Disability and Normalcy in Browning’s *Freaks* (1931) and Lynch’s *The Elephant Man* (1980)

The meaning of the term “freak” has undergone significant historical transformation, shaped by shifting cultural, social, and ideological contexts. In its more modern usage, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, the term acquired a punitive and countercultural connotation in the United States, often associated with the hippie generation, long hair, drug use, nonconformity, and eccentric lifestyles. However, prior to this period—especially from Victorian Western society through the early twentieth century—the term “freak” was firmly embedded within the institution of “freak shows,” which were organized in museums, circuses, and amusement parks as forms of public entertainment for both the aristocracy and the general public. As Leslie Fiedler observes, the “freaks” under discussion are “physiologically deviant humans,” a category that historically included giants, dwarfs, Siamese twins, hermaphrodites, fat ladies, and living skeletons. Disability scholars such as Rosmarie Garland-Thomson, in dialogue with Fiedler, argue that this cultural fascination with bodily difference reflects a broader historical epoch in which the spectacle of the “Other” played a crucial role in shaping national identity. This fascination reinforced a shared sense of “conformed commonality,” drawing rigid boundaries between what was considered ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ and legitimizing the marginalization of bodies that fell outside normative standards.

This paper examines two significant twentieth-century films—Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1931) and David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man* (1980)—to analyze how disability, spectacle, and normalcy are negotiated within cinematic narratives. Browning’s *Freaks* stands as one of the earliest films to foreground the lived realities of marginalized circus performers, including dwarfs, Siamese twins, and a bearded woman, many of whom were played by real performers with disabilities. The film exposes the social exclusion, exploitation, and moral hypocrisy that these individuals face in their struggle for dignity and acceptance. In contrast, *The Elephant Man* recounts the tragic life of John Merrick, who becomes a spectacle within London’s freak show circuit due to his severe physical deformities. Although Dr. Frederick Treves attempts to rescue Merrick from public exhibition and integrate him into polite society, the promise of acceptance ultimately proves illusory. Merrick continues to be objectified, patronized, and isolated, revealing the limits of charitable intervention within an ableist social structure.

Across both films, the audience witnesses sustained efforts to dehumanize and marginalize differently abled individuals, alongside the active role played by so-called ‘able’ society in constructing hierarchies based on physical normality. These hierarchies operate through spectacle, voyeurism, and moral judgment, reinforcing the binary between the normal and the abnormal. By juxtaposing Browning’s and Lynch’s cinematic treatments of bodily difference, this paper seeks to interrogate the evolving meaning of the term “freak” and its continued relevance in modern cultural discourse. Ultimately, the study explores the possibility for differently abled individuals to assert agency and lead lives of self-determination by resisting socially imposed restrictions, while also tracing how cinematic representations both challenge and perpetuate the historical legacy of freakishness in the modern imagination.