Freaks: Strategies for the Textual Representation of the Uncommon Other

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The exhibition of human oddities, of freaks, for profit is no longer part of Western culture. This doesn't mean, however, that we have lost our curiosity for the abnormal body, quite the opposite. Since the early 1980s a considerable number of Hollywood films have focused on the freak, either natural born or imaginary, physical or mental. The discourse binding these films together is conditioned by the particularities of the construction of the freak in America but applies at the same time to Western culture generically. As we try hypocritically to conceal the existence of real-life freaks, treating them as diseased bodies kept hidden from the public gaze, we congratulate ourselves on our preference for films which often sentimentalize them but never contradict their social rejection. We thus reinforce our wish to believe that freaks are a separate category of mankind, conveniently forgetting there are no such boundaries.

KEYWORDS: freak as spectacle, freaks in films, natural-born freaks, imaginary freaks

The freak show was a product of mid-Victorian America which survived until the end of World War II. The exhibition of 'different' persons for profit –abnormal white people but also 'exotic' non-whites– has been part of Western culture for centuries. The American freak show, though, differs from its most immediate predecessors, such as medieval fairs or Enlightenment anatomical collections, in its intensive commercialization of the Other as an object of amusement and entertainment.

P.T. Barnum (1810-90), the business genius behind the scenes, applied the market techniques he had learned as a slaveholder in ante-bellum America to the construction of a booming social and commercial phenomenon, based like slavery on exploiting fellow human beings.[1] Operating a complex publicity apparatus, Barnum launched with his American Museum of New York (opened in 1841) a popular new type of show that would eventually flounder in touring museums, circus side-shows and Conney Island fairgrounds. In the 1950s a combination of medical interests, humanitarian concerns derived from civil rights movements and new popular forms of entertainment finally pushed the natural born freak out of the limelight and into the shadowy territory of disability. Fiction, however, still shows a remarkable interest in the figure of the freak, present both in print and on the screen.

Real-life freaks first received the academic attention they were due in 1978, with the publication of Leslie Fiedler's singular *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*.

Adopting a not too militant Freudian approach and a lively, popular style, Fiedler simultaneously tried to explore why we find freaks attractive and to debunk rigid academic codes. He only partly succeeded in the latter aim, for the freak has become the subject of plenty of conventional post-structuralist research in Cultural Studies, American History and Studies, Sociology, Bioethics, and Disability Studies.

The volume by Robert Bodgan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1982), is the other main pillar on which Freak Studies rely. Bodgan made an important point by arguing that "'[f]reak' is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created; a perspective, a set of practices - a social construction" (1982: x). As David Gerber (1996) points out, Bodgan disregarded the important matter of the degree of consent allowed to the persons presented as freaks in the process of enfreakment, to use David Hevey's useful term (1992: 53). Today, most studies of the freak refer back to both Fiedler and Bodgan, considering, as Gerber does, the socio-cultural factors determining enfreakment. Disabled scholars like Hevey himself and others like Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996) are contributing to Freak Studies a different perspective, which does take into account the position of the persons still enfreaked today by American society without his or her consent.

Nobody disputes the fact that the disappearance of the freak show and the demonization of 'freak' as a politically incorrect word have by no means done away with the need to gaze at the Other. This need is, simply, being fulfilled by other media: TV talk shows, documentaries and the tabloid press in the case of real-life 'freaks',[2] films, novels, comics, computer games in the case of imaginary human and non-human freaks. The discourse on the freak is quite consistent despite the many differences between media. Essentially, stories about freaks express the fears of average individuals of being suddenly isolated from their 'normal' peers to be scorned and exposed to public humiliation. In these stories the freak is always presented as the Other, never accepted as 'one of us.'

Paradoxically, American society, the main generator of freak fiction, demands that its men and women be distinct individuals aspiring to success and, therefore, to public exposure; Americans, though, are also expected to be respectable members of their community. This unsolvable tension between the drive towards individuation and the need to belong in a homogeneous mass of individuals is at the root of the negative representations of the freak in fiction and the media. A freak is, in short, an individual who gains dreaded notoriety rather than coveted popularity.

Natural Born Freaks

Originally, the word 'freak' meant 'caprice,' but not necessarily 'monster.' Many freaks were, no doubt, the victims of infanticide but others were objects of awe or curiosity - hardly hatred; some, like, for instance, the royal freaks of Velázquez's paintings, were even kept as pets in the houses of the rich and powerful. For centuries beginning with the Greeks and up to the 18th century it was also believed that the unknown territories of the Earth (the *terra incognita* of old maps) were populated by monstrous races, collections of bizarre imaginary freaks that travellers, merchants,

pilgrims and crusaders routinely claimed to have seen. As John Block Friedman explains (1981: 24), these imaginary races responded to an ancient, Western inclination for "fantasy, escapism, delight in the exercise of the imagination, and - very important - fear of the unknown. If the monstrous races had not existed, it is likely that people would have created them" (1981: 24). The problem, however, is that the members of other races 'discovered' as the exploration of the world progressed were also represented as monstrous freaks, which explains why non-white 'exotics' were still exhibited in Victorian freak shows on both sides of the Atlantic.

As Rosemarie Garland Thomson observes "[n]ot until 1847 does the word [freak] become synonymous with human corporeal anomaly," (1996: 4) that is to say, with monstrosity. 'Freak,' it must be noted, is a word far more common in the vocabulary of American English than of the British varieties of the language. This is so because American society is particularly concerned with the definition of normality. The society of the United States seems to be highly intolerant of difference, despite the fact that it does not have a homogeneous racial or social basis, or, rather, *because* it lacks one. Thomson's intriguing thesis regarding this point is that "[t]he freak show made more than freaks: it fashioned as well the self-governed, iterable subject of democracy - the American cultural self. Parading at once as entertainment and education, the institutionalized social process of enfreakment united and validated the disparate throng positioned as viewers." (1996: 10) That is to say, the activity of gazing at the freak erased the differences between the onlookers of mixed national origins and made them all normative Americans. The freak, more often made than born, became a convenient 'Other' to create the fantasy of a unified America.

As Nigel Rothfels notes, "despite the continuity of freakmaking in Western history, however, it is important to understand that freaking has a historical frame - the precise cultural interpretation of an unusual person has a great deal to do with the historical moment in which that person finds himself or herself freaked by his or her own or another culture." (1996: 158) It is crucial, therefore, to consider the historical background against which the freak show disappeared and the textual representation of freaks in films and novels was popularized. Essentially, as real freaks disappeared from the public gaze and fictional freaks started taking over through fiction, the freak body became a metaphorical site to explore normativity, specifically that of white American men in a Cold War, late capitalist world. If the original freak show of the period 1840s-1940s served the purpose of creating a unified, normative America by exposing and exhibiting freakish anatomies, the new freak shows of the last 50 years in fiction and the media are playing the role of reinforcing that normativity by simultaneously relegating real freaks to obscurity. Freak fiction deals today not so much with the freak, as with the fear, maybe the frisson, of becoming one. This is so because in the second half of the 20th century the powers that run America (and the West) have convinced individuals that deviance from the norm is negative: globalised politics and economics need mass markets of standardized individuals willing to believe they are free to choose. Bodies that do not fit in must be isolated and erased, and the fear of being different instilled in the apparently free citizen of the western world.

The text that articulates the transition towards this new mode of representation - fully established by the 1950s - is, no doubt, the film by Tod Browning, *Freaks* (1932). Famous older English texts, such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) and Mary

Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), had already dealt with the freak as, respectively, an exotic creature and a criminalized monster. They demanded a certain amount of sympathy from spectators and readers, but Browning's film attempted to go even further, asking audiences to sympathize *and* enjoy seeing real-life freaks on the screen. Browning, however, miscalculated, thinking that fantasy horror films like his own successful adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (also 1931) had prepared audiences to accept all types of screen monstrosity. At a time of economic depression like the 1930s audiences welcomed gothic fantasy and romantic escapism but were far less receptive towards the most distressing aspects of reality. Browning, who had recruited his accidental actors among the most popular artists in freak shows, could not really understand why suddenly the spectacle of their bodies seemed so intolerable.

Browning's film opens with a singular notice explaining that in the past freaks were regarded as signs of ill omen and condemned to infanticide, something which is only partly true. This situation, the prologue announces, is about to change thanks to modern science, which will eliminate the blunders of nature - implicitly, through the then popular idea of selective breeding (eugenics). In the meantime, audiences are invited to see "the most startling horror story of the unnatural and the unwanted." The plot, based on the short story "Spurs" by Tod Robbins, narrates how the wicked couple formed by the blond trapeze artist Cleo and her lover, the strong man Hercules, plan to swindle Hans, a midget dotingly in love with her, out of his money. Poor Frieda, Hans's midget fiancée, sees through Cleo's plot but, despite having the sympathy of 'normal' fellow artists Venus and Frodo, can do nothing to prevent Hans and Cleo's wedding. During the banquet the rest of the circus company, an assortment of friendly freaks, welcomes Cleo to their midst; disgusted and enraged, Cleo humiliates Hans publicly and he finally opens his eyes to her wickedness. When she tries to kill him, the freak community decides to take revenge.

Browning portrays his freaks in everyday domestic situations, always backstage. His point is to persuade spectators that, despite their unusual physical appearance and employment freaks are ordinary people. This impression is, however, utterly shattered by the revenge scenes in which the freaks are photographed as threatening, horrifying monstrosities chasing Cleo and Hercules knife in hand. Cleo certainly deserves punishment, as she is an appalling moral monster. Yet, the treatment she meets (she's mutilated and turned into a freak) is so abominable that it is hard to see how sympathy for real-life freaks must arise from it. The film, in addition, has a clear sexist subtext, for Hercules is killed swiftly but Cleo is made to suffer a terrible torture. Joan Hawkins points out that "it is precisely when the freaks turn monstrous - when they seem to step outside the bounds of normal social constraints - that they become enforcers of patriarchal convention. It is when they become monstrous that they most clearly function - within the dominant society - as one of us." (1996: 274)[3] By rejecting the film, audiences may have been thus rejecting unawares the moral monstrosity of ordinary people. They focused, though, their dislike of the film, on the freak's body.

Freaks went actually out of circulation until it was re-released in the 1960s to college audiences beginning to celebrate difference and using the word 'freak' in a hype, countercultural sense, as in the verb to 'freak out.' In the meantime, fantasy freaks - from the werewolf to the 50 feet woman, from Batman to the inhabitants of the *Planet*

of the Apes - had colonized the popular imagination. Science fiction, of course, had been fulfilling for decades the compulsion of white Americans for the exotic, relocating, as *Planet of the Apes* does, "the terrestrial freak into orbit," and thus imitating "the actual incorporation of non-Western peoples into the freak show [… of the] the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." (Weinstock, 1996: 330)

Natural born freaks had, meanwhile, practically disappeared from the public gaze. Medicine had 'cured' some, far fewer than it had promised, and institutionalized most, depriving them of social visibility and their possibilities for integration into ordinary life. Infanticide came to be legally sanctioned through selective abortion in many Western countries, whereas freaks whose condition allowed them to lead normal lives were categorized as disabled people and discriminated as such. Diane Arbus became famous for her patronizing photographs of American freaks in the 1960s, at the same time that the wonder drug thalidomide produced an alarmingly high number of freaks of a new category: the victims of science. Despite the calls of civil rights movements for more tolerance and respect for difference, medical technology started presenting itself as "a means of normalizing the body, of producing replicants of a single, idealized model" (Adams 1996: 279): the young and uniformly beautiful. The amazing diversity of the human body was to be dramatically reduced in the late 20th century thanks to the standardization brought about by fashion, cosmetics and medicine, as was to be expected from an industrial age replicating the same products for world consumption. Contradictory as this may seem, difference could be kept and even flaunted only as long as 'normality' was enforced in this brave new world led by American values.

The latest cycle in the representation of the natural freak began in 1980 with David Lynch's elegant film *The Elephant Man* and is characterized by its limited treatment of the social reality behind enfreakment practices. In the last 20 years many American films and novels have discussed the predicament of the natural born freak but have completely failed to propose a solution for his or her integration in society, frequently choosing to reach closure through the convenient death of the freak. Quite often, the focus has been laid, rather, on the imaginary freak, either framed by a realist context (films like *Phenomenon*, *Powder*) or by pure fantasy (*Edward Scissorhands*, *Shrek*), since the screen presence of the natural born freak is not really well tolerated.[4] Although it might seem that there is a huge leap between *Freaks* and *The Elephant Man* - as attested by the current stigmatization of the word 'freak' - fiction and the media still insist on denying 'freaks' a right to shape their own textual representation.[5] The advances in medicine have also drastically lowered the tolerance for the freakish body: it's not just a matter of subjecting conjoined twins to monstrous operations which may include the sacrifice of either one, but also a matter of using surgery to enfreak the body (by using, for instance, silicon implants for breasts) or to erase its apparent freakish features - a nose too large, lips too thin - through plastic surgery.

The Elephant Man, based on the real-life story of John Merrick, explains with diaphanous clarity the freak's transition from the freak show to the realm of medicine. The main point made by the film is that the respectable Victorian doctor that rescues Merrick from his exploiter uses him for his own ends. As a poignant scene shows, the drunken crowds gaping at Merrick's body are not in essence less morbidly curious than the elite of medicine students and practitioners crowding the lectures in which Dr.

Trewes analyses the anatomy of his protégé. Even though Merrick is fêted by royalty, he sees after being harrowed by a nasty mob in the underground that his chances to lead a normal life are nil, hence his choosing death.

Similar films placed in a contemporary setting - *Mask* (1985), *Johnny Handsome* (1989), *The Mighty* (1999) - need no longer consider the matter of the freak show but still fail to find a solution to the problem of how the natural born freak should be integrated in society. His condition - freaks are usually male[6] - is described in medical-scientific terms but medicine also fails to provide a solution, leaving the freak stranded in social limbo. In *Mask* teenager Rusty, deformed by the same complaint affecting Merrick, makes the most of his short life managing to have a girl (a blind one!) fall in love with him. In *Johnny Handsome* a surgeon gives Johnny a new, normal face believing this will also make him a normal man but the weight of his past social rejection is too heavy and handsome Johnny relapses into criminality. In *The Mighty* a dying child, badly deformed by a tumor located in his spine, teaches another freakish child - a very big boy - to accept his body before he himself dies. The mood of these films is sympathetic because it is elegiac; elegy requires, of course, the previous suppression of the individual commemorated.

The European equivalent - *My Left Foot*, based on the life of Irish artist Christy Brown - leaves elegy aside to celebrate the *life* of the disabled individual, making the point that freakishness must be rejected as an out-moded, intolerant presentation of disability. As is common practice on both sides of the Atlantic, in this film the main role is played by Daniel Day-Lewis, a fully-abled actor. Hollywood, whose audiences love seeing top actors in roles involving some kind of disability but have no tolerance for disabled actors,[7] duly awarded Day-Lewis an Oscar for the role. This suggests that the day when 'freaks' can return to the screen to show others a glimpse of their ordinary life is still remote. Nothing has changed since Browning's sadly failed attempt to portray the ordinary beneath the extra-ordinary body.

Imaginary Freaks

Natural born freaks have, as I have argued, a very limited presence in contemporary films. They have hardly any in contemporary novels. Far more common is the representation of imaginary freaks (fantasy creatures born with impossible anatomies, but also ordinary people transformed by strange accidents), and, less frequently, of ordinary people enfreaked by disease or accident. Fiction about these imaginary or fake freaks does not really distinguish between the physical and the mental freak (or prodigy) who looks outwardly ordinary. The point of most stories is that the individual who looks abnormal or has physical and/or mental abnormal abilities is 'rightly' denied a chance to become socially integrated. There is a certain amount of sympathy for freaks as social victims but they always end up unleashing their pent-up rage against their tormentors, as Frankenstein's creature did, thus justifying their representation as threatening monsters.

Most American freak fiction follows today narrative paradigms derived from three essential European gothic texts: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (1886) and Franz Kafka's

"The Metamorphosis" (1915). Their plots have been adapted to suit the needs of contemporary rational, technological American society but remain, essentially the same. The Frankenstein paradigm is used to narrate the plea of the man who cannot fit into normative society because he looks and feels different due to the abnormal circumstances surrounding his birth. The Jekyll paradigm serves to tell the ordeal of ordinary men suddenly trapped into monstrosity by the patriarchal science and technology in whose development they collaborate. Finally, Kafka is a referent for all the texts that narrate an innocent man's abrupt transformation into a freak by supernatural or natural accidents.

Frankenstein is the primal text among all dealing with the imaginary born freak as a victim unjustly rejected by society. Its main plot line lies behind films as diverse as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Powder* (1995), *A.I.* (2001) or even *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). As can be seen from the diverse physical characteristics of the main characters in these films, the common denominator shared with Frankenstein's artificial son is not physical monstrosity but physical difference. While Mary Shelley attributed the rejection endured by her creature to his ungainly looks, the far more pleasing looks of the freaks represented in the first four titles here mentioned are no guarantee for their social acceptance. Quite the opposite: the more human they look, the more feared these freaks are.

In fact, freaks like Frankenstein's creature or the boy of *A.I.* are rejected because they are physically or intellectually superior to average human beings, hence more powerful. If the freak as inferior is an object of morbid disgust, the freak as superior is a threat, an object of terror. Only *Shrek* (2001) tries to change disgust and fear for self-acceptance but because of its fairy-tale, comic atmosphere it will certainly have a lower impact on the representation of difference than a film about real difference could have. After all, most people would name *The Elephant Man*, a pseudo-documentary film, and not *Frankenstein*, a fantasy novel, as the main fiction text about the freak.

Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" is a descendant of *Frankenstein* in which creator and monstrous creature are one and the same person. Even though both texts deal with an ambitious scientist overstepping the limits of good and evil - going beyond in a pre-Nietzchean sense - science is nothing but an excuse for the authors to discuss other themes: the irresponsible narcissism of the artist in Shelley's case, the boundaries of Victorian respectability in Stevenson's. Nevertheless, the twin topics of the maddened scientist as capricious creator of new monstrous life and as prey to his own dangerous experiments have inspired more stories about imaginary freaks than any other. Both are, in addition, tangled with the recurrent use of metamorphosis in plenty of freak fiction. Many freaks are the result of self-induced metamorphosis, like Dr. Jekyll, or the victims of mad scientists like Frankenstein that force horrific transformations onto unsuspecting victims.

Most readings of Stevenson's novella stop at the surface, supposing Dr. Jekyll is honestly trying to rid mankind of its evil half through his experiments. In fact, the good doctor is looking for a safe way to enjoy the forbidden pleasures he so loved in his youth but that are now outside the reach of the respectable Victorian gentleman he has become: hence Mr. Hyde. This individual goes much further than Jekyll expected but fulfils the need due to which he was called from the depths of Dr. Jekyll's body. Being

himself a Victorian, Stevenson condemns both Jekyll and Hyde, though. Oscar Wilde did the same with his own Dorian Gray (1891), another hedonist that delegates the horrific effects of vice onto a second persona, that of his famous portrait. In the most recent version of the Jekyll theme, *The Hollow Man* (2000) - actually an adaptation of H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* - a more than willing scientist uses his new invisible, freakish body to wreak havoc, feeling far less compunction than Stevenson's or Wilde's heroes for his misdemeanors. Freakishness signifies here unbounded freedom to do mischief and, as such, a condition to be abhorred by the average person, who is portrayed as the freak's potential victim.

The classic unwilling or accidental victim within the Jekyll paradigm is Seth Brundle, protagonist of *The Fly* (1986). Brundle's ordeal straddles the Jekyll and Kafkaesque paradigms, for his enfreakment is produced by his own irresponsibility but also by an accident. The insect that crosses his path recalls the cockroach into which Kakfa's Grigor Samsa is transformed in "The Metamorphosis." Yet, whereas Samsa plays no part in his misfortune, Brundle is much to blame for it. Again, as I noted in reference to *Frankenstein* and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," freakishness is but an excuse to deal with quite a different subject, in this case disease and, specifically, cancer.

Brundle, who is working on a system of teletransportation, gets inside his telepod unaware that a fly has also entered it. The experiment to teletransport himself to another pod succeeds but it also results in the intermingling of his DNA with that of the fly. This unlikely side effect leads to the progressive enfreakment of his body, a loathsome process which, according to Noël Carroll, was meant to replicate "the conflict between emotion and disgust" that film director David Cronenberg felt as his father was dying of a cancer (Carroll 1990: 222). Cancer victims, especially those suffering from lung cancer, may be considered responsible for their malady by desperate relatives, which may have well been Cronenberg's case: hence his blaming Brundle for the accident that triggers his fantastic metamorphosis.

The transformations narrated by the Roman poet Ovid in his seminal anthology of tales in verse, *Metamorphoses* (finished in 9 AD), are framed by a magical system of punishment and retribution - some times protection - controlled by the Olympian gods. Thus, Ovid narrates how the cruel tyrant Licaon is punished by Jupiter for his brutality and transformed into a werewolf or 'lycanthrope' (literally, wolf-man), but also how Daphne becomes a laurel tree when she asks for help to prevent her rape by Apollo. In Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis" (1915) divine justice has been suspended and substituted by arbitrariness. Whereas Stevenson's doctor is a victim of his own immoral pursuits, Kafka's Grigor Samsa, a modest office clerk, simply awakens one day transformed into a man-sized cockroach, without having previously done anything deserving such awful punishment. Samsa loses the capacity to communicate with his unsympathetic family - a metaphoric cry of anguish in the face of alienating modernity - and is finally swept away by the broom of the maid. There is neither Jupiter nor Frankensteinian mad doctor to answer for this atrocity.

Modern metamorphosis is, therefore, as in the case of *The Fly*, often located between two models: the ordeal of the extraordinarily ambitious individual that brings disgrace onto him or herself for overreaching (the Romantic-Victorian model) and the torture of the victimized individual at the mercy of forces s/he cannot understand (the

Modernist model). It is a nightmarish catch-22 situation, for American fiction indoctrinates individuals to behave - or else end like Dr. Jekyll - but also preaches that no matter how good we are a sudden horror may plunge us into Otherness, as happens to Samsa. Considering that the main originators of modern metamorphosis are a Scotsman raised in an atmosphere tinged by Calvinist predestination (Stevenson) and a Prague Jew (Kafka) may help illuminate this obsession with sin and persecution.[8] In comparison, the pagan model of metamorphosis feels liberating.

American gothic fictions of the last two decades have used metamorphosis to express the fear of losing control over our bodies and minds, a fear typical of deeply individualistic societies. Individuals in these novels and films are threatened with sudden enfreakment by four main types of metamorphosis, which are triggered by other persons or by fate: accident or disease (Patrick McGrath's novel *Martha Peake* or Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*), an ambiguous supernatural event (*Phenomenon*), a magic transformation (*Wolf*, Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*) or a technological metamorphosis (*Robocop*, *The Lawnmower Man*). The victims of these alterations respond to them initially with fear and despair but learn to accept their new bodies or minds eventually, most as a terrible curse.

The most peculiar aspect of the representation of the metamorphic freak is that although the transformed individuals are rejected by society and often hate themselves, metamorphosis itself is glamorized in the novels and films. Readers and spectators are supposed to negotiate their longing for change and for resistance against normativity by learning the lesson that being different does not pay. Nothing, though, seems to quench the thirst for feeling special. At the end of *Interview with the Vampire*, Louis realizes he has failed to impress his interviewer with the horrors of his new life as a vampire and that, in fact, the young man is dying, if the easy joke can be allowed, to become one of Louis's vampiric kin. The films and the novels tell their audience that change is attractive but negative, yet audiences behave like Rice's interviewer: we all want to know what being different feels like. Within certain limits, of course.

This fantasy clashes badly with the actual discriminatory practices that 'different' people suffer in everyday life - the idea of becoming a vampire is glamorous, but who would like to be another John Merrick? This, in essence, shows how frivolous American, and by extension, Western society can be as regards the representation of the freak but also how deeply ingrained the need for the imaginary Other, pointed out by John Block Friedman in reference to the races of the *terra incognita*, is still today. Real freaks have been hidden from the public gaze but we live surrounded by imaginary freaks who are the more glamorous the less they recall reality.

Films like *Phenomemon* try to break away from gothic horror to teach tolerance by inviting the spectator to identify with the average American as victim. He, played here by John Travolta, is harassed by a bigoted community that who cannot understand the amazing mental abilities he has developed after being touched, as he claims, by an alien ray of light. In Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*, Johnny starts seeing into the future after suffering a car crash, and saves as a result the USA from a homicidal future President. His new extra-sensorial perception may be actually due to a brain tumor - the complaint also suspected of giving Travolta his sharp mind in *Phenomenon* - but what really hurts Johnny is the fear his abilities elicit from others. Whereas films like *Edward*

Scissorhands or *Shrek* ask for tolerance for the Other born looking different from us, *Phenomenon* or *The Dead Zone* ask readers and spectators to consider how our ordinary lives can be changed by accident: indeed, to consider ourselves grateful for being 'normal,' if this is what we are.

Freak fiction never questions, though, the very meaning of 'normality,' assuming it is a fixed category. The pessimism of most freak fiction arises, precisely, from its inability to offer an alternative or to imagine that there can be one. Despite its apparent good intentions, a film like *Phenomenon* is ultimately nothing but bitter Kafkaesque horror: we may sympathize with its main character, but we want to avoid his fate. The film cannot appease our fears nor convince us that, should we become a 'freak' like him, we would be treated in a better way. In fact, it reinforces our impression that cruelty rules society in America and, possibly, all over the world.

Clearly, all the films and novels I have mentioned here address 'normal' (implicitly American) people either to terrify them with the threat of sudden enfreakment or to ask for increased tolerance towards difference. All of them have been written or filmed by fully-abled people - mostly white, educated American men - and lack thus a first person experience of exclusion. Like the old freak shows, these texts aim at reinforcing a certain version of America, one still dominated by the values of white men in which difference is often equated with powerlessness. The appeal for tolerance of freak fiction has actually less to do with the people formerly called 'freaks,' whose voices and bodies are missing from fiction, than with those fully empowered individuals afraid of disempowerment.

Practically, no progress has been made since *Freaks* as regards the presence on the screen of real freakishness despite the popularity of films focused on disabled or 'different' people, both ordinary or imaginary. Novels tend to use freaks as metaphors for other concerns but haven't done much, either, to alter our perceptions of physical and mental Otherness. Defenders of the rights of women, ethnic and sexual minorities, children and animals have already protested against their 'othering' and have asked both for a chance to represent themselves (not children and animals, of course!) and for less biased representations by others. Those who used to be called freaks are beginning to be heard through the work of scholars in Disability Studies, campaigns and political lobbying, though their appeal for more tolerance is seen as a minor problem given, precisely, their low social visibility.

In a sense, the disappearance of the freak show has turned out to be a great liability, for freaks have lost the only public space that gave them any kind of visibility. The freak show was indeed exploitative, but not more than other freak shows today, such as the fashion world, sports, or TV talk shows. Its return is by no means desirable but more room must be made for difference in American or Western culture. However, as long as fiction continues preaching the idea that being different is a curse rather than part of human nature, and as long as freaks are represented to discuss other concerns - such as the normativity of white men - and not to really know what they feel and think, real tolerance will not increase. Callous as this may sound, it is in our own interests to support tolerance for the 'freak,' since we will not suddenly become individuals of another gender, race or age but we can suddenly lose control over our bodies and minds or bear children outside the 'norm.' The freak, let's remember this, is not really the

Other but our next-door self and, always, the body we may become through accident or disease.

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