

Source: Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

SIDESHOW CINEMA



FIGURE 13. Tod Browning, director of *Freaks* (1932). *Freaks* © 1932 Turner Entertainment Co. A Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

During the shooting of Tod Browning's *Freaks*, a drunken F. Scott Fitzgerald, working at the time as a screenwriter for MGM, found himself sharing a table in the commissary with two of its featured actors, the conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton. Just as he sat down to order lunch, "one of them picked up the menu, and, without even looking at the other, asked, 'What are you going to have?'"¹ This banal question, turned extraordinary by the fact that the interlocutor shared a body with the recipient, proved too much for the author, who immediately rushed outside to vomit.² It is not surprising that Fitzgerald, a writer whose life and fiction were marked by persistent class anxiety, would object to the intrusion of an el-

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ement associated with the lowest forms of popular entertainment, the carnival freak show, into his personal space.³ In contrast to the confusions described in the previous chapter, where visitors applied the freak show's interpretive modes to human exhibits in the zoo and museum, in this case the freak show imposed itself on unwitting bystanders. Fitzgerald's visceral reaction to the twins was echoed by others on the MGM lot, who shared his disgust at the presence of freaks in the commissary of a studio known for its slick, glamorous productions. Indeed, given the entire cast, which included midgets, pinheads, two women without arms, a man without legs, a man with neither arms nor legs, and a bearded lady, the petite and fetching Hilton sisters may have been among its less shocking luncheon companions. So disturbing was the prospect of sharing a meal with the freaks that they had to be assigned to a special table outside (figure 14). The response of the MGM staff prefigured the reception of *Freaks* by American audiences, whose outrage was captured by one reviewer's description of the film as "a catalogue of horrors,



FIGURE 14. The cast of Tod Browning's *Freaks* eating outside at a table on the MGM lot following their expulsion from the studio commissary. Compare this relatively peaceful gathering with figure 17, the still of the raucous wedding banquet scene that takes place in the film. *Freaks* © 1932 Turner Entertainment Co. A Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

ticketed and labeled, dragged out into the sunlight before the camera to be photographed against whatever background happens to be handy."⁴ Public outcry against the film was so vehement that it had to be pulled from circulation at considerable financial cost to MCM.⁵ Stunned by the negative reaction to *Freaks*, Browning never recovered from his failure and, after making several less controversial films, became a recluse and renounced the career that had made him a fortune, declaring to a friend, "I wouldn't walk across the street now to see a movie."⁶

Freaks, loosely based on the short story "Spurs" by Tod Robbins, takes place behind the scenes at a low-budget traveling circus, where Hans (Harry Earles), a midget, falls in love with a big woman, a trapeze artist named Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova). Initially amused by the midget's interest, Cleo begins to take him seriously once she learns that Hans has come into a large inheritance, with which he intends to finance his retirement from circus life and marriage to his fiancée, Frieda (Daisy Earles). With Hercules (Henry Victor), the circus strongman, Cleo plots to wed Hans, poison him, and inherit his money. In response to her advances, the lovestruck Hans breaks off the engagement with Frieda and proposes to Cleo, who eagerly accepts. Their union is celebrated at a carnivalesque wedding feast that turns ugly when the freaks chant their acceptance of the new bride as "one of us." She reacts by turning on them in horror, calling them "filthy, slimy FREAKS."⁷ When Hans falls ill after the wedding, the freaks, who are already suspicious of Cleo's intentions, learn of her scheme. Following their own code of justice—"offend one and you offend them all"—they plot their revenge against the two big people. The film ends after the freaks have enacted a grisly retribution by murdering Hercules and transforming Cleo into a pathetic, feathered creature who is half chicken, half woman. Frieda is reunited with Hans when, in the company of their sympathetic friends, Venus (Leila Hyams) and Phroso (Wallace Ford), she visits the mansion where he has retired to nurse his broken heart.

Reactions to the film must be understood historically, as its reception changed dramatically between the moment of its initial release in 1932 and its revival thirty years later. Browning had made his career in the 1920s by producing films about characters who, through theft, deception, and murder, seek illegitimate wealth while expressing deep-seated resentment against a moneyed elite. As a result, he would seem an ideal spokesperson for the anxieties and desires of Depression-era audiences. And *Freaks*, with its story of a midget punished for his unearned riches and aristocratic pretensions, would appear to convey popular animosity towards class privilege during this time of economic deprivation.⁸ Yet the film was also made in the context of the sideshow's growing obsolescence, in the face of the medicalization of disability and changing notions about re-

spectable entertainment. *Freaks'* dramatization of contemporary class antagonisms could not counteract the shocking effects of its severely disabled actors on viewers who had recently witnessed the wounded veterans of the First World War and were in the midst of financial collapse.⁹ Moreover, at a moment when extravagant musicals were among the most popular of film genres, the carnival setting and characters of *Freaks* recalled too vividly the low origins of cinema in storefront theaters and on the vaudeville circuit. Not only did it reanimate the conventions of a mode of live entertainment many Americans were eager to erase from cultural memory, it also explored the way that cinema could intensify and prolong the experience of a live sideshow by bringing the freak off of the display platform and onto the screen.

Ironically, Browning's death in 1962 coincided with a revival of *Freaks*, which screened at the Venice Film Festival and has attracted a devoted fandom ever since. As a consequence of its re-release, almost all of the authors and artists who appear in later chapters of this study cite Browning's film as the inspiration for their own thinking about freaks. Leslie Fiedler described his scholarly work *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* as "a belated tribute to that great director and his truly astonishing film."¹⁰ Diane Arbus was transfixed by the experience of watching an art house revival of *Freaks* and returned to view the film again and again during the same period that she began her haunting photographic documentation of social marginality. Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, which Skal Savada describes as "a knowingly postmodern homage to Tod Browning's America," reanimates many of the film's most provocative questions about agency, sexuality, and collective identity.¹¹ Given this considerable chain of influences, the film functions in this book not simply as another representation of freaks—for there is indeed a growing cinematic tradition¹²—but as the foundational text through which authors and artists in the twentieth century came to understand the freak show. *Freaks* is not a documentary about sideshow culture, but it became a point of reference for all subsequent representations of that culture, ensuring that the freak show, as Browning envisioned it, remained a vivid aspect of popular cultural memory. In other words, it is impossible to chart the course of representations of the freak show in the twentieth century without considering the enduring significance of Tod Browning, for better or for worse, the auteur par excellence of freak cinema.

The following analysis of *Freaks* echoes many of the concerns introduced in chapter 2, which explores what happens to freaks when they move outside the traditional confines of the sideshow, particularly the disturbances they cause in locations that would otherwise shun any association with carnival life. While movies

do not share the cultural prestige of an anthropology museum or even a zoological park, MGM was distinguished by the high quality of its cinematic product. The reaction of employees on the lot suggests how dramatically Browning's film departed from the studio's usual fare. This chapter will argue that *Freaks* makes an explicit formal and thematic link between the medium of film and the freak show. Although both movies and freak shows are forms of popular culture, by 1932 one was an ascendant medium with aspirations to aesthetic value, whereas the other was a residual form that threatened to drag film back to its unglaorious beginnings.¹³

Freaks is significant because, in looking back at modes of popular entertainment on the decline by the 1930s, it reanimates the figure of the freak and the culture of the freak show for a new generation of American audiences. Grappling with the transition from live entertainment to screen, *Freaks* probes the capacity of film to alter perception. Whereas the classic freak show could exploit and dehumanize, the film guides its viewers towards a more sympathetic approach to the disabled body. In contrast to the chaste figures of Ishi and Ota Benga, Browning's cinematic sideshow provides an environment rich with polymorphously perverse sexuality, where a proliferation of erotic proclivities coexist, partners are exchanged, and heterosexuality is one among many options. Ultimately, though, this explosion of sexualities is countered by the sexual propriety of the midget couple, Hans and Frieda, whose perspective increasingly dominates the narrative. It is no accident that the position of moral authority is upheld by a pair of little people, who are the literal embodiment of petite bourgeois conservatism. Although *Freaks* closes by endorsing the more normative perspective of Hans and Frieda, it cannot allow them a happy conclusion. The pair may be reconciled and Hans's fortune restored, but he seems incapable of recovering his vanquished masculinity. In the end, it is hard to say which of the film's wounded characters are the victims, which the antagonists. A multivalent and contradictory narrative, *Freaks'* protean qualities offered varied points of identification to the authors, artists, and critics who would take it as inspiration.

Freaks and the "Cinema of Attractions"

Although it has often screened on the art house circuit, *Freaks* is commonly dismissed as formally uninventive by critics who describe the unusual bodies of the actors as its only real claim to distinction. What they fail to recognize is that the film also pays knowing homage to a medley of historical genres, skillfully putting a variety of formal and narrative conventions to different effects.¹⁴ Structurally, it is a hybrid monster that yokes together elements of the live performance of circus

and carnival, early cinema, as well as later innovations in editing and camera work. As such, *Freaks* seems to be seeking a structure appropriate for showcasing the talents of its freak stars. Formally, it recalls film's origins in earlier modes of entertainment such as the sideshow and vaudeville. Yet at the same time, it makes problematic the kind of looking that such spectacles encouraged by experimenting with the camera's ability to manipulate perspective.

That a circus is the mise-en-scène for Browning's most memorable work is unsurprising, since he often recalled his youthful experiences as a carnival performer as a source of inspiration for his films. As a boy, he ran away from home to join a traveling show, inaugurating a varied career that included work as a spieler for a "Wild Man of Borneo" act, an escape artist, a clown, a contortionist, a black-face comedian, a ringmaster, as well as a live burial in a stunt called the Hypnotic Living Corpse.¹⁵ If Browning himself claimed the influence of show business on the content of his films, it also had a formal impact, for *Freaks* retains the fragmented structure and playful reversals of illusion and reality of the ten-in-one.

The first half of *Freaks* resists many of the conventions that bring continuity to narrative film, evoking instead the episodic feeling of the circus sideshow. The freaks, as well as many of the nondisabled performers, are introduced by a series of vignettes, which demonstrate their talents and personalities but make little effort to unify the characters through a common storyline. "Circus Slang Gives Picture Local Color" proclaims one of the film's pressbook articles, making reference to the use of authentic sideshow jargon, as well as the fact that "freaks from sideshows all over America played principle roles, and the setting and 'props,' actual circus material, were handled by circus people." Many of the initial appearances take place within a circle of carnival wagons, which is a backstage version of the circus ring. One by one, characters such as Josephine-Joseph, the Half Man-Half Woman, the conjoined twins Daisy and Violet (figure 15), and the Half-Boy Johnny Eck emerge into this space, in a manner more reminiscent of a variety show than a narrative film. Stage and screen identities are blurred as each character goes by the same name they use in their live performances. Many of the early scenes were added to the original script as Browning became fascinated with the performers' remarkable abilities and sought excuses for working them into the diegesis. These seemingly incidental episodes alternate with the more conventional romantic plot involving two couples, Venus and Phroso and the midgets, Hans and Frieda.

The film's fragmented structure not only replicates the conventions of the live entertainment it depicts, but recalls the "primitive" films produced before 1906–1907 that Tom Gunning has called "the cinema of attractions." Direct

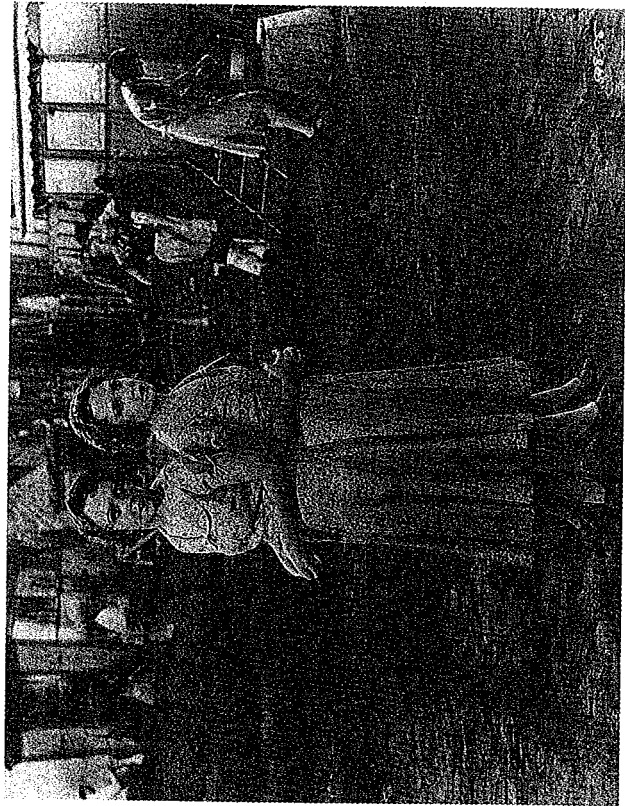


FIGURE 15. Publicity still of the conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton (who play themselves in Browning's film) standing inside the circle of carnival wagons. This space backstage is a counterpart to the ring where the circus folk conduct their public performances. *Freaks* © 1932 Turner Entertainment Co. A Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

descendants of the circus and the carnival, these early films, Gunning writes, "related more to the attractions of the fairground than to the traditions of legitimate theater. The relation between films and the emergence of the great amusement parks, such as Coney Island, at the turn of the century provides a rich ground for rethinking the roots of early cinema."¹⁶ Gunning's insight is significant because it locates the origins of the film industry in precisely the venues that provide the setting for *Freaks*. Many of the initial sequences are short, nonnarrative episodes shot with a relatively static camera that seem to gesture back to the film's cinematic precursors. Form follows content as *Freaks* recalls the cinema's emergence in amusement parks, fairgrounds, and vaudeville.

According to Gunning, the first films screened during variety shows composed primarily of live performances. Borrowing material from circus and stage, early cinema frequently portrayed acrobatic acts, contortionists and exotic dancers, trained elephants, and clowns. As Gunning explains, the short films were intro-

duced with speeches much like the spiel of a sideshow barker, who "builds an atmosphere of expectation, a pronounced curiosity leavened with anxiety as he stresses the novelty and astonishing properties which the attraction about to be revealed will possess."¹⁷ Aesthetically, these shorts tended towards the grotesque or sensationalistic, consciously resisting the "orthodox identification of viewing pleasure with the contemplation of beauty" of a more traditional mode of spectatorship.¹⁸ Relying on surprise and amazement, the cinema of attractions used spectacle to stimulate the viewer instead of attempting to draw her in through identification with the characters, as would become typical of classic narrative film.¹⁹

Like the cinema of attractions, early portions of *Freaks* are characterized by an aesthetic of spectacle that is only heightened by the stiff, self-conscious performances of many of the disabled actors. These performers do not "act" in traditional ways; their wooden delivery subverts the conventions of classic Hollywood cinema by preventing the spectator from becoming absorbed in the drama. There is hardly a moment in *Freaks* when we can forget that we are watching actors speak their lines, for we are all too conscious of the awkward gap between person and screen persona. Moreover, the narrative itself seems contrived, even by its own terms: the bodies of the actors engaged in the motions of daily life are more fascinating than the thin story of love and vengeance that makes a flimsy pretext for gathering them together. Rather than a driving force, plot becomes incidental to the talents of the film's stars. Yet there is a certain poignancy in their limited thespian abilities. According to Skal, many of the disabled actors shared mainstream America's admiration for the glamorous world of Hollywood.²⁰ They aspired to be professional actors, not professional freaks.²¹ Insofar as most of them are playing themselves in the film—or at least performing the same roles they played in the freak show—*Freaks* is structured to reproduce, not counteract, the sideshow's transformation of bodily difference into freakish spectacle.

The live freak show, like primitive cinema, relies on curiosity to thrill and entertain its audience, discouraging any substantive interaction between viewer and performer. Curious looking enables the paying customer to see the freak as an object on display for the sole purpose of her amusement or education. As I argue throughout this study, the spectacular structure of live performance is often ruptured by the unexpected behavior of audience members or performers. But these interruptions are unintended and the sideshow's format—is orchestrated by the spieler's authoritative monologue and the freak's silence—is designed to impede such contact. Despite his borrowing of the freak show's form and his unapologetic depiction of the film's characters as freaks, Browning makes an effort to transform the more negative aspects of looking at the disabled body that the

spectacle invites. *Freaks* employs the structure of the freak show and the cinema of attractions, but works to dispel the initial shock that the unusual bodies of its protagonists might evoke, decoupling disability from freakishness by demanding a more engaged—and potentially sensitive—mode of viewing in the audience.

To this end, the film invokes and revises an even earlier cinematic precursor, the stop-motion photography of Eadweard Muybridge, in which multiple shots of the moving bodies of animals and humans reveal details imperceptible to the naked eye. Whereas most of Muybridge's subjects exhibit the dynamics of normative movement, one memorable sequence pictures a legless man propelling himself from a chair onto the floor.²² This series suggests that curiosity about the disabled body in motion is encoded within the earliest attempts to capture the human form on film. The desire to stare, which is the primary impulse behind the freak show, is addressed by these images. But Muybridge's disabled man is hardly a freak, for his minimal surroundings lack the sensational context that would define him as such. By showing the disabled body engaged in the activities of daily life, Browning hearkens back to the Muybridge photographs. However, his purpose is somewhat different, for he is less interested in movement itself than in experimenting with the cinema's power to alter viewers' understanding of the human body. Rather than using the camera to further degrade the disabled actor, as some negative reviews suggested, *Freaks* proves that film may be instrumental in creating greater tolerance to various kinds of difference.

For example, *Freaks* manipulates scale to demonstrate that size is relative rather than absolute. In the original script, a note that accompanies a scene of the midget couple in Hans's wagon attests to the screenwriters' concern with the relativity of scale: "[I]n these surroundings we become less conscious of them as midgets, because everything about them is in proportion to their size."²³ Similarly, Hans's first impression of Cleopatra is that "she is the most beautiful big woman I have ever seen." From his perspective, Cleo is not a "normal" woman but a big one, and the camera aligns the spectator's gaze with his point of view. As Susan Stewart has argued of the social construction of scale, "the miniature is a cultural product, the product of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to, the physical world."²⁴ *Freaks* calls attention to the power of the camera to alter the viewer's visual orientation by making size and proportion unfamiliar. Although others have argued that these machinations reverse the categories of freak and normal, the disruption is in fact more subtle, as it unmoors the possibility of such absolute categorical distinctions altogether: the "normal" is an elusive fiction, as is its abject byproduct, the "freak."²⁵

Of course traditional freak shows also played with scale, but always in refer-

ence to the normality of the spectator. The viewer's assessment of the freaks on stage must be a comparative one in which she measures the prodigious body against her own. Live freak shows enhance the bodily extremes of the performers through contrasts of size (midget and giant), shape (skeleton and fat lady), and skin color (black and white) that implicitly locate the audience as the standard against which the abnormal is defined. By contrast, identification with moving images projected into a darkened theater is so intense that it is possible for the viewer to forget about her own body. *Freaks* makes adjustments in scale to meet the needs of its diminutive characters without providing a normative point of reference. By creating a context in which Hans and Frieda are not too small, the film exploits the camera's exceptional ability to destabilize the notion of a proportional norm, implying instead that bodies should be measured in relation to their environment. When this scale is disrupted by Cleo's presence in Hans's home, she appears to be a giant, her body too large to fit the space best suited to his needs.²⁶

In addition to manipulations of scale, *Freaks* blurs the distinctions between disabled and able-bodied performers in other ways, particularly through its depiction of everyday life. For example, an exchange that, in the film, takes place between Phroso, Venus, and Johnny Eck was originally scripted for the limbed Randian, who was supposed to crawl towards the couple according to the following instructions: "Phroso and Venus are not startled. They treat Randian like a normal human being throughout."²⁷ At another point, Frieda hangs her laundry out to dry while Venus sews on the steps of her wagon. Although Frieda's wet clothes appear tiny, they are not the focus of attention, which centers around a discussion of Hans's vulnerability to Cleo's seductions. In two scenes, the armless ladies, Frances and Martha, eat and drink with their feet. Each is accompanied by a companion who does not seem to notice this accommodation, as they converse about some other topic. To treat one another like "normal human beings" is not the same as to insist on a single standard of normalcy, as the screenwriters' direction might imply. As the film continues, a more normative perspective will predominate, subordinating the particularities of the body to a conventional system of activities and social relations. But in the early scenes, "a normal human being" is one who deserves friendship and respect for the very differences that could not be tolerated outside of the circus community. These episodes aim to acclimate the viewer to seeing the freaks as multidimensional, as individuals who have accommodated their disabilities by developing other ways of performing everyday activities. Their interests extend beyond the contours of their own extraordinary bodies, and they require neither pity nor assistance from their more conventionally formed peers.

In this respect, the film's content differs dramatically from the short story on which it is based. "Spurs" represents freakishness as an absolute condition; even when offstage the characters continue to perform in ways that reduce their personhood to their dramatic personae. At the wedding feast, the snake charmer brings her animal charges to the table, and the juggler, M. Jejongle, tosses food, utensils, and dinnerware "although the whole company was heartily sick of his tricks."²⁸ In contrast to the film's version of the banquet, in which the freaks declare their solidarity and accept Cleo as "one of us," "Spurs" portrays them as "great egotists," so convinced of the superiority of their own talents that there is no possibility of community within the group, for "each one of these human oddities thought that he or she alone was responsible for the crowds that daily gathered at Copo's circus. . . . Their separate egos rattled angrily together, like so many pebbles in a bag. Here was gunpowder which needed only a spark."²⁹ The inebriated wedding guests begin to fight with each other, quickly descending into physical combat that is more animal than human until "every freak's hands, teeth, feet, were turned against the others. Above the shouts, screams, growls, and hisses of combat, Papa Copo's voice could be heard bellowing for peace."³⁰ "Spurs" thus reinforces the dominant logic of the freak show, which implies that the performers are less decent, well mannered, and sympathetic than the audience, and therefore deserving of their fate. Monstrous bodily surfaces correspond with monstrous interiority. Extreme corporeal difference is indicative of an egotistical individualism that makes community impossible. Although the action of "Spurs" takes place backstage, focusing on circus life beyond the display platform, it insists that the freak's character and motivations are delimited by the extraordinary contours of her body, whether she is onstage or off.

Browning and his scriptwriters rewrote Robbins's story to invest the freaks with an emotional complexity in excess of their onstage personae. Instead of a group of isolated egotists, backstage the carnies form a sympathetic and fiercely protective community. An early sequence of scenes in the first draft of the screenplay contains a key to understanding Browning's approach. The action begins in the French countryside, where a groundskeeper excitedly tells his master, Monsieur Duval, that he has just witnessed the horrifying sight of "monsters" trespassing on his land. Initially disgusted and outraged to find the freaks cavorting in a sunlit clearing, Duval changes his mind after conversation with Madame Tetrallini, the freaks' friend and caretaker:

MADAME TETRALLINI: Always in hot, stuffy tents—strange eyes always staring at them—never allowed to forget what they are. So you see, M'sieu,

when I get a chance, I like to take them into the sunshine—and let them play like children. That is what most of them are—children.

DUVAL: Children—when I go to the circus again, I shall understand.

MT: I know M'sieu—you will remember seeing them playing—playing like children.

D: I shall always remember.

MT: Among all the thousands who come to stare—to laugh—to shudder—you will be one who understands.³¹

Positioned at the beginning of the film, this dialogue is clearly intended to instruct the viewer, as well as Monsieur Duval and his groundskeeper, about how to interpret the events that follow. While the notion that the freaks are innocent as "children" will be called into question as the narrative continues, the initial effect of this description is to dispel the stereotypical association of the disabled body with evil and monstrosity. Set in a pastoral environment away from the fairgrounds, this sequence aligns the freaks with a benevolent and peaceful landscape that contrasts markedly with the depiction of their corrupt "nature" in "Spurs." Moreover, their placement in that setting implicitly challenges the typical understanding of the freak's body as a mistake of "nature."

Several changes to this draft of the script work to undermine its original intentions. Because this scene occurs later in the final version of the film, its pedagogical function is diminished. It comes *after* the opening shot of an audience gazing in horror at something we cannot see, a revision that allows the spieler's voice-over to provoke a more sensationalistic initial reaction to the freak's body. The dialogue is also edited, maintaining the troubling references to the freaks as children, while eliminating the lesson about returning to the freak show with a more sympathetic understanding of the performers. The film's epigraph, added when distribution rights were sold to exploitation impresario Dwain Esper in the 1940s, only increases the confusion by describing the freaks as "mistakes of nature." Although the frame-up praises the accomplishments of "modern science" for "eliminating such blunders from the world," this was never a position endorsed by Browning's version of the story, which is uninterested in pathologizing the freaks by describing their conditions in medical terms. Instead, its critique is directed at the social context that discriminates against the disabled, turning them into targets of laughter or abuse.

Surveying the many mutations of this film gives a better sense of why the surviving version is so confusing and why it often seems to adopt contradictory positions towards its characters. In its extant form, we can see how the first half of

Freaks employs the formal structure of the freak show to exploit the talents of its performers, while at the same time attempting to alter the conventional association of disability with freakish monstrosity. Browning accomplishes this goal by using dialogue and mise-en-scène to take the film's characters literally and figuratively off of the freak show display platform, building a paradigm of reception into the narrative itself; by manipulating scale, proportion, and perspective to unsettle normative hierarchies of scale; and by showing the characters backstage engaged in the activities of daily life. The vibrancy of this life, and the uncommon intimacies it encourages, are most pronounced in the treatment of sexuality during the first half of the film.

Camivalesque Sexualities

As I have argued, *Freaks* is less concerned with establishing the normality of its disabled characters than with subverting the notion of normative standards altogether, a commitment that is most apparent in the film's representation of sexual fantasies and acts. In the same way that its formal hybridity gives way to a more predictable narrative structure, *Freaks* begins by exploring a proliferation of sexual proclivities and ultimately closes down that multiplicity in favor of more standard heterosexual relations. Despite the fact that *Freaks* was released before the tightening of Production Code Administration regulations, changes from the original script chart the sanitization of the story in response to the demands of studio executives and conservative social groups. Nonetheless, the version that made it to the screen preserves a striking number of sexual innuendos, which link the extraordinary body to an array of erotic possibilities inconceivable for more typical cinematic characters. This linkage has the potential to become mere voyeuristic exploitation, but also can be seen as a recognition of the diverse range of erotic activities that step in when conventional sexual arrangements cease to be an option. Within the community of freaks, the heterosexual couple is not the dominant social configuration, but one of many varied expressions of desire and intimacy.

The first draft of the screenplay contains some surprisingly racy scenes that have no counterpart in Robbins's narrative. These perverse and sexually explicit descriptions are the inventions of screenwriters who would necessarily have had to imagine them not only as words on a page but realized in the flesh onscreen. For instance, in the original script the conflict between Venus and Hercules, which appears to have little motivation in the film, starts when the impoverished Hercules encourages Venus to become a prostitute to supplement the income from her legitimate job performing with trained seals. In this early version, the woman occupies a position akin to the freak in that her body functions as a com-

modity, desirable as much for its exchange value as any of the pleasures inherent in its possession. Venus's refusal aligns her with the disabled performers, who seek meaningful relationships to counteract the objectification they experience on the display platform.

Another instance of how more overt sexual references were muted in the transition from script to screen is a dialogue between Phroso the clown and the conjoined twins. In the film, this playful conversation reveals that when Phroso pinches Daisy, Violet can feel it. While the erotic resonances remain, Phroso's explicit curiosity about each twin's ability to experience the other's sexual pleasure is excised. (Before the film was cast, the twins in the script were named Rosie and Mamie.):

PHROSO: You know, there's one thing about your marriage that's got me puzzled. (Pinches Mamie.) Do you feel that, Rosie?

ROSIE: Yeah.

Phroso pats Mamie on the cheek and asks Rosie

P: Feel that?

R: Sure.

Phroso gets a kick out of this. The girls are still puzzled. Phroso becomes serious and asks Rosie

P: Rosie, what are you going to do tomorrow night after the wedding?

R: Why?

P: Oh, I thought we might step out—if you could get away.³²

This dialogue derives its humor from the contrast between the twins' innocence and Phroso's knowing jokes about Mamie's impending marriage and, specifically, her wedding night. The conversation is overheard by Mamie's jealous fiancé, Roscoe, who plays a Roman lady during the evening show and is still wearing his feminine costume. Playfully amplifying the scene's sexual confusion, the scriptwriters added the stage direction—"Roscoe is standing indignantly twirling his false breasts." Roscoe's prosthetic bosom is suggestively linked to the inescapable presence of his sister-in-law's body, a feminine excess that may multiply and complicate the pleasures of marital sex. The image of a frustrated man in women's clothing watching the conjoined twins flirt with a clown is toned down in the film, as Roscoe has changed back into his more conventionally masculine dress by the time this exchange takes place.

The most salaciously voyeuristic moment in the script occurs soon after Mamie's marriage as the twins are making the bed which, presumably, they share

with Roscoe. Their dress, which has not yet been fastened in the back, hangs open, and the direction to the camera reads, "as Roscoe goes on talking off-scene, we get a flash of where the Twins are joined together."³³ Shot in the bedroom, this scene draws attention to the erotic possibilities of the doubled female body by directing the camera's gaze at the physical site where one body merges with and separates from the other. The band of connective tissue is enticing because it is the specific source of the twins' exoticism, as well as a more general metonym for the many forbidden sites of erotic interest on the surface of the female body that cannot be shown on film. The conjoined female form here does not simply double the erotic possibilities, but multiplies them by providing previously unimaginable points of voyeuristic interest. In the Freudian terms so attractive to Browning, the forbidden peep at the point of connection might stand in for the taboo glimpse of the female genitalia, the site of lack that raises the specter of castration within the male viewer. This brief shot thus seems calculated to arouse intensely ambivalent feelings of sexual desire and anxiety. By the time it appears in the film, the twins' dress is demurely unbuttoned only at the neck, leaving the chance of glimpsing the most exotic and private of corporeal surfaces entirely to the imagination.

That sex is one of the primary ways freaks relate to one another in this narrative is emphasized in the climax of the script (and a lost, uncut version of the film), which implies that Hercules' punishment by the freaks was not death but castration. In the film, Hercules, who has been figuratively castrated by a knife wound to the thigh, crawls through the mud pursued by the vengeful freaks. Next, the film cuts to a terrified Cleo running through the darkened forest. The very literal significance of that editorial cut for events within the diegesis becomes clear in the script and the longer version of *Freaks* when Hercules reappears as a performer at Tetralini's Freaks and Music Hall. Observing that Hercules is no longer a strong man, Madame Tetralini remarks that he "has changed a lot": he has grown fat, wears the tuxedo of a dandy, and is singing "in a beautiful tenor voice."³⁴ Editing demanded by MGM executives required the replacement of castration with death, a conclusion inconsistent with Browning's usual themes. In particular, the films he directed with celebrated actor Lon Chaney repeatedly equate the loss of masculine power and potency with the loss of limbs (*The Black Bird*, 1926; *The Unknown*, 1927; *West of Zanzibar*, 1928) or voice (*The Unholy Three*, 1925).³⁵ It is more typical of Browning to revel in protracted experiences of male suffering, mutilation, and sexual rejection than to kill off his antagonists.

Despite the revisions demanded by Browning's superiors, the first half of *Freaks* retains numerous sexual innuendoes that imply a rich and varied erotic life among the circus performers. The initial appearance of the half man-half

woman, Josephine-Joseph, is hailed by the Rollo brothers, who usher the hermaphrodite in with a mocking parody of the Spieler's banter: "Ah, hal just as they are upon the banner you will see them inside! Living, breathing monstrosities, Josephine-Joseph, Half-Woman-Half-Man." "Have a cigar, Joseph," one brother quips with mock courtliness; "You dropped your lipstick, Josephine," says the other. "Don't get *her* sore or *he'll* pop you in the nose," his brother responds. Later, the hermaphrodite's physical ambiguity is connected to a multiple and potentially contradictory capacity for desire when Roscoe jokes to Hercules that Josephine is attracted to him, while Joseph isn't.³⁶ The extreme anxiety this remark provokes in the hypermasculine Hercules is demonstrated when he punches Josephine-Joseph in the face for spying on his amorous embrace with Cleo. The hermaphrodite, who has no lines and no apparent narrative function, serves throughout the early portions of the film as a figure of sexual indeterminacy who lurks at the edges of the screen, deriving pleasure from watching the sexual exploits of others. In this, Josephine-Joseph is the character most closely aligned with the film viewer's own perspective. If a certain kind of feminist film theory argues that classic Hollywood cinema is dominated by a male gaze, *Freaks* subverts that convention by granting the hermaphrodite the position of voyeuristic spectator.

Freaks repeatedly flirts with representations of female desire and sexual pleasure. Having excised much of the suggestive dialogue between Phroso and the conjoined twins, the film returns to the question of their shared sexual arousal when Violet passionately kisses her new fiancé, Mr. Vadjia, while Daisy stares off into space with an ecstatic expression on her face. Although they have already said as much, this scene provides visual confirmation that one twin is able to experience the other's erotic sensations. The most sexually aggressive character in the film is Cleo, identified early on with the chicken woman she will eventually become. When Hercules visits her after breaking up with Venus, she offers him some eggs and asks "How do you like them?" while pushing her bosom prominently into his line of sight. Understanding this question as an erotic double entendre, Hercules gazes amorously at Cleo's breasts and grasps her in a passionate embrace while the eggs sizzle on the stove.³⁷

Even the stilted relationship between Hans and Cleo recalls the perverse eroticism that is frequently associated with the original freak medium. Often freak show promoters concocted fantastic marriages between unlikely couples such as fat ladies and skeletal men, dwarves and giants, or bearded women and men.³⁸ Although couched in the chaste language of romantic love, these publicity stunts implicitly raised questions about the sexual practices of the unusual pair.³⁹

It is clear that, from Cleo's point of view, her relationship with Hans is a means to fame and profit: not only does she want his inheritance, but the enhanced career opportunities of such an uncommon partnership (figure 16). Cleo's aspirations are understandable within the logic of the sideshow, where the conventions of bourgeois romance are exploited for commercial value. But Hans, who vehemently resists the economy of the freak show, sees Cleo as "the most beautiful big woman in the world." With the greatest sincerity (which is hard not to read as comedy), he behaves as if he were in a different film altogether, a romance in which he plays a chivalric hero who defends her virginal beauty. This quaint and outdated understanding of love has no place in the bawdy culture of the circus. The dignified and deeply unironic Hans stands out because he endorses a normative heterosexuality that is at odds with the multiplicity of sexual options available inside the carnival gates.

Little Hans and His Big Woman

Freaks diverges both structurally and thematically from the exploration of carnivalesque sexualities when it turns to the story of Hans, who is torn between

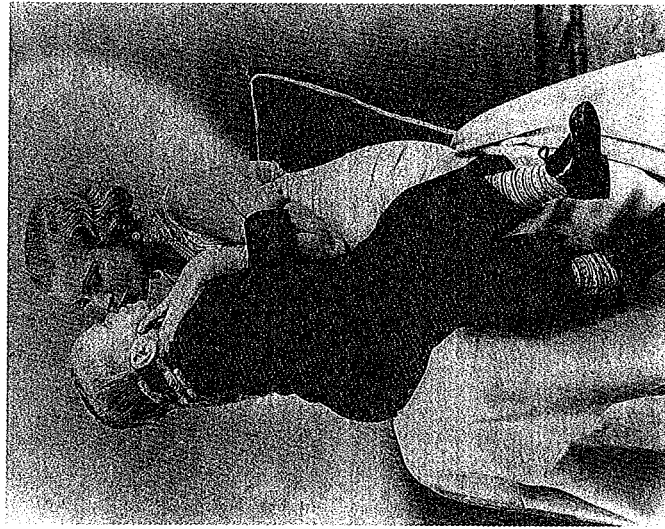


FIGURE 16. This publicity photograph of Olga Baclanova (Cleo) and Harry Earles (Hans) exploits the extreme contrast between big woman and little man. Sitting stiffly with his tiny feet dangling in the air, Hans appears more child than romantic suitor. *Freaks* © 1932 Turner Entertainment Co. A Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

Frieda's devotion and Cleo's sexual allure. In a sense, *Freaks* is two films that co-exist in uneasy juxtaposition: one, a racy, cinematic sideshow, the other, a straightforward story of romance and vengeance that happens to be set at the circus. This duality explains the considerable critical disagreement over the film's generic classification.⁴⁰ According to one 1932 reviewer, "as a horror story, [*Freaks* is] either too horrible or not horrible enough, according to the viewpoint."⁴¹ A more contemporary assessment concurs: "[I]f *Freaks* is not totally satisfying to audiences of today, that is perhaps due, for the most part, to the fundamental conflicts inherent in merging horror and social criticism."⁴² These conflicts are built into the film's narrative, which, as I have argued, spends the first hour disabusing the spectator of the traditional association between disability and monstrosity, then climaxes by demonstrating the freaks' extreme capacity for violence. After establishing Hans as a sympathetic character who suffers unwarranted abuse, the spectacle of Cleo's body, mutilated at the hands of the freaks, leaves the viewer unsure about who is the victim and who the aggressor. *Freaks* is never decisive about whether it really wants to humanize its disabled protagonists or to tell a story of love and revenge with unconventional actors as its horrifying antagonists. If the love plot is one of many narrative possibilities during the first half of the film, it moves to the foreground in the second half. Moreover, the two parts of *Freaks* are characterized by the distinctive affective resonances of comic laughter and horror. Hysterical emotions that initially seem opposed, ultimately they are part of the same crucible of anxious responses to the freaks' incomplete or excessive corporeality.

What Hans fears most is becoming the object of hysterical laughter derived not from shared humor, but the terrible anxiety evoked by the presence of an accumulation of severely disabled bodies.⁴³ The nondisabled characters who exhibit such anxious outbursts anticipate the viewer's own response to the sight of the anomalous performers. Indeed, Olga Baclanova, who played Cleo, the character most closely associated with excessive, raucous laughter, recalled the mixed emotions she experienced when Browning first introduced her to her disabled costars: "[H]e shows me a girl that's like an orangutan; then a man who has a head but no legs, no nothing, just a head and body like an egg. . . . He shows me little by little and I could not look, I wanted to faint. I wanted to cry."⁴⁴ The actress's hysterical reaction to bodies that appear fragmented or inhuman is translated within the film narrative into her character's neurotic laughter—too loud, too long, and too tinged with fear and anxiety to have any association with humor—which is an auditory leitmotif that resonates throughout the film.⁴⁵ According to Mikita Brottman, in *Freaks* "a horror of undifferentiated, disorganized, uncontrolled relations is echoed in the pathological laughter inspired by visions of human bodies that

are mutilated, truncated, interwoven, crossed over, etiolated, doubled, incomplete.⁴⁶ Laughter in the film is rarely associated with humor, as the sanctioned jokes of clowns and other circus performers fail to provoke a desired levity. Instead, scenes of humiliation and rejection, usually at the midgets' expense, are accompanied by neurotic convulsions that divide characters from one another. Such laughter is a way of asserting distance from the object of denision, a warding-off gesture that disavows connections between persons and fractures community. Following the Freudian recognition that jokes perform serious cultural work, humor operates as a defensive process in the film by displacing sources of displeasure into the realm of the comic, which is not really very funny after all.⁴⁷ If *Freaks* manipulates narrative and camera to confuse the boundaries between freak and normal, laughter, as the privileged domain of "normal" characters, reestablishes those categories. The film does not encourage the viewer to participate in the forced mirth of its characters: because their laughter is so often of a hysterical rather than a humorous nature, it is not infectious. Rather than enticing us to share the emotions expressed onscreen, it effectively separates us from them.

Freaks neither invites the viewer to participate in the repeated ridicule of Hans by other characters, nor endorses his position, for it consistently refuses to grant his most profound desire, to be "a man like other men." This clichéd phrase becomes ridiculous when it is incorporated into Harry Earles's high-pitched, wooden delivery. Given the psychoanalytic slant of Browning's films, many of which overtly thematize castration anxiety, male impotence, and fetishization, it is impossible not to equate the male protagonist of *Freaks* with Freud's Little Hans, the source of the castration complex. Freud linked Hans's phobic behavior to the traumatic experience of realizing that his mother (a big woman) had no penis, thus generating anxiety about the loss of his own member.⁴⁸ In *Freaks*, form and content conspire in the project of unmanning the film's own version of little Hans. The same camera that made scale relative by bringing the concerns of the midget couple into the foreground also frequently undercuts Hans's aspirations by dwarfing him in relation to his surroundings. This is particularly true of his encounters with Hercules and the tall, statuesque Cleo, who make him appear a tiny boy by comparison. By impeding spectatorial identification with his character, the film works visually to make Hans's desires for wealth and romance appear foolish. Early on, Hans has a single opportunity to wield the masculine gaze of power and desire. In this utterly conventional romantic shot, the viewer shares Hans's admiring look as the camera tilts upward towards the beautiful Cleo, perched alluringly on her trapeze. After this initial moment, all subsequent attempts at mastery are consistently undermined by narrative and camera alike. In one scene with obvious

Freudian undertones, Frieda scolds Hans for smoking a large cigar. Attempting to reassert his manly authority, he rebukes her sharply by registering his distaste for women who give orders. But the implication—that he is too small to enjoy the phallic symbol of a more conventionally sized man—is too powerful to be reversed. For the rest of the film, Cleo proceeds to cut Hans's cigar down to size by laughing at him, pinching his cheeks, and telling him that he is "cute." Hans's greatest humiliation occurs at the wedding banquet, where he watches jealously as Cleo and Hercules engage in a passionate kiss.

The wedding feast is a transitional sequence that inaugurates the film's shift into horror mode and the narrative dominance of Hans's story (figure 17). The mood darkens when the freaks attempt to initiate the beautiful bride as "one of us." The tolerant, generous atmosphere of their community suddenly appears ominous. Threatened, Cleo turns on the raucous crowd, silencing them with her cry: "Freaks! Filthy, slimy FREAKS!" Significantly, this moment, when the performers are hailed as freaks by an apparent outsider, is also the first time that her laughter is silenced, as the film shifts into horror mode and Hans's story gains

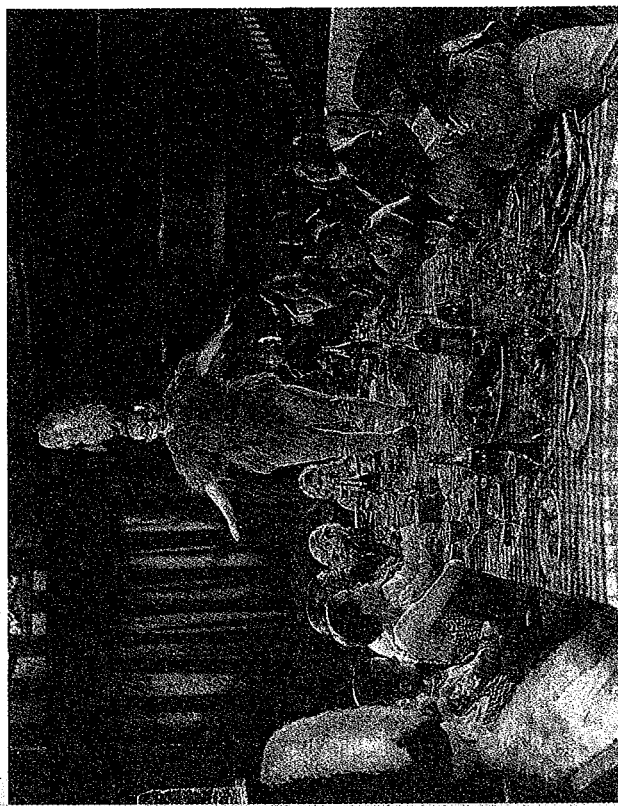


FIGURE 17. The wedding banquet where Cleo responds in horror when the freaks welcome her as "one of us." *Freaks* © 1932 Turner Entertainment Co. A Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

narrative primacy. Her shocking utterance collapses the distinction that has been established between the disabled actors and their performances as "freaks." Unlike the other circus folk, Cleo cannot see the group as anything other than the freakish personae that they enact onstage. Appalled at the freaks' ritualistic chanting, she turns on her tiny husband, asking aggressively, "What are you going to do? Are you a man or a baby?" Her aggressive questions demand that Hans prove his manhood by defending his beloved. Drunk and poisoned, he is unable to walk home, let alone come to the rescue of his new bride. His infantilization is linked to effeminacy as Cleo, inverting the marital homecoming ritual, carries his limp body across the threshold into his wagon and puts him to bed.

Emasulation is also intimately bound to issues of class, as one of Browning's recurrent cinematic themes is the struggle between members of a criminal underworld (whose lawlessness is often projected physically by bodies that are monstrous or disabled) and an elite upper class. Impotence in a Browning film is not simply a loss of sexual function, but an inability to generate income through legitimate means. Although the denigration of the wealthy is a recurrent theme in Browning's work, one that has a particularly timely resonance in his Depression-era films, it is also a longstanding characteristic of sideshow culture. As I argued in the previous chapter, the sideshow, always at the margins of respectability, made light of but also jealously appropriated the conventions of the aristocrat and the professional. Robert Bogdan has termed the freak show's version of gentility, as exemplified by figures such as Tom Thumb, the "aggrandized mode" of presentation. Freak performers who worked in this vein dressed in fine clothes, assumed titles such as "general," "colonel," or "countess," traveled the world to meet with royalty, and were received as respectable members of high society.⁴⁹ It is no accident that the wealthiest character in *Freaks* is a tiny man with a German accent, the literal embodiment of a myopic, small-minded European aristocracy. Long before we learn that he is to inherit a fortune from a wealthy relation, Hans is shown to be a ridiculously pretentious figure: he wears a suit and tie even when not in costume, speaks with exaggerated chivalry to both Frieda and Cleo, and woos Cleo by buying her flowers, jewelry, and fine wine. Hans's riches, inherited rather than earned through his own labor, are inconsistent with the tawdry atmosphere of the traveling circus. Aspiring to social and economic respectability, he rejects the working-class members of the carnival community, despite their common tolerance for physical difference of all kinds. Hans's class pretensions, coupled with his implausible assertion of masculine authority, prevent the viewer from identifying with his aspirations or his suffering. His humiliation is in keeping with the film's carnivalesque rejection of class distinctions and social mores, and

the plot seems motivated as much by a desire to ensure his degradation as to avenge the wrongs committed against him.

Hans's economic privilege insulates him from the violent revenge enacted by the community of freaks on his behalf. After the discovery of Cleo's treachery, he helps to plot her punishment, but serves more as a mastermind than an actor at the site of brutality. On the night of the crime, we glimpse him chasing Cleo through the darkened forest, distinguished from the rest of the freaks by his white shirt. But Hans is absent from the more disturbing scenes in which the freaks crawl and slither through the mud beneath the carnival wagons, holding guns, knives, and other implements of destruction. Mary Russo argues that this sequence depicts the freaks as "a revolutionary underclass" dressed in caps and dark clothing that bespeak their proletarian status.⁵⁰ If this is the case, then Hans, in the stereotypical garb of an aristocrat, provides the rationale for, but cannot be directly implicated in, that revolution.

The film's epilogue proves that without his manhood, Hans's inherited riches can have little value. By refusing to valorize his manly aspirations, the film deviates markedly from the original short story, which concludes with the dwarf's sadistic mastery over the greedy trapeze artist. Whereas in "Spurs," the dwarf Jacques punishes his new wife Jeanne Marie by forcing her to carry him across France, in *Freaks*, Cleo humiliates the drunken Hans on his wedding night by carrying him home on her shoulders. Tod Robbins's big woman is subdued by the phallic sword Jacques brandishes, its power enforced by his vicious dog, St. Etienne. Tod Browning's big woman is punished not by the man she has humiliated, but by the community of freaks who consider the insult to Hans as an insult to them all. The effect of this shift is to highlight the fearful collective power of the freaks, but also to diminish Hans's capacity for avenging his own wounded pride.

Despite the brief shot of Hans pursuing Cleo through the forest during the revenge sequence, his manhood is never recuperated. The film's epilogue finds him living alone in a lavish mansion. When his butler tells him that he has visitors, he requests that they go away. Ignoring his wishes, the guests—who turn out to be his old circus friends Venus, Phroso, and Frieda—insist on seeing him. They find him ensconced in an enormous chair that makes him look all the more tiny. In contrast to Hans's carnival wagon, where alterations in scale brought the space into proportion with his body, the large parlor emphasizes his diminutive stature, a signal that in the world outside of the circus he will be judged in accordance with normative standards of shape and size. Although the scene holds the potential for the estranged couple to renew their relationship, Hans mourns his own humiliation, as well as the loss of Cleo. Rather than declaring his love, recuperating a

more conventional masculine authority by becoming the dominant partner, he weeps in Frieda's lap while she comforts him. This ending deviates from the original script, in which Venus and Phroso return to Madame Tetralini's Freak and Music Hall with a photo of the happily married couple holding their new baby. In that version, the midgets replicate the rendition of bourgeois domesticity enacted in miniature by the famous wedding of Tom Thumb to Lavinia Warren. Although the real couple never bore children of their own, publicity photos picture them holding a baby as a sign of marital bliss and reproductive success. These images turn the couple into a tiny replica of the social norms upheld by big people. However, *Freaks* cannot allow Hans this satisfaction: in an ending that is neither happy nor particularly conclusive, he returns to the same position of childlike feminization that he occupied in his relationship with Cleo. In place of the photograph, a visual representation that can be adjusted to the couple's own proportions, the camerawork of the epilogue reemphasizes Hans and Frieda's deviation from the norm.⁵¹

In conclusion we must return to one of the most haunting images in the film, the spectacle of Cleo's mutilated body, which hangs ominously over the reunion of Hans and Frieda (figure 18). This is a moment of shocking misogyny on a formal as well as a thematic register, for the camera lingers on the woman's scarred and bruised face, her drooping mouth and vacant eyes, and the incomprehensible layer of feathers that covers her chest. A feeble pair of squawks takes the place of her excessive, raucous laughter. The most obvious interpretation of this ending is to take it seriously, to believe that the freaks are capable of extreme, sadistic violence. Although it is unclear how they have accomplished the metamorphosis of a tall, statuesque woman into a feathered, legless creature, the horrified response of the freak show spectators attests to the credibility of the spectacle. As Russo writes, the transformation is "hard to believe, but, in the realist terms of the film, it is impossible for her to be read as a carnivalesque or cinematic hoax. This residual piece of flesh is insisted upon as a *real woman*."⁵² Within the film's patriarchal logic, Cleo must be punished for her greed and sexual aggression while Frieda, the patient, long-suffering little woman, is rewarded with the comforts of marriage and domesticity. This reasoning also implicates the viewer in the final acts of violence, for our desire to look at the freaks onscreen is revealed to be the same desire that propelled the narrative forward towards the shocking revelation of Cleo's body. The customers gathered eagerly around the exhibit at the beginning of the film launch the speller into the story of Hans and Cleo; presumably we follow that story in the hope of catching a glimpse of what they have seen. In keeping

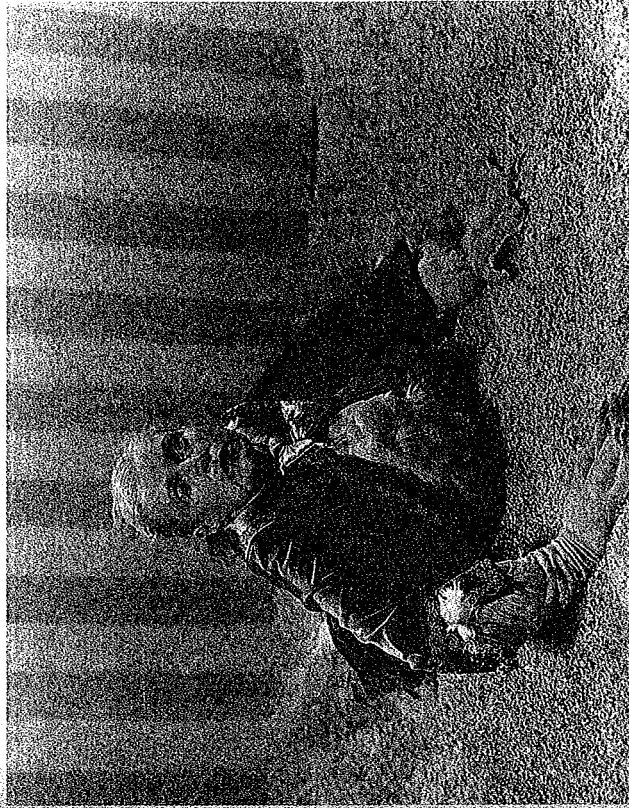


FIGURE 18. As punishment for her cruelty and greed, Cleo is transformed into a hideous chicken woman. Are we meant to believe in the reality of her metamorphosis, or see it as one more carnivalesque hoax? *Freaks* © 1932 Turner Entertainment Co. A Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

with the conventions of the horror film, violence is linked to the gaze.⁵³ Looking is the primal activity that produces freaks in the first place. As one critic put it, after seeing the last scene, "we are horrified, but we are simultaneously ashamed of our horror; for we remember that these are not monsters at all but people like us, and we know that we have again been betrayed by our own primal fears. Had the picture ended on a more idyllic note we might have been self-satisfied, stuffed with our own tolerant virtue. Instead, we are plunged back into the abyss of our own sick selves, to recall once again that the most fearful inhumanity we can know is our own. With this final scene, then, the double image is complete."⁵⁴ This reading assumes that the identification between the viewer and the freaks persists in spite of the monstrosity of their actions. It is an identification that extends beyond tolerance for bodily difference to a sense that freakishness is a quality contained within us all; the surfaces of the disabled body are not radically Other, but reflect back the convolutions of our own tortured interiority. The horrors enacted on screen are frightening precisely because they incite the viewer to recognize a

similar capacity for violence within herself, to see her own sadistic impulses projected in the contours of the freak's body. Hans's participation in the scene of violence, and his subsequent regret, mirror the viewer's own soiled feeling of complicity as the film closes.

However, there is a second possibility that does not see the freak as the audience's monstrous double but as a figure possessed of a distinct, and not necessarily benevolent, agency. Despite Russo's insistence that "it is impossible for her to be read as a carnivalesque or cinematic hoax," Cleo's fate has been read in this way by more than one film critic, an alternative that has enduring implications. According to this interpretation, the story of Cleopatra is a trick that plays on the spectator's willingness to associate the freaks with deviant behavior. Since the film viewer (unlike the sideshow audience) knows that the chicken woman differs from the other freaks because she is played by an able-bodied actress, it is reasonable to doubt her reality. In the spirit of the many gaffs that we have seen the circus folk perform throughout, the chicken-woman is a fabrication; in believing that this is a horror film, and that the freaks are monsters, the audience has been taken for the biggest ride of all. This perspective is more consistent with the first half of the film, in which we see the freaks delighting in jokes, pranks, and magic tricks, wearing different costumes, and playing a variety of roles both onstage and off. If Roscoe performs as a Roman Lady, or Phroso runs around in a suit that makes him look as if his head has been knocked off, it is not inconceivable that Cleo's battered face, feathers, and webbed limbs are also an elaborate ruse.⁵⁵ Credulous looking does not produce violence, but it can make the viewer a victim of the humbug on which the freak show is based.

Ultimately, my point is not to determine which of these possibilities is more accurate, as the film itself seems more invested in making a space to display the freaks' remarkable bodies than in weaving a plausible and unified narrative around them. What these varied interpretations suggest, however, are two ways in which the freak show would continue to have meaning as the twentieth century progressed and sideshows became increasingly unavailable to consumers of popular culture. In keeping with the first reading, the freak became a figure akin to the monster of horror or the alien of science fiction. Often displaced in time and space, such monsters are understood to embody contemporary problems or more universal aspects of human nature. From this perspective, the sideshow has little relevance as a historical entity, for the freak's significance is found in her connection with the deviance that is an integral part of subjectivity itself. Freaks are powerful symbols of a common anxiety that underneath the apparent normality of our bodies we are as divided as the conjoined twins, as fragmented as the human

torso, as excessive as the fat person. When freaks disappear from popular culture, other monsters will come to replace them. This model is most extensively developed by Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks*, in which the extraordinary body becomes a signifier for the author's "secret self." It is also a key feature of psychoanalytic readings in which the disabled body stirs unconscious responses in the viewer based on her fears about her own bodily integrity.

The second interpretation, in which the chicken-woman is a hoax, recognizes the freak show as a subculture with its own set of beliefs and conventions. Freakishness, from this viewpoint, is a performance that plays on the spectator's assumptions about those who look different. We believe the story of the chicken-woman because we already associate disability with freakish aberrance and monstrous sadism. But in fact, these freaks are not a vengeful community that responds with violence to any perceived insult but a group of actors, savvy about how they are looked at and how to manipulate that look for maximum profitability. The joke is on us, the spectators, and the fact that we are fooled is evidence of our exclusion from the sideshow's insular collectivity. This interpretation does not excuse the freaks for the story they have woven around the chicken-woman, which remains a cautionary tale about excessive female desire and greed. But it is a lesson taught through representation rather than literal violence. And it is one that requires a more complex sense of how freak shows, like film, are an expressive form that thrives on the ability to manipulate illusion and reality.

The contradictions within Browning's film are precisely the quality that opens it to ongoing reinterpretations, which have changed over time and across different viewing communities. A film of little technical sophistication, contrived narrative, and poor acting, *Freaks* continues to provoke and inspire its viewers almost seventy years after its initial release. Its durability is explained by the fact that Browning's daring effort to assemble the most talented and strange collection of living freak performers has never again been replicated. There is no other widely available motion picture that preserves so many of the great sideshow personalities in such unsparing detail. As a result, those who wish to experience the ambivalent pleasures of the freak show must revisit *Freaks*. Whether the spectators who were most profoundly touched by this experience perceived themselves as freaks, believed that those freaks are "one of us," or insisted on the freak's radical Otherness, the imprint of Browning's film will resonate in the representations discussed in subsequent chapters.