

## E I G H T E E N

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### "One of Us": Tod Browning's *Freaks*

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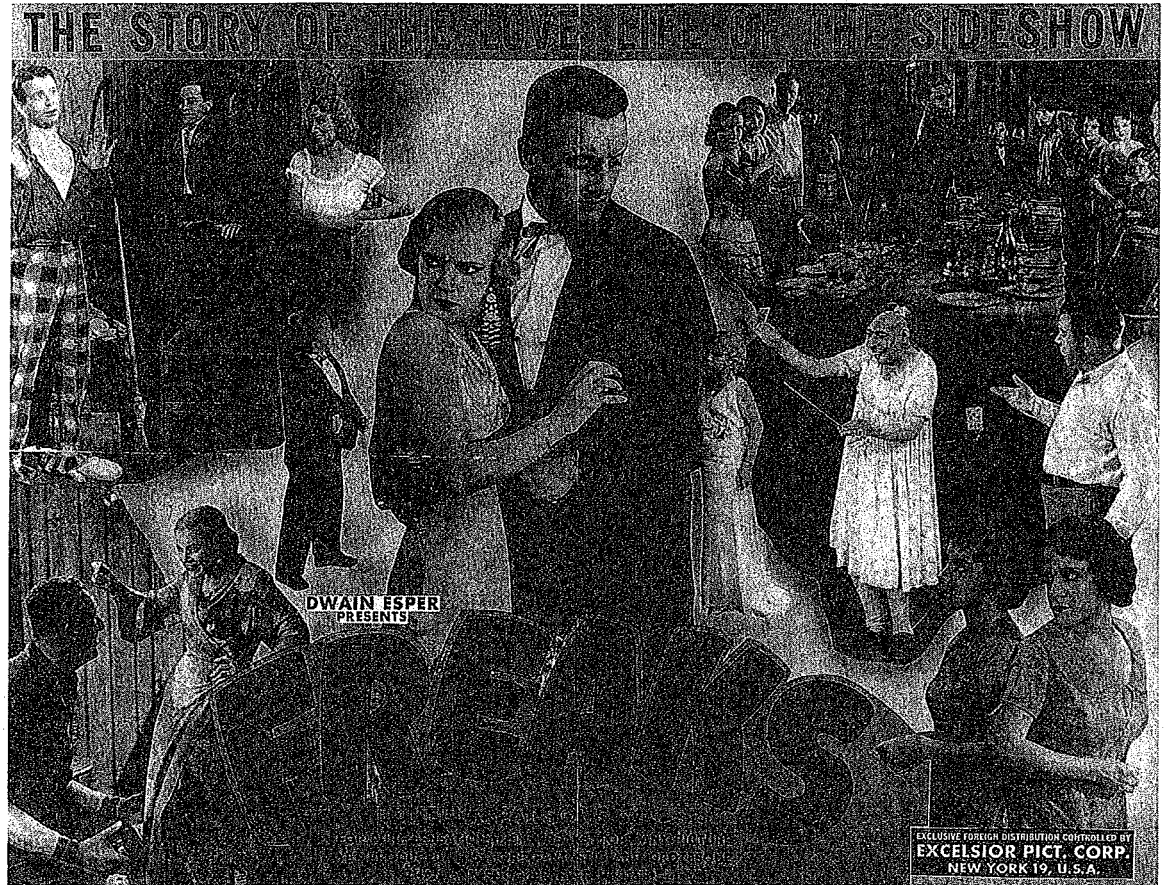
Source: Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

Tod Browning's 1932 production, *Freaks*, certainly stands as a classic in studies of freakishness and freakmaking. Removed from distribution by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) shortly after its release and banned outright in Great Britain, the film—as *The Encyclopedia of Horror Movies* points out—immediately “acquired an unsavoury reputation which lingers on even though denied by the film itself.”<sup>1</sup>

*Freaks* tells the story of a circus midget's impossible love for a “big woman,”<sup>2</sup> the circus trapeze artist, Cleopatra. When she becomes aware of Hans the midget's love for her, Cleopatra contrives to marry him for his money (Hans, we learn, has a fortune). Shortly after the wedding, she and her strongman lover begin administering poison to Hans. The other freaks in the circus become suspicious, however. Following the “code of the freaks,” they kill the strongman and mutilate Cleopatra, turning her into a chicken-woman, the star of the Freak Show.

Critical reception was mixed.<sup>3</sup> Confusion over the film seems to have stemmed largely from the use of real freaks to play the parts.<sup>4</sup> Critics worried that the film merely replicated the most unsavory aspects of the freak show. The *New York Times* reviewer talks about “the underlying sense of horror . . . that fills the circus sideshows.”<sup>5</sup> *Variety* faults the film for its “too fantastic romance,” claiming that “it is impossible for the normal man or woman to sympathize with the aspiring midget.”<sup>6</sup> And *Time* refuses to evaluate the picture at all, detailing instead all “the misfits of humanity” it numbers among its cast: “A man without legs walks on his hands. A woman without hands eats with her feet. A Negro with no limbs at all lights a cigaret [*sic*] with his teeth. Siamese twins have courtships.”<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, publicity for the film points up *Freaks*' relationship to the carney culture it so poignantly depicts. “Unlike anything you've ever seen,” the Rialto Theater's 1932 ad for the film proclaims. “The *strange* and *startling* love-drama of a *midget*, a lovely *siren*, and a *giant*!” In addition to Leila Hyams, Baclanova, Wallace Ford, and Rosco Ates, the ad lists “a horde of caricatures of creation—not actors in make-up—but *living, breathing* creatures as they are and as they were born!” The base of the ad carries a warning: “Children will not be permitted to see this picture! Adults not in normal health are urged not to!”<sup>8</sup>



18.1. Poster for Tod Browning's 1932 film, *Freaks*. Courtesy of the Ron Becker Collection, Syracuse University Library, Department of Special Collections.

Although both critical reaction and box office success appear to have been mixed, mass public reaction was not. A few favorable statements buried in otherwise ambivalent reviews were not enough to counter the negative reviews that appeared in the local press. Despite the fact that the film had shown good box office receipts in some areas, theater owners—particularly those in rural areas—refused to handle the film. At the same time, parent-teacher associations and what Leslie Fiedler calls “other organizations specializing in moral indignation” lobbied against the movie. Even some of the freaks who had played in the film, Fiedler notes, “most notably the Bearded Lady, were convinced in retrospect that Browning had vilified their kind and said so in public.”<sup>9</sup> It was in the face of so much opposition that MGM withdrew the film from circulation shortly after its release. While the film could be seen, without the MGM logo, on the exploitation film circuit, it remained unavailable for mainstream viewing in the United States from 1932 (when MGM shelved it) until its revival in 1962.

Watching *Freaks* today is an unnerving experience, although not for the reasons implied by the 1932 reviews of the film. It is not seeing the freaks lead normal lives (“Siamese twins have courtships”) that is unsettling. On the contrary, the film’s apparent thesis—namely, that “freakishness is only skin deep, and that differently formed people have all the feelings, intelligence and humor of ‘normal’ folks”<sup>10</sup>—is one that most contemporary audiences find

appealing. "What keeps *Freaks* 'freakish,' " as the Pacific Film Archive notes for the film point out, "is rather the duality of Browning's own intentions. Despite being one of the few films that, *mutatis mutandi*, treats the Other as 'one of us'; and despite purporting in the original prologue to be an exposé of the exploitation of 'nature's mutants,' *Freaks* is guilty of the crime it denounces." Through "its bizarre revenge plot" and its periodic insistence on the "code of the freaks," the film "traps its characters in a horror mode."<sup>11</sup> It reinscribes physical difference as a thing to be feared.

The first half of the film goes to great lengths to "normalize" the freaks. We see differently formed people going about the everyday business of life. Frances, the armless woman, eats; Randian, the "living torso," rolls and lights a cigarette; Frieda, a midget, hangs out the laundry. And while it is tempting to read these actions—as the *Time* review of the film does—as a series of sideshow acts, the presence of sympathetic "big people" in nearly all these scenes helps to mitigate the performative aspect. Randian is in the middle of a conversation with one of the Rollo brothers—the circus acrobats—when he lights his cigarette. Similarly, Frances, the armless woman, is listening to one of the Rollos brag as she eats her evening meal. Frieda, as she hangs out her laundry, exchanges confidences with Venus, the circus seal trainer. The film clearly brackets these exchanges as everyday conversation ("You're not singing this morning, Frieda," Venus observes, as she sits on her wagon step to sew and chat). It also uses the "big people" as audience stand-ins: much like the screaming victims in traditional horror films, they "cue" us to the appropriate audience response.

Furthermore, there seems to be something odd about most of the "normal" people in the film. The Rollo brothers' excessive bragging appears here as far more quirky than Randian's dignified cigarette routine. Rosco, the man who works with Hercules, stutters. The sword-swallower and the fire-eater are lumped with the freaks in the circus attractions. And Phroso the clown, the most sympathetic "big man" in the film, refers ominously to his "operation" and appears a little slow in his dealings with the street-smart Venus.

Even Cleopatra, the "Queen of the trapeze" and the "most beautiful big woman" Hans has ever seen, appears here as somehow too large. Seen in Hans's wagon after her marriage to him, Cleopatra must hunch over in order to move around. And Venus, Phroso's sympathetic, conventionally formed lover, calls Cleo a "big horse" when she learns from Frieda about the trapeze performer's designs on the midget. But it is Cleo's perverse nature that most establishes her as the "living monstrosity" of the circus. Initially flirting with Hans as a nasty joke, Cleo turns deadly serious when she learns he has money. "Midgets are not strong," she tells her lover Hercules. "He could get sick. . . . It could be done." And the hunched position she must assume in order to give Hans his poisoned medicine once he does, in fact, become ill, is simply the visible sign of the predatory nature Cleo has nurtured all along. "In this extraordinary film," Ivan Butler writes, "Browning has turned the popular convention of horror topsy-turvy. It is the ordinary, the apparently normal, the beautiful which horrify—the monstrous and distorted which compel our respect, our sympathy, ultimately our affection. The visible beauty conceals the unseen evil, the visible horror is the real goodness."<sup>12</sup>

Just in case the audience somehow fails to get the point that it is the "freaks" in this film who deserve our allegiance and sympathy, Browning includes at least two scenes that make the film's thesis quite explicit. When Hans falls ill, Venus confronts Hercules and makes it clear that she does not regard herself as one of his "kind." "You better get Cleo to tell the doctor what she put in the wine last night," Venus tells Hercules, "or I'll tell the coppers."

"So," he replies, "you'd tell on your own people." "My people," Venus says, pulling herself up, "are decent circus folks, not dirty rats what would kill a freak to get his money."

A more telling scene, however, occurs early in the film. The setting here shifts away from the cloistered world of the circus to the surrounding countryside. We see a gentleman walking with his groundsperson, Jean, who is struggling to describe the horrors he has just seen. "Horrible, twisted things," he says, "crawling and gliding." The gentleman assures the distraught man that he'll clear his grounds of any "things" or persons who do not belong. We then see—in long shot—Madame Tetralini, the owner of the circus, and a group of circus freaks that she has brought out for exercise. The human skeleton is lying on his back, playing a reed pipe. The pinheads, Schlitz, Elvira, and Jennie Lee, and some of the midgets are dancing in a circle, singing and giggling. Nearby this strange pastorate, Madame Tetralini sits, reading. As the disgruntled Jean moves in to chase the strange band away, the camera comes in for a medium to medium-close shot. Madame Tetralini rises; Schlitz and Elvira run to her for protection. The other freaks gather closely around. Clinging to her skirts, they—especially Schlitz and Elvira—look like frightened children. And children, Madame Tetralini explains, is exactly what they are. "These are children from my circus. . . . When I get the chance I like to take them into the sunshine and let them play like—children. That is what most of them are—children." When the gentleman gives them permission to stay and calls the still-sputtering Jean away, Madame Tetralini scolds her charges for being frightened. "Shame. . . . How many times have I told you not to be frightened. Have I not told you that God looks after *all* His children."

Madame Tetralini's speech, like Venus's, is clearly meant to remind the audience that physical difference is an accident of birth. Her gentle insistence that we are *all* God's children functions here as a reproach to any Philistines in the audience who might believe—as Jean and Hercules clearly do—that differently formed people are "little apes" or "monsters." But Madame Tetralini's speech points to one of the subtler aspects of the film: While it is certainly true that the freaks are all God's children (i.e., God's offspring), it is not so clear that all the freaks—or even "most of them"—are literally "children" (i.e., innocent and helpless beings), as Madame Tetralini claims.

Although some of the freaks—most notably the pinheads—are portrayed as childlike throughout most of the film, the male freaks included in the pastoral scene are all explicitly linked to the adult world. The human skeleton playing the reed pipe appears in a later sequence as the proud father of the bearded lady's baby. Randian, the "living torso," has a mature, weather-lined face and sports several tattoos. And the midget who leads the band in thanking the gentleman for allowing them to stay is obviously mature. It is he who proposes and leads the "one of us" toast at the wedding banquet, who seems to organize and orchestrate the surveillance of Cleo when Hans gets sick, and who first calls the audience's attention back to the freaks' "code." Enjoying a glass of wine with Frances, the armless lady, he angrily predicts that Cleo will have problems if she tries "doing *anything* to one of us."

If it is wrong to judge people as "monsters" simply because they are differently formed, it is equally wrong (and potentially dangerous)—the film seems to be saying—to attribute childlike qualities (like helplessness and innocence) to adult people who happen to be diminutive in size. And this is a mistake that many of the "normal" people in the circus make. Even Cleo, who plays on Hans's adult sexual feelings throughout the first half of the film, periodically confounds his appearance and behavior with that of a child. She laughs at his courtly

manners behind his back and teases him when he shows signs of jealousy. At the wedding banquet she accuses him of acting like "a baby" when he does not join in her outburst; and she further humiliates him by taking him on a piggyback ride around the deserted table. Even in her gentle moments, Cleo tends to infantilize Hans. She calls him "my little," in a vain attempt to convince him of her affection, and tells his friends to go home so that she can tuck him in for the night. But Hans is not "a baby"; he is, as he tells her early in the film, "a man" who has the same feelings "big people" have. And these feelings turn quite nasty when he begins to suspect that Cleo is trying to poison him.

It is Hans's and, by extension, *all* the freaks' revenge against Cleo that helps to establish *Freaks* as a true horror film. Certainly, the revenge sequence is terrifying in a way that suspense can never be. But if the freaks' revenge inscribes the film as part of the horror genre, it also reinscribes the freaks as monsters within that genre. In fact, the entire revenge sequence can be read as a systematic reversal of the earlier pastoral scene, which attempted to establish the freaks as harmless children. Whereas the pastoral takes place in a contained, sunlit space, the revenge sequence unfolds at night during a rainstorm; its overt sense of menace derives precisely from the fact that the freaks can *not* be contained. Anywhere that Cleo runs, she is vulnerable. Furthermore, whereas the pastoral sequence expounds antifreak prejudice (in the form of Jean's tirade to his employer) in order that Madame Tetralini might refute it, here Jean's anxieties about the freaks are given literal expression. Pursuing Cleo through the mud and rain, the freaks here *do* crawl and glide; and given the fact that it is night, they *do* resemble "horrible twisted things," rather than differently formed people. Finally, while the pastoral scene attempts (somewhat unsuccessfully, as I argue above) to represent the freaks as "children," the revenge sequence shows clearly that the most childlike freaks can be quite vicious. Even Schlitz—perhaps the most childlike pinhead—appears monstrous here, as she gambols through the mud clutching a knife.

If the pastoral scene shows a group of vulnerable freaks who cling to a big woman, Madame Tetralini, for protection, the revenge sequence depicts a big woman who desperately needs protection from a band of marauding freaks. It is clear that Cleo occupies the star-victim position here. From the moment she runs screaming into the night with the band of vengeful freaks behind her, Cleo begins attracting audience sympathy. And it is this very shift in audience sympathy—*away* from the freaks and *toward* their intended victim—that tends to undermine what Robin Wood would call the earlier "progressive" nature of the film.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, there are indications that the freaks have done this sort of thing before. The barker's ominous references to the "code of the freaks," as well as the prologue's invocation of such a code, sensitizes the viewer from the very beginning to the possibility of freak violence. Even the "progressive" sequences of the film—those which show the freaks behaving "normally" at home—hint at a dark side of freak culture. Relaxing over a glass of wine, Frances, the armless woman, and her friend, the midget who played a leadership role in the earlier pastoral scene, gossip about the budding romance between Cleo and Hans:

SHE: Cleopatra ain't one of us. Why, we're just filthy *things* to her. She'd *spit* on Hans if he wasn't giving her presents.

HE: Let her try it. Let her try doing *anything* to one of us.

SHE: You're right. She don't *know* us; but she'll find out.

Frances's observation that Cleo doesn't really "know" the freaks serves in part to remind us that the freaks are a marginalized, maltreated group. Like any such group, they have been forced to adopt an inscrutable, "unknowable" public demeanor in order to survive. But the reminder comes at a very odd moment in the film. Just when the film appears to be downplaying difference (by showing that the freaks' domestic lives are not very different from those of "big people"), it explicitly connects the idea of difference to an implicit threat ("She don't know us; but she'll find out"). This threat is, of course, realized in the revenge scene.

While there is a certain poetic justice to Cleo's final transformation, her emergence as a chicken-woman further complicates the depiction of physical difference in *Freaks*. For Cleo is constructed, not born, as a freak. And this construction seems to have two implications for the film. On the one hand, it works as a nice metaphor for the way that freaks are shown as "social constructs" throughout the film (i.e., the film shows that there is nothing inherently freakish about differently formed people and that in the freaks' world, it is "big people" who seem abnormal and odd). On the other hand, however, it directly contradicts the argument for tolerance that we are given at the beginning of the film. Having been initially reminded by the barker that physical difference is an "accident of birth," not the visible sign of some inner monstrosity, we are ultimately presented with a woman who has been turned into a freak as punishment for her immorality and greed (i.e., a woman whose physical difference is the tangible sign of her inner monstrosity). The fact that Cleo—the true "living monstrosity" in the circus—is transformed into a physical "monstrosity" raises the possibility that physical difference can be the tangible sign of inner depravity, which serves to partially blunt the progressive edge of *Freaks*.

The film itself seems to acknowledge the fact that it comes perilously close to completely undermining audience sympathy for the freaks. Although Cleo's appearance as a chicken-woman seems to be the logical conclusion to the film,<sup>14</sup> *Freaks* has a brief coda whose only purpose seems to be the recuperation of audience sympathy for Hans. In the coda, Phroso and Venus bring Frieda to see Hans. Hans, who has been a recluse since leaving the circus, does not wish to see his old friends; but Phroso and Venus contrive to enter and to leave Frieda with him. "Please go away," Hans tells them, "I can see no one." "But Hans," Frieda tells the now-sobbing midget, "You tried to stop them. It was only the poison you wanted. It wasn't your fault."

Besides providing a romantic ending (Hans and Frieda are together again) to an otherwise grim film, the coda serves to remove responsibility for Cleo's condition from Hans. But it also serves to establish Hans as another victim of the freaks' revenge. Completely broken by the events he seems to have unleashed, Hans now can bring himself to see no one. Hidden away, he is even more isolated from the "normal" world than he was in the circus. And it is hard not to see this all as somehow Cleo's fault. She is the one, after all, who encouraged his attentions, who gave him "ideas"—first to send her gifts and later to marry her; and she's the one who tried to poison him.

In fact, the film's ending can be read as the logical conclusion to Hans's relationship with Cleo. For, in true horror-victim fashion, Hans seems to be completely feminized in this scene. While Phroso and Venus's tiptoed exit—complete with pokes in the side and broad winks to one another—leads the audience to expect to see the midgets in a passionate embrace, the final shot of the film shows a completely unmanned Hans sobbing in Frieda's arms. And it is the unmaning of Hans—the divestment of both his money and his sexual pride—that Cleo

apparently has in mind all along. From the beginning of their relationship, Cleo seems to have mounted a campaign of sexual humiliation against Hans. "Are you laughing at me?" Hans asks Cleo when she first attracts his attention. And it is Hans's sexual humiliation that Frieda tries to prevent when she goes to see Cleo in her wagon. "Everybody's laughing," she tells Cleo, "because he's in love mit you. . . . I know you just make fun, but Hans, he does not know this. If he finds out, never again will he be happy."

Despite Frieda's attempts to comfort Hans with the thought that Cleo's tragedy was not his fault, one has the impression that the *real* cause of Hans's depression at the end of the film is the collapse of the marriage itself. For Hans finally did find out that Cleo was just making fun. "I don't blame you, Cleo," he tells her on their wedding night, "I should have known you would only laugh at me." And having found out, Hans—as Frieda predicted—can never again be happy.

The coda, then, attempts to undo some of the revenge sequence's impact. Having been forced—almost against its desire—to see the freaks as monsters, the audience can return at the end to its earlier vision of Hans as Cleo's victim. It is significant, though, that such a return can be effected only through the complete feminization and infantilization of Hans. As the camera rests on Frieda and Hans at the film's end, Cleo's earlier taunt (that Hans was a "baby," not a man) seems to have been realized. Having failed in his efforts "to be a man" (i.e., to win Cleo's respect and to control her punishment), Hans is recast at the end as Frieda's "baby." Sobbing in his fiancée's arms, he seems to be destined for maternal rather than sexual love.

*Freaks* remains a troubling film to watch largely because of its own internal demonization of the freaks and because of the demands it makes on the audience (first we sympathize with the freaks, then with their victims, then with the freaks again). But equally troubling are the misogyny and gynophobia that run throughout the film. From the opening barker's speech—"Friends, she was once a beautiful woman"—to the revelation of the chicken-woman, the film's real topic seems to be "dames" who "squeal when [they] . . . get what's coming to [them]."<sup>15</sup> And it is the punishment of one such "dame," Cleopatra, that I wish to reconsider here.

On one level, there is an element of poetic justice in Cleo's final transformation. Having previously refused to become "one of us" symbolically during the wedding banquet scene, Cleo is literally transformed into a freak as punishment for her arrogance and for her betrayal of one of the freaks. But there is also a strong sexual component here. Not only did Cleo plot to kill her husband, she sexually humiliated him in front of all his friends. Kissing Hercules passionately at the wedding banquet, insulting the wedding guests, and, finally, symbolically unmanning Hans (with the piggyback ride around the table), Cleo emerges here as the quintessential transgressive woman, and her mutilation appears as an atavistic enactment of the punitive scarring visited upon adulteresses in certain preindustrial tribes. The goal is to ruin her looks so that she cannot attract other men. As in any ritual designed to bring female sexuality under control, the rape imagery in the revenge sequence is strong. When Hans demands in the wagon that Cleo turn over her little black bottle of poison, one of his friends dramatically opens a switchblade. In the hands of the midget, the knife looks enormous; the spring action of the weapon combined with its piercing, penetrating function seem perhaps too obvious a phallic symbol for Hans's assumption of authority over his wife. Later, in the chase scene, everyone—even the pinheads—is armed with some kind of phallic weapon.

Interestingly, Cleo alone is mutilated in *Freaks*. As J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum point out, the story's original ending called for the castration of Hercules, as well as for Cleopatra's mutilation.<sup>16</sup> Originally, both of the lovers were to be treated with sexual brutality—essentially, to be “neutered.” The transformation of Hercules' punishment from castration to swift capital punishment (one of the midgets throws a knife into Hercules' back) is just one of the elements that is troubling here. For it is not really certain that Hercules is being “punished” at all. When the midget throws his knife into the strongman's back, Hercules is in the process of strangling Phroso. The knife attack is, then, as much an expedient means of saving Phroso's life as it is punishment for the crimes that Hercules committed against the freaks.

If—as the original ending for *Freaks* would suggest—mutilation and castration are the appropriate penalties for sexual transgression, then Cleo takes the punishment for both herself and Hercules. Her mutilation stands in for *two* violent and disfiguring acts: her own symbolic rape and Hercules' castration as well. In that way, Cleo may be said to serve the same symbolic function that Carol J. Clover maintains the female victim in contemporary slasher films always serves. As her body symbolically becomes the site for Hercules' punishment as well as her own, Cleo becomes the figure onto which the male experience of castration may be quite literally displaced.<sup>17</sup>

But Cleo's punishment symbolizes a kind of female castration as well. For if Cleo is, as I argued earlier, a monstrous figure, much of her monstrosity derives from her assumption of male prerogatives and roles. It is Cleo who takes the sexual initiative with both Hans and Hercules (“So that's how it is,” she tells the strongman after she calls him to her wagon, “You have to be called.”) It is Cleo who devises the plan to kill Hans and avail herself of his money. And it is Cleo who takes responsibility for carrying the plan out. Physically stronger than anyone in the circus except Hercules,<sup>18</sup> Cleo's very physiognomy establishes her as an androgynous creature. As Ivan Butler describes her, she is “tall, blonde, almost aggressively vital. . . . One critic described her performance as ‘voracious,’ and there is indeed at times a nasty feeling that at the back of her mind is an obscene desire to sink her teeth into the midget and gobble him up.”<sup>19</sup> Certainly, she physically dominates Hans. Carrying him piggyback around the banquet table, she asserts her physical strength and humiliates him in front of his friends. Carrying him to his own wagon when he is ill, she reinforces his position as feminized victim.

Cleo's sexual criminality is compounded, then, by the masculine codes she so readily assumes. Not only does she betray Hans in standard femme fatale fashion, she also overtly usurps his position of physical and emotional dominance. Demonstrating that she is a better man than Hans will ever be, Cleo becomes what Susan Lurie would designate a “phallic woman.”<sup>20</sup> And, as such, she must literally be “cut down to size” by her husband and his friends.

Cleo's mutilation—her punishment for transgressing certain sexual and gender limits—is the culminating event in a film obsessed with the meaning of physical difference. In fact, its presence here serves to highlight the degree to which *Freaks'* obsession with physical difference can also be read as an obsession with gender difference. The film repeatedly raises gender issues and questions the basis of gender assignment and identity. The silence that falls over the performers whenever the half-woman, half-man Josephine/Joseph walks by, the accouchement of the bearded lady, and Hans's struggle to be recognized as a “man” are all indications of the way in which “freakishness” in this film seems inevitably to involve gender

duality or confusion. Even the performers associated with the freaks are often cast in sexually ambiguous roles. Rosco, the stutterer who performs with Hercules, dresses as a Roman lady for his act. And Phroso the clown refers to an unspecified "operation" in one of his early conversations with Venus.<sup>21</sup>

But if Cleo's mutilation is the culminating event in a film obsessed with gender confusion and duality, it is also the culminating event in a film haunted by misogyny. Punished for betraying Hans and for transgressing her gender/sexual role, Cleo emerges as the "most amazing, the *most* astounding living monstrosity of all time." She emerges as the quintessential example of what Phroso designates as essential femininity: At the hands of the freaks she becomes one of those "dames" who "squeal when [they] . . . get what's coming to [them]."

I realize I have raised more questions about the function of gender in *Freaks* than I have been able to answer here. But identifying provocative patterns and raising questions about latent material may be the only possible way to analyze a horror film that, as Raymond Durgnat maintains, "at every turn evokes the name of Buñuel."<sup>22</sup> Despite its apparently tidy structure—framing device plus story plus framing device plus coda—*Freaks* resists the kind of analysis that most horror films invite. The film, as I have tried to show, does not really establish itself as a horror film until the freaks begin stalking Cleo—almost two-thirds of the way through the movie. And playing with our very notions of what constitutes freakishness and monstrosity, the film demands a complicated viewer response that, as Durgnat argues, fits our expectations of avant-garde cinema more than it does our expectations of horror.

It is in its treatment of sexuality and gender, however, that the film becomes most difficult to pin down. Cleo functions both as an essentialized female who fills the role that Phroso assigns to *all* women near the beginning of the film (dames who squeal when they get what's coming to them), and as an androgynous character who looks like a woman and performs like a man. Furthermore, even her sexual motivation appears to be fluid here. For all of her femme fatale dealings with both Hans and Hercules, Cleo gives strong indications that at least her *initial* advances towards Hans may be motivated more by her antagonism toward Frieda than by the joke she wishes to play on Frieda's fiancé. It is Frieda's eye she catches when she makes her first pass at Hans. And, immediately after flirting with him, she approaches the diminutive woman seated on horseback and fluffs up her ballet skirt. "Nice, nice," she says. ("Don't, don't," Frieda replies). Later she torments Frieda by thanking Hans for the gifts he has sent her. "By me, she has no shame," Frieda tells Venus. "*Always when I can hear it* she says to him, 'thanks, my darling, for this and thanks, my darling, for that' " [emphasis mine]. Finally, Cleo only decides to marry Hans after Frieda comes to her wagon and begs her to stop toying with his affections.

There are, then, two erotic triangles at play in *Freaks*. There is the Cleo-Hans-Hercules configuration, the triangle that explodes into open conflict at Hans and Cleo's wedding banquet. But there is also the less obvious triangle of Cleo-Hans-Frieda, a triangle that is just as fraught with psychological turmoil and intensity. What interests me here is the power model implied by the Cleo-Hans-Frieda triad. As René Girard argues in his book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*,<sup>23</sup> there are always two active members of an erotic triangle (the rivals), and it is their relationship that structures the dynamics of power within the threesome. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, this observation has enormous implications for the sexual dynamics that take place within the ménage. "What is most interesting in his [Girard's] study," she writes "is its insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals

is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent."<sup>24</sup> Sedgwick uses this observation to analyze the ways in which depictions of the traditional erotic triangle (two men and one woman) introduce the notion of male homosocial desire into Western literature. What she does not consider—and what *Freaks* only hints at—is the degree to which female *gynosocial* desire (in this case Cleo's bond with Frieda) may be viewed as profoundly threatening and disruptive to a system in which, as Sedgwick points out, "sexuality functions as a signifier for power relations."<sup>25</sup>

Claude Lévi-Strauss once postulated that the exchange of women (through marriage and sexual liaisons) forms the basis of patriarchal sexual economy and, by extension, of patriarchal society itself. "The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman," he writes, "but between two groups of men [the woman's kin and the kin of her prospective husband], and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners."<sup>26</sup> The point of such an exchange is to cement liaisons between different kinship units; the woman, in this model, becomes the conduit for an alliance between men. Girard, of course, draws heavily on Lévi-Strauss's cultural paradigm to bolster his argument about the nature of adulterous liaisons. And, as Sedgwick demonstrates, the classic Girardian threesome—two men vying for one woman—does nothing to alter Lévi-Strauss's model. If anything, it reinforces the basis of the sexual economy, as the circulation of the woman causes the men—in both Sedgwick's and Girard's view—to forge a powerful relationship to one another. But when a man becomes the object of rivalry between two women and, hence, is designated as a commodity of sexual exchange, the male basis for power becomes seriously compromised. Here, the important relationship, the *active* relationship, is the one that obtains between the two women rivals. The man is merely the "conduit of a relationship' in which the true *partner*" is a woman."<sup>27</sup>

In the microcosmic world of the circus, then, Cleo functions as a disruptive force on two counts. Not only does she refuse to keep the social place assigned to her by the dominant sexual economy, but she also builds relationships that seem to threaten the very existence of the patriarchal sexual economy itself. To put it another way, Cleo is not merely struggling for position in a world order whose legitimacy she recognizes. She is behaving in a way that usurps the very basis of male power.<sup>28</sup> And it is for the role she plays in compromising the foundation of male dominance that Cleo ultimately must be reduced to a hen.

Oddly, it is the freaks in the film—those most associated with mixed and confused gender identities—who become, in this context at least, the enforcers of a patriarchal social order that has spurned and marginalized them. Chasing Cleo through the woods and mutilating her, they seem unwittingly to become the instruments of the dominant society's revenge as well as the enforcers of the "code of the freaks." That is perhaps the most troubling dimension of a film that continually defies the very viewer expectations it works so hard to elicit. But in ultimately identifying the freaks' revenge with the enforcement of patriarchal sexual hegemony, *Freaks* also introduces a theme that Wood has identified as standard in horror: It illustrates the basic connection that always exists between the monster and the "normal" world (s)he menaces.<sup>29</sup> For 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.

# NOTES

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1. Phil Hardy, Tom Milne, and Paul Willemsen, *The Encyclopedia of Horror Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 51.
2. This is the term that Hans uses throughout the film to describe Cleopatra. "She is the most beautiful big woman I ever saw," he tells his fiancée Frieda at the beginning of the film.
3. See, e.g., "Not for Children," *New Yorker*, 16 July 1932, 45; and "The Circus Side Show," *New York Times*, 9 July 1932, 7.
4. I have decided to use the word "freaks" despite—or perhaps because of—its derogatory connotations. Whether or not physically challenged people are "freaks" is, after all, one of the crucial questions posed by the film; and it is, I believe, the central issue involved in the film's suppression.
5. "The Circus Side Show," 7.
6. The reviewer's discomfort with the use of real freaks in the film is obvious here. One year after *Freaks* was made, *King Kong*—surely the most fantastic love story of all time—was released to rave reviews. See *Variety*, 12 July 1932, n.p.
7. "Freaks," *Time*, 18 April 1932, 17.
8. The ad appeared in *New York Times*, 9 July 1932, 7.
9. Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 296.
10. Program note in the Pacific Film Archive series Received Images: A Reading of Disability in Cinema, University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive *Calendar*, July 1990, University of California at Berkeley, © Regents of the University of California.
11. Ibid.
12. Ivan Butler, *Horror in the Cinema*, 2d rev. ed. (London: A. S. Zwemmer; New York: A. S. Barnes, 1970), 65.
13. For Wood, horror films "are progressive precisely to the degree that they refuse to be satisfied with . . . [the] simple designation of the monster as evil." See Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 192.
14. In terms of both structure and plot, the shot of the chicken-woman seems like an appropriate place to end. Structurally, it parallels the barker's speech that opens the film and completes the opening sequence's missing shot. Thematically, it unveils the monster that the audience has been waiting to see.
15. Early in the film, Venus leaves the strongman, Hercules, with whom she had been living. As she carries her things back to her own wagon, she sees Phroso taking off his makeup. Realizing that he has heard the entirety of her argument with Hercules, Venus lashes out at Phroso. "Women are funny, ain't they?" she says sarcastically. Phroso follows Venus back to her wagon, where he replies, "You dames are all alike . . . how you squeal when you get what's coming to you."
16. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Da Capo, 1983), 297.
17. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 50–53.
18. In fact, Cleo's preference for men who can physically dominate her is one of the few traditional female codes she follows.
19. Butler, *Horror in the Cinema*, 66.
20. See Susan Lurie, "Pornography and the Dread of Woman," in *Take Back the Night*, ed. Susan Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980); and Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).
21. At the end of his argument with Venus, Phroso advises her not to start drinking. "Say, you're a pretty good kid," she tells him. "You're darn right I am," he replies. "You should have caught me before my operation." Given the sexual tenor of the scene, the audience is led to see the operation as somehow sexual—an old war injury, like the one suffered by the narrator of *The Sun Also Rises*, perhaps?

22. Raymond Durnat, "Freaks," *Films and Filming* 9, no. 1 (August 1963): 23.
23. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).
24. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 21.
25. *Ibid.*, 7.
26. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 115; quoted in Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 26.
27. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 26.
28. This is very complicated because Cleo also functions as an object of sexual exchange between Hercules and Hans.
29. See Robin Wood, "Return of the Repressed," *Film Comment*, July-August 1978, 26.