

Reframing Disability

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ANGELO MUREDDA: Horror movie fans will recognize this scene from the silent film classic *The Phantom of the Opera* as the moment where Lon Chaney's Phantom is revealed to have a facial disfigurement, much to the anxiety of his beloved Christine. Disabled viewers, though, might recognize something else: a tired old tradition of casting disabled people as monsters to be feared or pitied, which goes all the way back to the beginning of film as a medium. So what might it mean to actually see disability differently? And what might it mean for disabled people to see themselves, and not some distorted mirror image of themselves, onscreen? I'm Angelo Muredda, a disabled film critic, programmer, and teacher. I'm a wheelchair user, and an amputee. I'm wearing a collared shirt that is white and striped. I have thin metal glasses and a beard and dark hair. I've completed a PhD in English on representations of disability in Canadian literature and film. And I've thought a lot about what it means to see disability onscreen, or to live, as a disabled viewer, with a lot of broken images of disabled people. Lon Chaney was a master of disguise, a makeup artist as well as an actor famous for creating a range of colourful disabled characters. In his portrayals of those characters, for which he was dubbed "The Man of a Thousand Faces," are an early place

where we see disability portrayed on film. Those characters are often villains, but they're sympathetic ones. They're likeable outsiders, demanding a dignity and respect that society often denies them. Cheney's portrayal of sympathetic but monstrous disabled people set a standard for other early horror films that associate disability with both pity and fear. One of these is the silent film classic, *The Hands of Orlac*. In that film, Orlac is a master pianist who loses his hands in a train accident and receives a transplant from a murderer. The loss and the transplant give him an identity crisis, and he wonders about whether he is the person that he used to be before he was disabled. Early in the film, when it still seems like he will go on as an amputee, his wife begs the surgeon to save his hands, pleading that they are more than his life. And the suggestion is that for Orlac to live as a disabled man is to live as a shadow of himself, a fate that might be worse than death.

ALICE WONG: I'm an Asian-American disabled woman. I'm wearing a red hoodie. I have short black hair. I am sitting in a power wheelchair, and there is a mask over my nose, attached to a ventilator. Disabled people, you know, we have our lived experiences, and we can tell when performances are not rooted in actual lived experience. And that informs a person's, you know, performance. And no matter how hard, you know, an actor does the research and puts in the effort,

there's nothing like seeing actual disabled people in the profession, and also just acting. You know, I think this is something that we are absolutely entitled to see.

MUREDDA:

Disability is a bit more complicated in *Freaks*, which is directed by Chaney's frequent collaborator, Tod Browning. *Freaks* repeats some of these offensive tropes about disability, but it also subverts them at times. The film is about a non-disabled trapeze artist named Cleopatra who worms her way into a carnival sideshow that's made up of largely disabled performers. And her plan is to seduce one of the sideshow's star performers, Hans, so that she can murder him and cash in on his inheritance. Hans is played by the popular sideshow performer Harry Earles, a member of the Doll Family, who also appeared as some of the Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz*. His sister Daisy also appears in the film. And much of the rest of the cast is also made up of visibly disabled carnival performers. That makes *Freaks* pretty rare, despite its exploitative plot and despite the marketing that emphasized the opportunity for audiences to be terrified by all kinds of disabled people. On the contrary, the disabled cast of *Freaks* are just performers with a diverse range of bodies. They're talking, they're working together, they're falling in love, and they're taking care of each other. And for Browning, it's mostly seemingly normal schemers like Cleopatra who are actually the monsters. *Freaks* is a

rare, complicated example in a tradition that's far too often been uncomplicated. Film is an imaginative medium, but the stories of disabled people have often been shown through the unimaginative lenses of nondisabled filmmakers and performers. Disabled people have seen themselves from time to time then, but they largely seen themselves through eyes that come from outside of the community.

WONG: I think there's still a hunger out there, and there's still a void. Do we deserve to see ourselves? I don't under... I kind of don't understand why we still have to debate this, the fact that, you know, why can't this be the default, that disabled characters are played by disabled actors?

MUREDDA: That's often a problem of who has played disabled characters onscreen. Chaney's work established a still-strong tradition of nondisabled actors playing disabled characters and getting critical acclaim out of it. The history of disability on film, then, is often a history of nondisabled actors and filmmakers turning disability into something of a lesson for nondisabled audiences. It's so rare to see disabled performers that when Harold Russell, an actual amputee and a veteran of World War II, was up for an Oscar for his performance in *The Best Years of Our Lives* in 1946, the Academy created an honorary Oscar for him. Russell played Homer, an amputee returning from the war and struggling to

reintegrate into his old life. The Academy said that Russell's honorary Oscar was "for bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans through his appearance." He won that Oscar in addition to his own competitive Oscar for Best Supporting Actor which, to this date, is one of only two Academy Awards for disabled characters that went to disabled actors playing them. All of this in spite of the fact that his character never even appears on the poster. Things haven't changed all that much since Harold Russell's mere appearance as a visibly disabled performer was deemed inspirational enough to earn him an honorary award. We've seen lots of stories about famous disabled people overcoming their so-called limitations rather than simply living their lives. And those films are frequently anchored by the showy performances of nondisabled actors who are putting on their characters' disabilities as they might put on makeup or costumes. Actors such as Daniel Day Lewis have won Oscars for portraying famous disabled people, in his case Christy Brown, the celebrated Irish poet with cerebral palsy. More recently, Eddie Redmayne won an Oscar for his portrayal of Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*. These are technically accomplished performances. But as disabled critics such as Dominick Evans and Anita Cameron have pointed out, they're also based in mimicry. Nondisabled actors have worked really hard to imitate and to recreate disabled

people's mannerisms and appearance. But sometimes, they've missed the nuances of disabled people's lives, the things that you can't see by copying. Disabled viewers, meanwhile, have often seen their lives turned into motivational stories that aren't even meant for them to see. So what does it mean to see yourself as a disabled person onscreen? And what do we lose when the only images of disability that we see onscreen tend to look a certain way? Not just monstrous, but also overwhelmingly white, and cisgender, and male. Who continues to not see themselves represented at all? And what might it look like to look at the screen and see yourself reflected rather than distorted? It might look like the work of Sins Invalid, a disability justice-based performance project that incubates disabled, queer, and gender-variant artists of colour. Their documentary is a powerful record of performance artists embracing and centring their often marginalized disabled bodies, and their sexuality as disabled people. We see them embracing their beauty as well as their radical potential in the process.

WONG:

I want to quote, you know, my friend Vilissa Thompson who created a hashtag called #DisabilityTooWhite. And, you know, basically, her entire point is that when most people see me for the first time, the representation of disability as a middle-class, white disabled experience, again, that's a very small, narrow part of this incredibly complex and diverse and

broad, you know, disability community. And, you know, we're not a monolith. There's just so much richness out there, you know, especially by Black and Indigenous and people of colour who are disabled or Deaf. You're missing out on such a culture and wisdom, and just different ways of being. I think that's... That's a loss for everybody, in terms of just knowing what's out there because people like me exist, and we are still waiting for better representation of, you know, disabled women of colour, queer disabled people, trans disabled people, you know, everything. And I think this also speaks to the very low expectations or assumptions about what an audience can handle. And I think that also speaks to the lack of creativity and risk taking, that, you know, people are saying, "Oh, you know, let's stay safe with our choices for if we want actually to have a Deaf or disabled character." You know, let's play it like as middle-of-the-road as possible rather than really just being open to what's out there.

MUREDDA:

Or it might look like the work of Maysoon Zayid, a stand-up comedian, actress, and activist with cerebral palsy who has worked on stage, screen, and television. Zayid has made her own path as the creator of a one-woman show in an industry that frequently sidelines disabled women of colour. Disabled artists of colour in particular have had to work much harder to see themselves onscreen, typically having to cast

themselves in order to make their projects happen. It might also look like *Speechless*, the ABC comedy series that was radical in its decision to cast a disabled actor with cerebral palsy, Micah Fowler, in a central role as a disabled character. It might look like Aaron Schimberg's 2019 film *Chained for Life*, a comedy about disability onscreen. The film stars Adam Pearson, an actor with a facial disfigurement as well as a disability activist, as another actor who also has a facial disfigurement. Pearson's character is like most disabled people who've looked up at a film screen and puzzled over the distorted images of themselves that they've seen. But the difference is that he's casting his own image in response.

WONG:

A lot of people in the film world, they want something that's pretty, that's heavily polished, that's also narratives that are easy to swallow. And I think that's what a lot of disabled, you know, artists are trying to push back against, right? Like, why do we have to have stories that have a redemption arc, or have a, you know, happy resolution, or just about you know, these sort of like... You know, where we can have linear kinds of story arcs? You know, we could do much more than that.

MUREDDA:

In a lot of ways, then, we haven't entirely left the world of paltry representations behind. But disabled artists and filmmakers and performers like these have been doing the

real work of getting us to see disabled people in more interesting lights. And it's up to all of us, I think, to look a little bit closer.

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