Research Articles and Essays

Temporal drag, Radical Negativity and the Re-articulation of Disabled Identities in American Horror Story

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Abstract

American Horror Story (AHS), a US anthology horror series created for cable network FX by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, broke new ground in its capacity for presenting disabled bodies in most of its interconnected miniseries. In an (almost) ensemble cast throughout, disabled characters were most in evidence in series four, 'Freak Show', with several parts played by disabled actors, e.g., Mat Fraser (Paul), Jyoti Amge (Ma Petite) and Rose Siggins (Legless Suzi). Additionally, Jamie Brewer, an actor with Down Syndrome, was featured in several of the series (as Addie, Nan, Hedda. Marjorie, before reprising Nan, allowing her to run the gauntlet of character types). AHS has been seen to offer much potential in 'queering' representations on many axes, especially, sexuality and gender; Geller and Banker (2017), for example, have argued that the show creates 'temporal drag' through its rejection of 'historical verisimilitude'. Women, particularly female 'stars' also played significant central and recurring roles, once again challenging the conventional positioning of women within the horror genre, whilst simultaneously troubling, repeating and neglecting some familiar tropes, e.g., the excision of the monstrous woman and the whiteness of history (King, 2016). Taking forward the idea that the show queers the normativities of reproductive

futurism (argued by Geller and Banker) this paper considers the value of the show for the depiction and rethinking of disabled people's subjectivities, particularly in terms of use of 'temporal drag', and 'radical negativity', e.g., embracing sex, death and violence. The paper concludes that progress in disability representation has been made, but that significant narrative and representation inequalities remain within AHS.

Keywords: American Horror Story, narrative inequality, temporal drag

Understandably, there was much excitement[i] about the inclusion of disabled actors in American Horror Story (AHS), an anthology horror series (FX) featuring an (almost) ensemble cast of well-known actors throughout, including Jessica Lange, Angela Bassett, Sarah Paulson and Kathy Bates. Whilst these and other high-profile actors perhaps added to the marketing, appeal, and success of the show, it is of some significance that it also took 'risks'[ii] with the employment of disabled actors, introducing the audience to Jamie Brewer, an actor with Down Syndrome, as a regular player throughout the anthology series. Moreover, alongside the roles played by Brewer, there were several significant parts played by other disabled actors, e.g. Mat Fraser (Paul), Jyoti Amge (Ma Petite) and Rose Siggins (Legless Suzi).

Not only did this mean that 'real' disabled people gained much higher visibility, and were able to showcase their talents, the potential for groundbreaking portrayals of disability was high, especially as AHS has been seen to offer much potential in 'queering' normative representations along several axes, especially sexuality and gender (see Geller and Banker, 2017). Indeed, AHS can be seen to tick several diversity boxes in its presentation of disability and impairment. This is most notable in terms of greater equity in the employment of disabled actors – across impairment groups— and can also be seen on content, especially in the agency of disabled characters, and the disabled people's activism which ensues. Season Four, *Freak Show* (henceforth *FS* when referring only to AHS's Freak Show), in particular, provides themes which echo some of the earlier radical content of Tod Browning's 1932 'horror' film *Freak*s, which was arguably the most political representation of disabled people in the history of cinema (see Markotic, 2001 for an analysis). One of its greatest similarities was that they both portrayed a range of disabled characters whose guiding principle is that of solidarity to other disabled people. As Nussbaum argues, *FS* 'replicates' the focus on

'horizontal identities', the driving force of *Freak*s, where people defined by their bodily difference from accredited norms take this identity as core, as a point of pride. Importantly, in both cases it is clear to the viewer that these horizontal identities are a matter of survival against disabling norms, with only those who are trusted as non-oppressors accepted into the group of disabled people as 'one of us'[iii].

For these reasons alone, *FS* can be judged favorably, taken on a standalone basis, especially in terms of its inclusion of disabled people and its rights-based content. However, we cannot assume that the inclusion of disabled actors or such political content is sufficient; the way a story is told is fundamental to what meanings we take from it. This is a lesson we have learned from the restructuring of potentially valuable stories of disabled people's lives being used to promote inspiration porn (see Mureda, 2020). Instead, we need to consider the complexities of cultural representation and viewer interpretation, the wishes of the marginalized disabled audience, and the obduracy of media stereotypes in production contexts which are governed by commercial interests. Specifically, we need deeper analysis to gain better understanding of how AHS, as a whole, has contributed to the evolution of disability representation, and whether or how it has moved beyond the narrative and representation inequalities which dominate the mediascape. Further, given the re-articulations of disabled identity, and the fluidity of portrayals therein, there are other novel aspects of disability representation in AHS which may serve to persuade us to rethink some of the criteria on the disability movement's recommendations for improving media portrayals. Arguably (perhaps), one of the progressive qualities in disability representation within the whole show lies in terms of including disabled people in its 'radical negativity'[iv], something which may be seen as antithetical to disabled people's media agendas, especially to appeals for 'positive' imagery, an approach which will be considered further.

I am arguing that *FS* needs to be contextualized within the entire anthology to be able to give it the scrutiny it deserves. As enjoyable as *FS* was, the presence of disabled actors, or indeed of actors from Black and other marginalized groups, is no guarantor of representational change, of narrative equality, or of meaningful impacts on re-articulations of disabled identity in the wider world, as I have argued elsewhere (Wilde, 2018). Fundamentally, then, I start this analysis by raising key issues of narrative and representational in/equalities, across all series.

Disability, multiplicity and AHS

As suggested, the majority of the disabled actors in AHS were in S4, *FS*, the only season which was overtly associated with disability. In addition to the actors already mentioned (Fraser, Siggins and Amge) there were other disabled actors in *FS* in more minor roles, including Benjamin Eric Woolf and Drew Rin Varic[v]. I believe it to be important to mention them in this paper, especially as their presence lent added authenticity to the ensemble in the context of the freak show, serving to make the whole cast of 'freaks' feel more genuine, despite the casting of several non-disabled actors. Other actors who tend to be marginalized in the screen professions were also cast as freaks, people who lived their embodied status in their real lives – Erika Ervin, also known as Amazon Eve (a woman who is six feet and eight inches tall), and Chrissy Metz (a woman who is much larger/heavier than average).

Notably, Woolf's appearances in two series placed him in sharply contrasting roles. In S1 he was cast as Infantata (a dismembered baby brought back to life as a bloodthirsty 'monster'), and in S4 he played the character of Meep, a mild-mannered 'geek', who only speaks his own name. Historically, those employed as geeks were there to instill fear in the audience through the performance of 'disgusting feats and tricks' (Germann, 2002, para 1),

often biting the heads of chickens in the original freak shows. The 'geek show', warm-up element of the freak show placed 'geeks' as the lowest of the low within the cast, and they were treated as such (Germann, 2006). Although Meep's portrayal retains historical verisimilitude in the latter sense, both characters could be criticized for their resemblance to dominant tropes of dwarfs. Woolf had pituitary dwarfism[vi], and his portrayal of Meep can be interpreted as falling into the categories of 'comic sidekicks or magical freaks' especially as he is in a freak show (Martin, cited in Benedictus, 2010, para 2). Similarly, his Infantata character could be seen to echo conventional portrayals of dwarfs as evil (Barnes, 1992). But Woolf's placement in two completely different roles refuses a straightforward stereotyping of his impairment, as an individual actor or as a representative of the dwarf community. Moreover, these characterizations should be placed within the context of the whole show, where many non-disabled actors also play freaks of one sort of another, with many exhibiting traits of evil, and few being presented as 'positive'. Together, this spread of roles and personality attributes indicate a considerable degree of narrative and representational equality within *FS*. However, as Brewer and Woolf were the only disabled actors to appear in more than one series, this made for a sharp contrast with many of the non-disabled cast; leading roles, across the whole anthology, including some disabled characters, were played by actors such as Frances Conroy, Lily Rabe, Kathy Bates, Lange, Evan Peters, Sarah Paulson, and Angela Bassett.

Jamie Brewer: The destabilization of Down Syndrome and disabled womanhood

As suggested, Jamie Brewer was the other actor who was given an opportunity to show an impressive range of acting skills. Indeed, her inclusion as a recurring member of the cast, in a number of different roles, is perhaps the most radical re-presentation of impairment, or disability that we might find in recent years, especially as she was allowed the freedom to

challenge conventional portrayals of Down Syndrome without recreating new stereotypes. Although I have argued that the creation of stereotypes is largely unavoidable (Wilde, 2004; 2018), this form of horror fantasy enables a strategy of 'radical excess', i.e., 'differance – radicalised difference, or very briefly, difference that cannot be contained by any unifying system' (Ang and Stratton, 1995, 124). Such features are evident throughout AHS – whereby there are few norms to deviate from and there is a continuous 'destabilisation of the natural' (Kuppers, 2002, 191), which tends to deconstruct conventional abnormality/normality dualisms, exposing 'common-sense' understandings of impairment and disability. Other dimensions associated with more realist fare are also thwarted, even our expectations of life and death; some of Brewer's characters, like others, continue to exist in different guises after they die. Nowhere is this strategy of radical excess more apparent than in the characters played by Brewer. Moreover, her shifting roles created additional fluidity, defying any urge to stereotype.

Jamie Brewer was introduced to us from the start as a key (if not leading) member of the cast in Season One as Adelaide 'Addie' Langdon, daughter of Constance Langdon, played by Jessica Lange (a leading actor in the first four series), then went on to feature in several later seasons (as Nan, Hedda, Marjorie, then Nan again). The first of these roles cast Brewer as an abused dependent of her mother, but she was also a threatening character who was defiant at times. It could easily be argued that this first role drew on previous cultural understandings of victim status and Down Syndrome, learning difficulties, and disabled womanhood, but the complexity of Addie's character skewed this considerably. As Brewer then went on to occupy a multiplicity of roles in AHS, this disruption of stereotyping much went further. Disturbing such tropes even further, subsequent roles she played included the promiscuous, clairvoyant witch Nan in Season Three, *Coven*. Nan's occult powers and sexual

appeal are underestimated by all those in the coven with Nan going onto a relationship with her new neighbor, Luke Ramsey, perhaps reminding the audience not to make assumptions about her desirability. Nan is eventually killed as a sacrifice to Papa Legba (the gatekeeper of the spirit world), ending up in 'hell' as his sidekick, a position which she prefers to her previous life in the coven (she returns with him, much later, in Season Eight, *Apocalypse*). Having established herself in a range of roles, Brewer than goes on to play a ventriloquist's dummy, Marjorie, in Season Four, *FS*. This was a notable casting decision given that this series presented all its other disabled cast members as acts within the freak show. To complicate her parts even further she is not just cast as the doll – the puppet's master Chester believes her to be a real person, thus her primary role is to act in Chester's hallucinations, often in a cruel and manipulative ways, driving him to acts of violence. By her third role then, the audience have seen her shift through a wide range of personalities, and a key development in this role lies in Chester's utter dependence on her, including her opinions of his attitudes to women, and love and sexual relationships. This, and her capacity to initiate violent acts, progressively take her further away from our expectations of cute and cuddly, innocent, helpless depictions of Down Syndrome.

Forcing these re-articulations of disabled women's subjectivity further – having firmly established that people with Down Syndrome are sexual subjects, have strong identifications with other women (including those who are non-disabled, especially in *Coven* and *Cult*), hold capacities to control others, and are as capable of evil and violence as anyone else – she goes on to play the part of a member of the feminist, anti-patriarchal group SCUM, in Season Seven, *Cult*. The SCUM cult, like many other aspects of the show, refers to, or is based loosely on, historical events, in this case the publishing of Valerie Solanas's S.C.U.M. Manifesto (see Solanos, 1967). The changing form, and semi-ensemble cast, and a time-

hopping structure across all the series, allowed her to present a range of character types, something which seems unprecedented, especially for someone with her impairment. Although people with Down Syndrome, and people with intellectual impairments generally, have been afforded a larger range of roles[vii] over recent years, many of which have included radical departures from old tropes[viii] (e.g., dependency and infantilization (Arnold, 2018, Mathews, 2018)), such fluidity of personality and character is maximized in media which offers a range of characters, offering a more diverse range of portrayals and personality types. Old stereotypes also tend to unravel when a greater number of disabled characters are shown, with the frequent exception of dwarfs (Wilde, 2018); this occurred, for example, when a range of different actors/characters with Down Syndrome were cast in *No Offence* (2015-2018), encouraging us to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the community of people with Down Syndrome (Jones, 2015).

Brewer's occupation of a multiplicity of roles in AHS, spread over different time periods – including resurrections of individual characters throughout different seasons – can be theorized as a form of 'temporal drag' (Geller and Banker, 2017, explained further in the next section). As such it has taken the deconstruction of stereotypes much further, shattering ideas of fixed identities. Significantly, her inclusion in the temporal drag of the show puts her on a par with the non-disabled characters of the main ensemble cast. I have argued elsewhere (Wilde, 2004; 2018) many of the problems with stereotyping lie in relationships of narrative and representational in/equality. That is, it is usual to see multi-dimensionality in non-disabled characters, whose personalities are often allowed to evolve, though we can see them conform to stereotypes in phases of their evolution. Conversely, stereotypes of marginalized groups are rarely afforded such fluidity, and often denied 'the full range of humanity' (Bowdre, 2009,107), largely dependent on the positioning of non-disabled bodies (like white

and/or and middle-class bodies) as 'coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity' (Dyer, 1988, 47, cited in Bowdre, 2009, 109).

Apart from the roles played by Brewer and Woolf, all the remaining disabled actors are to be found in S4 as suggested. As good as this was in presenting new, or revised versions of disabled personhood (albeit many ideas borrowed from in Freaks, 1932), closer analysis of S4 will be valuable in investigating the re-presentation of both impairment and disability. Comparison of other disabled characters and actors' roles, and the ways in which these relate to the whole anthology will be especially useful in investigating rearticulations of impairment tropes and politicized portrayals of disability.

Themes of disability and disabled characters in *Freak Show*, and *Asylum*

Freak Show

As suggested, *FS* carries most of the burden for disability representation across the entire AHS series, especially as that it where we meet most of the disabled actors. Many disabled people welcomed the visibility of disabled actors in FS, despite some concerns about the exploitative potential of this season (Nussbaum, 2014). However, disabled people are undoubtedly underemployed in the show as a whole. In FS, a minority of non-normative bodies are played by disabled people, an estimated six/seven amongst a cast of forty-four, with a further eight/nine disabled/freak roles played by non-disabled actors (see below for examples). The predominance of non-disabled actors seems especially problematic in a genre which relies heavily on the depiction of abject and non-normative bodies and minds. Nonetheless, with the emphasis of this series placed firmly on disability and explorations of ideas of freakdom, it echoed and developed many of the themes Browning's *Freaks*. Clear

similarities can be seen in expressions of group solidarity and the reversal of the insider/outsider hierarchies which position disabled people as abnormal, even as 'bare life', a state conceptualized by Agamben as a state of exception from social/human life structured through biopower (discussed in relation to disability, in Reeve,2009). Like *Freaks*, FS often works to show disabled people in situations which challenge audience expectations of disabled people, position them as important and valuable human beings, whilst retaining elements of spectacle, refusing a simple reversal of moral protagonism, and rejecting the safety of happy endings.

Despite the disabled actors being comparatively few, most of these had significant and multidimensional roles, most of which transcended conventional portrayals, e.g., in the depiction of disabled bodies as sexual agents, as desirous, and desirable. The inclusion of several disabled actors also allowed for a more diverse range of disability representation, including various impairments as well as Black disabled women, or disabled women 'of colour'[ix], who are rarely employed in film and television (Wilde, 2020). Furthermore, whereas the context of the freak show immediately positions the disabled actors (as well as the non-disabled actors playing 'freaks') as a spectacle, often based on historical figures[x] or trends (Lewis, 2020), the showcasing of disabled people performing extraordinary or spectacular feats was kept to a minimum, focusing more on their lives within the freak show/world. Mat Fraser for example had previously used Sealo's original freak show act as the basis for one of his own, amalgamated in his portrayal of Paul as the 'Illustrated Seal',[xi] but FS focused on his life narrative rather than these acts.

Like most of the other series, the plots are complex and intertwining, with a large cast, far too intricate to do them justice within one article. However, taken as a whole, it seems accurate to say that, as integral as the disabled actors are to the story telling, none of them are

amongst the main protagonists. In addition to viewing the series, a cursory glance at cast lists of main, recurring and guest characters[xii] shows this to be the case, with all main parts being played by members of the main AHS ensemble. Whilst most of the disabled characters show a great deal of capacity for self-determination and resistance to the oppressive and evil forces surrounding them, invariably non-disabled aggressors, it is often the disabled characters who become the victims of cruelty and violence. There is certainly a strong case to show the barbaric treatment of disabled people given the history of freak shows, especially as few characters escape the violence or supernatural forces which are a hallmark of whole show. Stories such as the capture, killing and subsequent exhibition of Ma Petite at the Museum of Morbid Curiosities, are often portrayed as a necessary form of magical realism which fits with the show's broader commentary on many aspects of society, historical and contemporary e.g., cults and forms of neoliberal governance in Series 7. This is offset well with the magical realism within the rebellion of the 'freaks 'in the penultimate episode. At this point, they attack Stanley, who has come to the community to recruit 'freaks' to the Museum of Morbid Curiosities and make him look like Meep - a homage to the finale of *Freaks*, where the freaks reshape their adversary Cleopatra into a human duck.

Despite their casting outside the core groups of the 'main cast', it is also true to say that the disabled characters (played by both disabled and non-disabled actors) were endowed with many personality traits, and significant back stories, enabling them to thwart what the audience comes to expect of supporting disabled actors; they are certainly not treated as ciphers for the journeys of the non-disabled leads (Darke, 1998; Shakespeare, 1997, 23). Most characters tend to be multi-dimensional in their own right, and the presence of multiple disabled actors, with varying impairments, and diverse personality traits added to this.

Paul's character, for example, shows him as an ambitious person (having tried to seek

Hollywood fame through his move to the US), who is unashamedly vain, e.g.; "I have the face of a pretty lad. A handsome face. Could you imagine this mug on a normal body? I could have ruled the world" (also quoted in Oswell, 2014). His beauty and sexual status also play out in his appeal as a lover, (particularly to Elsa Mars), within orgies, and eventually in his love for Penny, initially a hospital volunteer who has inherited a disablist attitude from her father, who he eventually turns into a freak as punishment for her relationship with Paul. But Paul has many other significant traits: he is also angry at his 'monster' status, as his comments on his pretty face imply, but shows a great deal of compassion towards Penny's eventual 'disfigurement', blaming himself. He is also one of the leading protagonists of the community of freaks, opposing the mistreatment inflicted by the new owner Dandy Mott, actions which lead eventually to his death. Similarly, Legless Suzi's character, while more peripheral than Paul, shows variation across the FS season; although she is eventually killed with her fellow freaks, she is an important member of the disabled community, demonstrating along the way a significant capacity for violence. The only characters played by disabled actors who are cast in roles which are close to stereotypes of their impairments, are Woolf's roles as Meep (as discussed earlier), and Jyoti Amge's role as Ma Petite (she is the smallest woman in the world, according to Guinness World Records, 2021), notwithstanding a similar stereotype in the character of Pepper (see Asylum section). Ma Petite's child-like, innocent traits and eventual kidnapping and murder are quite typical of the stereotyping of people with dwarfism (Wilde, 2018), especially the infantilization which they are made to endure in their everyday lives (Shakespeare, 2010).

These complex personality traits lead us away from fixity to more dynamic, open-ended expectations of what disabled people are or what they might be, what they do or may do. A key component within this is their participation in 'negative' portrayals; as such they

have an equal stake in the 'radical negativity' of the whole show. Geller and Banker demonstrate the radical potential of this negativity, where negative states of being (including violence, sex, extreme 'carnal aesthetics', witches, asylum inmates, and monsters) are seen as central for the production of meaning and being. Indeed the 'freaks' are one of the many aspects of the whole show which carry the radical negativity 'opposed to every form of social viability' as theorized by Geller and Banker (2017, 43). As can be seen, in most of the examples above, all of the disabled actors, and indeed the disabled characters, are placed in storylines which demonstrate 'negative' dimensions of personality, and some of the destructive forces which ruin their lives. Whilst such portrayals may have been met with disapproval from disability scholars, and the disabled people's community, over the last few decades (e.g., Barnes, 1992), especially as common victims of violence, there is no doubting that these social dynamics exist and are a part of our history, and of contemporary life. Indeed, some authors have written on the virtues of similar portrayals as forms of 'radical negativity. Halberstam (2011) has written that 'queer negativity' and 'radical passivity' position the work of artists such as Yoko Ono and Marina Abrahamovic – emphasizing masochism, submission, fragmentation, and sacrifice[xiii], as statements of radical passivity, 'of pure opposition that does not rely on the liberal gesture of defiance but access another lexicon of power and speaks another language of refusal' (139). He goes on to say that art such as this

> binds the perpetrator to the criminal, the torturer to his victim, the corporate raider to the site of pillaging; collage shows the open mouth, the figure in distress, the scream and its cause; it glues effect to cause and queers the relations between the two (144),

and suggests work such as Ono's 'inhabits a form of unacting, unbeing, unbecoming' (145).

This queering of subjectivities, being, and normativity, and the power of radical negativity also lies at the center of Geller and Banker's (2017) analysis of AHS, as a show with radical antisocial queerness at its core. They also suggest that its disruptive capacities are driven by the creation of 'temporal drag'. They argue that the show contrasts sharply with the usual serial televisual structures, by the 'narrative momentums' (29) offered by temporal drag. Put as simply as possible, combined with the role of the death drive, as a key part of the radical negativity of the show, the use of temporal drag rejects historical verisimilitude, and a linear 'chain of events' (40), even refusing death as the end of life (several characters come back to life within and across the series[xiv]). Together these are theorized to pose a challenge to the real world 'politics [ ] propped on the fantasy of the (reproductive) future' (36).

It is even true to say that disabled characters are included in this temporal drag *within FS*, as they exist in the afterlife, where Penny and Paul are now married and all the freaks perform as before. However, this is a very limited form of inclusion. Unlike many of the other characters, and actors, the temporal drag afforded to the freaks is contained within the bounds of *FS.* We do not meet them in other seasons. Given the radical excess and key mechanisms of radical storytelling this is a significant form of inequality, which I will briefly return to in the final sections.

Asylum

Despite the association of S4 with disability, impairment and disability were present, if less explicit, throughout most seasons, most notably in season 2, *Asylum*, set in Briarcliff Manor in the 1960s. Themes of madness and oppressive power relations between inmates and their caretakers are writ large within this series. Of particular note are the links made between institutionalization, mental illness, disabled people, cruelty, and religion, with many of the evil acts committed by nuns and clergy, especially Monsignor Timothy Howard, Sister Jude

(Jessica Lange), and Sister Mary Eunice (Lily Rabe, possessed by The Devil in the course of the story). There is also a potent theme established between the disablement of those who have labels of madness imposed upon them by medical professionals, and their ultimate demise. This is embodied in the character of Oliver Threadson, at first portrayed as a benign and kind- hearted psychiatrist, who sets out to rescue Lana Winter from her wrongful confinement, before the show exposes him as the serial killer 'Bloody Face'. Indeed, *Asylum* covers many of the bases of disablist oppression. It is eventually revealed that Dr Arthur Arden, the asylum's Administrator, was former Nazi doctor and scientist Hans Grüper, who is using the inmates to continue his experimentation; this commonly involved severe mutilations to, and mutations of, the inmates' bodies. As such, the disciplinary regimes or ideologies of religion, medicine, and politics can all be seen to contribute to the horrors of the asylum and the oppression of those locked within it.

Not only does present set clear themes of disablement, focused on the evil power relations of those who wield it, it also introduces us to more characters we will meet in later series, including Lana Winters, played by Sarah Paulson. Another of these was Pepper, an inmate of the Asylum. Pepper was played by a non-disabled actor, Naomi Grossman. Born with microcephaly, her back story is that her family abandoned her to an orphanage and Elsa Mars (as played by Jessica Lange) rescued/ recruited her for her Cabinet of Curiosities, i.e., the freak show. Like many others in the asylum, she was put in the asylum against her will after being framed for a crime she didn't commit; indeed, she played a comparatively innocent, playful, friendly, yet timid person in both series (see the AHS wiki for examples), closely emulating the personalities of those with similar conditions in *Freaks*[xv]. One might argue that Pepper's character is a little more retrogressive than her predecessor 'pinheads' in *Freaks*. In both cases, the show is owned by a woman who shows some degree of

benevolence towards those she recruits. Elsa Mars employs Pepper as her personal assistant, a choice which is akin to the expectations placed on those in by Madame Tetralini in *Freaks*. However, as Hawkins (1997, 268) has argued, the depiction of the original 'pinheads' emphasized their childlike traits – often playing, singing, dancing, and giggling – and show how they look to Tetralini as a protector/mother figure, but that the narrative works to tell the audience that 'physical difference is an accident of birth' (ibid), and that we should all be treated as 'God's children'. Although Pepper's trajectory through the freak show often emphasizes her humanity, and her life beyond the show (with her cruel family and then in the asylum), demonstrates how society metes out barbaric treatment to many or those deemed different, the moral message to the audience is less direct.

Although *Asylum* was the second season, Pepper's life in the freak show (S4) came first, quite typical of the time-hopping of the anthology. Unlike Brewer's character, or that of most of the other 'freaks, Pepper's personality is rather stereotypical, resembling many other figures with intellectual impairments across the contemporary mediascape (see Hawkins, 1997, and Mathews, 2018, for example). Indeed, it is impossible to separate the seasons, one from another, by design, as they all have linkages which play out in other seasons, e.g., Gruper's responsibility for the amputation of Elsa Mars' (Jessica Lange) legs in S4, set a decade earlier than her roles as Sister Jude in *Asylum* (S2).

Such flipping back and forth between time periods is a key feature of the show. Similarly, the continued/recurring appearances of some characters across seasons, alongside the changing use of an ensemble cast, usually in a time-defying manner (e.g., Grossman's Pepper back story emerging in S4 after her first appearance in S2), adds to this drag. Hence some non-disabled actors play different characters in various series, while some reprise original roles, with most doing both. But, as suggested, the ongoing inclusion of disabled

actors was less in evidence, with the exception of Brewer, in five of the eight series, and the more minor roles of Woolf (in S1 and S4). The only other forms of temporal drag afforded to the disabled actors' characters were those contained *within FS*, the 'family together'[xvi] featured in the after-life after they were killed by Dandy Mott. Underlining the temporal drag and radical negativity of the whole show Ethel asks the (afterlife's) freak show audience, and, by implication, us, whether stars shine more brightly in life or death, presenting the newly resurrected Elsa Mars as proof of the latter.

As radical as these strategies have proved to be (Gellner and Banker, 2014), paradoxically, this issue of shining stars is part of the problem of the show – the non-disabled actors (or less visibly disabled) are allowed far more opportunities to sparkle brightly throughout all series, perhaps dimming the gleaming talents of the disabled actors. Indeed, Randle and Hardy (2017) have provided evidence that there is an industry perception that disabled actors are always at 'entry level' effectively preventing their ascension to the heights of stardom.

Further, the show has a greater linearity than some of the other series (e.g., *Murder House*, and *Coven*) with only Pepper appearing as the same character in an earlier series/later time period. Although *FS* is clearly based in a period which marked the end of the original freak shows, whilst indicating that the new age of television and Hollywood will continue the legacy of en-freakment, the end of the freak shows can also be read as implying moves towards a post-disablist society, in much the same ways that *Coven* suggests a post-racial one. King, for example, has argued that while AHS has provided an 'uncharacteristic visibility' to women in the genre, as both 'monsters and victims' (557), the narratives in *Coven* serve to both analyse and criticize racial oppression, 'reversing some racists tropes' and presenting racism as 'truly abject', they also reinforce some sexist imagery, and support

the 'cultural amnesia' of a 'post-racial utopia' (571); she theorizes that this is brought about by the portrayal of the monstrousness of white racism, embodied in the figure of LaLaurie (Kathy Bates). The same seems to be true of aspects of *FS*, with several leading figures, such as Stanley and Dandy Mott marked as non-disabled, treating disabled characters as far less than human in their quest to use them for their own sadistic ends.

So far, I have argued that disabled actors have been offered several opportunities to forge new understandings of disability, and that this is also true of the reformulation of racial and gender relationships within this show. But these portrayals of disability are not in conditions of disabled people's own making, despite some negotiations (Oswell, 2014). That is, disabled people are rarely in the position of writing or directing the stories (see Wilde, 2018). But I have also suggested that their narrative inclusion is partial and unequal. So, how radical is AHS in its re-articulation of disabled identity?

'Ego loves identity - Drag mocks identity - Ego hates drag' (Paul, 2013)

AHS has been seen to offer much potential in 'queering' representations on several axes, especially sexuality and gender, and in so doing it puts many aspects of contemporary identity in doubt. Geller and Banker (2017) have argued that one of the most significant ways in which the show confounds our expectations of social identities is through its use of 'temporal drag' and its rejection of 'historical verisimilitude'. They argued that the show queers the 'normativities of reproductive futurism', which perhaps questions ideas of normality across the board. The interconnectedness of the stories between series and the time-hopping, plus the additional of supernatural, science fiction and occult features is seen to destabilize the 'formal structures on which reality is propped' (37), queering linear narratives and creating 'new expectations of temporality and death' with characters often returning to life within and across series. This is especially true of depictions of women, with female stars

playing significant central and recurring roles, serving to challenge or trouble the conventional positioning of women within the horror genre, e.g., through a re-imagining of the monstrous feminine, though it has been argued that they repeat some familiar tropes and perpetuate the cultural amnesia of a 'post-racial society' (King, 2017).

I have argued that these features of temporal drag are less true of *FS*; like other seasons it has a narrative arc, but it also has a greater sense of closure, despite minor linkages to some of the characters played by non-disabled actors, e.g., Elsa Mars. The vast scope of the show, and its creative attempts to queer time and audience expectations whilst subverting oppressive imagery seem to get in the way of its capacity to hit its representational targets, especially in terms of race and disability. Although we get a glimpse of its potential to disruptive dominant ideologies and to contest utopian visions of the future they are bound up with, e.g. eugenic betterment, the rethinking of disabled people's subjectivities is less apparent beyond the limits of *FS*. Certainly, S4 allows just as much opportunity for the disabled characters and the audience to find 'senseless enjoyment' in the 'radical negativity' of 'meaningless sex' and 'irrational violence' (Geller and Banker, 2017, 43) which characterize expectations of the whole show, offering a diversity of disabled roles which might otherwise be refused in the name of 'positive imagery'. This seems to be a step forward. But it is significant that the temporal drag is not afforded to them. As Murphy himself has said, 'This season, once you die, you're dead' (Stack, 2014, para 24).

Thus, temporal drag has been theorized as the primary queering mechanism of the whole show but denied to almost all the disabled actors. The characters played by Jamie Brewer are notable exceptions, although she never returns as her *FS* character Marjorie (a ventriloquist's dummy). Hence disabled people are still located just outside the boundaries of 'queer time' in the Horror Story' universe, unable to fully harness 'the powers of horror' to

'refute the norms of straight television'. Further, the fact that non-disabled actors cast in leading disabled roles (e.g., Lange, Paulson and Peters) are major players in the ensemble cast serves to exacerbate these considerable narrative inequalities. In terms of representational and narrative equality, it seems fair to say that (a diversity of) disabled actors and stories were integrated well, but that they are not yet included. This suggests that the radical status of AHS, and the progressive affordances of temporal drag continue to privilege whiteness and non-disabled identities.

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Footnotes

[i] See Mipuri (2014) and Nussbaum (2014) for example, and their anticipation of a reformulation of disabled identities.

[ii] As I argued in 2018, the inclusion and exclusion of disabled actors is usually woven into the 'unconscious bias' against disabled people as a commercial risk, and assumptions about the safety of casting people with star status.

[iii] This idea of 'one of us' is pivotal to the film *Freaks*, with 'We accept her, we accept her, one of us', chanted by all the disabled characters in a key scene, a wedding banquet; this scene is cited frequently in popular culture, references in shows such as *The Simpsons,* and *South Park*, and in popular film and music (the Ramones 'Pinhead'), and as an influence on Christine and the Queens.

[iv] Here I am following the work of scholars such as Sedgwick (2003), Halberstam (2011), and Žižek (1993), in (briefly) conceptualizing radical negativity as ways in which cultural representations can 'valorise negative states of being as key conditions both for the production of meaning and being and as organizing principles of identity' (Goldsmiths, 2014, para 4).

[v] I have only discussed actors where there a public record of their impairment; it is possible that other actors categorized as/assumed to be non-disabled may have a disabled identity. Jessica Lange, for example, has spoken publicly about her depression (McKenna, 1995).

[vi] I have used past tense as he died in 2015.

[vii] See footnote ii.

[viii] This would include the wide range of people with Down Syndrome cast in *No Offence* (2015-18), Zachary Robin Gottsagen playing a starring role as Zak in *Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019), Steven Brandon playing the central protagonist, Luke, in *My Feral Heart* (2016), and the casting of Connor Long (Tommy)
Bridget Brown (April) as a married couple in Wiener Dog.

[ix] Whilst I have reservations about using these terms, there are currently none which are universally accepted as best terminology.

[x] Mat Fraser's character Paul, billed as 'the illustrated seal' for example, is an updated version of Stanley "Sealo" Berent. See Lewis (2020) for further discussion of this and other characters, and Ogidi at the BFI (20o3-14): http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/932307/index.html

[xi] The character Paul as the illustrated seal, appears to have been a compromised rearticulation of the writer's

original character - a lizard man, renegotiated by Fraser, as he has pointed out (Oswell, 2019, para 9); probably bringing knowledge which as a greater verisimilitude to real freak shows, whilst putting Fraser's acting talents in clearer view.

[xii] Several of these can be found, with little difference amongst them, i.e. the American Horror Story Wiki https://americanhorrorstory.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Freak_Show_(story); American Horror Story on IMDB (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1844624/?ref_=ttep_ep_tt), and also on Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Horror_Story:_Freak_Show.

[xiii] Halberstam discusses Yoko Ono's 'Cut piece' in particular. See: https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964/

[xiv] This is a pattern set right at the start in S1 with the 'entropic Gothic' of Murder House, featuring a 'claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space and repetition in time' (Keetley, 2013, 89)

[xv] This includes Schlitzie Surtees; see Alverman (2019) for example, retrieved 2nd August, 2021 from https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/79587-nobody-s-fool-the-story-behind-zippy-the-pinhead.html

[xvi] This was a phrase used by Ethel Darling - the 'bearded woman' when she welcomes Elsa Mars to the afterlife – this can be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhOKKeEvIPU (Retrieved 4th August, 2021).