

**Multimedia****Review: *Code of the Freaks* (2020)**

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**Abstract**

The documentary film *Code of the Freaks* explores representations of disability in American film. Designed to be enjoyed by academic and non-academic communities alike, the ultimate objective of the film is “to capture the conversations that we and those within our communities were so desperate to have, hoping that these conversations could also have a wider audience and reach” (Chasnoff et al., n.d.). This brief review outlines some of the key arguments of the film and connects the work to research happening in the field of media and disability studies.

*Keywords:* film studies, disability studies, narrative prosthesis

An important dichotomy lies at the heart of the documentary *Code of the Freaks* (Chasnoff et al., 2020): the ways we mediate disability and the actual lived experiences of disabled people. Representation of disability in film appears ensnared in Deleuzian rhizomatic simulacra (1994), doomed to perpetually repeat, expand and naturalize several key tropes or “codes” of disability despite the apparent disconnection from lived experience. Written by Chicago-area academics and artists Susan Nussbaum, Alyson Patsavas and Carrie Sandahl and directed by Salome Chasnoff, *Code of the Freaks* picks up the mantle from works like Norden’s *Cinema of Isolation* (1994) or Chivers’ *The Problem Body* (2010), seeking to identify and chronicle the (mis)representation of disability in over a century of American film, with Nussbaum et al. explaining,

With few exceptions, disability still functions as a storytelling device, an inspirational trope, and a vehicle for a non-disabled character development. These images, in turn, continue to perpetuate disability oppression in their erasure of the full lives disabled people live and their propagation of harmful stereotypes that disabled lives are less valuable and/or less worthy of living. (Chasnoff et al., n.d.)

The prostheticizing of disability for narrative benefit, popularly explored by Mitchell & Snyder (2001), is unpacked throughout this feature-length documentary in a series of interviews with academics, activists and artists and accompanied by clips and exemplars from recent and historic film. Designed to be enjoyed by academic and non-academic communities alike, the ultimate objective of the film is “to capture the conversations that we and those within our communities were so desperate to have, hoping that these conversations could also have a wider audience and reach” (Chasnoff et al., n.d.).

Straddling the delicate balance between inquiry and critique, *Code of the Freaks* begins with a radical proposition: perhaps the film *Freaks* (Browning, 1932) is one of the truest representations of disability in film. Despite critiques of a film that leverages disability to induce fear or anxiety in nondisabled audiences, *Code of the Freaks* notes that *Freaks* features one of the biggest casts of disabled actors and that within the “freak” community we see a type of solidarity and internal support networks that exemplify the best of the modern disability community. In fact, the film argues, *Freaks* does well when compared to the current incarnation of representations of disability in popular culture. *Code of the Freaks* focuses the rest of the film on identifying, exploring and critiquing typical tropes found in Hollywood films “about” disability. To begin, the film explores the modern obsession with inspirational stories about disability, in which cure or superpower is deployed to sanitize or “fix” disability to the joy of nondisabled audiences. When disabled characters are not uplifting or teaching nondisabled characters valuable lessons, they are instead presented as monsters or villains, not unlike the findings of Paul K. Longmore’s work on facial deformity as symbolic of villainous intent (2003, p. 133) or Angela Smith’s exploration of monsters in *Hideous Progeny* (2012). While hero and villain stereotypes of disability in film have been amply explored in the academy, the film also considers the ways disabled characters are (de)sexualized, presented as either incapable of sexual performance or elevated to fetishized object of exotic vulnerability in the case of d/Deaf women (Wilson, 2013). The film also notes, quite uniquely, that when disabled characters are sexualized it is usually with nondisabled characters. Finally, the film considers the pitfalls of using nondisabled actors to “play” disability and the ways the demand to be “cured” is satisfied when the nondisabled actor, now restored and out of character, walk to the podium to accept an Oscar.

The truth strength of *Code of the Freaks* is its ability to translate years of academic

theory and activist discussion into a compelling and easy to follow documentary. Well researched with excellent exemplars, the film manages to condense a ton of ideas into a tight, digestible package that makes good on answering the documentary's central thesis. This is perhaps no surprise, given the years of experience in the production team along with the wonderful cast of interviewees. Of note is the exceptional editing, which helps make the film feel more like dynamic conversation than droning lecture. The film also opts to spend ample time "showing" rather than just telling, splicing together commentary with clips from over a century of film to great result.

Although there are few criticisms to be made of the film, there were two things that have stuck with me after watching the documentary several times. One critique of the film is the limited time spent delving deeper into the political economy of Hollywood films. The film does mention some of the business factors driving representation, gesturing to some of the systemic explanations as to why we represent disability the way we typically do, but there was some fertile ground here that was unfortunately not fully cultivated. Another limitation of the film is the almost exclusive focus on representations of disability from the United States, both in interviewee and exemplar used. This heavy focus on American thinkers and texts leaves the film as exploration of (mostly) *American* discourses of disability that may not feel as grounded for viewers in other regions. Less focus on American examples could have added nuance to the existing investigation, especially in a streaming era that has brought significant access to foreign content that may be starting to "flip the script" on American disability hegemony.

Ultimately, *Code of the Freaks* offers a compelling and engaging overview of representations of disability in film. The documentary expertly explains the common mistakes made in films about disability and suggests succinctly why we must tell better

stories about disability. As educational as it is entertaining, this film is great for both novice and advanced educational settings, being just as comfortable in a film production classroom as in a disability studies graduate seminar.

The film is available for educational and personal use from Kino Lorber.

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