

## Forum Articles

The Legacy of 19th Century Popular Freak Show Discourse in the 21st Century *X-Men* Films

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**Abstract:** This essay seeks to tease out the narrative similarities found in nineteenth-century freak show literature and in the *X-Men* films of the twenty-first century. Both of these forms of popular entertainment emphasize the precarious position of people with extraordinary bodies in their contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** freak, *X-Men*, disability

### Introduction

In terms of the narrative similarities between the nineteenth-century freak show and the *X-Men* films, there are two key components that this paper will explore. There exists a striking similarity in how certain freak show performers and mutated characters in the *X-Men* speak about their condition. Additionally, there is a degree of resonance between how ‘normal’ or non-normative bodies speak of the freak, the mutant, or the “other”. This paper addresses the narrative relationship to demonstrate the legacy of popular nineteenth-century freak show discourse.

During the winter season of 1898-1899, the popular Barnum and Bailey Circus, dubbed the “greatest show on earth,” exhibited in London at the Olympia theatre. The show was a huge success and was regularly featured in numerous popular periodicals. In the middle of this season, the freak show performers, who made up a large portion of the circus, held a protest against their designation as “Freaks of Nature”, and instead adopted the title of “Prodigy.” They explained: “In the opinion of many some of us are really the development of a higher type, and are superior persons, inasmuch as some of us are gifted with extraordinary attributes not apparent in ordinary beings” (Man about town, 1899, p. 41). The performers acknowledged that they had extraordinary attributes, but sought wider recognition of their superior traits. Freak show performers represented a broad spectrum of physical otherness, from sword-swallowers and tattooed women to bearded ladies, elastic-skinned men and armless wonders, and many variations of uncommon corporeality in between. While the media coverage of this protest and the exhibition itself continued to vary the terms used to reference the performers, the notion of their ‘ordinary’ and ‘normal’ attributes, received regular attention. Indeed, the normalizing of freak show performers through their everyday actions, alongside an emphasis on their extraordinary attributes, was an important convention in freak show discourse that has been brought forward to popular narratives of disability and otherness in the twenty-first century. In this paper, I will consider how the legacy of these freak show narratives resonate in the twenty-first century through the unlikely format of the superhero films based on the *X-Men* comic book series.

Simply put, the *X-Men* movies (*X-Men*, *X2: X-Men United*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, *X-Men: First Class*) feature a world where humans and Mutants struggle to live together peacefully. However, the relationship between these two spheres of the

population is often strained and far more complex, with the attempts for a peaceful coexistence ranging from cooperation to genocide. Indeed, the second film in the trilogy, *X2*, begins with a voiceover by the character of Charles Xavier remarking that “sharing the world has never been humanity’s defining attribute” (Shuler Donner, Winter & Singer, 2003). The Mutants are essentially human beings with a genetic makeup that has evolved and mutated to produce a being with exceptional abilities. These extraordinary attributes range in their visibility and strength. From the shapeshifter, Mystique, whose natural body is blue and scaly, to the telepath, Charles Xavier, who has no visible trace of his ability written on his body. Due to their extraordinary traits, the mutants are exploited, ostracized, pitied, feared, and glorified. While they have extraordinary attributes, these features often impair the Mutants and make it difficult for them to participate in ‘normal’ society. The Mutants themselves are divided in their approach to this treatment. While those who side with Magneto seek revenge on a society that struggles to accept the Mutants, the other Mutants, the X-Men, who side with Professor Xavier, take measures to be accepted in ‘normal’ society and exploit their extraordinary attributes only for good. Despite being fiction, these fantastical bodies employ cultural narratives and offer, as Aaron Taylor has noted, “A site of departure for typical ways of thinking about and categorizing the body” (Taylor, 2007, p. 347). Narratives of otherness due to physical difference are rife within these films, and this paper aims to link these narratives to their historical roots in nineteenth-century freak show discourse.

Both the nineteenth-century freak show and the *X-Men* film series are forms of popular entertainment accessed by wide-ranging audiences in their contemporary periods. Freak show histories have demonstrated how the variety of exhibition and performance venues (including travelling fairs, circuses, and shop-fronts) used by the showmen, as well as the multiplicity of print representations (such as newspapers, children’s magazines, and trade journals) allowed broad and diverse audiences to engage with and consume freakish bodies throughout the nineteenth century (Durbach, 2010; F. Y. Pettit, 2012; Toulmin, 2006). Similarly, the *X-Men* also have a strong print and visual culture presence, originating as a comic book series from Marvel in the 1960s and later developing into films in the 2000s. Film scholars have noted the success of *X-Men* films in terms of their “blockbuster” status, and, indeed, the overwhelming influence of the comic book genre in the filmed entertainment industry (McAllister, Gordon, & Jancovich, 2006; Weltzien, 2005, p. 230). Due to the extent of their reach, both the freak show and *X-Men* have brought extraordinary bodies to the fore of their contemporary popular culture.

Central to the popular engagement with the freak show and the *X-Men* is the perceived otherness of the bodies on display. These two forms of popular entertainment showcase extraordinary beings that represent a minority population separate from the general populace. As such, they are seen as the exception, the opposite to “normal”. It is through the variations of this narrative in the shows and the films that brings this analysis into the realm of disability studies. As Gary Albrecht, Katerine Seelman and Michael Bury have explained, “The history of disability studies in the Western world reveals that from early times, disability has raised questions of normality, theories of difference, the perceived threat of difference to the established order, and institutions and mechanisms of social control” (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001, p. 5). From the fraught relationship between the *X-Men* and their society to the freak show’s challenges to perceptions of normality, this analysis will demonstrate the value of disability studies in understanding the legacy of popular culture narratives from the nineteenth-

century in the twenty-first century.

## Background

There have been several studies on the legacy of the Victorian freak show in twentieth- and twenty-first century disability studies. These works have demonstrated how the notion of “otherness” created within the shows has continued to attach itself to cultural representations of disabled bodies through time.

Integral to the question of difference or deviance is the notion of “normal.” A key debate within disability studies and studies on the freak show centers on ideas of social inclusion and otherness. In her analysis of the continuation of freak show performances in the twenty-first century, Elizabeth Stephens notes that “dominant cultural concepts of the body as a natural and coherent entity emerge in and through the exhibition of bodies identified as chaotic, unstable, and exceptional” (Stephens, 2005). This same point on the creation of normality simply through comparison is regularly addressed by Disability Studies scholars. Indeed, as shown in David Turner and Kevin Stagg’s *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity*, there is a very diverse history of who has been considered disabled and deformed through time and how those people were (un)able to engage in their contemporary societies. Turner explains “What connects these disparate histories and experiences is a shared element of stigma and separation from what dominant cultural and medical discourses define as ‘natural’ or ‘normal,’ leading to devaluation and socially imposed restriction” (Turner, 2006, p. 4). In the nineteenth-century, the freak body was used by both medicine and popular culture as a site to define and circulate notions of normality.

In his seminal study of the history of freak shows, Robert Bogdan highlighted that freak was a “social construction” rather than an inherent attribute of the performers (Bogdan, 1988, p. xi, 1996). This means that freakishness was woven into representations and exhibitions of the freak show performers, rather than an instant assumption made upon viewing a person with a disability or deformity. One of the most pervasive examples of this is the attempts to make the ordinary and everyday actions of the performers seem extraordinary due to their appearance. For instance, an 1889 interview with the freaks performing in the Barnum and Bailey circus explains, “that but for one particular trick which Dame Nature has played each one of them, these sports of Fortune are just men and women, with the feelings and habits, the likes and dislikes, the occupations and amusements of the rest of the world, with, of course, certain inevitable limitations” (Goddard, 1898, p. 493). By highlighting the everyday aspects of the performers’ lives and comparing them to the “rest of the world”, this article makes their “normal” attributes seem extraordinary and freakish. Rather than normalizing the performers through this acknowledgement of their similarities to the readers, it makes it seem incredible that the freaks are in fact “just men and women.” This notion of otherness, despite the similarities, is a key narrative that has continued in popular culture discourse on disability.

Further, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, has described “freakery” as “a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness [...] constituting the freak as an icon of generalized embodied deviance” (Garland Thomson, 1996, p. 10). She situates the freak show as a cultural site for reinforcing normalcy. She explains, “the freak’s bizarre embodiment could assuage viewers’ uneasiness either by functioning as a touchstone of anxious identification or as an assurance of

their regularized normalcy” (Garland Thomson, 1996, p. 11). This was brought out in the freak show not only through the physical appearance of the freak performers, but also largely through the narratives cultivated and sold in the shows. Garland Thomson argues that the symbolism of deviant bodies has continued through time, taking on new narratives to serve the contemporary notions of normalcy.

Traces of nineteenth-century freak show narratives are numerous in the *X-Men* films and are woven into the storylines and dialogue. These range from more obvious references, such as the mutant characters being called freaks, or performing as novelty acts in circus sideshows, to more nuanced references which will be teased out here. Rather than provide an in-depth analysis of each film’s engagement with disability narrative, I hope to introduce some of the key themes which exhibit the legacy of freak show narrative. Primarily, these are brought out in the films through notions of evolution, mutation, and social exclusion, all of which are supported and expounded by the concepts of deviance and normalcy.

### Evolution

Underscoring the creation of Mutants in the films is the theory of evolution. Throughout the first three films, evolutionary theory is regularly referenced. For instance, one of the opening scenes in the second film, *X2*, shows the students from Xavier’s school having a lesson on the evolution of man in the Neanderthal exhibit of a museum. Also, the first film begins and second film ends with the same speech on the importance of evolution to human survival: “Mutation. It is the key to our evolution. It has enabled us to evolve from a single-celled organism into the dominant species on the planet. This process is slow, normally taking thousands and thousands of years, but every few hundred millennia evolution leaps forward” (Shuler Donner, Winter & Singer, 2000, 2003). Further, in *X-Men: First Class*, we also learn that Professor Charles Xavier achieved his doctoral degree for his expertise in gene mutations, based on the theory of evolution. This conceptualization of evolution permeates the storylines of the *X-Men* films as a means to explain the origins of the Mutants’ abilities. Rather than ever giving a comprehensive explanation, the films assume the audience’s familiarity with evolutionary theory. In a similar manner to the Victorian showman’s manipulation of popular understandings of evolution as a means of selling his freak performers to curious audiences, the *X-Men* films also rely on viewers’ knowledge of evolution to understand the formation of mutants.

In the nineteenth-century freak show, evolution was regularly traded on as a freak narrative. Indeed, some acts were even touted as the missing link between man and ape. However, as the freak protest demonstrates, many freak show performers did not see themselves as lower down on the evolutionary scale, even though they had performed this role in the shows. Instead, they were of a “higher type” and “superior persons” (“Man about town,” 1899, p. 41). In a similar vein, many of the Mutants consider themselves to be of a separate and superior species from Humans. The character of Magneto employs this narrative throughout the films and goes to great lengths to remind Humans of their frailty next to the extraordinary attributes of Mutants. During the opening scenes of the first *X-Men* film, viewers are introduced to Magneto’s belief in Mutant superiority:

Charles Xavier: Mankind is evolving.

Magneto: Yes, into us[...].

Magneto: We are the future Charles, not them [Humans]. They no longer matter (Shuler Donner, Winter & Singer, 2000).

Indeed, throughout the films, the characters who wish to hurt humans, and are therefore depicted as the villains, often frame their justifications for their actions on the narrative of mutant superiority and human simplicity. Magneto reassures one of his recruits in *X2* by stating: “You are a god among insects. Don’t let anyone tell you different” (Shuler Donner, Winter & Singer, 2003). While many of the mutant characters are shown to struggle to adapt to their society, being a Mutant is often portrayed as something to be proud of, at least from within the Mutant community.

While the nineteenth-century protestors did not cite evolutionary theory as the root of their superiority, the employment of the same narrative on extraordinary superiority in the *X-Men* films provides an interesting comparison. Marlene Tromp and Karyn Valerius have described the necessity of interpreting “freakishness” within the performer’s social context and “particular cultural moment” (Tromp & Valerius, 2008, p. 4). With this in mind we can understand why the nineteenth-century freaks would not use evolutionary theory to explain their superiority. In that period, evolution was more regularly used to justify the differences between races, frequently making the non-white races inferior and more closely related to ape than man. By contrast, the *X-Men* films use contemporary understandings of evolution to explain the existence of a higher, superior type of human. In the films, Mutants are the result of evolution leaping forward, whereas in the heyday of the freak show, freak performers were represented by showmen as proof that “normal” humans had evolved. However, the protest against the name of freak and the performers’ justification for this, are more closely aligned with the Mutant narrative in the *X-Men* films. The narrative supporting the protest pre-empts the twentieth-century move towards more empowering discourse surrounding difference.

### Human or Animal

A more direct link between the nineteenth-century use of evolutionary narrative in freak shows and the *X-Men* films can be seen in Logan’s animalistic traits and the language surrounding this in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. On top of his body’s regenerative ability, Logan is also able to grow claws in between his fingers, has an acute sense of smell, as well as extraordinary climbing abilities. The first part of the film demonstrates that Logan regularly used his abilities and his short temper to kill. His Mutant name, Wolverine, furthers his animalism. Throughout this film his bestial qualities are referenced in recognition of his proximity to the animal kingdom. For instance, the military scientist, Striker, who uses Mutants for experimentation in the creation of an ultimate weapon, convinces Logan to use his animalistic skills to kill his own brother, Viktor. He says, “I can’t take Viktor down myself, Logan. To kill him you’ll have to embrace the other side. Become the animal” (Shuler Donner, et al. & Hood, 2009). In another scene, Logan’s girlfriend attempts to calm his animalistic instincts, which become particularly aggressive when he is angry, by reminding him, “You’re not an animal, Logan. You have a gift” (Shuler Donner, et al. & Hood, 2009).

Logan's animalism is reminiscent of the narratives in the freak show surrounding both "missing link" acts and "wild boy" exhibits. Both of these types of acts merged human and animal characteristics to produce a freakish creature. In 1894, *Illustrated Chips* mentioned two such creatures in a series on "Freaks of Nature." The first was the "Man-Monkey" from Africa, which by the description seems to have been a primate rather than a human ("Freaks of Nature IV," 1894, p. 6). The second was a child called "Peter, the Wild Boy," "A creature who was half a boy and half an animal. Half a monkey would perhaps be a better term to apply to him" ("Freaks of Nature VII," 1894, p. 3). Both are described as being neither completely human, nor completely animal. However, it is likely that the Man-Monkey was actually a monkey and that Peter was a human. Due to the contemporary debates and popular understandings of evolution, freak showmen were able to trade on the similarities between man and animal exhibited through primates and get audiences to question animalistic features in humans.

### Mutant Experimentation

In their overview of Disability Studies, Albrecht, Seelman, and Bury note that "disability is both a private and public experience" which may be "a shameful condition to be denied or hidden" for some, but also "a source of pride and empowerment – a symbol of enriched self-identity and self-worth" for others (Albrecht et al., 2001, p. 1). It is this notion of pride and enriched self-worth that we see in the freak protesters and in the Mutants. However, as David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have demonstrated in their review of Humanities studies of disability, negative imagery is pervasive in literary and filmic representations. Quoting Paul Longmore's work on television and film representations, they note that oftentimes, "'Disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their 'fate'; disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them'" (Longmore qtd. in Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 197). Throughout the films, the character of Magneto and his dislike for non-mutants falls in line with Longmore's analysis. At the same time that Magneto encourages the Mutant's sense of self-worth, he also propagates a strong hatred for the 'normal' humans. So, both of these conceptions of disability, empowered pride and embittered resentment, resonant in the *X-Men* films through the Mutants.

Magneto's hatred towards non-Mutants stems from his own horrific experiences and from the constant reinforcement that Mutants are "other." At the beginning of the first film and elaborated in *X-Men: First Class*, we learn that as a child Magneto lost his family in a German concentration camp and he was subjected to cruel experimentation. The use of Mutants for scientific study and experimentation is also a powerful theme in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. In *Wolverine*, Logan and many other Mutants are taken to an island run by the US military and are used for experimentation. These storylines are entwined not only with Eugenics and the World War II atrocities enacted on 'othered' bodies, but also with narratives from the nineteenth-century medical relationship with freaks. Since the origin and complexities of many of the conditions exhibited by freak performers' bodies were still unknown, they attracted a great deal of interest from the medical community. In attempts to legitimize the shows, showmen would often invite medical practitioners to hold private audiences with the freak performers. As the famous case of Joseph Merrick and the surgeon Frederick Treves has shown, when freaks became the subjects of medical practitioners this relationship could easily lead to further

degradation and humiliation for the performer in the name of science (Durbach, 2010, pp. 33–57). Further, freak bodies offered opportunities for the development of medical practices, such as the separation of conjoined twins (F. Pettit, 2012, pp. 74–78). At the crux of this medical interest in freaks and in the experimentation on the Mutants, is the narrative of difference.

### A Cure for Difference

Both freak show histories and Disability Studies have argued that the concept of an “other” or a deviant body has worked to reinforce notions of “normal” bodies. Through the freak show, the notion of normalcy was brought out by the freaks enacting everyday activities, and it was the “inflated language that [made] them remarkable even as it invites pity and admiration” (Garland Thomson, 1996, p. 10). The ordinary is made to seem extraordinary because of the “cultural premise of irreducible corporeal difference” seen on the freak’s body (Garland Thomson, 1996, p. 10). Indicated in the article interviewing the Barnum freaks, described above, this was a common narrative used to sell freak shows. The author, Arthur Goddard, stresses that “with the one particular reservation in each case, they are just men and women, normal and healthy, ‘even as you and I’” (Goddard, 1898, p. 496). So, without their freakish corporeality, the freak performers were ‘normal’ people, but their bodily difference would always be “other.”

This same narrative is echoed in the *X-Men* films. In the final part of the trilogy, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, a cure is developed to suppress the “Mutant X gene”, transforming the abnormal Mutants into normal humans. The language of the announcement is reminiscent of Goddard’s article: “These so-called Mutants are people just like us. Their affliction is nothing more than a disease, a corruption of healthy cellular activity” (Shuler Donner, et al. & Ratner, 2006).

The release of a cure for mutation sparks anger from all sides of the Mutant community. Magneto, in particular, actively ignites hatred for humans and recruits scores of Mutants to attack the labs creating the cure. The Mutants who side with Charles Xavier, the X-Men, work to stop Magneto and try to prevent the humans from being harmed. However, even the X-Men are angry by the notion that they are a problem in need of a cure. Storm, one of the leading members of the X-Men, rails against the Xavier’s explanation of the cure to one of his students, “No Professor, they can’t cure us. You want to know why? Because there’s nothing to cure. Nothing’s wrong with you or any of us for that matter” (Shuler Donner, et al. & Ratner, 2006). Storm’s pride and empowerment from being a mutant echoes Albrecht, Seelman and Bury’s description of disability (above) and highlights the prevalence of disability studies discourse in the *X-Men* suite.

### Mutant and Proud

The most recent *X-Men* film (at the time of writing), *X-Men: First Class*, which chronologically pre-dates the trilogy, highlights the struggle for Mutants to feel empowered by and proud of their extraordinary abilities, and also feel a part of society. This is particularly brought out by the character of Raven, who later adopts the name of Mystique. In her natural state, Raven has blue skin, red hair and yellow eyes. Through her ability she is able to transform into other forms and often adopts the appearance of a Caucasian female with long blonde hair. Recognizing that society would struggle to accept her in her natural form, Raven’s friend Charles Xavier recommends that she adopts a ‘normal’ appearance when out in public. In an argument

with Charles, Raven challenges his recommendation and mocks the use of the phrase “mutant and proud” she overheard in his flirtatious conversation with another woman: “Or is it only with pretty mutations or invisible ones like yours? But if you’re a freak you better hide” (Shuler Donner, et al. & Vaughn, 2011).

Later in the film, Raven toys with the idea of trying a normalizing serum developed by another character, Hank. The two discuss their shared wish to look normal. However, by the time the serum is ready to use, Raven’s self-image has altered again and she encourages her friend to adopt a similar empowering narrative. In answer to Hank’s admission, “I don’t want to feel like a freak all the time,” Raven protests: “You’re beautiful Hank. Everything you are, you’re perfect. Look at all of us. Look at all we’ve achieved this week, all we will achieve. We are different, but we shouldn’t be trying to fit into society. Society should aspire to be more like us. Mutant and proud” (Shuler Donner, et al. & Vaughn, 2011).

This point brings us back to the empowering message behind the freak protest of 1898. Rather than wishing to hide due to the fear of not being accepted by ‘normal’ society, the freaks were vocal about their extraordinary traits and demanded a greater respect be paid to them. So too, do the Mutants.

### Conclusion

In the nineteenth-century, the freak show was a ubiquitous entertainment in popular culture. Many of the narratives from this mode of entertainment, particularly those surrounding the concept of physical otherness, continued to proliferate and transform in popular culture through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. In the *X-Men* films we can see numerous similarities between the narratives of otherness represented by the mutants, and disability narratives with roots in the nineteenth-century freak show. Interestingly, little focus is placed on the only traditional representation of disability in the films; that is, Charles Xavier’s use of a wheelchair. Rather than following traditional representations of disability, the *X-Men* films demonstrate that disability narratives are present in our contemporary popular culture in even the most unlikely of places. While this essay has only been able to examine a handful of these instances in the films, it has opened the possibilities of exploring non-standard contemporary representations of disability narrative.

All of the *X-Men* films employ a narrative of conflict between the “normal” humans and “abnormal” mutants. In these films, the people living with differences don’t necessarily see them as problematic, but their position in society is affected by their differing attributes. While some of the mutants struggle to accept their difference, there is an underlying, empowering theme, which Barnum and Bailey’s freaks also employed in their protest. This common theme is the belief in the power and strength of difference. Rather than accepting a marginalized and inferior position in society, these groups of ‘others’ choose to reinforce the equality, if not superiority, their extraordinary attributes entitle them to have in society, a theme that resonates strongly with Disability Studies today.

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exhibitions of the body.

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