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FILMING THE FREAK SHOW
NON-NORMATIVE BODIES ON SCREEN

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SUMMARY

FILMING THE FREAK SHOW NON-NORMATIVE BODIES ON SCREEN

The article focuses on four films that display the exhibition for profit of non-normative bodies in a context that is variously called freak show, sideshow, monster show, odditorium. Freaks (Tod Browning, 1932), The Ape Woman (La donna scimmia, Marco Ferreri, 1964), Elephant Man (David Lynch, 1980) and Black Venus (Vénus noire, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2010) are reflexive movies that tell stories of abnormal bodies and of people who buy a ticket to see them. They inquire the fictional nature of “freakness” – a cultural and historical artefact, a social construction, a frame of mind and a set of practices – and draw attention to the continuity between the world of the freak shows and the scientific and medical milieus. The article finally considers the new visibility of the corporeal freak in contemporary voyeuristic television programs.

The image, Jean-Luc Nancy writes, is essentially “of the order of the monster”¹ – a prodigious sign that warns (*moneo, monstrum*) of a divine threat. The image of the freak, prodigy on prodigy, seems to double the nature of the image itself. It is possibly for this reason that visual media – portrait painting, photography, cinema, television – have always displayed a profound interest in the subject. Of course visual media’s attraction corresponds or responds to a fas-

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ination on the side of the viewer. In history non-normative bodies have always been regarded as curiosities, wonders, spectacles². This appeal is evidently far from being innocent. It inquires the gaze, its voyeuristic side, infiltrated, as Christian Metz states, by sadistic inclinations³. What attracts the viewer to the freak's body is exactly its repulsion. The onlooker is thus exposed to striking accusations like the one raised by a freak character, Gaston Leroux's Phantom of the Opera: "Look! You want to see! See! Feast your eyes, glut your soul on my cursed ugliness!"⁴.

We can recognize in this desire to see the risk of "*concupiscentia oculorum*" from which Saint Augustine in *The Confessions* warns against: there is a "lust of the eyes", a morbid curiosity ("*vana curiositas*") by which sight is attracted to filth, weakness and death. *Concupiscentia oculorum* acts as a counterpart to the "*voluptas oculorum*", the other sin affecting the eyes whenever they long for beauty and art. If the latter passion is rather comprehensible, what pleasure could possibly lie "in the sight of a lacerated corpse, which makes you shudder? And yet if there is one lying close by we flock to it, as if to be made sad and pale"⁵. Georges Didi-Huberman reads in this very passage a confirmation of the relation linking seeing with dying: "if the passion for the visible, straightly tied to the passion for bodies, is defined *perversio* or *nequitia* it is exactly because man just stares towards nothingness. Saint Augustine's main thesis is that man bends over the visible as he bends over nothingness [l'homme penche vers le visible comme vers le néant]"⁶. Visual media proposing representations of freaks seem to tempt the eyes of the viewer with this sinful attraction named *concupiscentia oculorum*.

Searching for the "freak" keyword on the Internet Movie Data Base (www.imdb.com) we find 152 films and episodes from tv-series. An audiovisual text can be catalogued under this label because of the presence of "monsters of nature": *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977), *Phenomena* (Dario Argento, 1985), *Batman Returns* (Tim

Burton, 1992), *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus* (Steven Shainberg, 2006); midgets: *Salon Kitty* (Tinto Brass, 1976), *South Park*'s episode "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson" (1997); hunchbacks: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Wallace Worsley, 1923); hermaphrodites: *Fellini – Satyricon* (Federico Fellini, 1969); war amputees: *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), *Johnny Got His Gun* (Dalton Trumbo, 1971);⁷ bodily transformations or hybrids produced by mad science: *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (John Frankenheimer, 1996); human-mechanical hybrids: *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990);⁸ etc.

In this essay I will not try to produce a list of the film presence of non-normative bodies⁹ but I will focus on a few of them that display the exhibition for profit of freaks in a context that is variously called freak show, sideshow (with respect to the "main show" of the circus), monster show, odditorium, etc. *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932), *The Ape Woman* (*La donna scimmia*, Marco Ferreri, 1964), *Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980) and *Black Venus* (*Vénus noire*, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2010) are reflexive movies that tell stories of abnormal bodies and of people who actually buy a ticket to see them. *Freaks* is interpreted by "real" freaks while the other title-characters are respectively staged by actors Annie Girardot, John Hurt and Yahima Torres. But in this domain the very distinction between real and imaginary is slight. The true nature of "freakness" is indeed "fictional", cultural and historical, a "social construction"¹⁰, a "frame of mind and set of practices"¹¹. Far from being biological, the freak is the sum of the body, plus social context, plus individual choices¹².

The body of the "corporeal freak" or "born freak" may have features that are considered anomalous within a certain society at a certain time – singularities, malformations, disabilities. We can include in this category giants, dwarfs, very fat or very thin people, microcephalics, Siamese twins, bearded ladies, albinos, hermaphrodites, people without arms or legs, three-legged people, etc. But the

social context certainly shapes the definition of “giant”. The rarity of the presence of a certain specimen or “race” (a black person in Europe, a white person in Africa) also contributes to mark a person as a “freak”. The concept of freakness, as is the notion of “pathological”, is strictly related to the identification of a minority. As novelist Richard Matheson summarizes in *I Am Legend*, “normalcy is a majority concept”¹³.

However, being a freak is also a personal choice: the bearded lady, for example, decides to be “freakish” by the simple choice of not shaving. In this category of “self-made freaks” we find people who work on their body to make it extra-ordinary (for example, extensively tattooed people or people with very long hair or nails), for reasons that go from personal preferences to wanting to work as a circus actor¹⁴. Another category is constituted by the performative freaks, the so called “geeks”, people performing “novelty acts” such as biting off a live rat’s head¹⁵.

Leslie Fiedler’s thesis in one of the most important studies on the matter¹⁶ is that freaks fascinate *and* repel exactly because they trouble the traditional distinctions and borders – between human and animal (elephant-man, ape-woman...), male and female (the hermaphrodite), the self and the other (the Siamese twin), elder and child (the dwarf), black and white (the albinos), the “right proportions” (very small or very tall, very fat or very slim people). The monster, as also Michel Foucault writes, is “essentially a mixture ... of two realms ... It is the blending, the mixture of two species ... It is the mixture of two sexes ... It is a mixture of life and death ... Finally, it is a mixture of forms”¹⁷.

The freak challenges our confidence in that we stand just on one side. Following Fiedler, this exceptional figure mirrors the image of a *hybrid* “secret self”. Its asserted alterity hides the most uncanny proximity.

The obliged reference needed to start thinking about this matter through cinema is Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932). The film captures a historical moment, the twilight of the American sideshow tradition,

whose golden age goes from 1840 to 1930¹⁸. By the early Thirties the exploitation of freaks at fairs, carnivals or amusement parks was beginning to fade. These were the years of an important switch: the “monsters” were disappearing from the real world to populate the imaginary world of cinema, a medium just entering into the sound era¹⁹. As a consequence of modernisation, of a new social sensibility and moral attitude and of scientific progress (for example, Siamese twins could be surgically separated more easily), monstrosity became at the same time acceptable and medicalized: the deformed body was being removed from society, vanishing from sight.

Horror cinema was prompt to provide new, fictional monsters in response to this disappearance. The great XXth Century monsters (Dracula, Frankenstein, the Invisible Man, King Kong, the Mummy, the Werewolf...) ²⁰ find in these years their conventional visual shape. It was now possible to stare at the monster directly, with no sense of guilt. Differently from the freak at the sideshow, the film monster cannot return the viewer’s gaze. Voyeurism has found a screen.

In this very moment, when real freaks progressively hide from public visibility and great film monsters are created, Tod Browning’s *Freaks* appears as a troubling vision. The encounter between the world of sideshows and that of cinema is indeed extraordinary and unique. The most famous corporeal freak artists of the time played in the movie: the midgets Harry and Daisy Earles, the Siamese Twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, the “Pinheads” Schlitzie, Elvira and Jenny Lee Snow, the “Half Woman-Half Man” Josephine Joseph, the “Half Boy” Johnny Eck, the “Armless Girl” Frances O’Connor, the “Human Skeleton” Peter Robinson, the “Bearded Lady” Olga Roderick, the “Bird Girl” Koo Koo, the “Living Torso” Prince Randian etc. The director himself was an insider, a former circus performer acting as a “buried alive” stuntman²¹.

The main theme of the movie is the contrast between “freaks” who are not responsible for their physical deviancy and “normal” human

beings who are responsible for their moral monstrosity. The film tells the story of a midget who marries a trapeze artist who just wants to take possession of his inheritance and poisons him with the help of the Strong Man. In the central sequence depicting the marriage celebration the freaks accept the trapeze artist as “one of them”: “We accept her! We accept her! One of us! One of us! Gooble-gobble, gooble-gobble!”. The response of the woman is a violent refusal and disgust. The contemporary audience and critics’ reaction to the film was almost unanimously negative. The movie was soon withdrawn from circulation by Metro-Goldwin-Mayer. Newspapers of the time sentenced: “Those neurotic individuals who find agreeable occupation in following ambulances and pursuing fire engines, find themselves, at the present moment, the beneficiaries of an era in the motion picture theatres dedicated largely to them and their quaint amusement tastes” (*The Washington Post*, February 21st 1932)²².

For Antoine De Becque *Freaks* marks a landmark sign²³. Its flop demonstrates that the displaying of real freaks had become unpopular. People now wanted to admire an actor like Lon Chaney, capable, in *The Unknown* (Tod Browning, 1927), of *playing the number* of an armless man, of *interpreting* the freak as a virtuoso, of *miming* or *becoming* the monster.

The first appearance of real freaks on the silver screen sets thus the premises to be also their last. But at the same time we cannot say that the attraction exercised by the deformed body disappears from the eye of the viewer as soon as corporeal freaks hide from sight. It is precisely this ever-lasting appeal of the freak body that is investigated by the next movies we will consider, based on the true stories of three people exhibited at sideshows, John Merrick, Julia Pastrana and Saartje Baartman.

Leslie Fiedler very frankly writes in a footnote: “Finally, it seems to me, nobody can write about *Freaks* without somehow exploiting them for his own ends. Not I, certainly”²⁴. With this issue in mind,

responsible cinema that wants to tell the stories of freaks has to “find distinction”, to demonstrate a particular sensitivity: it has to differentiate itself from institutes like the sideshows that take advantage of their image. The desire to “see the monster” that gathers people into the freak shows is in fact similar to the one that attracts audiences into cinema theatres. Cinema must be able to distance itself from the point of view offered by the sideshows.

Cinema, however, is a visual medium; it has to *display* the characters. If it stands in a front-stage position where the freak is better seen, the camera will inevitably overlap the place of the freakshow voyeur. How can we look at these bodies without becoming peeping toms? A responsible spectator needs to find a moral shield in the eye of the director, in the way he or she has been able to inscribe in the text ethical space. In front of the non-normative body the viewer refusing a voyeuristic vision confronts his/her gaze with the filmmaker’s to find a moral legitimacy for vision. While the filmmaker shoots the freak, the film viewer watches him/her watch, judging if the director “ethically inhabits a social world, visually responds in it and to it, and charges it with an ethical meaning visible to others. As well, such sign vehicles are the means by which the mediate viewer – the spectator or the film – immediately and ethically inhabits the theatre and visually responds in it”²⁵.

David Lynch’s *Elephant Man* (1980) is a film where these ethical sign vehicles are immediately detectable. Joseph C. Merrick, the “Elephant Man”, was the “great freak of nature” of Victorian England²⁶. Lynch adapts the biography written by Frederick Treves²⁷, the doctor of the Royal London Hospital who “saved” Merrick from being exploited in the sideshows bringing him instead in the protected context of a clinical house. This transfer from the fair to the clinic is a symbolic one. The report written by Treves is a Victorian fable on the “triumph” of enlightened medical science on irrational terror and repulsion arisen by deformity and handicap. David Lynch cannot certainly be faithful to this assumption. His artistic vision is far from sharing such a



Fig. 1 - David Lynch, *The Elephant Man* (1980)

positivist point of view. The director focuses instead on the continuity between the freak show and the scientific milieu. The underground exchanges between official science and the carnivals were indeed continuous: doctors went to the fairs searching for extraordinary cases to study while sideshow promoters were eager to have “scientific proofs” of the uniqueness of the human oddity they possessed.

To see the “Elephant Man” Treves leaves the hospital for the nearby Whitechapel Road. The showman detaining Merrick builds a narrative for the doctor, telling the story of a pregnant woman who, scared by an elephant, eventually gave birth to a monster. In a sort of parallel way also Treves, since science is unable to understand the real nature of Merrick’s illness, establishes around that body a fictional story. In both cases the freak is the object of a discourse, not the speaker, a subject. His transfer to the Royal Hospital ratifies the transition from one subalternity to another: from show business to clinical discipline, based on correction, domestication and taming. Treves later introduces Merrick into the houses of upper class members who long to shiver in front of the monster, manifesting the ability to control their emotions and not express their fear²⁸. Meanwhile,

Merrick is clandestinely visited during the night by groups of proletarians, introduced by a deceitful guardian. This crew, on the contrary, emphatically manifests their horror. Incapable of controlling their eyes and body's reaction, they scream, hide their faces, run away. The position of science is beside the bourgeois group that shows no fear. However this self-control, certainly less harsh, is possibly not in any way more ethical. Fright is instead displayed in the film as the more humane of emotions. It is precisely this fear – more than the ability to memorize and repeat the verses of the Bible of which Merrick gives proof in one scene of the film – that reveals the total and complete humanity of the Elephant Man. Merrick is, in fact, the most scared of all the characters: he is scared of himself when he looks into the mirror and, most of all, scared by seeing himself reflected in the eyes of others. We can read an account of this moment in the notable review written by the great French critic Serge Daney:

This movie is strange in many ways. And firstly because of what David Lynch does with fear: the spectator's fear (ours) and the characters', including John Merrick's (the elephant man). Thus, the first part of the film, until the arrival at the hospital, works a bit like a trap. The spectator gets used to the idea that sooner or later he will have to bear the unbearable and face the monster. A coarse cloth bag with one eye-hole is all that separates him from the horror that he guesses. The spectator has entered the film like Treves, from the angle of voyeurism. He has paid (just as Treves has) to see a freak [...]... And when the spectator sees him at last, he is all the more disappointed that Lynch then pretends to play the game of the classic horror movie: night, deserted hospital corridors, clouds moving rapidly in a heavy sky, and suddenly this shot of John Merrick raised on his bed, racked by a nightmare. The spectator sees him – really – for the first time, but what he also sees is that the monster who is supposed to scare him is himself afraid. It is at this moment that Lynch frees his spectator from the trap he had first set (the "more-to-see" trap), as if Lynch was saying: you are not the one that matters, it's him, the elephant man; it is not your fear that interests me but his; it is not your fear to be afraid that I want to manipulate but his fear to scare, his fear to see himself in the look of the other. The vertigo changes sides²⁹.



Fig. 2 - Marco Ferreri, *La donna scimmia* (1964)

For the most part, films depicting the story of non-normative bodies tend to suggest the obvious fact that the “human oddity” is an innocent victim and that the real monsters are: the showman that exploits the freak; all the institutions that desire to see him/her closer or better; and at last, as wonderfully proven by Daney’s interpretation, the same film viewer, trapped in his or her own voyeurism. Marco Ferreri’s *La donna scimmia* (1964) adopts the simple device of the inversion of the roles of monster and victim to complicate it, to use it as a tool for a further investigation on the relation between the gaze of the characters (the freak’s, the manager’s and the diegetic audience’s gaze), the objective of the camera and finally the eye of the film spectator. Set in contemporary Italy, *La donna scimmia* is inspired by the real story of Julia Pastrana (1834-1860), a Mexican woman affected by hypertrichosis, exhibited in European cities by her husband-promoter³⁰. When she died due to postpartum complications, both Julia and the baby who died at birth were embalmed to permit the husband to continue his business. This is essentially also the synopsis of *La donna scimmia*³¹.



Fig. 3: Marco Ferreri, *La donna scimmia* (1964)

When Antonio (interpreted by Ugo Tognazzi) first meets Maria “the Ape Woman” (Annie Girardot), she lives in a nursing home where she works as a kitchen maid. When she perceives the presence of Antonio she covers her face. The freak, object of the gaze by definition, instinctively hides from being seen. Like Merrick in *Elephant Man*, Maria fears to see the horror in the gaze of the other (or, more simply but not less painfully, his morbid curiosity). She refuses to have her identity returned by the distorting mirror of a stranger’s gaze. The film shows the multiplicity of sources for exploitation that insist on using the woman’s body: Christian charity (the nuns in the nursing home), marriage (the institution that allows Antonio to utterly dispose of his wife’s body), male domination, the society of the spectacle, and finally science (Maria is led to the house of a professor who wants to privately “examine” her body)³².

The sequence of the marriage shows Maria and Antonio walking down the Spaccanapoli, a narrow street in Naples. Exhibiting Maria in her white dress, Antonio uses the wedding as free advertising for

his freak show. The camera precedes the couple, moving backwards, framing from a low angle. Let us compare this sequence with the one that ends the film, when we see framed in medium shot or close-up, Antonio and his new business pal in the square, in front a carnival ride containing Maria's mummified body, inviting the audience to enter and enjoy the show. Antonio proposes to the viewer (the diegetic spectator on the square *and* the film spectator) to enter and see, but the director instead chooses the opposite alternative. After a cut, we see the carnival ride from a frontal, complete view. While the music fades in, a long zoom out, ending in an extreme long shot, detaches us from Antonio and the spectacle.

This very last take is shot from a roof surrounding the square. The frame widens, trying to include the whole cityscape. Placing the camera far from the show, the director chooses not to watch, and we undergo this decision. Stuck on a roof, we cannot have a different point of view; we are not free to see Maria's body. This linguistic act marks a substantial difference with respect to the scene of the wedding. In that case the film spectator assumes the point of view disposed by the showman, that is, in front of the advancing spectacle. The last frame of the film obliges the viewer instead to decline Antonio's invitation and perspective. The place of the spectator is separated from the carnival ride. Antonio's voyeuristic *mise-en-scène* is refused by the director, acting here as an ethical instance, as a shield for the morality of vision. At the same time the zoom out elicits the viewer not to judge or blame only Antonio, a proletarian struggling to make a living, but to broaden the gaze to the entire city and society.

If responsible cinema wants to tell the story of a non-normative body involved in a freak show it has thus to (linguistically) inscribe in the text ethical space, to switch perspectives, to fight objectification. If the frontal view of the stage is the standard position of the onlooker, a reverse shot will make us assume the perspective of the person exhibiting, making *the audience* the target of observation. This is the choice



Fig. 4 - Abdellatif Kechiche, *Vénus noire* (2010)

of Abdellatif Kechiche's *Vénus noire* (2010), based on the true story of the "Hottentot Venus" Saartjie Baartman (1790-1815), a South-African woman with particular bodily features (large buttocks and elongated labia), exposed for this reason in various locations in England and France. In the film we see her both as a guest and as a prisoner of the usual venues – the freak show, the scientific academy, the brothel – where different gazes, none of them respectful, pose on her body: the colonial one, that sees her as an exotic object; the racial one, for whom she is a specimen of an inferior race; the male one, appealed by this sexual extravaganza; the scientific one, which studies through its objects (lenses, rules...) her body as an object. Kechiche insists on scientific voyeurism, equivalent to the other kinds of voyeurism. The director forces the movie viewer to confront with the different onlookers diegetically displayed in the movie (the freak show

participants, the bourgeois audience of Saartjie's private exhibitions, the medical students in the lecture hall, the brothel clients), each of them mirroring the spectator's condition. All of these figures make us aware of the risk of pushing the gaze in the direction of morbid curiosity, of scrutinizing for proofs or anatomical details. We cannot identify with these characters, we must find a distinction, avoiding to fall into the "more-to-see trap" evidenced by Serge Daney.

Having to cope with the possible suspect of a new visual exploitation of the image of Saartjie, the director takes an unequivocal position in the order of duration. The permanence of the gaze on non-normative bodies is generally considered a forbidden act. Kechiche decides to violate the prescription and to revolt this practice against the voyeurism that motivates it. The director forces the viewer to a constant, close viewing. The camera shares the spaces with Saartjie throughout the whole movie. Her performances are shot from the beginning to the end. Time is dilated. The extension of filming conforms to Saartjie's spleen, as she is forced to continually reproduce the same canonical gesture. After the first exhibition, Kechiche shows the second in full length, the third, the fourth and so on. Before the sad and obscene rituals involving Saartjie's body any sort of ellipsis is prohibited. It is in this way that the film is capable of creating a distance between the diegetic spectator and the film viewer. We get to share the point of view of Saartjie repeating her act, not the one of the customers entering and leaving the show. At the same time, though, we cannot really identify with Saartjie neither, represented as an absolute alterity, untouched by our dull attempt of empathy.

It is possibly because of this lack of sentimentality and of the painful persistence of the gaze on the body that the film met a controversial reception at its first screenings. Among many critics, I quote the Italian Mariuccia Ciotta, who implores to avert one's eyes from that over-observed body, "flayed alive again by the camera"³³, once and for all. Following this iconoclastic line no representation would be

permitted³⁴. We must nonetheless consider that even the choice of “not looking”, of not portraying Saartjie Baartman’s body and life could be criticized: invisibility – possibly leading to indifference or oblivion – is as problematic as visibility³⁵.

Vénus noire is one prominent example of a renewed interest for the entertainment spectacle known as the freak show³⁶. Among recent productions we want to mention the HBO tv-series *Carnivàle* (created by Daniel Knauf, 2003-2005), a two-season long, Tod Browning and David Lynch-inspired series that follows a carnival travelling through the dusty prairies of the United States during the Great Depression. Many standard human oddities are represented: the bearded lady, the Siamese twin sisters, the dwarf, the lizard man... Should these people be considered on the basis of their onstage or backstage roles? *Carnivàle* insists on the goffmanian question of the plurality of selves, emphasised by the compelling nature of freaks³⁷. However, after a long period of substantial disappearance from society and screens, also the corporeal freak has found a new visibility in the contemporary mediasphere: “Television and film has started to demonstrate an explicit, and unashamed, freak show style interest in the non-normative body”³⁸. Real freaks seem in fact to reemerge today from neglectfulness, finding a role in a mediascape characterized by voyeurism, particularly evident in the most important television phenomenon of the first decade of the new millennium, the “reality television” and “reality show”. Tv programs such as the *Big Brother* (1999-) are based on the same “morbid gaze” of the freak show tradition³⁹. Neill Richardson refers to the presence of freaks in British television programs like Channel 5 series *Extraordinary People* (2006-), Channel 4 *Bodyshock* (2003-) and the documentary series *The World’s... And Me* (2008-2010)⁴⁰. On Italian television, there is *Lo show dei records* (2006-), aired by Canale 5, hosting “geeks” (e.g: a man immersed in a pool full of bugs), “performative freaks” (e.g: the Elastic Man with extensible skin) and “corporeal freaks” (e.g.:

He Pingping, the world's shortest man). Barbara D'Urso, the tv presenter of the 2006 edition, offers the latter a compassionate, maternal, deeply asymmetrical gaze, just as long as she does not look at the performative freaks (or plays the part of the disgusted woman). In the films we analysed, both these behaviours before the non-normative body (looking at the freak as a minor; exhibiting him and at the same time averting one's eyes) are rejected as unethical: if the options are either patronizing or repulsion it is better not to look at all.

These shows also raise the very ancient and controversial question about the freedom of people in full mastery of their own lives to perform as circus actors. Can this be described in any case as exploitation, even if it is in fact *self-exploitation*? Would it be better if they lived possibly more miserable lives far from the stage? Richard Butchins' documentary *The Last American Freak Show* (2008) focuses on this matter, leading us through American routes with a company of disabled actors (a dwarf, a woman with prosthetic limb and lesioned torso, a "Half Woman" etc.). The director says in an interview that the performing actors "have taken control of the way they're looked at. They go on stage and say: 'If you want to look at us, pay \$10'. People think that exhibiting yourself for money is fine unless you're a cripple. But these performers are doing it willingly and know what they're doing. The trouble is there's an assumption that if you've a disability, you're stupid"⁴¹. In many senses, the opposition against freaks' self-exploitation is the same that is raised against pornography by some commentators (in particular anti-pornography feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine McKinnon). The practice would be degrading independently from the voluntary engagement of the subject because it hits "without simulations" the body, denying human dignity⁴².

Faced with these disturbing questions, responsible visual media must demonstrate they possess the ethical strength to tackle the controversies that the display of non-normative bodies may arise. In front of the "system of monstrative attractions"⁴³ that a freak show represents,

the “excess of the visual” theorized by Fredric Jameson is immediately recognizable⁴⁴. The filmmaker’s effort to repress this excess is under the scrutiny of the viewer. The image of the monster (the image-monster) forces thus to confront with our own gaze, to think about the (comfortable or uncomfortable) viewing position we take.

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8. Even for this topic we can have a look at the Far Eastern cinema, where the filmography of Tsukamoto Shin’ya – in particular his *Tetsuo Trilogy: Tetsuo* (1989), *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1992), *Tetsuo: the Bullet Man* (2009) – is possibly the most interesting cinematographic approach on the subject of man-machine hybridisation. See BRODESCO A., *Autopsia del sapere. Tecnoscienza, megamacchina, campo scopico*. In: BOSCAROL M. (ed.), *Tetsuo:*

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 14. In the second half of Twentieth Century freakness became also a “mean of expression” embraced by subcultures intending to fight the dominant culture. We can cite the emblematic album *Freak Out!* (1966) by Frank Zappa’s Mothers of Invention, an entire Long Playing dedicated to the “celebration of Freedom, seen at that time by Zappa as the only possible antidote to the relentless consumer culture of America” (MILES B., *Zappa: A Biography.* New York, Grove Press, 2004, p. 115). The album’s liner notes say: “On a personal level, *Freaking Out* is a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole. Less perceptive individuals have referred to us who have chosen this way of thinking and FEELING as ‘Freaks’, hence the term: *Freaking Out*”. But we could also mention the contemporary “self-monstrification” in Goth and Emo music subcultures, where “freakish” tattoos, piercings and dress are worn as a badge of honour and distinction.
 15. BOGDAN R., see ref. 11, p. 8. The current use of the term “geek” describes “1. a computer expert or enthusiast (a term of pride as self-reference, but often considered offensive when used by outsiders)”; or “2. a peculiar or otherwise dislikable person, especially one who is perceived to be overly intellectual”; but its cultural origins go back to “3. a carnival performer who performs sensationally morbid or disgusting acts, as biting off the head of a live chicken” (geek. [n.d.]. *Dictionary.com’s 21st Century Lexicon*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/geek>). The *Etymology Dictionary* says: “geek. ‘sideshow freak’, 1916, U.S.

- carnival and circus slang, perhaps a variant of geck ‘a fool, dupe, simpleton’ (1515), apparently from Low Ger. geck, from an imitative verb found in North Sea Gmc. and Scand. meaning ‘to croak, cackle’, and also ‘to mock, cheat’. The modern form and the popular use with ref. to circus sideshow ‘wild men’ is from 1946, in William Lindsay Gresham’s novel ‘Nightmare Alley’ (made into a film in 1947 starring Tyrone Power)” (geek. [n.d.]. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/geek>) (last visited: December 3rd 2012).
16. FIEDLER L., *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1978.
 17. FOUCAULT M., *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. New York, Picador, 2003, p. 63.
 18. BOGDAN R., see ref. 11, p. 62.
 19. See GIOVANNINI F., *Mostri*. Roma, Castelveccchi, 1999, p. 21.
 20. *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), *The Mummy* (Karl Freund, 1932), *The Invisible Man* (James Whale, 1933), *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), *Werewolf of London* (Stuart Walker, 1935).
 21. See SKAL D. J., *The Monster Show. A Cultural History of Horror*. New York, W. W. Norton, 1993; and GANDINI L., *Tod Browning*. Milano, il Castoro, 1996.
 22. Quoted in SKAL D. J., see ref. 21, p. 168. The film was later to be canonized with a glorious place in cinema history after its reissue at the 1962 Venice Film Festival and after the fostering of Tod Browning as an “*auteur*” within the then spreading “*politique des auteurs*”. The “freak out!” motto by the hippy movement in the late Sixties also contributed to the delayed success of the film: “*Freaks* probably reached its greatest popularity at the height of the Vietnam War, as a midnight movie favorite of a counterculture that had claimed the title word itself as a badge of identity” (SKAL D. J., see ref. 21, p. 291).
 23. DE BECQUE A., *Tod Browning, Freaks, Lon Chaney. Les monstres, de la parade à l’artifice*. In: CAIOZZO A., DEMARTINI A.-E., *Monstre et imaginaire social: approches historiques*. Paris, Creaphis, 2008, pp. 287-293.
 24. FIEDLER L., see ref. 16, p. 171.
 25. SOBCHACK V., *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2004, p. 244.
 26. On both the real and film figure of Joseph Merrick see MINA G., *Elephant Man: l’eroe della diversità. Dal freak show vittoriano al cinema di Lynch*. Recco, Le Mani, 2010.
 27. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. By Frederick Treves, Bart. G.C.V.O., C.B., LL.D. Serjeant-Surgeon to His Majesty the King,

- London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne, Cassell and Company, LTD, 1923. First edition available online: <http://archive.org/stream/elephantmanother00trevuoft#page/n7/mode/2up> (last visited: September 12th 2012).
28. See LOCATI S., *Lo sguardo e la norma*. The Elephant Man *di David Lynch*. In: MINA G., ref. 26, pp. 77-106.
 29. “C’est le monstre qui a peur”, *Cahiers du cinéma* 1981; n. 322, reprinted in *La maison cinéma et le monde, Volume 1 “Le temps des Cahiers 1962-1981”*, P.O.L, Paris, 2001, pp. 266-269. English translation from <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/web-only-the-monster-is-afraid-the-elephant-man-david-lynch> (last visited: September 11th, 2012).
 30. See, among the many publications on the subject, BROWNE J., MESSENGER S., *Victorian Spectacle: Julia Pastrana, the Bearded and Hairy Female*. Endeavour 2003; 27,4: 155-159.
 31. The very cruel finale that shows the husband exhibit the bodies of his wife and son was cut and not shown in the Italian movie theatres. For the French market an alternate happy ending – in which both Maria and her (hairless) son survive – was imposed by producer Carlo Ponti. See http://www.italiataglia.it/casicelebri/la_donna_scimmia_ (last visited: September 11th, 2012).
 32. On male voyeurism, medical gaze and representation see CARTWRIGHT L., *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
 33. CIOTTAM., “*Venere nera*” e altri guardoni. Il manifesto, June 17th 2011, p. 12.
 34. For speculations on the concept of irrepresentable see RANCIERE J., *Le destin des images*. Paris, La Fabrique, 2003.
 35. See BRIGHENTI A. M., *Visibility: a Category for the Social Sciences*. Current Sociology 2007;3: 339.
 36. See RICHARDSON N., *Transgressive Bodies. Representations in Film and Popular Culture*. Farnham-Burlington, Ashgate, 2010, p. 1.
 37. See GOFFMAN E., *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, Doubleday, 1959.
 38. RICHARDSON N., ref. 36, p. 1.
 39. “Whether voyeur TV made us that way or just found us out, the predominant pop culture narrative relies on a suspiciously convenient coincidence: the predilection for voyeurism on the part of TV audiences emerges alongside a seemingly endless supply of celebrity-hungry exhibitionists, who are only too willing to trade in their privacy for the chance of a brief flirtation with fame” (ANDREJEVIC M., *Visceral Literacy: Reality TV, Savvy Viewers, and*

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- Auto-Spies*. In MURRAY S., OUELLETTE L., *Reality TV. Remaking Television Culture*. New York-London, New York University Press, 2009, p. 324).
40. *The World's* [Tallest Woman, Smallest Man, Fattest Pet, Hairiest Person, Cleverest Child, Most Enhanced Woman, Strongest Child, Strangest Plastic Surgery, Most Identical Twins] *and Me*.
 41. www.disabilitynow.org.uk/entertainment/arts/filming-the-freak-show (last visited: July 20th 2012). On this topic see GERBER D. A., *The "Careers" of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization*. In: GARLAND THOMSON R., see ref. 10, pp. 38-54, where Gerber underlines the freaks' lack of options, due to unequal social possibilities.
 42. See SMITH C., *Reel intercourse. Il sesso e il corpo performante*. In: BIASIN E., MAINA G., ZECCA F., *Il porno espanso. Dal cinema ai nuovi media*. Udine-Milano, Mimesis, 2011, pp. 79-109.
 43. GAUDREAU A., *From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2009, p. 57.
 44. "The visual is essentially pornographic [...]. The most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess" (JAMESON F., *Signatures of the Visible*. New York-London, Routledge, 1992, p. 1).

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