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Limping Towards Representation:

Writing Disability in Three Twentieth Century Narratives

by

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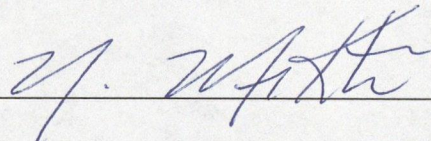
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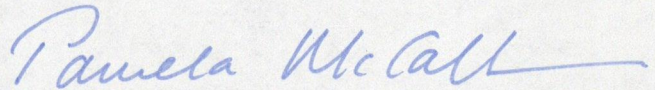
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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Limping Towards Representation: Writing Disability in Three Twentieth Century Narratives" submitted by Christopher Matthew Ewart in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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Abstract

“Limping Towards Representation: Writing Disability in Three Twentieth Century Narratives” explores representations of disability and the disabled character within narrative. Peter Handke’s language-play Kaspar (1967), Tod Browning’s controversial film Freaks (1932), and Anosh Irani’s unsettling novel The Cripple and His Talismans (2004), feature disability as narrative device while challenging and informing ableist constructs of normalcy. Employing Michel Foucault’s notion of the gaze, disability theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s analysis of how disability surfaces in narrative as metaphor, and theorists Lennard J. Davis, Oliver Sacks, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Robert McRuer, Paul K. Longmore, Michael Bérubé, Simi Linton, Sally Chivers, Anita Silvers, among others, provides a theoretical template to analyze and invigorate the ways in which disabled characters in these texts both inform and deconstruct the enigmatic relationship between normalcy and disability. My thesis advocates the importance of innovative representations of disability in narrative in order to re-evaluate the hegemony of normalcy.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Patricia and Gary Ewart, for their continual support, encouragement and inspiration, and to my brother Geoff, for being the first to realize how important English can be. I am also very grateful to Miss Sandy Lam for all her assistance and patience.

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Limping Towards Representation:

Writing Disability in Three Twentieth Century Narratives

I mean to say that a sentence is a monster. (Kaspar 139)

My thesis explores depictions of the disabled character in various genres of contemporary narrative. Whether a novel, play or film, representations of disability often appear as a “master trope” (Brenda Jo Brueggemann et al. 4) which invigorates, problematizes and posits a re-evaluation of normalcy and the metaphors and mechanisms that maintain disability as “other.” The novel, The Cripple and His Talismans, written by Canadian author Anosh Irani, the play Kaspar, by Austrian writer Peter Handke, and American director Tod Browning’s film Freaks, share a commonality of subject: innovative representations of the disabled character which do not confer normalcy or able-bodiedness as a stable, desirable site of identity. Although disability in narrative operates in conjunction with and often reinforces normalcy, these texts resist and inform fictive ableist constructs of normalcy. Various theorists contribute to a consideration and evaluation of representations of disability in narrative in terms of how such representations both inform and deconstruct the enigmatic phenomenon of normalcy/disability. These theorists include: Michel Foucault, who, in his work The Birth of the Clinic, investigates the notion of the gaze in terms of establishing a corrective order for disorder; David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in their analysis of disability as a complex feature of many narratives and the ways in which this feature surfaces as an often reflexive metaphor informing paradigms of identity and society, as well as Lennard J. Davis, Oliver Sacks, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Robert McRuer, Paul K. Longmore, Michael Bérubé, Simi Linton, Sally Chivers, Anita Silvers, and others.

Commenting upon the role of the disabled character in narrative, Davis suggests:

In literature, central characters of novels are imagined as normal unless specific instruction is given to alter that norm, and where a disability is present, the literary work will focus on the disability as a problem. Rare indeed is a novel, play, or film that introduces a disabled character whose disability is not the central focus of the work. (“Nude Venuses, Medusa’s Body, and Phantom Limbs – Disability and Visuality,” 68)

Davis observes that representations of disability in narrative need not be problematic. The disabled character need not necessitate hindrance, inadequacy, bitterness, sympathy nor operate as an emblematic site of corrective possibility. Disability as “problem” suggests disability as subaltern, marginal and fixable. Davis’s suggestion that “almost any literary work will have some reference to the abnormal, to disability” (“Constructing Normalcy” 23) qualifies the importance of analyzing representational diversity within narrative and within works that posit disability as more than a conundrum unable to fit within the relatively modern concept of normalcy.¹ Constructs of normalcy permeate and inform

¹ In his essay “Bodies of Difference: Politics, Disability, and Representation,” Davis discusses the instillation of the concept of normalcy in western society. He writes: “the word *normal* appeared in English only about 150 years ago” (100) which coincides roughly with the development of statistics and the bell curve – as Davis notes, previously called “the normal curve” (101). Prior to this,

the regnant paradigm was one revolving around the word *ideal* [, and] if people have a concept of the ideal, then all human beings fall below that standard and so exist in varying degrees of imperfection. . . [as] part of a descending continuum from top to bottom. No one, for example, can have an ideal body, and therefore no one has to have an ideal body. . . [But since] the [statistical] idea of the norm [, . .] the majority of bodies fall under the main umbrella of the curve [and t]hose who do not are. . . abnormal. Thus, there is an imperative placed on people to conform, to fit in, under the rubric of normality. Instead of being resigned to a less than ideal body in the earlier paradigm, people in the last 150 years have been encouraged to strive to be normal, to huddle under the main part of the curve. (100-101)

This process simultaneously invents the concept of the abnormal. Steve Kuusisto believes the first interpolation of the term “disabled” occurred with Karl Marx, in reference to injured workers who were unable to perform a “normal” day’s labour (AWP Conference 2005).

narrative, and a definition of normal often insists upon an abnormal counterpart. Such a binary inhibits an adequate description of texts that interrogate constructs of normalcy as problematic, rather than disability as problematic.

The apparent problem of disability in narrative occurs as achievement and maintenance of normal ideals (such as able-bodiedness) prove unattainable through investiture in normal characters. Narrative requires resistance to resolve itself. And often, as Davis points out, “alter[ing]” the “imagined. . . normal” (68) character in some fashion maintains the disabled character as a locus of interest and a site of potential and obligatory conformity:

The stereotypes, metaphors, and images of disability have been primary means by which human cultures [and their narratives] have constructed disability in systems of compulsory able-bodiedness. (Michael Bérubé, Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities 342).

Bérubé asserts that disability is built upon and operates within a template of ableist² ideology. Such pervasive use of disability as an “other” to the statistical and populist conceptualizations of normalcy not only subsumes disability in terms of dominant ideology – comparative to idealized images of the able-body for example – but also negates disability as an autonomous, desirable site of representation. That disabled characters assume a substantive role (or not) in a text because of their bodily deviation from the norm, or because of what myriad deviations may signify in a larger normative or societal context, invites such characters as a re-examination of the confines or “systems”.

² In her text Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity, Simi Linton suggests that “the construction of the terms *ableist* and *ableism* . . . can be used to organize ideas about the centring and domination of the nondisabled experience and point of view” (9). These terms also signify an ideology which posits people with disabilities as inferior to those without disabilities.

(akin to Bérubé's observation) of normalcy or "compulsory able-bodiedness." I shall examine disabled characters in terms of Disability Theory discourse to explore how "disability serves as a master trope that challenges pervasive social fictions about the experiences of embodiment" (Brueggemann et.al. 4). Innovative representations of disability in narrative invigorate the fictions of ability and disability alike by decentralizing the authority of normalcy.

Narratives of disability, or narratives that contain and represent disabled characters as a site of fictive endeavour are, as disability theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder suggest, "a forthright interest of literary narrative" (Narrative Prosthesis 2). Moreover, "the socially 'forbidden' nature of the topic has compelled many writers to deploy disability as an explicitly complicating feature of their representational universes" (2). "Representational universes" then, with their tropes of disability and disabled characters stimulate dialogue concerning how and why such representation becomes complex. The narratives within my thesis exemplify interest in the disabled character and interrogate societal constructs of the disabled/non-disabled relationship in imaginative ways. Admitting an ableist audience's various adjectival responses: "when I read/see. . .I feel..." to the featured character(izations) of disability necessitates an examination of the synonymous entrenchment of disability as "other," while concurrently acknowledging disability as a compelling facet of narrative.

The first chapter of my thesis entitled, "Forcing the Normal in Peter Handke's Kaspar," discusses and exposes the inability of language to contain and correct a character who possesses a marginal linguistic identity. In the play, language attempts to construct and maintain order for an apparently disorderly individual. Handke's

exploration of language points to the fallacy of linguistic control over bodily constructions such as disability. Here, the dramatized, hyperbolized spectacle of disability becomes subject to a compulsory order of language signification and thought, ultimately providing “Kaspar” with the ability to speak, but in a language no longer his own.

The second chapter, entitled, “Freaking Normal: Shifting Perceptions in Tod Browning’s Freaks,”³ provides analyses of how presentations of disabled bodies on-screen inflect and challenge normative/ableist identification. Throughout the film, Browning utilizes and frames disabled characters as protagonists, while the more normative bodies/characters in the film encapsulate and represent disorder, dishonesty and greed. Browning’s innovative representations of disability (and of normalcy) disrupt notions of able-bodied stability and control over the disabled “other” eventually presenting the disabled characters as a vengeful spectacle, but also as capable of autonomy.

The final chapter of my thesis, entitled, “The Disappearing Act of Disability in Anosh Irani’s The Cripple and His Talismans,” investigates the metaphorical capacity of disability in narrative through the perspective of a recently disabled narrator. In the novel, Irani extrapolates upon the misgivings of a narrator who has lost an arm. The narrator’s subsequent search for his arm becomes the motivation of the novel’s narrative. This process interrogates the construct of disability as absence – as a sense of loss – while serving (and severing) a metaphorical connection to the narrator’s surroundings and most

³ At a recent conference at the University of Calgary about film and disability, I delivered a condensed version of this chapter along with a scene from the film that illustrates Browning’s deliberate modification of setting to accommodate the statures of Hans and Frieda, in order to establish perceptions of disability as normative. Several people in attendance had not noticed the “dimensions” of the scene before.

importantly, his past. The Cripple and His Talismans pushes disability representation to its most fictive, grotesque and humorous, and simultaneously presents normalcy as an conscientious site of undesirability.

Although Kaspar, Freaks, and The Cripple and His Talismans are not unique in terms of presenting a disabled character whose disability is not “the central focus of the work” (Davis 68), these narratives present a unique attentiveness towards a re-evaluation of concepts such as normalcy and ability. Each of these works exemplify, through differing means of signification, alternative possibilities to the hegemony of normalcy, often illustrating the failure and absurdity of normalcy as ideal, and of its language and models of behaviour to contain and correct the disabled body. Interpreting this process within the framework of Disability Theory shows that the inherent difference of disability can and does provide substantial resistance and alternatives to ableist ideology.

Chapter One:

Forcing the “Normal” in Peter Handke’s Kaspar

An exemplary presentation of a disabled character as a site of “otherness” or spectacle is Peter Handke’s 1967 play Kaspar. The play exposes the inability of language to contain and correct a character who possesses a marginal linguistic identity. As language attempts to construct and maintain order for “Kaspar,” it also contributes to his disillusionment of such a process. In their article, “Ghosts of Germany: Kaspar Hauser and Woyzeck,” Ruth and Archie Perlmutter suggest: “Handke’s [Kaspar] is about the limitations of language” (237). Taken further, the play exposes the inadequacy of, and questions the need of, language itself to contain and, indeed, correct disability. According to Disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s apt corollary:

Disabled people have variously been objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter, or fascination – but they have always been stared at. (Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities 56)

“Kaspar,” as a character upon the stage, evokes such variable responses because he is disabled. That disabled people “have always been stared at” provides compelling material for Handke’s play but also suggests that disability becomes subject to the prerogative of normalcy simply by being looked at. Although a stare is more blatantly obvious than a glance or a gaze,⁴ the process often incites and requires a linguistic counterpart to contextualize disorder/disability within normative, ableist ideology. Michel Foucault’s

⁴ The “stare” often implies power of able-bodied over disabled, normal over abnormal. The “gaze” is often more informed.

analysis of a multi-faceted gaze⁵ (as a subtler, although more complex relative to Garland-Thomson's stare) arrives out of a systematic, historical and institutional entrenchment of disability as pathological disorder while confirming the healthy body as a desirable cultural construct. Handke's language-play challenges dominant epistemology of correcting disability via the gaze and the language that follows the look. "Kaspar" as a spectacle of disability, and the mechanisms onstage which demand his normalcy offer a forum to re-evaluate the ability and appropriateness of language to subjugate disorder. As Foucault suggests in his conclusion to The Birth of the Clinic, the clinical gaze incites "the abyss beneath illness, which was the illness itself, [to] emerg[e] into the light of language"(195). Handke's Kaspar suggests language is a problematic tool in terms of facilitating such emergence of "illness" as a means to "exorcize every disorder from [Kaspar]" (63). Foucault connotes the significance and process of the inherently corrective gaze and its inevitable, problematic concretization within the/a linguistic/symbolic order:

Clinical experience – that opening up of the concrete individual for the first time in Western history, to the language of rationality, that major event in the *relationship of man to himself and of language to things* – was

⁵ In The Birth of the Clinic, Foucault discusses several types of gazes contextualizing disease upon the "visible body" (3) which "enabl[es] one to *see* and to *say*" (xii), including: the "positive gaze" (xi), "empirical gaze" (xiii), "patient gaze" (xv), "medical gaze" (9), "qualitative gaze" (13), "penetrating gaze" (15), "a gaze [which is] diacritical" (23), "superficial gaze" (29), "intersecting gazes" (31), "the gaze of compassion" (40), "a purified purifying gaze" (51-2), "Childhood-Gaze" (65), a "sovereign. . . gaze" (89), a "happy gaze" (105), an "observing gaze" (107), "clinical gaze" (108), "a hearing gaze and a speaking gaze. . . balanc[ing] between speech and spectacle" (115), a "searching gaze" (125), a "neutral gaze" (126), a "surface gaze" (129), an "anatomy-clinical gaze" (146), "a gaze that touches" (164), an "integrating gaze" (165), and a "rather dilated gaze" (171). Akin to the roles of the magic eye and prompters in Handke's play, Foucault cautions against "the great myth of a pure Gaze that would be pure Language: a speaking eye. . . teaching those who do not know and have not seen. This speaking eye would be the servant of things and the master of truth." (114-115). Foucault's exhaustive analysis advocates a symbiotic relationship between disease, the gaze, and language – culminating in an ideal "brightness" and "purity of an unprejudiced gaze" (195).

soon taken as a simple, unconceptualized confrontation of a gaze and a face, or a glance and a silent body; a sort of contact prior to all discourse, free of the burdens of language, by which two living individuals are ‘trapped’ in a common but non- reciprocal situation. (xv, italics my own)

The initial kinetic (non-verbal) connection between doctor and patient that Foucault speaks of is wrought with the eventual inclusion and control of “rational” language. As doctor and patient apparently share a similar “trap” where language provides release, Foucault posits the inevitable process whereby language’s “burden” (at least in part) ensures an evaluation of the abnormal; thereby distancing these two beings. How might the ways in which an individual relates to him/herself in conjunction with the rational language of “things” necessitate a strain or burden upon language? If, as Foucault suggests, the clinical role of language (as summation and confirmation of the gaze) is to illuminate and diagnose in the hope to fix the apparent gulf between disease and health, disorder and order, disability and ability, etc; then its role (ironically) also reaffirms and coerces such pedantic binaric gaps.

“Be Like Me”

From a disability studies perspective, the historical entrenchment of these binaries continues to inform the larger ableist culture’s desire – as partially instituted by sociomedical ideology and practices intended to cure the sick – to impose normalcy upon the definably abnormal. In his essay, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” disability theorist Robert McRuer comments upon this phenomenon:

[Such a] culture. . . assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me? (93)

McRuer's salient question is both obvious and under-examined from a literary/narrative perspective. It questions the system perpetuating able-bodiedness as cultural standard. Such foregrounding illuminates the tensions inherent in Handke's Kaspar. The play challenges and complicates the illusory collusion between the "*relationship of man to himself and of language to things*" (Foucault xv), and the assumed ableist prerogative in relation to disability: wouldn't you rather be like me? Again, how might the relationship of a disabled character to the "things" around him actualize a burden upon language? Language exhibits tenacity towards inclusion of the language of disability within the larger (ableist) cultural lexicon (Linton 9); so, would it not be easier to fix difference with language rather than affixing and accommodating difference to language?

It is precisely this conundrum that Handke's Kaspar examines. Central to the play's construction is the deliberate interpolation of the historical and disabled⁶ figure, Kaspar Hauser. As June Schlueter remarks in The Plays and Novels of Peter Handke,

⁶ In their introduction to The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability entitled "Disability and the Double Bind of Representation," Mitchell and Snyder provide a definition of disability from Explanation of the Contents of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (M. Golden et al.): (1) the impairment of a major life function, (2) an official diagnostic record that identifies a history of an individual's impairment; and (3) a trait or characteristic that results in the stigmatization of the individual as limited or incapacitated (2). Mitchell and Snyder suggest that "Such an expansive definition identifies the terms *disability* and *disabled* as denoting more than a medical condition or essentialized "deformity" or

[Kaspar is] well known in German literature [as] an autistic young man who appeared in Nuremberg in 1828, after some sixteen years of presumably solitary existence, in possession of only one sentence: “A sochener Reiter mocht i warn, wei mei Voter aner gween is” (“I want to become a horseman like my father once was”). (41)

The Kaspar Hauser of *history*, ironically, gives a voice to McRuer’s unspoken question: wouldn’t you rather be like me? Kaspar’s only sentence is one which designates a desire to be more capable than he is, presumably, like his father. In addition to his autistic state, this historical character/referent also possesses “no knowledge of human society, and he could scarcely walk” (Kuhn, Peter Handke: Plays: 1 xv). Handke, then, imbues what Mitchell and Snyder term his “representational universe” with whatever established notions an audience may have of Kaspar Hauser, a person whom, by historical account, was perceived as a cultural curiosity, a romanticized model of reform,⁷ and predictably, as tragic victim (especially after he was “mysteriously murdered” (xv)). In his text New German Dramatists, Denis Calandra describes the Kaspar Hauser of history as a “wild boy phenomenon” (64). Commenting on this in more subtle terms, Handke addresses his narrative interests in – and perhaps his motivations in calling upon – this disabled historical figure:

This Kaspar Hauser appeared to me to be a mythical figure, not just interesting as a simple case-history, but as a model of people who cannot

difference, [u]nlike the terms *handicapped* or *crippled* which suggest inherent biological limitations and individual abnormalities (2).

⁷ In his article “Triumph und Pleite der Wörter,” Peter Idén writes: “[Kaspar Hauser,] romantisierter Gegenstand unzähliger Illustriertengeschichten, hat die Psychologen wie die Sprachforscher fasziniert.” (“[Kaspar Hauser,] romanticized object of innumerable historical illustrations, fascinated the psychologists as well as the language researcher” [135]) (translation my own), thus, affirming Kaspar’s significant history as a public figure well beyond the stage.

reconcile themselves with themselves or with their environment, who feel themselves to be isolated. (qtd. in New German Dramatists 64-5)

Handke's insights are both telling and problematic. Apart from reinforcing an ableist perception of disability (mythical or not) as encompassing "people who cannot reconcile themselves," he also seems to advocate a response – or to give (for lack of a better term) agency to enigmatic perceptions of Kaspar Hauser. Returning to Mitchell and Snyder's idea that authors often use disability as a complicating feature within their representational universes of narrative, Handke's push to create a new Kaspar serves their theory well. It is precisely this narrative appropriation of disability which generates and informs credible acknowledgement of its presence in literature. Although Handke's play reinforces notions of "disabled literary characterizations as evidence for. . . frailties in 'the human condition'" (Mitchell, Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis 16), the play also suggests that the defining factors of a frail "human condition" are irreconcilable because of language's partiality to contain and control difference. According to Mitchell and Snyder, the task of disability theory is to find what else literary study has to "offer our politicized understandings of disability" (16). Kaspar promotes uncertainty by presenting and manipulating a character who repeatedly states: "I want to be someone like somebody else was once" but "[Kaspar] *has no concept of what it means*" (Handke 58).

A Clown in a Language Trap

Curiously, (considering the possible cultural inseparability between the well known folkloric Kaspar and Handke's fictional Kaspar,) Handke emboldens the play's representational, theatrical status. In the preamble he boldly states: "The play *Kaspar*

does not show how IT REALLY IS or REALLY WAS with Kaspar Hauser. It shows what IS POSSIBLE with someone. It shows how someone can be made to speak through speaking" (53), and further, "The stage represents the stage" (54). Having established the necessary instructive, contextual borders for the theatre to sustain its own reality (although narrative often works against its own declarations), Kaspar as a spectacle of experiment intends to commence free of its historical moorings. However, audiences will presumably bring their historical, romanticized knowledge of what Peter Iden calls the "Foundling" (135) Kaspar Hauser as a sensationalized, sympathetic referent to the play. Ronald Hayman attempts to deflect such possibility:

[Handke] is not attempting to dramatise the story told in Hauser's autobiography, but to analyse a comparable loss of linguistic innocence, [. . .] the underlying assumption is that language can be an instrument of oppression and depersonalisation. (104)

Hayman's romantic notion of a disabled character losing "linguistic innocence" is comparable to Handke's idea that such a character is assumedly unable to reconcile himself with himself or his surroundings (New German Dramatists 64-5). These lines of thinking promote troubling perceptions of disability as frailty, or indeed, innocence, and suggests a pre-linguistic state signifies natural vulnerability. Hayman's observations concerning the unaccommodating potential of language is also of significance – especially when concretized as an "instrument." Similar to Foucault's summation of reasoning surrounding the invention of the stethoscope as "a measure of a prohibition

turned into disgust and a material obstacle”⁸ language also has the capacity to depersonalize difference.

Handke incites and enforces a pervasive and often oppressive didactic/linguistic instruction/construction in spite of (and because of) the presence of a disabled character on stage. Handke also goes as far as to suggest that his play exists as an aggressive exercise in “*speech torture*” (Kaspar 54) designated for a character who possesses a marginal linguistic identity. Disability is not simply a feature of Kaspar – it is what motivates the narrative and imbues it with tension towards an uneasy reform. The directive preamble to the play describes the theatrical mechanics responsible for antagonizing Kaspar’s entry into language:

To formalize this torture it is suggested that a kind of magic eye [resides] above the [stage]. This eye [. . .] indicates by blinking, the degree of vehemence with which the PROTAGONIST is addressed. The more vehemently he defends himself, the more vehemently he is addressed, the more vehemently the magic eye blinks. (Or one might employ a jerking indicator of the kind used on scales for tests of strength in amusement parks.) Although the sense of what the voices addressing the protagonist say should always be completely comprehensible, their manner of speaking should be that of voices which in reality have a technical medium interposed between themselves and the listeners: telephone voices, radio or television announcers’ voices, [. . .] of stadium

⁸ In The Birth of the Clinic, Foucault cites incidents where a patient’s gender, physicality, and in some cases lack of hygiene “forbade” a doctor to place his ear directly upon the body. Hence, the stethoscope creates and signifies a “moral distance” and a “distance of shame” between doctor and patient (163-4); the mechanisms of Handke’s play allow the audience to “listen” to Kaspar in an analogous fashion.

announcers, of narrators in the more endearing cartoons, of announcers of train arrivals and departures, of interviewers, of gym teachers who by the way they speak make their directions correspond to the sequence of the gymnastic movements, of language course records, of policemen as they speak through megaphones at demonstrations, etc., etc. (53)

Handke's interrogative-eye construct is startling: it actualizes the power embedded in the gaze upon spectacle. Although this process is sensationalized through a larger-than-life theatrical prop, the "magic eye" monitors and signifies the intensity of Kaspar's linguistic apprehension and refusal. The bold visual and aural connectivity framing the play presents the gaze of the magic eye as inherently corrective. The play also establishes that with such a gaze, language must follow. Handke propels what understandings and curiosities an audience may have concerning the Kaspar of history into a realm of modern language and theatrics. The deliberate interposition of a technical medium between the sound or expression of language and its listeners makes its apprehension starkly clinical, void of emotion and distant. Handke presents language as a stethoscopic event; as an instrument designed to prod and poke at a distance, as an instrument designed to search out and correct disorder through aggressive implementation and control.

Foucault's theories of the clinical/medical gaze are analogous and applicable to Handke's theatrical *treatment* of Kaspar. Foucault writes, "The clinical gaze has the paradoxical ability to *hear a language* as soon as it *perceives a spectacle*" (108). Within this precept, such stylized language becomes synonymous with the implied, corrective stare/gaze of the "magic eye." To facilitate this process Handke installs what he terms *Einsagers*, or prompters:

The prompters – three persons, say – remain invisible (their voices are perhaps pre-recorded) and speak without undertones or overtones; that is; they speak neither with the usual irony, humour, helpfulness, human warmth, nor with the usual ominousness, dread, incorporeality, or supernaturalness – they speak comprehensibly. Over a good amplifying system they speak a text that is not theirs. [. . .] the audience sees Kaspar walking from the wardrobe to the sofa and simultaneously hears speaking from all sides. (60)

With the elimination of all possibilities of subjective, individualistic voices to address Kaspar, (somewhere between the stoic syllabics of announcers and the imperative shouts of gymnastics instructors and police), Handke establishes *what language is heard* within the play. The visual and aural structure of prompters' command facilitating Kaspar's action (or inaction) motivates an acerbic, callous process of forcing normalcy upon a disabled character. Kaspar's movements (which the audience sees) incite the prompters to speak. This process imbues Foucault's gaze-equals-language construct with narrative credence. The subsequent linguistic constraints/constructions Kaspar endures hyperbolize how the presence of a disabled (or in normative terms: "deviant") body in a staged narrative for example often "deforms subjectivity" and how deviant subjectivity may "violently erup[t] on the surface of its bodily container" (Mitchell, Snyder, 58). As Handke's constructions show, this process also instigates a parallel manipulation of objectivity.

The import of the gaze also manoeuvres the barometer of subjectivity/objectivity. The paradoxical ability of the gaze to inform itself with language occurs through *what*

spectacle is perceived. How is the spectacle of Kaspar perceived? In accordance with Garland-Thomson's salient commentary concerning disability as something to be "stared at" (56), Handke sensationalizes his Kaspar to undeniable proportions:

Kaspar (Kasper means clown in German) does not resemble any other comedian; rather, when he comes on stage he resembles Frankenstein's monster (or King Kong). (53)

The stage-directive description invokes a jarring contemplation: this character possesses a name one letter shy of clown, thus making him literally unique. His characterization also signifies and embodies difference. As Kaspar arrives on stage, the playwright evokes an odd sense of comedy. The patchwork body of Dr. Frankenstein's monster is not known for its jovial effect upon audiences, and a conjured image of King Kong certainly inscribes more brute power than humour (as both these characters in their original fictions *killed*) – even as a parodic image. Handke deliberately posits his character as spectacle; one which is identifiable within the cultural and imagistic lexicon of monster. Handke describes Kaspar's appearance as "*theatrical*" with

a wide brimmed hat [. . .] a light-coloured shirt with a closed collar; a colourful jacket with many (roughly seven) metal buttons; wide trousers; clumsy shoes; on one shoe for instance, the very long laces have become untied. He looks droll. The colours of his outfit clash with the colours on stage. . . . [H]is face is a mask; . . . He is the incarnation of astonishment.
(58)

Presenting Kaspar upon the stage in the guise of a comedic monster implies a deliberate othering in terms of his appearance in front of an assumedly normative audience. He is an

“incarnation of astonishment” solely because of his exaggerated appearance. He does not fit (in a normative sense) within his environment. His “clumsy shoes” foreshadow a difficulty with walking while also instating him as an amusing clown. In her article “Peter Handke’s Kaspar: The Mechanics of Language – a Fractioning Schizophrenic Theatrical Event,” Bettina Knapp remarks, “the clown, drawing guffaws, is viewed as a joyful and ebullient creature. Beneath the mask, however, is a diametrically opposed being: a sorrowful, pained, and victimized individual” (241). Whether or not Handke wishes to portray Kaspar as both externally happy and internally sad, the clown motif carries with it such implications.

His movements also establish him as spectacle: “*His way of moving is highly mechanical and artificial*,” Handke continues, “*For example, he takes the first step with one leg straight out, the other following timorously and ‘shaking’*” (58). Kaspar’s locomotion is as uncertain as his identity. Expanding the possibilities of his ambiguous sentence, “I want to be someone like somebody else was once,” (60) does he also want to move like somebody else moved once? The descriptions of his movement as a “*constan[t] chang[e] from one way of moving to another*” and further as a “*convoluted progress*” in laborious semi-comedic fashion resonate with Samuel Beckett’s “Watt”; a character whose movements are eventually dictated by the way in which he speaks.⁹ Both works share a postmodern inclination towards “corporeal automatism” which often generates a misplaced laughter devoid of subjectivity (Miller 64). Handke’s manifestation

⁹ In the latter third of the novel, the narrator witnesses Watt (advancing backwards) through the grounds of a house with a “blood[ied face and] hands” (159). His physical staggers (amongst trees and thorny bushes) emulate his linguistic staggers, and cause bodily harm. His entry into the world of speech brings a humorous yet disconcerting image: “Wonder I, said Watt, panky-hanky me lend you could, blood away wipe[?]” (159-60). Like Kaspar, Watt does not need to fit within the linguistic order to exist. He is physically driven by his own unique syntax. The narrator seemingly normalizes Watt’s predicament: “As Watt walked, so now he talked back to front” (164).

of disability also becomes an anticipatory spectator sport: “*as the audience has feared all along, [Kaspar] finally falls to the ground*” (58). It is troubling to qualify Knapp’s ableist assumption that “Kaspar’s stiff gestures do not conform to the spectators’ perceptions of a human being” – even as fictive event. Thus, Kaspar’s presence upon the stage signifies a useful tension between the binaries of normal and disabled, and moreover challenges what informs such perceptions. Knapp’s further summation that “such *creatures* are and have been popular from time immemorial – whetting the imagination, titillating the senses, and generating ripples of laughter” (251, italics my own) both frustrates understandings of Kaspar and is only applicable from an assumed position of normalcy. Disability does retain a popularity in literature for the reasons she cites, yet, *creatures* such as Kaspar (or Watt for example,) certainly garner more significance than the marginal implications of titillation and humour might suggest. Their inertia challenges standards of normalcy.

Kaspar does not remain on the ground for long. From a performative perspective, a character in stasis is generally an uninteresting one. Bringing himself to sit in a “*disorderly lotus-position*” (58), the narrative becomes a vehicle for rumination and expansion of his solitary sentence: “I want to be someone like somebody else was once.” For Kaspar, this sentence is as problematic as it is promising. The vagaries of the sentence insist upon the inevitable relationship of Kaspar to himself and of language to things.

The Problem With the Word

As Kaspar repeats his sentence “*over and over*,” he eventually imbues it with “*almost every possible kind of expression*,” including a scream (59). Although he is able to illustrate a tonal range of emotion with his words, his apparent isolation brings no response. This lack of recognition forces Kaspar to interact with the inanimate objects (a couch, table and chairs, wardrobe, etc.) that surround him. As he begins to walk again, Handke writes, “*He directs his sentence [. . .] at a chair. . . . [then] at a wardrobe, expressing with it that the wardrobe does not hear him*” (59). His apparent frustrations toward these new-found objects and their lack of response lead him to “*kic[k] the wardrobe*,” after which he responds: “I want to be someone like somebody else was once” (60). By directing his own words towards concrete objects, Kaspar initializes a process of self-recognition, or indeed, subjectivity of self through language. Although not quite arriving at the symbolic order of language, Kaspar is certainly knocking at its door. Does Kaspar’s single sentence constitute sufficient subjective awareness of self? – or as Handke illustrates, is insufficient awareness of self (from an ableist perspective) something that the biases inherent in the socializing power of language must attempt to correct? The sentence operates between two temporal, grammatical positions: “I want to be” (definitive future) “like somebody else was once” (uncertain past). The sentence thrives in the imaginary, and Kaspar’s visceral disapproval of the non-recognition of his words suggests Kaspar also thrives in the imaginary. To borrow from Jacques Lacan, “it is only in the moment of entry into the symbolic order of language that [a character’s] full subjectivity comes into being” (qtd. in Modern Literary Theory 123).

Although the notions associated with Schlueter's earlier use of the term "possession" (41) in regard to Kaspar Hauser's infamous sentence suggest a previously established linguistic identity for Kaspar, Handke's theatrical realm implies possession of a sentence is nothing if one does not know how to use it. How then is language used in Lacanian terms, if not simply to fictionalize the self? Corker and Shakespeare suggest,

All self-knowledge is fractured and fragile – put another way, experience lies as the individual subject is caught between imaginary traps of narcissistic mirroring and symbolic locations of language. (Disability/Postmodernity 9)

As a disabled "individual subject," Kaspar locates his language within the imaginary of his sentence. Recalling that he "*has no concept of what it means*" (58), directing his sentence to a piece of furniture serves as his appropriation of anchoring the sentence symbolically. Speaking words out loud, even without understanding them imbues Kaspar with an obscure subjectivity. His *misplacement* of the sentence informs the corrective gaze of the magic eye and incites the prompters to speak. With Foucault's concept in mind, *the perceived spectacle* of Kaspar attempting to anchor his sentence *forces a language to be heard*. This process allows the systematic, emotionless, directive, imperative didacticism of the prompters to locate and place language *for* Kaspar. The gaze possesses a limited patience. As the audience sees Kaspar walk from the wardrobe to the couch the prompters begin to speak:

<i>Kaspar goes to the sofa. He</i>	Already you have a sentence
<i>discovers the gaps between the</i>	with which you can make
<i>cushions. He puts one hand into a</i>	yourself noticeable. With this
<i>gap. He can't extract his hand. To</i>	sentence you can make yourself

<i>help extract it, he puts his other</i>	noticeable in the dark, so no
<i>hand into the gap. He can't.</i>	one will think you are an
<i>extract either hand.</i>	animal. (59)

Handke's spatial use of text throughout the play is significant: here, the left column is the omniscient narrator's domain and the right column belongs to the prompters – firmly establishing Kaspar (initially, at least) as a character without a voice. The prompters assume a constant control over Kaspar, in order to tell/instruct him of the capabilities of his sentence. Juxtaposing the two columns of text allows mirroring. The language of the prompters serves as a corrective lens of sorts, attaching itself to Kaspar the spectacle. Since the “sentence” makes Kaspar “noticeable” – through his earlier actions, etc. – it also implies hierarchical difference. Although Kaspar's staged-behaviour is an approximation of animalistic behaviour, such deliberate contradiction between dialogue and action continually frustrates the ability of language to control and contain the deviant/disabled body throughout the play. Commenting upon the uncertainty of controlling a body through language, Mitchell and Snyder suggest:

The relation between a body and the language used to describe it is unstable, an alien alliance: materiality is not language, and language cannot be material, although each strives to conform to the terms of the other. We engage our bodies in efforts to make their stubborn materiality “fit” ideals. Likewise, words give us the illusion of a fix upon the material world that they cannot deliver. (7)

In context of Kaspar's narrative, the role of the prompters is to make his “stubborn materiality” fit their objectives and ideology. The process becomes unstable. According

to this perspective, to “deliver” Kaspar into the symbolic order of language, or, indeed to anchor him (through words) to the materiality of his environment is a fragmented, hollow endeavour. Commenting upon the use of language in Kaspar, Knapp observes, “Words and figures of speech [become] mechanical devices endowed with concretion”

(241). What does phrasal concretion achieve? Handke writes:

You have a sentence to bring order into every disorder: with which you can designate every disorder in comparison to another disorder as a comparative order: with which you can declare every disorder an order: can bring yourself into order: with which you can talk away every disorder. You have a sentence you can take as a model. You have a sentence you can place between yourself and everything else. You are the lucky owner of a sentence which will make every impossible order possible for you and make every possible and real disorder impossible for you: which will exorcise every disorder from you. (63)

During the prompters’ spiel of correctives, Kaspar manages to “*tip* [a rocking chair] *over*,” as if his actions connote a physical purging of “disorder.” The possibilities of the sentence *do* become concrete. Through vigorous repetition, the notion of “a sentence” becomes multivalent. The sentence induces order; both as a construct of protection and as a disturbing source of normalizing power. The prompters imply disorder is fixable with language, and that language is a cure-all for that which is not orderly. In a Foucauldian sense, the sentence becomes a tool to label and correct difference. Kaspar is trapped within the margins of disorder until he acquires enough language to seemingly “exorcize”

himself. Through continual repetition, Kaspar's original sentence continually morphs as if to challenge processes of greater language acquisition, in spite of the prompters' words:

<i>He resists more vehemently,</i>	Where are you sitting? You are
<i>but even less successfully:</i>	sitting quietly. What are you
Waswant!	speaking? You are speaking
Somelike!	slowly. What are you breathing?
Someone!	You are breathing regularly. (68).

Handke's notion of "*speech torture*" (54) implies that the normative model of self refuses an individual's possession of (merely) a single sentence. Here, the prompters mirror and interrogate Kaspar's relation of language to behaviour more closely than before. Kaspar's frustrations oppose a set of questions and answers with misplaced question words. This partial balance between prompters and subject coincides with the directive that Kaspar's "resistance" is less successful, and allows the prompters to "*continu[ally] stuff him with enervating words*" and "*needl[e him] into speaking*" (70). Again, the act of speech is concretized into a corrective, invasive tool. Appropriating Kaspar's exclamatory responses to his lack of vocabulary, and inability to name innate objects (a table, broom, shoelace, etc.) the prompters suggest, "They are a horror to you because you don't know what they are called" (70). Language then, for the prompters, provides Kaspar salvation from the "horror" of a marginal linguistic capacity. Simply knowing the names of objects will apparently pacify Kaspar's unfamiliarity to them. Far from the natural maturation into the linguistic/symbolic order of language that Lacan suggests is necessary to keep an

individual from “danger” (130), all instructional progress is assumed and directed by the prompters.

The Sentence of ‘I’

Disability theorist/literary critic Sanjeev Kumor Upreti postulates upon the Lacanian notion that once someone comprehends identity as an “I,” or through a name, there exists an immediate fading away of the self through language, likened to a Freudian castration of the self which language is unable to replace (The Disability Studies Reader 370):

This sense of lack leads to the birth of desire and then to a continuous movement through which the subject seeks to fulfill the lack by taking up an infinite chain of signifiers, that is, by making a series of metaphoric and metonymic substitutions to move from one signifier to another. But the sense of lack does not find its fulfillment in any particular signifier, hence the continuous slide along the chain of signifiers. Language thus “chains” the human subject, capturing it irrevocably within the prisonhouse of language. (370)

As Upreti suggests, the lack associated with discovering (and trying to maintain) a sense of selfhood encompasses a perpetual search for language the self can attach to; a constant slippage of signification. As Mitchell and Snyder point out, words “cannot deliver” (7) so metaphors and other figures of speech etc., substitute for each other while attempting to contain the weight of one’s identity, in a sense, forming a Lacanian “prisonhouse” of

language. The sentence also acts as a verb signifying a linguistic struggle for stable identity. Kaspar's awareness of self through speech illustrates this conundrum:

Ever since I can speak I can stand up in an orderly manner; but falling only hurts ever since I can speak; but the pain when I fall is half as bad ever since I know I can speak about the pain;. . .but the pain never stops at all any more ever since I know that I can feel ashamed of falling. (74).

Speech, then, embodies and perpetuates a continual reconciliatory assessment for Kaspar. Communicatory ability does enable an expression of self, but for Kaspar, correction of his apparent disorder reifies a painful physical sensation that language is unable to stabilize, solve or fix. Language proves an inadequate tool for Kaspar's *relationship to himself*, as words are unable to deliver him comfort. Kaspar's continual foray into language brings an unsettling fluency fraught with word-play and faulty deductive reasoning. His *instructive* conversations with the prompters take on increasingly distant concepts of shifting, substitutive signification:

The avalanche roars. The angry
man roars.

The angry man thunders.
Thunder thunders. Without the
angry man, thunder couldn't
thunder. (93)

The absurdity of these syllogistic images frustrates Kaspar's logical entry into language while troubling the logic of language itself. As David Wills suggests, "The body's need to comprehend a materiality external to it is answered via the ruse of language" (qtd. in

Narrative Prosthesis 7-8). In other words, Handke forces an answer to Kaspar's understanding of external materiality through the "ruse of language." As the language is, in part, disruptive, so too is Kaspar's comprehension of the external. It is no surprise that Kaspar states: "I no longer understand anything literally" (139), including, presumably a forcible realization of himself. As Kaspar continually acquires language, his understanding of "I" as it relates to himself begins to change. The prompters' continual "needl[ing]" (70) eventually incites Kaspar to state his pre-condition in terms of disease: "Once plagued by sentences"; and his present linguistic abilities in terms of an unsettling addiction: "I now can't have enough of sentences" (110). The magic eye's corrective gazes upon Kaspar and the relentless imperatives of the prompters ultimately convince Kaspar "to be rational" (110). If his capitulation is reflective of, or causal to the sporadic specious dictates of the prompters, then Kaspar's *rational* behaviour becomes a suspect veneer upon his old self, and contradictory to the mechanisms of the play serving as enforcers of normalcy. Kaspar then uses his new-found rationality to express his desire. He states: "Now I know what I want: I want / to be / quiet" (111).

Ironically, Kaspar's use of language leads him to crave silence. Returning to Mitchell and Snyder's observation that language (and therefore the body within language) "strives to conform to the terms of the other" (7); the arduous task of Kaspar's conformance to the prompters' didacticisms pushes him to a silent space where language does not exist. Kaspar's refusal of the word illustrates the inclination of the word to falsely define self and desire. More importantly, shortly after Kaspar vehemently states "I am the one I am" (100), Handke instates an unnerving process of bringing other Kaspars onto the stage (102). By the second half of the play several Kaspars join the original

Kaspar, embodying much of his earlier behaviour. This process signifies that Kaspar who possesses language is simply a manipulated, appropriated puppet version of himself. As Tom Kuhn says, "Rather than an education, [Kaspar] receives a crippling deconstruction. He becomes a fluent speaker, but no longer of his own lines" (Peter Handke: Plays :1 xvi). Although he learns a sense of order, insofar as to "never / again / . . . shudder / before an empty wardrobe" (Kaspar 125), Kuhn's observation illustrates Kaspar's apparent education in *relating to things* does not necessitate a confidence of self. Kuhn's curious use of the term "crippling" to define Kaspar's narrative experience points to a unique phenomenon where an appropriated signifier of disability attempts to define the experiences of a disabled character.¹⁰ This process shares a similarity with the workings of Handke's play: the language that occurs because of the spectacle of disability becomes the language that attempts to correct disability within a fabrication of order and normalcy.

Peter Handke's Kaspar illustrates that the use of language to contain and control a disabled body is problematic and inadequate. Foucault's analysis of the gaze as relative to disability/literary theory, coupled with the ineptitude of words to define self invigorates the intent and process of normalization. Language is neither absolute, nor a reflection of normalcy. As an arbitrary construction of signs, language implies order, but as Kaspar's narrative experience shows, it is unable to guarantee order. The concept of forcing

¹⁰ In Claiming Disability, Linton writes,

Some of the less subtle or more idiomatic term for disabled people such as: *cripple*, *vegetable*, *dumb*, *deformed*, *retard*, and *gimp* have generally been expunged from public conversation but emerge in various types of discourse. Although they are understood to be offensive or hurtful, they are still used in jokes and informal conversation.

Cripple as a descriptor of disabled people is considered impolite, but the word has retained its metaphoric vitality. . . . The term is also used occasionally for its evocative power (16).

normalcy is oxymoronic, and trapped within its own terms. As Kaspar's disability is systematically expropriated through a language and methodology that is not his own, language becomes a disabling agent. Handke shifts Kaspar's initial magnetism as both spectacle and site of disability and reassigns it to language itself: Kaspar states: "I mean to say that a *sentence* is a monster" (139, italics my own), and therefore *not* the individual *or* the disability. The notion of spectacle belongs to words – not to someone who seldom uses them.

Chapter Two:

Freaking Normal: Shifting Perception in Tod Browning's Freaks

The presentation (and representation) of disabled characters constitute a familiar trope within filmic narrative but rarely do such narratives inform the fallibility of normalcy. Narratives interrogating the notion that those who are (physically or cognitively) different must somehow operate *outside* the margins of normalcy – instead of defining them – interrogate dominant (ableist) ideology. The cast of characters in Tod Browning's controversial film Freaks (1932), posits an examination of normalcy and its perceptions. The film actualizes a community of exploited bodies known, presumably, as pathological spectacles defined by both themselves and the normative, consumptive stare/gaze upon the freak show – creating a filmic diegesis that invigorates and challenges notions of normalcy in terms of body, behaviour, and viewer identification. As discussed in my first chapter, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's observations surrounding the spectacle of disability and the disabled as “objects of awe, scorn, terror, delight, inspiration, pity, laughter, or fascination,” also applies to Freaks, as well as that “they have always been stared at” (56). Browning acknowledges this phenomenon by presenting disability and the disabled character as central to the film's construction, and as a vital site of empowerment. While the diegesis of Freaks works against the eugenic nudging of “eliminating such blunders of nature from the world” (Freaks Prologue [added c.1945]), it also allows representations of difference and the disabled character to occupy (and define) a centre of identity, albeit one arriving out of the spectacle of a circus side show.

Not Your Average Soap Opera

Freaks exists as one of the most controversial films ever made. It was removed from theatres six months after its release in 1932 – apparently in part due to pressure from various interest groups seeking to preserve the morality of what was consumed upon the screen (Freaks DVD Commentary, David Skal). Skal also asserts in the commentary accompanying its recent re-release that it sent a woman “screaming down the aisle.” This promotional hype offers sensational hearsay in regard to Sharon L. Snyder’s suggestion that, “audiences had rejected its freak-culture vantage on the non-disabled” (181). That members of a side show (and circus) exist onscreen as protagonistic while several normal-bodied characters in the film display antagonistic behaviour offers a reversal of dominant ableist ideology. Yet Browning’s storyline in the film is relatively straightforward. It is the presumably *freakish* characters within the film (dwarfs, a human torso, conjoined twins, a man without legs who propels himself with his hands, etc.) and an audience’s acceptance or denial of these characters which generates unsettling tension. If one considers the simplicity of the film’s narrative (an engaged man lusting after another woman, and that woman feigning interest because of his wealth – and she attempting to murder him after their marriage – culminating in the subsequent revenge of the man and his friends when her evil plot is foiled) then why such controversy? Browning’s plot of love and revenge follows dramatic conventions, yet the film is continually classified as a horror film.¹¹ Is it due to Browning’s casting of a dwarf as the engaged man (Hans) and a *normal sized* woman (Cleopatra the trapeze artist) as his desire? Early promotion of the film (appearing on a poster) asks: “Can a full grown

¹¹ Reaffirming its classification, I purchased Warner Brothers’ 2004 DVD release of Freaks in the horror section of my local entertainment shop.

woman truly love a MIDGET?” (Snyder 181 (Fig.5)) and further, a later review of the film suggests, “for pure sensationalism *Freaks* tops any picture yet produced. It’s more fantastic and grotesque than any shocker ever written,” (Louella Parsons, qtd. from fig. 18.1, *Freakery* 266). If the storyline is relatively banal, then the shock value of *Freaks* exists solely in the characters it presents to the viewer, and more importantly how such characters might be perceived. The existence of non-typical characters in Browning’s film, and their collusion with apparently more normative models of self (such as Cleopatra and her strongman lover Hercules) forces a re-evaluation of normalcy itself. In this regard, it is important to note the film’s marginalized history. After MGM refused to distribute *Freaks*, it was distributed by the “notorious exploitation roadshow man Dwain Esper [who promoted it] with such lurid titles as *Forbidden Love* and *Nature’s Mistakes*” (IMDb online). Certainly, playing upon normative/ableist audiences’ curiosities with tabooed behaviour and subject matter is a tenet of entertainment exploitation. Much like the sentiment of the question: “can a full grown woman truly love a midget?”¹² elicits a response of improbability, *Freaks* operates within an already marginalized perception; especially considering its continual promotion as something illicit.

As if these eye-catching titles were not enough of an indicator of content, the film has included a “special message” added in the 1940s. This scrolling preamble or prologue attempts to contextualize (in two-and-a-half minutes) ableist perception(s) of disability in relation to disability throughout history. As Nicole Markotić points out in her article,

¹² As a contemporary referent, the 2003 film *The Station Agent*’s main character Finn (played by well-known dwarf actor Peter Dinklage), has a love interest with an able-bodied female character. Although the viewer sees them kiss, the next scene shows them lying side by side on a couch – implying that something more might have taken place, but it is never explicit within the film. In another scene, of mild violence, Finn is also referred to as a “freak” by the female character’s belligerent able-bodied boyfriend. Even seventy-one years after the release of *Freaks*, the studio initially refused to fund *The Station Agent* because it stars a disabled actor.

“Disabling the Viewer: Perceptions of Disability in Tod Browning’s Freaks,” the prologue was inserted by the film’s distributor in the late 1940s – almost twenty years after its initial release” (69). Keeping historical context in mind, the prologue’s language echoes of the systematic medical correction, experimentation upon, and extermination of disabled people in Nazi Germany: “Never again will such a story be filmed, as modern science and teratology are rapidly eliminating such blunders of nature from the world.”¹³ At one point, this *message* suggests that the “revulsion” a viewer might feel towards such “unfortunates” is simply “a product of our forefathers’ conditioning,” and gently reminds the assumedly able-bodied viewer that the characters about to be seen are susceptible to the “barbs of normal people.” Considering the blatant interpolation of eugenics in conjunction with terms such as “conditioning,” “eliminating,” and the phrase “blunders of nature,” it would seem the “barbs” of “normal people” are tame in comparison to the film’s own promoters. Although the possible intent of this message is designed to safely distance the supposed normal viewer from the film’s abnormal subjects, the story that follows deconstructs its authority. Freaks illustrates the disabled body in opposition to the limitations set out by the prologue, such as “begging, stealing or starving” and unable to “control their lot.” As the plot progresses, the freakish characters of the film seldom occupy roles of passivity and eventually affirm control over the antagonistic Cleopatra and Hercules – presumably in order to protect and maintain their community.

Freaks offers a glimpse at disability regardless of a dominant ideology that commercially or historically seeks to suppress it. As Snyder suggests, “Disability

¹³ Mitchell and Snyder note that during World War II “Nazi death camps. . . killed between 100,000 and 125,000 German citizens with disabilities” (The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability 21).

histories can be located in texts that seem to demand eradication through the promise of restorative cures or banishment from public arenas”(182). This idea is ultimately transferable to the notion of freak-empowerment. In the 1960s, Freaks garnered cult-status, and was shown in many universities and independent movie houses (Skal, Commentary). This was largely due to the reassignment of the term *freak* with the rise of the counter-culture in North America. The word itself became an emblem operating against dominant cultural ideology. Disability Theory also has investiture in the term. Linton asserts that the term “freak” has “transgressive potential [as] a useful means to comment on oppression [and to] assert [a disabled individual’s] right to name experience” (17). While this assertion and evident reclamation of “freak” operates as a sort of internalized discrimination, it also wrests ownership and dissemination from the hands of would-be exploiters.

Browning’s film continually troubles the plausibility of normal-bodied characters subsuming and actualizing control over the freakish characters within the film. One such moment occurs during the climactic “Wedding Feast” scene, where Hans and Cleopatra celebrate their hasty marriage with several members of the circus and side show. Yet the celebration is bifurcated by the differing motivations of Hans (the main protagonist) and Cleopatra (the main antagonist). Hans’s perceptible joy arises from his genuine affection towards his new, trapeze artist wife. Cleopatra, conversely, cajoles and flirts with her lover Hercules while she adds poison to Hans’s bottle of champagne – in obvious anticipation of inheriting his wealth. Browning’s deliberate villainization of Cleopatra and Hercules in this scene portrays them as opportunistic, greedy characters taking advantage of Hans’s good intentions. The wedding feast scene also troubles perceptions

of both normalcy and disability. In her article “The Horror of Becoming “One of Us”:

Tod Browning’s Freaks and Disability,” Sally Chivers suggests,

... audience members are lulled into a comfortable position viewing a celebration amongst friends who at least pretend to feel joy at what Hans considers to be his good fortune. Audience members also remain aware and visually confront the two “normal”s murderous intentions. (61)

With whom does an audience align in this scene? a gullible dwarf, or a normal-sized character knowingly attempting murder? Later, as Cleopatra is encouraged to drink from a ritualistic “loving cup” making its way around the table, various members of the side show group (including a bearded lady and a woman with no arms) begin to chant “We accept her,” “One of us!” and “Gooble, gobble!” (Freaks). Here, Browning juxtaposes the ‘freaks’ apparent inclusive jubilation with Cleopatra’s visceral repugnance of such a prospect; she physically removes herself from the table and refuses the symbolic loving cup by throwing its contents at those who identify as “us,” – apparently in fear of becoming *one of them*. Thus, Browning creates a unique possibility of identifiable subject for the audience, placing viewers in a position choice about whom to identify with, complicating what the phrase “one of us” connotes. Cleopatra resists the prospect of alignment with the freaks, and as a locus of identity during this scene, she also “supposedly mirrors the reaction of an ableist viewership” (Chivers 61). The fact that Cleopatra is complicit in attempting to murder her new husband makes her an uneasy, undesirable site of ableist identity. She may *look* normal, but her motivations perpetuate deviancy, dishonesty and point to the fallacy of ableist hegemony. Her refusal to become *one of us* implies that neither she (nor the presumptions of an “ableist viewership”) has a

stable identity within the film. That is to say, Freaks wrests control of the disabled body away from the antagonistic normal-bodied characters within the film. The wedding feast scene shows that the prospect of aligning with disabled bodies – as opposed to murderous normative bodies – destabilizes an audiences' relation to the characters upon the screen. Chivers continues:

Audiences cannot easily feel affinity for the “freaks” since their physical shape dictates moral infirmity and potential nefarious action, and they cannot easily feel affinity for the “normals” since their actions do not match their physical shape, and so they also present moral infirmity and nefarious action. (61)

Chivers's implication that disabled bodies “dictate” weakness and evil while normative bodies merely “present” such traits is indicative of stereotypical, clichéd representations of disability in narrative. The idea that a normative, able-bodied character displays behaviour that does not coincide with normative physicality suggests that able-bodied characters can choose such behaviour, while the disabled body, or character, demands it. In “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People.” Paul K. Longmore cites three well-worn tropes of disability in film. He writes, “disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their ‘fate’ [and] disabled people resent the non-disabled and would, if they could, destroy them” (4). The freaks, however, for the majority of Browning's film, emulate and embody normalcy. As Joan Hawkins suggests in her article “One of Us: Tod Browning's *Freaks*,” “the film goes to great lengths to ‘normalize’ the freaks” showing disabled characters “going about the business of everyday life” (267). Freaks presents the side show community and characters as

representative of normal behaviour.¹⁴ Therefore, any disruptions to the stability of their constructed-as-normal community creates tension which ultimately seeks narrative resolution. The dysfunctional, sensationalized relationship between Hans and Cleopatra provides impetus to drive the freaks, and Cleopatra and Hercules, to prove Longmore's observations of representation of disability in film correct. Hans becomes resentful of Cleopatra's treatment towards him, and corrals his community towards the eventual destruction of the antagonistic pair, Cleopatra and Hercules. Disability also operates as "a punishment for evil" when, near the end of the film, Hercules is killed and Cleopatra truly becomes "one of us" as a spectacle of the side show. Thus, Chivers's notion of disabled bodies/characters dictating and embodying "nefarious" vengeful behaviour is appropriate, seemingly out of a protective sense of self-preservation for the community of freaks – such behaviour, ironically, mirrors the eugenic overtones of the film's Prologue.

Browning illuminates this troubling protective process during Cleopatra's hyperbolic labelling of the disabled side show members as "Dirty, slimy, freaks!" The phrase serves as an ultimate refusal of her alignment with disabled bodies during the wedding feast. In a later scene, Browning reappropriates the same words to Hans, the now embittered newlywed. While apparently convalescing in his trailer, wise to Cleopatra's continued attempts to poison him, Hans arranges a meeting later that night in his trailer where "all [the freaks]" will be "ready" to presumably rectify his dilemma. With the plan underway, Hans mimics the placating words of Cleopatra after she leaves his trailer, stating bitterly: "I must hurry now and fix your medicine, my darling. Or I will

¹⁴ In the film, there are several scenes where disabled characters embody normative behaviour such as Frieda hanging up her laundry, a character with no arms using a fork and knife with her feet, Randian the Living Torso lighting and smoking a cigarette, a bearded lady giving birth, and one of the conjoined twins (Daisy) getting married.

be late. (Pauses) Dirty, slimy, freaks” (Freaks). Hans’s voice is also wrought with a tone of hushed vengeance as he plots revenge while lying in his sick-bed, recovering from Cleopatra’s attempt(s) to poison him. Hans *does* speak Cleopatra’s same oppressive terms, but he speaks as an occupier of a recently sympathetic subject of audience identification. Not only is he disabled, but also apparently near death. His appropriation of the phrase “Dirty, slimy, freaks!” seeks to rectify his marginalized experience, akin to Linton’s observation that the term “freak” serves as “a useful means to comment on oppression [and to] assert [a disabled individual’s] right to name experience”(17). Hans’s monologue makes an audience aware of his displeasure of being referred to and treated as a freak by Cleopatra, and also signifies a cohesion between freaks in order to punish her oppressive behaviour. Browning’s portrayal of Hans challenges the notion that sympathy is the only narrative currency of an invalid character. As Hans recovers he also plots his revenge. This switch in his characterization – from sympathetic victim to potential murderer – disrupts a viewer’s potential “affinity” (Chivers 61) to align and/or sympathize with Hans.

With its intriguing characterizations of the disabled body, Freaks expands the margins of acceptable subject matter while also employing many side show actors of the day. In other words, it employed freaks to play freaks.¹⁵ The lack of cohesion an able-bodied audience may feel towards such characters suggests that such an endeavour is “remarkable,” and moreover, “What is also remarkable is the film’s insistence that the freak characters be front and center of the camera” (Markotić 66). Browning’s presentation of actual disabled bodies as characters in the film is central to its diegetic

¹⁵ Citing a possible motivation for this, Markotić suggests, “Many of the actors made more from this one movie than their (often exploitative) roles in circuses enabled them to earn in their entire lifetime” (66).

construction by giving disabled characters ample screen-time to (returning to Hawkins's suggestion) normalize their behaviour (at least in the first two-thirds of the film) beyond the side show therefore normalizes their on-screen experiences for an audience. Such attention to the disabled subject (as normative or otherwise) leads Brian Rosenberg to declare, that "Browning [is] the father of freak studies in [the twentieth] century" (*Freakery* 307).¹⁶ This film does indeed attempt to study the disability without a preponderance of pathology. It certainly offers more than as David Skal suggests, "a soap opera set in a side show" (DVD Commentary). Skal's summation of *Freaks* attempts to normalize what much of the film seeks to disrupt, namely the objectivity of normalcy. The beautiful people of soap operas do not arrive with a prologue which attempts to apologize for the state and status of their characters, nor does their homogeneous consistency resonate with the bodily diversity exemplified in Browning's film.

Disability Can Happen to *You*

The setting of the film (a circus side show) provides a site to contain and display apparent abnormality for the normal, but soon establishes the opposite. Browning encapsulates the insatiable appetite of the paying (and presumably able-bodied) customer through an initial step-right-this-way framing of the film whereupon the barker states, "We didn't lie to you folks, we told you we had living, breathing *monstrosities* [. . .] and yet, but for the accident of birth, you might be even as they are" (*Freaks*, emphasis my

¹⁶ Rosenberg, however, displays some reluctance with this label for Browning, suggesting:

[*Freaks* possesses a] delicate balance (or confused indecision) between sympathy for and revulsion at its misshapen subjects. Characters who are one moment described as "God's children" are the next crawling through the slime prepared to murder and mutilate, so that one can't quite tell whether Browning wants to embrace or obliterate them. ("Teaching *Freaks*" 307)

own). The barker's commentary is revealing. Not only does the show consist of individuals tagged as objects of fear and repulsion, but the show also *owns* these characters. Such a construct enforces normative control over freakish bodies in terms of defining and regulating their exposure to an assumedly normative audience. This phenomenon, as Garland-Thomson suggests, was, prior to the close of the nineteenth century, "a central element in our collective cultural project of representing the body" (Freakery 13). These bodies serve as entertainment for an able-bodied audience of circus or film. If Browning's objective within the film is to consider and thereby critique this process, then he must invariably investigate the representation and perception of freak show bodies. Curiously, the barker's commentary touches upon a central tenet of disability studies inquiry while interrogating ideas of normalcy: "but for the accident of birth, you might be even as they are." There exists a potential, uncomfortable alignment between the possessors of the normative, consumptive stare (the crowd of able-bodied paying customers), and the object of their stare (the as-yet-unseen "chicken woman" in the illuminated box). The subsequent screams and murmurs of the crowd impart for the viewer a voracious and visceral curiosity for what might be in the box. Returning to the troubling definition of the central subjects in the film as "accidents" is similar to Michael Bérubé's assertion that:

Any of us who identify as "nondisabled" must know that our self-designation is invariably temporary, and that a car crash, a virus, a degenerative genetic disease, or a precedent-setting legal decision could change our status [. . .] If it is obvious why most non-disabled people

resist this line of thinking, it should be equally obvious why that

resistance must somehow be overcome. (Claiming Disability viii)

Bérubé's observations of how disability might be thought of from a "nondisabled" point-of-view emulates the repulsion expressed by the audience attending the freak show in Browning's film, and also illustrates the fallibility of normalcy and the "normal body." If disability is potentially accidental, then it is applicable to all – whether an individual chooses to think about it or not. While Bérubé rightly points out that disability can indeed "change our status," and that acceptance of such a possibility is fraught with ableist resistance, Browning's sensationalist introduction to the arcane world of the freak show – defining freaks as "accident[s] of birth" – implies birth as causation of difference. Such a clichéd notion of (ab)normality as merely a success or misfortune of birth, thus as something inherited, is problematic and fraught with eugenic connotations. Mitchell and Snyder's assertion that disability exists as a "complicating feature" of many narratives (as discussed in chapter one) is apparent in Freaks. By not allowing the camera into the illuminated *box of horror*, Browning forces the narrative to explain how and why such a spectacle exists. As the barker alludes to the representatively problematic "freak code of ethics," stating, "offend one and you offend them all," the narrative begins its interrogative journey of conflict, eventually resolving itself within the box (revealing the absurd and physically impossible "chicken woman" initially hidden from view). What (or who) could be responsible for this latest addition to the freak show? For the two normal-bodied antagonists of Freaks (Cleopatra and Hercules), disability features itself as a process of removal or making absent. Continuing his spiel, the barker reveals that the spectacle within the box *used to be* Cleopatra – the former "peacock of the air" trapeze

artist. For her, disability becomes the removal of beauty, a punishment which negates her ability to remain as a beautiful entertainer. Near the end of the film, she becomes an absurdly horrific chicken in a box. Hercules's castration (replaced with his murder in the released version of the film) also symbolizes disability as removal, namely removal of masculinity.¹⁷ It is clear that Cleopatra's altered body is not an "accident of birth," directing the viewer to speculate and conclude that her new condition is due to offending one of the freaks and thereby violating the "freak code of ethics." This event disproves the idea of disability as an accident of birth, and invites the plausibility of disability *happening to you* – reaffirming that normalcy is in fact, a temporary state.

Freak as Normal, Normal as Freak

Browning continually destabilizes comfortable notions of normalcy. Even before a single "freakish" character appears on screen, the viewer is placed back in time to witness the (apparently) beautiful and able body of Cleopatra, perched high above the circus stage, knowing she will not remain as normal as she appears to be. In a remarkable twist of dominant cultural perception, the view from beneath the trapeze framing Cleopatra belongs to Hans – the impeccably well-dressed dwarf. As Hans exclaims (in spite of his fiancé Frieda's presence), "She is the most beautiful big woman I have ever seen" (*Freaks*), Browning presents Hans as a locus of perception, anchored within his own cultural discourse. The adjective of "big" confers his desire to contain her normative body in his terms. Cleopatra becomes the subject of Hans's idealized male gaze. While

¹⁷ In her essay "'One of Us': Tod Browning's *Freaks*," Joan Hawkins writes: "Originally, both of the lovers were to be treated with sexual brutality – essentially to be 'neutered'" (272). The present ending reaffirms that Hercules's masculinity is still intact when he is murdered.

this scene initiates the predictable tropes of the marginalized undesirable body lusting after the desirable ableist body, and the male gaze objectifying the female body, it does so in unique fashion: it inverts the object of spectacle, making Hans – not Cleopatra – a stable and sympathetic site of identity – thereby forcing an identity choice upon the viewer: to align with the pleasant and polite Hans and Frieda or knowingly commit to a character (Cleopatra) whose normalcy is in peril. The film’s suppressed history (in terms of exposure to a wide audience) is in part due to Browning’s innovative alignment of viewer with a non-typical bodily perspective. Returning to Snyder’s suggestion that, “audiences had rejected its freak-culture vantage on the non-disabled” (181), Mitchell and Snyder vehemently connote the cultural importance of challenging ableist perspectives in films such as Freaks:

The constructed cultural estrangement from disabled people’s perspectives that have been shrouded in mystery must fall away [. . .] writers and filmmakers possess the unique opportunity to dismantle our alienating mythologies by risking entry into this seemingly unimaginable or uninhabitable universe. (175)

Relocating the source of the stare, and ultimately, viewer identification to a character entrenched in an “alienating mythology” does indeed risk entry into the unknown; insofar as it reverses Garland-Thomson’s observation of “awe” surrounding the idea that “Disabled people have [. . .] always been stared at” (56). The able-bodied Cleopatra is now the one being stared at. This process contributes to the perception that “Audiences felt (and still feel) incomprehension for being placed into a position of spectatorship unable to either relate to, or condemn entirely, the characters coming to life onscreen”

(Markotić 66-7). Hans's admiration for Cleopatra certainly moves beyond voyeuristic admiration; as in the scene where Cleopatra complains of a sore back and Hans eagerly provides relief. Her motivations provide humour for the other able-bodies close by and place the viewer in an uncomfortable position. There is nothing out of the ordinary with a back rub per se, but Hans's sexual motivations force the viewer to identify him as a character with sexual desires. And the humour provided to Cleopatra's friends suggests that Hans's desires are ridiculous. Browning's treatment of this scene allows an examination of the myths surrounding otherness. Hans's stature does not preclude him from his desires, therefore condemnation of his actions as a source of ableist "humour" within the film exploits his desires for the sake of other characters' amusements. Browning's Hans provides analysis of the intersections and tensions between ideas of normalcy and difference.¹⁸

With an innovative representation of what constitutes normalcy, Browning uses set design and filmic technique to frame the two central protagonists (Hans and Frieda) within a house suited to their proportions. The deliberate framing of a carnival-sized trailer encourages a re-evaluation of the dimensions of normalcy. Quite literally, Browning avoids placing Hans and Frieda in an environment that "construct[s] cultural estrangement from [their own] perspectives" and creates a very "[h]abitable universe" (Mitchell, Snyder 175) instead. Their surroundings are not disruptive, nor a reminder of a normal-sized environment. This alleviation of physical difference allows the conversation that takes place inside the seriousness it deserves. If these characters were speaking

¹⁸ By comparison, in Pär Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf* (1945), the "twenty-six inc[h] tall" (5) narrator finds *normal sized* people repugnant. His opinions throughout the text display a tendency to view normalcy as freakish – Browning also embraces this concept. The two works also share a contemporaneous resonance as foils to the logic of eugenics by portraying able-bodied, normative characters as fallible.

amongst giant, imposing furniture, the subsequent effectiveness would be comical. The quaint comfort of Hans's living space underscores the domesticity of their conversation. The setting also allows for differently-abled characters to exhibit normative clichéd behaviour in terms of gender stereotypes: a passive, compassionate female and an aggressive and deterministic male who provides a conventional response to an emotionally discarded female character. Standing at the doorway in classic filmic fashion, Hans seems oblivious to Frieda's calm caveats about his desire to wed Cleopatra. Frieda also reveals what the viewer has known since Hans began his pursuit of the belligerent Cleopatra:

FRIEDA: To me you're a man, but to her you're only something to laugh at. The whole circus...they make fun by you and her.

HANS: Let them laugh! They're swine! I love her, they can't hurt me!

FRIEDA: But they hurt me. (Freaks)

The repetition of "hurt" in their dialogue implies a emotive response on behalf of the viewer, especially given the external context of these characters as entertaining circus performers which negates the potential of disability as a site for "laughter" (Garland-Thomson 56). This scene creates tension between body and perspective. To Frieda, Hans is a man. To Cleopatra, Hans is an object of derision. But is he both? Although Hans's indifference does eventually hurt him (as he unknowingly imbibes poison during their wedding feast) his determination sustains the narrative – albeit within an uneasy site of identity. Frieda's concern that "they" make fun of Hans is in direct reference to some of the more normal-bodied circus performers. "They" are the same characters who laugh as Hans gives Cleopatra a back rub, and Frieda's pronoun obviously includes Hercules and

Cleopatra, the two “masterminds” behind the poison plot. In her article “None of Us: Ambiguity as Moral Discourse in Tod Browning’s *Freaks*,” Méira Cook suggests, “One of the ways Browning more successfully troubles the boundaries between normative and freakish is through his systematic monsterring – for want of a better word – of the so-called normal characters in the movie” (50). The unsympathetic presentation of these able-bodied characters leads the viewer to sympathize, and ultimately align (as the meticulously framed scene replete with couched dialogue illustrates), with Hans (and Frieda’s) plight. As the dimensions of Hans’s trailer show, even the setting accommodates the protagonists of the film. Conversely, to further support Cook’s argument about the systematic “monsterring” of the normal-sized characters in the film, images of Cleopatra and Hercules hunched and contorted as they attempt to manoeuvre within a similar-sized trailer serve as a spatial reference to the idea of able-bodied normalcy not fitting all environments. Browning’s treatment of some of the so-called normal characters in the film is symptomatic of their exploitive, disruptive behaviour – insofar as their awkward portrayal represents the film’s refusal to accommodate their dishonest motivations.¹⁹

The Vengeance Quotient: Enabling the Freaks to Action

In the latter third of the film, the freaks mobilize their “one of us” mantra into action. As the carnival procession leaves town during an evening of stormy weather, Hans (still in bed) is joined by his friends from the freak show. Cleopatra urges the

¹⁹ Not *all* the “normal,” able-bodied characters within the film are presented as monstrous. For example, Venus and Phroso (a dolphin trainer and clown, respectively,) are both sympathetic towards and outraged at Hans and Frieda’s plight.

friends (including two dwarfs and Johnny Eck – a man with no legs) to leave so that she may administer Hans's "medicine." Unaware that Hans knows her intent, Cleopatra's "What's this?" comment (in reaction to Hans's sudden return to health, fully dressed, and sitting on the edge of the bed) imparts a tone of surprised belittlement – as if she still controls Hans as "othered" subject, and source of her greed. Once the other freaks brandish their weapons however, the implied normal, able-bodied subordination of disabled characters disappears. This climactic scene stresses the film's significance and potency in implementing non-typical bodies as sites of nominative identity.

Freaks shows disabled characters as capable of revenge. It is curious that non-disabled characters enact revenge on other non-disabled characters quite frequently in narrative – often without issues of receptivity – but when the victim is non-disabled and the aggressor disabled, the prospect somehow becomes horrific, sending viewers (if one is to believe the hype) "screaming down the aisle" (Skal). Does Freaks garner such controversy because disabled characters *kill* able-bodied characters, or simply because of the rarity of its portrayal in film? Chivers suggests what might place Freaks in the horror genre:

[The] circus side show members of *Freaks* are horrifying, not only because their friends enact a murderous revenge on their attackers, but also because they refuse to remain trapped in a body image that suggests their activities should be restricted or curtailed. (61)

The assumedly pathological spectacles of the freak show now exhibit autonomous self-determination. Of significance is that Cleopatra's subsequent stares seem to be bulging out of her eyes in order to regain dominance. Her disbelief that disabled characters are

able to control *her* reveals an uneasy twist in perception. No longer are the side show freaks relegated to the role of the observable, pathological object. Whether Browning's representations of these characters as vengeful, potential killers is fair or not, it certainly substantiates Mitchell and Snyder's assertion that disability narratives in film and fiction should occupy and "ris[k] entry into this seemingly unimaginable or uninhabitable universe" (175). The sensationalized scenes near the end of the film do contribute to an ostracizing mythology of freak behaviour – including a scene with many freaks crawling through the mud in ominous pursuit of both Hercules and Cleopatra – but these scenes also enable the freaks to refuse "to remain trapped in a body image that suggests their activities should be restricted or curtailed" (Chivers 61). As characters in a narrative, the freaks are quite compelling – with the ritualistic polishing of their weapons, suggesting they have used them before. If Johnny Eck (the character polishing the pistol) had legs would he be less threatening? His actions force Cleopatra's capitulation to Hans (in handing over the poison), thus signifying the end of able-bodied control (or illusions of control) within the film, and once again forces the viewer to make a difficult identity choice. Does the viewer align with the (now murderous) freaks, or with the about-to-be-mutilated Cleopatra? Browning's refusal to provide a "safe" character for an audience to align with (whether able-bodied or disabled) allows the film to continually and consistently question the ideology of normalcy.

Understanding that narrative often works against its own declarations prohibits Freaks' sensationalist movie poster tag-line "Can a full grown woman truly love a MIDGET?" from coming to fruition. What Tod Browning does achieve, however, is a film resonating with bodily diversity, and a plausibility that to be normal means also to be

a freak. Freaks shows disabled bodies and characters occupying and defining a centre of sovereign identity while suggesting that the hegemony of normalcy is indeed, fiction. Aligning the viewer with characters such as Hans, Frieda, and the side show freaks dismantles the well-worn imperative of able-bodied narrative control over its disabled counterparts and refuses to suggest that able-bodiedness is a more favourable option than disability. In dramatic, and at times horrific fashion, the archaic notion of being fully grown becomes appropriately irrelevant.

Chapter Three:

The Disappearing Act of Disability in Anosh Irani's The Cripple and His Talismans

In the introduction to The Disability Studies Reader, Lennard J. Davis writes,

But disability seems so obvious – a missing limb, blindness, deafness.

What else could be simpler to understand? One simply has to imagine the

loss of the limb, the absent sense, and one is half-way there. Just the

addition of a liberal dose of sympathy and pity . . . allows the average

person to speak with knowledge on the subject. (2)

Davis's sarcastic observations about "the average person's" normative, empathetic, tertiary approach to the study of disability, rather than as a site of serious theoretical contemplation, also applies to the appropriation of disability within narrative. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder write, "the disabled body represents a potent symbolic site of literary investment" (Narrative Prosthesis 49). The employment of disability as metaphor and as informative of a normative self or society in fiction is as common as it is problematic. In his article "Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body, and Phantom Limbs – Disability and Visuality" Davis's interpolation of an "absent sense" as a passive definer of disability provides a unique site of analysis. He goes as far as to suggest that "disability defines the negative space the body must not occupy" (68). Given this basis of comprehending disability as a definition in the negative allows an examination of how disabled characters within literature signify "lack" when compared to ideals of normalcy. Anosh Irani's novel, The Cripple and His Talismans (2004), falls into a category of narrative that challenges Davis's concern that disability not be thought of as merely obvious and simplistic through attentiveness to the perspectives of a disabled narrator. In

doing so, the novel both interrogates and perpetuates notions of the “absent sense” of disability that Davis speaks of. The story follows the narrator’s journey through the streets of Bombay as he searches for his lost arm. Many characters he meets along the way are also disabled. Descriptions of the novel range from “magic realism at its finest” (Wagamese D19) to an “absurdist fairytale” (Hunt 43), and, most alarmingly, as possessing “a cuckoo plot and characters” (Burns, The Straight). These varied responses to The Cripple and His Talismans illustrate that investiture in and the potency of the disabled body in literature is not easily understandable or definable, and that disability operates within an enigmatic space that embraces and rejects ideas of the normative body.

Defining the novel as magic realism is apt insofar as it “represent[s] ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements” (Abrams 195). Early in the text, as the first-person narrator²⁰ asks a shopkeeper (a character thereafter known as the “In-Charge”) he has never met before for “information about [his own] lost arm” (12), Irani confronts the reader with a scenario that operates somewhere between ordinary and dreamlike. It is not common to ask for the whereabouts of one’s arm, but it is plausible. The In-Charge’s arcane directions, such as: “You must follow a few landmarks . . . [b]ut I cannot tell you what the landmarks are” (13) eventually frustrates the one-armed narrator, bringing forthright reflection and speculation that his disability reflects the In-Charge’s reception of him:

²⁰ A first-person narrator maintains a closeness to the character for the reader while eliminating dependence upon the representationally problematic third-person “they.” Commenting on the problem, Linton suggests, “*the objectification of disabled people* can be redressed by [narratives] from the position of the disabled subject,” thus avoiding “the third-person plural [where] ‘they’ do this [and] ‘they’ are like that.” She also points out that such labelling “contributes to the objectification [and] alienation [of] disabled people” (142).

Let me have my arm for just a second so I can teach him a lesson. I am not accustomed to being mocked. I am a novice cripple. (13)

Irani posits disability not as an appendage to a narrative that “suggest[s] individual action to overcome [physical] barriers” (Valentine 223), but as the substance of the narrative itself. In other words, the immediacy of a first-person narrator/character looking for his own lost arm focuses the prospect of resolution solely for *himself*, and not, for example, to make able-bodied characters within the story feel better about themselves.²¹ Disability permeates Irani’s novel as a deliberate “complicating feature” (Mitchell, Snyder, 2) and as a “potent symbolic site” (49) in two ways. It presents the idea of finding a lost limb as necessary, and forces the reader to align with a subject who identifies himself as a “novice cripple.” Whether or not the narrator desires to be less of a “cripple” (novice or otherwise) by finding his lost limb is unclear. Thus, the narrator operates as a vehicle of autonomous determinate possibility, despite the absence of a limb, rather than as a passive “victim” of disability. Returning to Davis’s apprehension concerning the “liberal dose[s] of sympathy and pity” (2) heaped upon the subject(s) of disability by “normals” (2) in order to placate deeper analysis of, say, a man with one arm, Irani’s amputee receives no such treatment. That the narrator seeks information about his arm from a shopkeeper commodifies the body—rather than presenting an able-bodied character to sympathize with the narrator’s physical state—and allows a scenario of exchange (information for a limb) to motivate the narrator.

²¹ In his article “Naming and Narrating Disability in Japan,” Valentine discusses representations of disability as indicative of overcoming a challenge, and suggests the concept is “aligned with a dominant narrative of perseverance, sustained through [narratives] in which disabled [characters] act as role-models for a non-disabled audience” (223). Similarly, in terms of disability reinforcing normalcy (and heterosexuality), McRuer suggests, “the disabled . . . figure, as in many . . . contemporary cultural representations, facilitates [cohesion] between the (able-bodied) male and female lead [characters]” (95).

Where's My Arm?

In his book A Leg to Stand On, Oliver Sacks comments upon the “severe disturbances of body image and body-ego [that] occur as a result of . . . injury, disease or disorder.” He asks “if such disturbances are indeed common, why are they not more commonly described?” (171-2). Although Sacks refers to descriptions of bodily change in terms of doctor/patient discourse and vice versa, his query does much to move the medical model of disability into the social realm, favouring language that emotes physical sensation and experience, and not medical jargon. He continues:

Every such patient . . . goes through a profound ontological experience, with dissolutions or annihilations of being, in the affected parts, associated with an elemental derealization and alienation, and an equally elemental anxiety and horror. (172)

Considering that the narrator of The Cripple and His Talismans “lost [his] arm two months ago” (14) and does spend some time convalescing in hospital, Irani imbues his character with uncertainty about his new physicality. Moreover, he expresses it in terms of disillusion and anxiety:

I take the map and walk out on the street. I hold it under the streetlight with my right hand. If I had both arms, I would have a better grip. I try not to think of my disability. At times it makes me so rabid that I want to rip my other arm off. I then realize that I do not have an arm to pull the other one off. This angers me even more.

A lost arm causes much more than physical disorientation. I question many more things. Why does so and so have an arm? Why is he happy?

Why is she beautiful? Why is the orange that I eat stale? A lost arm makes you question humanity and the cup of chai you spill with the same logic, within the recurring hours of the arm's nothingness. (14)

The narrator's reflections upon his "lost arm" in comparison to other people's appearances, emotions and to inane objects such as a "stale orange" invites humoristic repose before returning to the "nothingness" of the arm. Rather than deflect the reader's attention from what is not present, the narrator chooses to dwell upon his disability. As Davis suggests, "disability defines the negative space the body must not occupy" (68). The narrator's question, "Why does so and so have an arm?" implies that ideas of normalcy and the "normal" body construct themselves out of such negative space. Anita Silvers suggests that "the meaning of representing disability in art [or narrative] is the product of an inescapable conceptual struggle that places normalcy and disability in irresistible conflict" (236). It is precisely this enticing, paradoxical divergence that drives Irani's subject to search for his arm while adjusting to existence without one.

After "fe[eling] like a pariah in the company of normal people," the narrator happens upon Gura, "the floating beggar," who the narrator, in his "new physical state" refers to as an "equal," (14) seemingly allowing him to reveal more about himself. Irani writes:

... I did not speak a word for two whole months. It was as though my arm had done the talking before.

.....

... Gura's remark startled me.

"Don't worry. You'll get used to it," he said. (14)

The narrator offers a curious body/language connection here. The possibility that “[his] arm had done the talking [for him] before [he lost it]” allows for broader interpretation of Davis’s definition of disability as occupying what a “normal” body must not occupy in that a change in body from normal to disabled impedes normative use of language. The narrator’s reflections also suggest that the loss of one’s arm prohibits language to define the void of disability.

Rather than eliciting an enigmatic inexpressibility topos, language is often ineffective in representing the non-typical body (as I discuss in chapter one). As David Wills points out, “The word always augments a prosthetic relation to an exterior material that it cannot possess or embody (qtd. in Narrative Prosthesis 7). Irani’s narrator responds inversely to Wills’s concept: He feels an inability to express himself because he cannot anchor the “language” of his altered body to a normative, ableist ideal. If he responds to “normal” people with silence because he views himself as a “pariah,” (14) then language (or its lack) clearly occupies and contributes to the same “negative space” (Davis, “Nude Venuses, Medusa’s Body, and Phantom Limbs – Disability and Visuality” 68) as disability itself. The narrator revisits the idea that “[his] arm had done the talking before” (Irani 14), and that words are inextricable components of the body. He states:

It is not the mind that remembers words. It is muscle. It has to be.

Muscles twitch, spotting a familiarity in vowels, sounds, the way words travel through the air in curves and spirals, reaching the ears of those for whom they are meant. (240)

Figuratively (and physically) speaking, the narrator’s absence of words subsequent to losing a limb implies a bodily-absorption-of-language theory. How can he speak to

“normal” bodies if he does not possess the physical substance that constitutes normalcy? Further, the ambiguity of his summation implies a deliberate “othering,” in terms of words for “those. . . whom they are meant.” If disability pushes the individual to the margins of society, then it seems fitting that another marginal disabled figure brings the narrator from his speechlessness. He does, however, align himself with the non-typical body of Gura, simply by receiving words addressing his non-typical physicality. The previously unobservant narrator re-aligns himself within language. His attempting to come to terms with his loss via language also coincides with a new awareness of Gura’s marginality:

[Gura] sat at the entrance to my building. I had never noticed him before. Was it obvious that I had recently lost an arm? I looked at him and saw the face of darkness – a little hell, fallen trees, a couple of midgets thrown in for flavour.

“What will I get used to?” I asked.

. . . “Absence,” he said. (15)

Irani offers the reader a fantastic, carnivalesque description of Gura’s face, reifying a sense of magic realism. Although the narrator’s appropriation of “a couple of midgets . . . for flavour” complicates the imagery with the sensationalism of a freak show, it also juxtaposes the absurd and (to borrow Abrams’s term) “dreamlike” with the ordinary of disability. Davis writes, “Even a person who is missing a limb or is physically ‘different’ still has to put on, assume the disabled body and identify with it” (61). As the nameless narrator searches for his missing limb, his identity is continually shaped by his

interactions with others and his surroundings. Just as a “floating beggar” elicits speech from him, other characters elicit action from him.

Take My Finger for an Arm

Disruptive bodily events and alterations provide inertia for The Cripple and His Talismans. What is perhaps unique to the novel is the ways in which it explores and exploits the body to concretize magic realism. As his journey (in the present) continues, he is led by the “In-Charge” to a gathering in the street of “eunuchs,” “amputees,” and “beggars” to watch the “games” (24). The games consist of two lepers fighting, the victor being the one who loses more of his “ugly parts” (27). This fight in the negative sense concretizes Davis’s notion of disability as “negative space the body must not occupy” (68), and sensationalizes such bodies as willing participants in a disappearing act because of their disability. The winner then “bites [off his own] forefinger” and gives it to the narrator as an “offering” (28). The In-Charge explains the process:

“The victor must relinquish his finger. One by one he will renounce all his body parts until he ceases to exist. Only then will he be cleansed. You cannot let him down.” (Irani 28)

The finger, which the narrator begrudgingly accepts and goes on to describe as a “dry piece of dog shit” (29), operates as an uncomfortable talisman throughout the novel, an object of derision and compulsion, much like the notion of spectacle itself. In a chapter entitled “Mr. P and the Dark Torpedo,” he actually purchases a finger-sized coffin for the homeless appendage in order to “get used to th[e] absence of his arm” (Irani 135).

Recalling Abrams’s definition of the magic realist style of writing as “representing

ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements” (195), buying a coffin is common practice – buying one for a finger is extraordinary. It is the boldness of juxtaposition between the possible/actual (a person losing an arm) and the fictive/dreamlike (a leper giving up all his body parts, or to have one of them put in a coffin) that creates narrative tension. Using the leper fight as an example, the story motivates itself towards absence rather than the predictability of normalcy by challenging conventional outcomes. Of significance here is the fact that the In-Charge quite nonchalantly advocates a complete de-valuation of the body, (including a “cleansing” of its supposed abhorrence), to the point where the apparently supplicant leper may “ceas[e] to exist.” Irani manages to concretize Davis’s notion of “disability defin[ing] the negative space the body must not occupy” (68). In the case of the victorious leper, the disabled body may literally remove itself into absence – in uniquely disturbing fashion.

The narrator sees the leper’s finger as a guide retuning him to his former physicality: “[The finger] will lead me to my arm – leprous or torn off an ancient tree. It does not matter. It is a lead, and a lead is more than the stump I have” (38). Physical absence motivates this character to desire normalcy and to replicate its possibility. His desire also exemplifies his attempts to come to terms with a disabled body, even going as far to “Wate[r] the finger. . .so it can grow into an arm” (50). However illogical, and viscerally humorous, such a process allows the narrator to identify with an altered physicality. Returning to Davis: “Even a person who is missing a limb or is physically ‘different’ still has to put on, assume the disabled body and identify with it” (61). In the process of assuming a “new” body the narrator values even the prospect of his arm more than what isn’t there. As Bérubé points out, the normative, able-bodied identity is

“inevitably temporary [and] could change [able-bodied] status in [uncontrollable] ways” (Claiming Disability viii). For the narrator, finding solace in a *leprous* finger is an oxymoronic way of maintaining illusory control of a normative body image.

The Crooked Timber of Bombay

In his article “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” David Mitchell comments upon the pervasive usage of disability as metaphor for the misgivings of the larger social model, yet suggests the same metaphor binds and reinforces marginalization of the bodies and minds that (presumably) inform the metaphor. He writes:

Disability proves an exceptional textual fate in that it is deployed in literary narrative as a master metaphor for social ills; thus the characterization of disability provides a means through which literature performs its social critique while simultaneously sedimenting stigmatizing beliefs about people with disabilities. (24)

The process itself seems paradoxical, and metaphorically mired within counter-productive ableist ideology. Mitchell’s observations underpin a literary oversight. A somehow dysfunctional society should not automatically necessitate that the characters, or characterizations of people within that fictional society, share in disability. Is the temptation to employ and animate the “irresistible conflict” (Sillers 236) between normalcy and disability so powerful that it is unavoidable? Disability does in fact possess an “exceptional textual fate,” as the narrator’s observations of Bombay show.

The Cripple and His Talismans portrays the city as a place where:

... the in-roads were black as death, messages from prophets were scribbled on the walls and babies walked like tiny gangsters, toting guns and milk bottles. (18)

This passage serves as a backdrop for the fantastically real. The juxtaposition of “guns” and “milk bottles” implies that life for the people of this city may end shortly after it begins and that even those who appear innocent are dangerous. It is also a place of caste and commodity – a place where disability does not necessarily negate value in society, but where money signifies value. The narrator states, “A rich man without an arm is still superior to a poor man with one” (17). Interestingly, value judgements of economy supersede value judgements of body for the affluent narrator, but not without reservation: “As I walk, I wonder what I am doing here. I am sensible, literate. I should handle my loss [of the arm] with dignity” (20). Drastic alterations to the body, arguably, supersede “sensitivity.” The narrator certainly reifies Sacks’s observations of “dissolution[ment] or annihilations of being [relative to] the affected parts [of the body]” (172) by implying that one’s education and demeanour somehow dignifies the loss of a limb. What Irani problematizes in his text, (relative to Mitchell’s argument) is the prosthetic use of disability in narrative as metaphor to reinforce “stigmat[ic] beliefs about people with disabilities” (24). The narrator continues:

When I had both my arms, the people I met were ordinary. They were perfectly formed, but ordinary. Ever since my loss, I have run into beasts who hold the meaning of the earth between their teeth. (32)

This passage accomplishes two things. It qualifies the fighting leper as a wise “beast,” insofar as his former finger contains the vagaries of “the meaning of the earth.” But of

greater concern, it vilifies disability (however magically real) by suggesting it is not “ordinary,” and that not being ordinary, or even “perfectly formed” relegates an individual to conspire with unsightly monsters. Akin to the narrator’s earlier return to speaking, only when he becomes disabled does he notice disability in others.

The narrator’s time in hospital also reveals some startling (if not absurdly humorous) insights into what Davis might consider “the average person . . . speak[ing] with knowledge on the subject [of disability]” (The Disability Studies Reader 2):

I lay in bed knowing there had to have been a mistake. Only beggars and poor children lose their arms. There is not enough food in their bodies and the heart is unable to send blood everywhere. Their limbs anticipate this and fall off on purpose. (Irani 115)

But the character is not “average” any more. And it is difficult to qualify “knowledge” if the character is experiencing “severe disturbances of body image and body-ego” (Sacks 172). What is humorous about this passage (because it speculates upon clichés in regards to perceiving disability) is how disability becomes mistake, myth, and monetary all at once. The narrator’s perception of disability as “mistake” responds to Bérubé’s assertion that able-bodiedness is only a temporary state. Irani calls attention to stereotypical links between economy and disability, and why, exactly, limbs “fall off.” Such sarcastic reflection upon potential causes of disability exposes the absurdity of misinformed perceptions.

The Cripple and His Talismans also operates as a critique of selfishness. The prologue reads like a magic-realist parable, concretizing existence and morality in a “tree with. . . many limbs” (Irani 10). “In the beginning” a young boy finds a narcissistic

“Man” “entangled in his own embrace” (9). “These limbs,” the young boy narrator continues, “branch out to become the roads of the world,” consisting of the “crooked path,” the “straight path,” and the path where “anything can happen.” (10). Amongst the audience near the tree are “Woman,” “Snake,” “Tiger,” and various elemental “forms.” According to Irani’s parable,

The boy was upset with the[ir] choices. By not taking the straight path, the forms had cut off a limb [branch/road, and o]nly Man was left, so the boy turned to him.

“Go away,” said Man . . . And once again Man was tangled in his own embrace.

The boy told him, “I can see what is going to happen here. There will be magic, poverty, thievery. . .

. . . “tell me what this place is called,” [continued] the boy, “so I remember never to visit it, for it is no longer the place of the tree.”

“Bombay,” said Man. “There is no other like it.”

“Thank God,” said the boy. (11) .

Here the text seems acutely aware of itself, setting out its plot. Yet the word/image play between human limbs and tree limbs (with one already “cut off”) suggests the fictive Bombay is a uniquely “potent symbolic site” (Mitchell, Snyder 49) of decay and removal for nature as well as limbs. This Bombay is also a place of organic despair: when “Snake slithered away [down the crooked path] dragging Soil with it. Tree needed soil to live so

it followed” (Irani 10); it is a place where a tree cannot grow; and, metaphorically a unique place of perpetual decomposition, unable to sustain precepts of normalcy.

Book critic Manfred Malzahn comments on the “gruesome” portrayals of the body in The Cripple and His Talismans in relation to his own perceptions of Bombay, seemingly justifying Mitchell’s concerns of disability’s exceptional fate as a “master metaphor for social ills” (24). Malzahn nonchalantly writes:

[The novel presents g]ruesome fantasy perhaps: but no more gruesome than what really goes on in a city which has more than its *fair share* of stunted, thwarted, maimed or disfigured human beings. (TLS 22, emphasis my own)

Malzahn’s audacious use of the term “fair share” is disturbing, not only because of its eugenic and classist overtones, but also because it marginalizes disability. The term is problematic because it suggests that a certain quota of disabled individuals is acceptable, but to exceed such *fairness* denotes an actively “gruesome” society. Malzahn’s perceptions of disability as critique of Irani’s novel inform Mitchell’s comments that “characterization of disability provides a means through which literature performs its social critique while simultaneously sedimenting stigmatizing beliefs about people with disabilities” (24). To sedimentize disability as Malzahn suggests is for the disabled to operate as mere countable objects within a limited marginal group contributing to the vagaries of “what really goes on.” Malzahn’s comments reinforce the stereotype of disability as grotesque, whereas Irani’s text often balances the “gruesome” with levity, postulating upon the fantastic of Bombay’s uncertainty with vivid bodily hyperbole:

... Tomorrow I might meet a midget who is ten feet tall, a butcher who sells newborn babies, a boxer who works as an anesthetist in a hospital by knocking patients senseless. In this city, birds are forced to crawl and rats can fly if they use their tails correctly. When I think about this city, it is almost as if it does not exist. It is a body floating on air, and landing whenever it gets tired. That is why it is so noisy. The din is the sound of it panting. (131)

While boldly reinforcing the magically-real Bombay, the narrator also comments upon its potential absence. It is also a city of its own logic. Irani extends his bodily metaphor to suggest that the city *is* a body, vital, noisy, and nearly out of breath. By hyperbolizing the body Irani “ground[s] abstract meanings in the specifics of [the] story. . .[where] metaphors of disability serve to extrapolate the meaning of a bodily flaw into cosmological significance” (Mitchell 25). The symbiosis between the narrator’s perpetually exhausted city and its flawed, exaggerated populous connotes an surrealist environment of suffering – where images of disability and “bodily flaw” provide tangibility for the abstract notion of a city in decline.

The Disabling Metaphor

The Cripple and His Talismans employs disability, invariably, as a site of narrative interest and motivation. Characters who lack physical or cognitive normalcy (in terms of ableist/normative ideology) can often provide partially empty containers that a narrative seeks to fill. Returning to the immediacy of finding one’s lost arm calls upon Silvers’s idea of the “irresistible conflict” between normalcy and disability. This conflict

in Irani's novel operates between magnetism (will the narrator find his arm?) and repulsion (how did he lose his arm?). According to Mitchell and Snyder, "disability pervades narrative . . . as a stock feature of characterization and . . . as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (47). Irani exploits and challenges this prospect within his narrator: "It is not as if I lost my wallet. In fact, even when I lost my wallet I never handled things gracefully" (15). The Cripple and His Talismans illustrates that the opportunity to have a character react to his missing arm is infinitely more compelling than having him fret over the banality of a missing wallet, yet both scenarios share an experience of absence, and challenge set ideas of disability as only signifying a metaphorical moral loss. The narrator continues: "When I am reminded of my arm, I try to think of mundane things. This tactic is as useful as the map I hold" (20). Again, the narrator exemplifies that skirting around the issue of his absence does not motivate or perpetuate his cause. But what is the narrative's motivation of investiture in positing a disabled character as a "potent symbolic site" (Mitchell, Snyder 49)? Put another way, why, narratively, is the narrator missing an arm?

As I discuss in my second chapter, Paul Longmore's three well-worn functions of disability as metaphor (in filmic narrative) also prove equally applicable to literary narrative. He surmises that "disability [operates as] a punishment for evil, [presents characters] embittered by their 'fate' [,or disabled characters] resent. . .the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them" (67). Rather than present a schema to slot what metaphor or trope serves what end, Longmore's observations incite a re-evaluation of what disability offers and achieves (or does not achieve) in narrative. In the case of The Cripple and His Talismans, the reader learns that the narrator is "known as a drinker and

as a bad man who goes to bad women, and [that his relatives] want nothing to do with him" (58). He is also responsible (or so he believes) for his prostitute/girlfriend's death (220-21). These events (and others throughout the text) establish his deviant behaviour as motivation for, and contributing to a potential for a portrayal of "bitterness and anger" [Mitchell, Snyder 19]) well before his amputation. The suggestive problems and clichés of bitter and angry characterizations of disability seems narratively logical to the story while also mirroring Sacks's observations concerning a patient's associative disruption of body image and reaction(s) relative to severe injury (172). Although Sacks does not specify a time period for this process, he does suggest that if patients "are fortunate enough to recover [from such injuries they experience] a sense of 're-realization' and joy" (172). Sacks's non-fictional "real-life" observations help to establish the behaviour of Irani's narrator as plausible.

The narrator however, is somewhat averse to joy. Irani devotes much of the novel to the narrator's past behaviour, establishing his cognitive state, which ultimately leads to his present physicality. He writes,

Because I was expelled from school [my parents] were told I was a disturbed child. I never thought of myself as disturbed, but then a mad person always thinks he is normal. It is the normal ones who eventually go mad. (203)

Returning to the tension between normal and disability, the narrator postulates upon his labelled designation. While the narrator does not think of himself as "disturbed," he does refer to himself as "mad." His thoughts entrench the normal/disabled conflict. Anne Wilson and Peter Beresford suggest that cognitive disorders or disabilities are not

reflective of “a continuum that [shows] binary opposition between ‘the mad’ and ‘the not mad’ [or normal]” (154). Irani also touches upon the problems of labelling individuals as either/or, and the inadequacies of such designations. Although the narrator’s “madness” is uncertain, and only implied because of the labelling of a third-party observer, further examination of his behaviour shows expulsion from school was, perhaps, a necessary remedy.

Even though the narrator exists within a marginalized body and mentality, the story does not allow that body or person to exist simply as victim. The narrative complicates the location of sympathy throughout its progress (present or past), making it difficult to assign a (returning to Davis’s concerns) passive/normative understanding of disability. A significant victim in the story is the narrator’s classmate “Viren.” His portrayal as someone who is “best friends [with Shakespeare]” and favourite of the teacher, “Miss Moses” (109) provides a tense (albeit clichéd) contrast to the narrator’s inability to spell Shakespeare’s name (111). The following ensues:

... I hold Viren’s neck so he cannot move and bring the heavy lid down. Miss Moses gets up from her chair. There is a loud scream from Viren. It surprises me and I let go of his neck. He does not move his head. I try to get the desk lid off him but it will not move. It is stuck to his head. I jerk again until I see the blood. There is a nail in his eye. Our schools should have safer desks. (111)

This macabre and oddly humorous scene seemingly nullifies pity for the narrator by appropriating the role of “victim” to Viren. The discord in this scene actualizes Longmore’s notion of the (cognitively) disabled as attempting “to destroy [a non-disabled

character]” (67) which the narrator attempts to deflate with humour. His dismissal of the assault as a result of faulty school equipment is not entirely illogical, and offers consistency to his jaded characterization, for better or for worse. Irani also employs a familiar narrative technique insofar as no matter how vicious or cruel a character may be, a reader will often sympathize with that character as long as the narrative provides that vindictive character with something to care for, or about. As book critic Ann Eriksson concurs, “In spite of his heartlessness and cruelty, the narrator gains the reader’s sympathy” (Wordworks 30). A lost limb is a most visceral place to begin.

Longmore’s observation that disability occurs throughout narrative as a metaphorical “punishment for evil”(67) also finds an uneasy home in The Cripple and His Talismans, as the narrator’s journey eventually leads him to “Baba Rakhu,” (whose name the leper whispered into his ear after he accepted the offering of the finger [29]) and his warehouse full of limbs which Baba describes as his “pet dungeon that will save the world” (145). The narrator observes:

In dim light, human limbs slowly appear on the wall. I see all kinds:
dark ones, long ones, stunted ones. They are neatly packed in plastic
sheets as they hang shamelessly, suits and shirts waiting to be picked.

(145)

Again, filmic, dreamlike (or, nightmarish), imagery colludes with images of the everyday, here, the apparel of business. The narrator arrives in a place where limbs are a tangible, interchangeable commodity – just like suits and shirts, waiting to “be picked” like fruit, but more importantly, to be worn. The description of Baba Rakhu’s chop-shop continues, along with simplistic economic justification for its existence:

The organization of the arms and legs is meticulous – they are labelled with names in alphabetical order; they shine a little, coated with a substance to preserve them.

... “What are you thinking, brother? There is no shame in buying arms. It is like buying anything else.” (Irani 145)

Here, the narrative continues to investigate the notion of the arms trade literally. Baba’s familial use of the word “brother” suggests cohesion of the two characters, brought together by, and sharing an equal desire for flesh. If these limbs have names, they also have a destination. While Baba sizes up the narrator for a “trial fitting,” (146). The narrator approximates Sacks’s concept of “re-realization and joy” (172) as he imagines a return to a normative body:

...if I buy an arm [,] I will stand naked in front of the mirror and dance [and] count my fingers repeatedly as though I am the first to discover that humans have ten fingers. I will use my new arm to scratch an itch on my neck, to turn the pages of the newspaper. I might even learn sign language and never speak again. (Irani 146)

This scenario suggests that if he gains normalcy, he can choose a different kind of disability. His idealized, euphoric, jovial reaction to the possibility of regaining a limb, of regaining an apparently able body, oddly enough, comes as a gesture towards the hearing disabled. Irani’s characterization, although humorous on one level, ascribes disability as a choice on another level. The appealing tension (to borrow from Silvers) between normalcy and disability invites pause here, because the narrator (in his magically-real universe) is literally given a choice between the two. Silvers continues,

representations of disability necessarily invoke what they are not and so always signify being in deficit. This is thought to be so because normal bodies are conceived of as being unified, consolidated, whole. (237)

Arguably, the narrator “invoke[s] what [he is] not” by imagining a more normative body for himself.²² Thus, it would seem normalcy is a commodity with endless demand, and, fortunately (or not) for the narrator, Baba Rakhu has a bountiful supply of limbs. In a remarkable actualization/concretization of the “thought of normal [whole] bodies” filling the “deficit” in characterizations of disability, Baba states, “To date, I have fixed two hundred cripples” (Irani 148) with concise medical precision.²³

So I’m a Cripple, Now What?

The Cripple and His Talismans also responds to the perpetual, troubling preference to “fix” disability. Snyder comments on the phenomenon of narratives employing disability that “espouse an open cure or kill mind-set in order to comprehend disability’s absence or unspeakability . . . [in order to] better society” (180-1).²⁴ Contrary to Baba Rakhu’s surgical approach to normalcy, the narrator, in coming to terms with his disability decides to actualize a more stark scenario. In her essay, “Sex and Death and the

²² McRuer states that this larger cultural phenomenon is due to “compulsory able-bodiedness” which “functions by covering over, with the appearance of a choice, a system in which we there is actually no choice” (92).

²³ In A Leg to Stand On, Sacks narrativizes his own experience with the “fix” of disability. After an operation on his leg, he suggests to the surgeon that his “leg doesn’t *feel* right.” After dismissing Sacks’s concerns as “vague and subjective” the surgeon likens his role to that of a “carpenter. . . called in to do a job.” Sacks metaphorizes the state of his leg: “Carpentry would suffice if it were a wooden leg. And that *is* exactly how the leg feels – wooden, not like flesh, not alive, not mine” (82).

²⁴ Snyder also suggests, “Disability histories can be located in the texts that seem to demand eradication through the promise of restorative cures or banishment from public arenas” (182), contributing to the paradoxical role of representations of disability existing through a promotion, or advocacy of their non-existence.

Crippled Body: A Meditation” Nancy Mairs suggests that disqualifications inherent in some disabilities lead to an assumptive ableist “conclusion” that without certain abilities the individual “is better off dead” (164). She cautions against such alarmist assumptions, stating: “The view from inside the disabled body is seldom so romantic or so extreme” (164). Irani’s narrator however, attempts the “better off dead” approach to disability – not once, but twice.

In the chapter “The Rule of Widows and Mad Dogs,” the narrator ruminates over various methods of suicide and so decides to take the bus to his final destination:

“Which stop?” [The bus driver] asks.

“Last stop,” I reply.

“Next time, exact change,” he says.

“No next time,” I say. “Today I am suicide!” (Irani 61)

The narrator’s personification of suicide and continual joviality impart mutable characterizations of disability (albeit less than favourable). While the “grinding stone” (59) he carries with him to the top of a “tall building” (62) operates as a metaphor of routine existence, he also intends to use the stone as an object to expedite his demise. As the figurative becomes concrete, Irani conflates the “dreamlike” with the “ordinary” (Abrams 195), attempting complete erasure of his narrator:

“Were you about to jump?” [The construction worker] asks.

... “Yes” I say.

“What is that stone for?”

“The stone is for speed.”

“Okay, best of luck.” (Irani 63)

Surprised by a lack of sympathy, the narrator stays put, allowing their conversation to continue, scaffold to window ledge:

“Where is the note?”

“What note?”

.....

“You forgot [your suicide] note? You don’t watch TV at home?” (64)

Desiring a “televised” conceptualization of suicide, the construction worker elicits clichéd remarks from the “novice cripple” (13) and jumper:

“Oral[ly then.] Recite to me. I am your audience.”

.....

“What shall I say?”

“Be insulting. Give bad words.” (64)

The narrator certainly performs for his “audience.” With little coaxing, he states bold comments such as “Sewer of a city,” and “May the blood of a thousand lepers be on your hands” (64). This scene sensationalizes the disabled subject – as spectacle for an able-bodied observer – en route to his own death, while attempting to speak himself into absence. In slapstick fashion, the construction worker desires to touch the grinding stone before the narrator jumps, as a “mark of respect” (65) with predictable results. The narrator observes, “He is off balance. I reach out to hold him; I extend my left arm. The problem is, I do not have one” (65). Ironically, the narrator’s “problem” keeps him alive.

Unsuccessful the first time, the narrator decides to find another “place on earth where life and death meet. It is called a Job” (66). Fraught with attempts to find adequate

information from an inept member of the Indian bureaucracy on the other end of the telephone, the narrator reveals his physical state:

... "I just want to work for the government."

"Why? You have a criminal record?"

"Madam, please, I am not a criminal."

"Then what? Tell the truth."

"I'm a cripple."

"That is not good. Now what job are you looking for?"

.....

"I wish to be a suicide bomber." (Irani 67)

Once again, disability is definable in terms of what it is not – in this case, "not good." Apart from hinting at discriminatory hiring practices, and the confusion of bureaucracy, such dialogue illustrates the absurdity of "better off dead" (Mairs 164) characterizations of disability. After the phone attendant refuses his request to blow up anyone "[the government] want[s] dead" (68), he declares more plausible intentions: "There is no room for cripples even though we occupy less room than full-formed humans do. I need Mental Health Support" (74). The inclusionary pronoun "we" in relation to his physicality suggests alignment with a larger community, and that he may indeed be comprehending "disability's absence or unspeakability." (Snyder 181).

An Arm to the Past

Addressing characterizations of disability as being in deficit in relation to models of normalcy returns perspective to Davis's notion of disability as an "absent sense" (2).

As the narrator in The Cripple and His Talismans “get[s] used to th[e] absence of his arm” (Irani 135), what motivates this deployment of disability, and what might it signify? His conversation with Baba Rakhu after being asked if he recognizes his former limb provides a partial answer:

“But it does nothing. It just hangs there.”

“Exactly. It is *your* arm. The one you lost.”

“What?”

“All your life it has been good for nothing. So I took it.”

“You took it?”

“In one clean cut.” (Irani 247)

While Longmore suggests disability operates as “punishment for evil” (67), it also qualifies as punishment for apparent misuse and complacency. Baba’s comments imply an addendum to an old axiom: use it *properly*, or lose it. In an earlier scene, he elicits a man to confess to beating his wife because “She deserves it!” (155). The man’s subsequent limb removal then justifies his deviant morality and behaviour. Appropriating the body in this fashion is both disturbing and problematic. If disabled bodies signify deviancy, then able, whole bodies indicate virtuosity.

From a broader perspective, the novel also investigates perceptions of bodily disfigurement. As Malzahn notes, “[one of t]he central motif[s] of The Cripple and His Talismans] is mutilation” (22). Images of “razor cuts on [his] Father’s face increasing as [the narrator’s parents’] love decreased” (Irani 98) permeate the narrator’s past, positing mutilation to the body as a visible indicator of suffering. Moreover, the narrator grinds his classmate Viren’s hand in a machine (169-70), to the point where Viren is “missing

several fingers" (205). Baba Rakhu's temporal statement "all your life [your arm] has been good for nothing," implies a devaluation of the narrator's body because of his previous debauchery. As their conversation continues, the loss of the narrator's arm metaphorizes as punishment for deviant behaviour:

"How did you get this mark [on the arm]?"

"I cut myself when I was little" . . . "On purpose."

"The only way you recognize your own arm is through a self-inflicted wound," [Baba] snarls. "That should tell you something." (248)

What exactly the narrator should be told is uncertain. As Eriksson rightly observes, Irani's novel manages to make "the theft and brokerage in limbs suddenly see[m] honourable" (30), while addressing an assumption that disability is acceptable for some, but not for others. Mitchell's assertion that metaphorical appropriations of disability "serve to extrapolate the meaning of a bodily flaw into cosmological significance" (25), defines this subversive play of bodily (ab)normality as reflective of some archaic morality or code of justice – or redemption. Baba states the reason for amputating the narrator's arm was "To cut off [his] past" (248). The concept of a limb as a container, or marker of memory allows the concrete to obtain abstract qualities, and vice versa. As if from a journal of magic realism, Sacks's recollections of his own injury leave pathology by the bedside and take on the quality of a dream:

The leg had vanished, taking its "place" with it. Thus there seemed no possibility of recovering it . . . Could memory help, where looking forward could not? No! The leg had vanished taking its "past" away with it! I could no longer remember having a leg. (63)

If a leg can “vanish” along with its past, then why not an arm? The supposition of intangible time, memories, and feelings (or lack thereof) culminate in the narrator’s refusal to have his arm reattached. In an insistence of absence, of deficit, and of the disabled body, he states, “Burn it, cut it into small pieces, feed it to vultures. I don’t want it” (Irani 248), and further, (akin to Sacks’s notion of “place” and “past” of a limb) “That arm is my past. If you attach it, you are giving me back my past and I may return to its ways” (249). Within this precept, if he were to regain the limb he may also return to thinking of the body in terms of normal/abnormal. Thus, the limb itself proves a “potent symbolic site of literary investment” (Mitchell, Snyder 49). It signifies potential deviance and potential reification of the normal/abnormal binary. The narrator’s vehemence to remain an (apparently moralistic) amputee incites Baba’s horrific command: “[now] you must help others by ridding them of their rotten, misguided limbs” (Irani 245). Again, returning to overtones of eugenics in terms of “demand[ing] eradication [of limbs] through the promise [helping society]” (Snyder 182) and images of deliberate mutilation, the tale continues to suspend disbelief like a bad dream. In a culmination of perverse altruism, or delirious sacrifice, the narrator accepts the role as Baba Rakhu’s apprentice, and immediately presents his other arm for amputation:

“I must give up this arm as well” . . . “Take it.”

“You want me to cut the other one off.”

“Donate it to someone who deserves it more.”

“You have made me proud, my cripple.” (250)

Within such visceral sensationalism, there also exists horrific sentimentality and misguided pity and irony. The narrator’s body becomes “proud” and eager material to

fulfill the myth of normalcy for others while reinforcing the construct of disability as subordinate to normalcy and as insufficient for himself. Indeed, Mitchell's notion of metaphorical "bodily flaws" as indicative of a problematic order, or morality perhaps, suggests that disorder (or disability) continually reaffirms its opposite. As Davis suggests, "disability seems so obvious – a missing limb. . . What else could be simpler to understand? One simply has to imagine the loss of the limb, the absent sense, and one is half-way there" (The Disability Studies Reader 2). Curiously, the reader is not privy to the reattachment of any severed limbs, only to the fiction/illusion of their absence.

Anosh Irani's The Cripple and His Talismans offers the body as a site of both reluctant and willing deficiency. The disabled body's capacity represent a multitude of abstract and concrete concepts – from a caveat against devious, cruel behaviour to the often absurd vitality of a city – proves to be at continual odds with ideas of normalcy. The narrator's body itself concurs the fiction of normalcy, yet ends up representing disability as an enigmatic symbol of suffering, and often as indicative of misguided morality and behaviour. Irani's whimsical, tactile and grotesque exploration of disability requires a body to work upon, and to explore: a mutable magically real subject in a magically real place. The narrator's confluences of disability as removal of past, and of body become a metaphorical commentary upon societal lack, and signify a lack of self worth. The multitude of bodies within the text metaphorize a push towards erasure while attempting to construct and sustain normalcy out of absence. As Irani concurs, "This city is a window. It is always mourning a loss" (251).

Conclusion:

I Want To Be Like One of Us Was Once

What is more representative of the human condition than the body and its vicissitudes? (Davis, Disability Studies Reader 2)

Davis's question not only qualifies the importance of Disability Theory in analyzing and contemplating the enigmatic, modernist preoccupation of the "human condition,"²⁵ but more importantly, his question also reaffirms the significance of the mutable body within narrative as a necessary vehicle, or container of representation. By examining various representations of the disabled character, the ways in which the disability trope manifests in narrative to become an inextricable part of a text is as variable as the human body, or condition of the body itself. Although the metaphorical exploitation of disability often problematizes, or indeed calcifies perceptions of disability in terms of stock characterizations which lend themselves to the fix of normalcy, narratives (written and filmic) which explore the inexplicable attraction, sensation and tension between ability and disability, between the normal and abnormal in productive ways provide alternatives to an either/or designation of difference. Peter Handke's Kaspar, Tod Browning's Freaks and Anosh Irani's The Cripple and His Talismans signify and redefine textual awareness and refusal of ableist, normative precepts and allow disability to inform and contribute to their respective characters rather than define them as inadequate.

²⁵ In his text Modern Times, Modern Places, Peter Conrad suggests modernity "reve[als] that identity is tenuous, as mutable as the earth which is forever being eruptively transformed" (16). By this analogy, the disabled body/character in narrative provides valuable representation indicative of human capriciousness.

Calling upon a representational imbalance that Disability Theory attempts to rectify, in his article "Constructing Normalcy," Davis postulates: "one can nevertheless try to imagine a world in which the hegemony of normalcy does not exist" (10). I believe that as Disability Theory continues to assess and inform representations of both disability and normalcy, such theoretical practices must also be cognizant of, call attention to, and ultimately resolve the callous, indolent, counter-productive representations of disability in narrative and popular culture. As disability theorist and author Steve Kuusisto remarks, "pejorative metaphors of disability often indicate lazy writing" (AWP Conference 2005).²⁶ The importance of analyzing such appropriation of disability remains vital because many lazy writers, it seems, are unaware that pejorative metaphorical use of disability misinforms disability, and far too often perpetuates, reflects and informs a terse, desensitized, inaccurate understanding of disability for the larger normative society. When one considers the continual preponderance of terms in the media which signify disability to analogize and attach a society's myriad disparate problems to disabled individuals, communities and cultures, there exists incentive to question why, and inertia to facilitate change. Whether a comment falls upon *deaf* ears, someone is *blind* with rage, the economy is *limping* along, or recently in Canada where "a submarine was *crippled* by an electrical fire" (italics my own),²⁷ Disability Theory must encourage accountability

²⁶ In disturbingly ironic fashion, this AWP panel exposed and concretized the ignorance of the conference's organizers in terms of accessibility for *all* participants. The location of the panel (table, water glasses, chairs, microphones, etc.,) was on a raised stage. With no ramp, several of the panellists were unable to access the stage. To further the frustrations of the panellists and audience alike, one of the presenters displayed a sign which he removed from a wall on the *second* floor of the antiquated hotel, reading: "For wheelchair access, please contact the banquet department."

²⁷ From a CBC News report entitled, "Weather postpones sealift of crippled submarine" 05 Jan 2005. <<http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2005/01/06/chicoutimi-050106.html>>. Not to deter from the tragedy of an event "that killed one sailor and injured eight others," but that this information immediately

within language and examine how texts represent disability. Disability Theory also continues to investigate and extrapolate how textual representations challenge and inform narrative constructs of disability and normalcy.

Although the texts explored in "Limping Towards Representation: Writing Disability in Three Twentieth Century Narratives" share a relative temporality (as they are all from within the last seventy years), representations of disability in narrative encompass the breadth of literature itself. From Homer's "lame"²⁸ Hephaestus to the symptomatic maladies defining the characters of Samuel Beckett's Murphy,²⁹ or the unapologetic portrayals of bodily difference in the short stories of Flannery O'Connor,³⁰ Disability has been and continues to be a "complicating feature of [authors'] representational universes" (Mitchell, Snyder Narrative Prosthesis 2). As disability provides desirable complexity to narrative, as sensationalized object/subject or metaphor for social maladies, it also continually defines itself in terms of ability – even in relation to another disability. Herman Melville contextualizes this phenomenon by commenting upon Milton's blindness in relation to Kaspar Hauser's autism: "Had Milton's been the lot

follows the above quotation hints toward a negative association of disability with injury and death. The article also mentions subsequent use of a "specialized transport vessel" to assist the "disabled vehicle."

²⁸ Homer's disabled Hephaestus does well to establish stereotypical characterizations of disability as source of bitterness, lack and misery:

Aphrodite had Zeus for father; because I am lame she never ceases to do me outrage and give her love to destructive Ares, since he is handsome and sound-footed and I am a cripple from my birth; yet for that my two parents are to blame . . . and I wish they had never begotten me." (The Odyssey, VIII, 307-311)

²⁹ For a remarkable study of the connections between the names of the characters in Murphy and the disorders which inform their bodies and behaviours see Hugh Culik's article "Mindful of the Body: Medical Allusions in Beckett's Murphy." Eire – Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies 14.1 (1979) : 84-101.

³⁰ Her short story "Good Country People" presents a disabled female character who, under the premise of attaining intimacy with a young and savvy thief (posing as a Bible salesman), ends up having her wooden leg stolen. In "Wise Blood," O'Connor presents an initially able-bodied character who deliberately blinds himself, in part, to be a more compelling preacher.

of Caspar Hauser, Milton would have been as vacant as he" (qtd. in Silences, Olsen 3).

Melville's remarks point to a paradoxical appropriation and valuation of disability.

Invocation and juxtaposition of Milton and Kaspar Hauser implies that Melville's audience would be aware of their respective disabilities, and presumably agreeable to such an absurd syllogism. To suggest disability as "vacant" is to imply its absence, yet Melville institutes a hierarchy of normalcy upon this vacancy. How does Milton's blindness compare the historical Kaspar Hauser's autism? To value one disability over another in terms of its normative potential reinforces a rank and file system consisting of degrees of ability with "greatest ability" as desirable and ideal. Disability then stigmatizes and identifies individuals as pathological unfortunates, rather than disability as a facet of individuality. The complexities of statements such as Melville's encourages continual consideration of how audiences think of disability. That an author utilizes the folkloric referent of a disabled individual to situate and speculate upon the "lot" of another author works synonymously (and similarly) to an author or film director employing disability within narrative to situate the perspective (and attention) of an implied reader³¹ or viewer. The knowledge, experience and awareness of disability a reader or viewer brings to a narrative informs the intent of that narrative. Innovative representations of disability and the disabled character that expose the falsities and

³¹ In Six Walks in the Fictional Woods, Umberto Eco describes his idea of a "Model Reader" as "very similar to the Implied Reader of Wolfgang Iser" (15), quoting from Iser as follows:

the reader "actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. These connections are the product of the reader's mind working on the raw material of the text, though they are not the text itself – for this consists just of sentences, statements, information etc. . . . This interplay obviously does not take place in the text itself, but can only come into being through the process of reading. . . This process formulates something that is unformulated in the text and yet represents its 'intention'." (15)

inaccuracies of normalcy and ableist ideology contribute to a necessary continuum of education which accommodates and celebrates difference.

Peter Handke's Kaspar interpolates historicized and romanticized understandings of the "vacant" (returning to Melville's adjectival description) Kaspar Hauser as a receptacle of potential normalcy. Handke's Kaspar, however, does not become a case study for the romantic era (as his inspirer was), but rather, a hyperbolized body subject to the cacophonic *spiel* of modernity via language. His rapid entry into the symbolic order of words offers a quick fix to his apparent disability, yet Handke portrays his subsequent linguistic ability as disjunctive and unsettling. The speech prompters in Kaspar institute the corrective gaze of the "magic eye" (53) above the stage through repetition and regurgitation of pedantic, tautological phrases and syntactically manipulated poetics, often exhibiting the absurdity of language as indicative of normalcy. Handke's work also hyperbolizes and inverts Foucault's connection between the gaze and language in terms of bringing disorder into order through vehement verbal illustrations of language's inability to correct disorder.³² Once Kaspar attains linguistic adeptness or normalcy amidst the bright lights of the stage, he wishes to return to his former marginally-linguistic self, suggesting that language pacifies disability rather than curing it.³³

³² In The Birth of the Clinic, Foucault suggests that the "syntactical reorganization of disease [or disorder allows] the limits of the visible and invisible [to] follow a new pattern [whereby] the abyss beneath illness, which was the illness itself has emerge[s] into the light of language" (195).

³³ In 2000, director Alex Novak and his German theatre company, Theater die Tonne performed an interpretation of Handke's Kaspar at UCLA's Northwest Campus Auditorium. The play was set in a modern schoolroom and employed children with physical and mental disabilities as Kaspar's classmates. Suggesting analogous experiences between the disabled actors and the fictional (and perhaps historical) Kaspar, Novak states: "[The disabled actors] have their own language of their eyes and gestures. They live in their own world. This was the problem of Kaspar." Commenting on the importance of such a performance, he continues: "It is so rare to see not just children, but disabled children as actors. It is never seen in the U.S. The play should make [the children] think about theater differently, their disability differently, and their world differently, and that's good" (Hunter, UCLA Daily Bruin Online).

Tod Browning's film Freaks posits an inversion of dominant ableist ideology while resonating with the last vestiges of the freak-show. Through displaying non-typical bodies on-screen and innovative filmic technique, Browning presents the disabled character as a central site of identification which forces and actualizes an audience's attention upon the spectacle of disability. This process is similar to disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's notion of the stare that often accompanies visible disability, but because the disabled characters in Freaks exhibit normative behaviour throughout most of the film, the spectacular, sensationalized freak as "must-see-object" becomes nullified. Browning's portrayal of able-bodied characters as vile and freakish deconstructs normalcy as ideal. With dwarfs and amputees as central characters of the film, Browning's work does away with the mystery of disability, allowing disabled characters to occupy sites of viewer identification. Apart from the word "freak" becoming a term of empowerment and identification for the disabled community (Linton 17), the film also ascribes to normalcy as a temporary state, similar to Michael Bérubé's it-can-happen-to-you observations upon disability.

In contrast, Anosh Irani's novel, The Cripple and His Talismans, offers disability as a temporary state, as something that can be fixed with the purchase of a limb. His novel also metaphorizes disability as punishment for immoral behaviour. The narrator's search for his lost arm concretizes disability as a sense of loss, or absence, reaffirming Davis's observation that "disability defines the negative space the body must not occupy" ("Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body, and Phantom Limbs – Disability and Visuality 68), and Oliver Sacks's "real-life" sensations of injury. The Cripple and His Talismans provides a multivalent narrative of a recently disabled character who fictionalizes the

experience of disability as a journey of self-awareness while illuminating and interrogating clichés of disability. Through appropriating disability as commodity, humorous, grotesque, terms for discrimination, indicator of societal and personal immorality, and ultimately as a desirable bodily state, a “novice cripple” (Irani 13) gains awareness and unsettling acceptance of his disability. In doing so, the privilege of able-bodiedness becomes insufferable, and normalcy proves impossible.

As these three narratives illustrate that the correlation between normalcy and disability is subjective, they also animate a diversity of characters who stimulate tensions and explore possibilities beyond dichotomy by paradoxically confronting the validity and adequacy of such designation. “Limping Toward Representation” implies that representations of disability and the disabled character already exist as a multitude of marginalized bodies and minds within many forms of narrative, and thus deserve to be theorized, scrutinized and most importantly realized. Peter Handke’s Kaspar, Tod Browning’s Freaks, and Anosh Irani’s The Cripple and His Talismans present characters that both repel and amaze, challenge an understanding of difference and facilitate it – all the while subverting the static banality of normalcy.

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