

# THE GENERAL AUDIENCE TALKS BACK: *CODE OF THE FREAKS* AND THE EVOLUTION OF HOLLYWOOD SHAMING DOCUMENTARIES

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Our interviewees not only school the audience on their own perspectives and experiences of these movies; they also include detail that speaks directly to other disabled people by using cultural references and insider language, which is often politically incorrect. Unlike Hollywood, then, we assume our “general audience” includes people with disabilities.

—Carrie Sandahl (on *Code of the Freaks*)

Why do we even care about the Oscars? You know, lots of filmmakers are going, “Let’s make our own stuff!” Yeah, well, the industry standard is an Oscar or a Golden Globe. Whether we like it or not, that’s what attracts the attention and the commercial success allowing you to go and make your next thing. Tod Browning wouldn’t have got to make *Freaks* if he hadn’t had a hit with *Frankenstein* the year before, right?

—Mat Fraser (in *Code of the Freaks*)

*Code of the Freaks* (Salome Chasnoff, released in 2020, opens with a clip from the final scene of *Freaks*, Tod Browning’s infamous pre-Hays Code 1932 film. *Freaks* has a mythical place within film history and theory, with a cult following as well as widespread critiques from disability studies scholars and activists. Most of the participants in *Freaks* were people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> In fact, about a third of the first anthology on film and disability, *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, was dedicated

to Tod Browning’s films, especially *Freaks*, his most controversial work.<sup>2</sup>

*Freaks* follows Hans, a little person working as a circus performer, who falls in love with the nondisabled trapeze artist Cleopatra. Together with her partner, Hercules, she plots to kill Hans after their wedding and inherit his fortune. In what was defined by anthology contributor Sally Chivers as the only classic horror scene in this film, the community of disabled people, learning of her plot, stalk Cleopatra, trap her, melt her feet and hands to look like duck feet, and then tar and feather her torso, turning her into a “chicken lady.” The final scene in *Freaks*, which is also the opening of *Code of the Freaks*, explains that the circus’s new exhibit, featuring a transformed Cleopatra, is the result of revenge executed by the tight-knit community of sideshow freaks. The carnival barker exclaims: “Their code is a law unto themselves. Offend one, and you offend them all.” The framing of *Code of the Freaks* with this scene is essential to its workings. A cowriter on *Code*, disability scholar and activist Carrie Sandahl, explains:

[T]he Code [i.e., “Offend one, and you offend them all”] ... implies that we as filmmakers, our interviewees, and by extension the entire disability community have been offended and that we are enacting the code of the freaks: this documentary is our revenge. Our representational retribution deforms and “enfreaks” those movies that do us harm. The documentary acts as synecdoche for the disability community itself, which, despite a history fractured by institutionalization, isolation, and segregation, has emerged to build a political and cultural movement.<sup>3</sup>

*Code of the Freaks* embraces the crip solidarity in *Freaks* as a call for action rather than a rant.

Made almost ninety years after *Freaks* debuted, *Code of the Freaks* is a documentary featuring thirteen disabled activists, artists, and scholars responding to hundreds of movie clips

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 31–38. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2022.76.2.31

stereotypically portraying disability.<sup>4</sup> *Code* is a low-budget documentary that boasts no deals with Netflix, has modest production values, and purposely does not include many Hollywood “celebrities,” instead featuring what author and activist Simi Linton has termed the “criperati,” to describe crips who are “intensely interested in disability cultural affairs.”<sup>5</sup> Among the thirteen interviewees are the British actor and writer Mat Fraser (perhaps most well known for his performance as Paul the Illustrated Seal in *American Horror Story*; painter and writer Riva Lehrer; writer Mike Ervin; Candace Coleman, a racial-justice community organizer at Access Living, in Chicago; and Lawrence Carter-Long, a coeditor of and contributor to this dossier and also a cohost of the Turner Classic Movies monthlong film program “The Projected Image: A History of Disability in Film.”<sup>6</sup>

The documentary juxtaposes sequences detailing some of Hollywood’s most prevalent tropes about disability: little people as magical creatures; nondisabled women tending to paralyzed men; blind men driving cars; deaths by suicide, suggesting a life not worth living; disabled characters inspiring nondisabled people—even “cripface.”<sup>7</sup> A particularly favorite trope of mainstream filmmaking is the “cure narrative,” in which the obstacles of disability disappear and the assistive devices are discarded, such as in *Monkey Shines* (George A. Romero, 1988) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). The late Chicago-based playwright, novelist, and longtime disability rights and culture activist Susan Nussbaum, a cowriter on *Code of the Freaks* (together with Carrie Sandahl and Alyson Patsavas), pointed out that able-bodied actors playing disabled characters who then ascend the Oscar stage to receive their awards also “cure,” with that act, their disabled characters.<sup>8</sup> *Code of the Freaks* includes disabled activists’ observations on the harm these elements cause, alongside humorous commentary on how ridiculously unimaginative they are.<sup>9</sup> While dismantling the ableist gaze embedded in these tropes, the documentary is framed around “the code of the freaks”—a concept developed from the film’s complex relationship with Browning’s *Freaks* and defined as community, solidarity, or grassroots activism by the criperti interviewees.

This relationship begins with the documentary’s very first cautionary slide. *Code of the Freaks*, like *Freaks*, opens with a direct address to the audience: “The following contains images from a century’s worth of Hollywood cinema and therefore depicts some nudity, sexual contact, and violence, particularly violence against people with disabilities.” This on-screen text is followed by *Freaks*’s scene of the carnival barker explaining the code. Yet, this slide also ironically references Browning’s infamous warning at the beginning of *Freaks*:

Before proceeding with the showing of the following *highly unusual attraction*, a few words should be said about the amazing subject matter.... They [the freaks] are forced into the most unnatural lives. Therefore, they have built up among themselves a code of ethics to protect them from the barbs of normal people. Their rules are rigidly adhered to and the hurt of one is the hurt of all, the joy of one is the joy of all. The story about to be revealed is a story based on the effect of this code upon their lives.... With humility for many injustices done to such people ... we present the most startling horror story of the *abnormal* and *the unwanted*.<sup>10</sup>

While *Freaks* is ironically used as inspiration in *Code of the Freaks*, it is also, at the same time, itself “enfreaked” or “abnormalized” by the documentary.

Even before the documentary’s title, *Code of the Freaks*, appears on-screen, a long sequence of clips from *Freaks* is juxtaposed with numerous criperti explaining their relationships to the film, while other relevant clips are projected in the background of the “talking heads.” Mat Fraser begins by praising *Freaks* for its depiction of “radically different disabled people. People like me, people with congenital deformities are in it, and you never see those people on-screen.” To that end, filmmaker Tommy Heffron explains that the wedding-feast scene in which Cleopatra is offered a loving cup to the famous “One of Us” chant holds a promise for a kind future that is not delivered. Fraser concludes his remarks in this opening sequence by declaring that no other Hollywood film comes close to *Freaks* in capturing this “camaraderie and edgy outsider necessity of collective difference.”

*Freaks* raises questions such as “Who do you want to be?”; “Who do you belong to?”; “Who is one of us?” With a scene from the film running in the background, activist and media enthusiast Lawrence Carter-Long argues that the villains in *Freaks* are the nondisabled people, while the freaks are the folks with whom you identify. The audience’s discomfort invoked by *Freaks*, as disability studies scholar Sally Chivers suggests, is caused by an identification with a person deviating from the norms of the ideal Hollywood body. The film’s horror relies on this discomfort caused by shifting the spectator’s gaze, subject of interest, and sense of identification from the nondisabled body to that of people with disabilities. Chivers’s inevitable conclusion is that the film’s only horror is identification with a body that is different from the Hollywood norms of a normate (to use Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s term) or extranormate, superabled, ideal body.<sup>11</sup>

At the end, *Code of the Freaks* circles back to *Freaks* with a sequence presenting notable clips from the film juxtaposed with Carter-Long suggesting that “[w]hat was unique and remains unique about *Freaks* ... eighty years later is that when you watch that film, you have to meet the freaks in the movie on their own terms.” For Mat Fraser, those terms, and “the code of the freaks” itself, sound “like some secret thing you have to untangle and work out to understand. Well, that is real, isn’t it? Because you can’t just arrive at the word ‘freak’ and think you know what it means. It means very complicated, layered, cultural, historical, and contemporary things.”

Through its political and aesthetic techniques, *Code of the Freaks* shifts attention from the voyeuristic gaze directed at the freaks to the continuous “enfreakment” and code of solidarity that being a member of the disability community offers: offend one, and you offend them all.<sup>12</sup>

### From Criperati Salons to Collective Spectatorship

In addition to the circular narrative of *Code of the Freaks* revolving around *Freaks*, the documentary also features the distinctive aesthetic device of projecting archival clips behind the interviewees as they speak. *Code of the Freaks* thus gives disabled viewers the opportunity to experience

the pleasures not merely of being represented, but also of being addressed as insiders to the critique and conversation who are privileged to be in on the joke. It provides a sense of communal spectatorship, including even the ability to time-travel into cinematic history, something far more than simply an indictment (or a rant). Although the featured criperati sit alone on-screen, one by one, in a space invisible to the spectator, they are often edited together as though they constitute a group, with several responding to the same scene or film, offering a sense of a collective conversation. While *Code* could be misperceived as an educational film aimed at nondisabled viewers, its greater significance lies in the reverse: its potential to offer this type of inclusive experience to its own community of spectators and listeners.

The essential access features that accompany *Code of the Freaks* when it is screened—those that accommodate deaf and low-vision spectators through audio-description track and open captioning—are but one aspect of a decade-long process devoted to honoring diversity within the disability community. *Code of the Freaks* began within and for the disability community when Susan Nussbaum teamed up with feminist documentary director Salome Chasnoff to create a salon for discussions about Hollywood’s representation of disability.

These salons invited community members to respond to the movie clips, and the team—including disability



The British actor Mat Fraser in *Code of the Freaks*. Photo courtesy of Kino Lorber.

studies scholars and activists Carrie Sandahl and Alyson Patsavas, who brought the experience of having taught a large disability and American film class at the University of Illinois at Chicago, as well as independent filmmaker Jerzy Rose—realized over time that “even some of the most egregiously offensive and traumatizing films had moments of value for certain members of our community.”<sup>13</sup>

## Hollywood Shaming Documentaries

*Code of the Freaks* continues and transforms a forty-year tradition of “Hollywood shaming” documentaries. Such documentaries construct “Hollywood” as a collective archive to historicize the othering of their communities. Films of this kind include documented accounts of Hollywood’s racism, misogyny, homophobia, Islamophobia, sexism, transphobia, ableism, and more. They rely on the cumulative effect of multiple nearly unwatchably offensive clips from a large number of fiction films spanning the years from cinema’s early days to today. Such documentaries may be defined as self-curated archives of the marginalized, preserving the reverse of how Hollywood prefers to see itself. Although these documentaries have evolved over time, their basic structure has remained unchanged: the offended group makes its case by presenting visual evidence, traces its negative impact on the community in question, and demands accountability from mainstream producers as well as their consumers.

This subgenre begins in the eighties with films, such as *Black Hollywood: Blaxploitation and Advancing an Independent Black Cinema* (Howard Johnson, 1984) and *Ethnic Notions* (Marlon Riggs, 1986), that explored the issues of US antiblackness. Both investigated the role of Black actors, directors, and audience members, as well as the deep-rooted stereotypes that have fueled antiblack prejudice. *Black Hollywood* was a television production that focused on the economic aspects of antiblackness in Hollywood, while *Ethnic Notions* explored the broad scope of racism toward Black Americans in popular culture. In the 1990s and 2000s, *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 1995) and *Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema* (Lisa Ades and Lesli Klainberg, 2006) surveyed Hollywood homophobia and the stereotyping of gay and lesbian people through carefully curated clips.<sup>14</sup>

Since 2000, filmmakers who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color have expanded the documentary protest against Hollywood. *Reel Bad Arabs* (Jeremy Earp and Sut Jhaly, 2006) explores a long line of degrading images of Arabs; *The Slanted Screen* (Jeff Adachi, 2006) and *Hollywood Chinese* (Arthur Dong, 2007) focus on

Hollywood depictions of Asian American male characters from films spanning almost a century; the Canadian *Reel Injun* (Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, and Jeremiah Hayes, 2009) explores the history of the depiction of Native Americans in Hollywood films. It wasn’t until 2014 that a feminist version of the Hollywood shaming documentary was released, under the title *Reel Herstory: The Real Story of Reel Women* (Ally Acker), a film that endeavors to correct the notion that women working behind the scenes of motion pictures held peripheral careers. In 2020, the same year as *Code of the Freaks*, Sam Feder’s *Disclosure* took up representations of trans and nonbinary people and gained broader recognition, primarily through Netflix’s distribution and advertising.<sup>15</sup>

As these films resist the harmful effects of stereotypical representations by juxtaposing their clips with responses from activists, filmmakers, actors, archivists, and scholars, they are positioned somewhere between educational nonfiction and documentary film. This subgenre has long been known by film and media educators, and those from marginalized communities. However, *Code of the Freaks* can be said to mark a shift in the evolution of the subgenre from educating the general audience to addressing their own community members as desired, even privileged, spectators. *Code of the Freaks* does this by focusing on the portrayal of disabled people while also making the film accessible through captioning and audio description. It also addresses intersectionality within the community, in particular critiquing the antiblackness embedded in many ableist representations and vice versa.

This essay uses the anachronistic term “shaming” instead of the more contemporary term “cancel” to describe and define this subgenre.<sup>16</sup> My intention is to preserve the quality of (guilty) pleasure in these very images and to recognize the oppositional meanings they entail. I also wish to stress that, at the heart of *Code of the Freaks*, there is something that is the very opposite of canceling: by incorporating materials that may be triggering, it forces audiences to engage with the pain that such materials inflict, rather than to look away. Furthermore, as many of these films demonstrate, the same audiovisuals can impact different members of the same community in different ways; they are more nuanced than positive/negative or celebratory/cancel-worthy representations. Whether shaming, calling out, or even blaming, such documentaries have been aimed at an imaginary general audience and its silent collaboration in the form of spectatorship.

In a sense, collectively, these documentaries put Hollywood on trial for its offenses against a majority of its spectators: women and people of color; Black, Indigenous, disabled, queer, and trans folks. Each of these documentaries

drafts an indictment, complete with convincing arguments, compelling archival evidence, reliable expert witnesses, and—most importantly—testimonies from the victims. Because these documentaries lack the judicial authority of a verdict, they use shaming as a tool against the producers and consumers of such oppressive images. Through this strategy, the imagined or desired spectators of the films become jury members and judges—or suspects, defendants, and perpetrators.

A somewhat scolding tone remains a prominent characteristic of the subgenre, although that, too, has shifted with the release of *Code of the Freaks*, which allows more room for community members' joy, expressed through what Carrie Sandahl calls "insider language."

In mixed audiences, different pockets of responses become perceptible and predictable. There may be a group of disabled audience members who snicker at all the insider jokes, making nondisabled audience members aware of their presence. Their laughter decenters assumptions of audience normalcy and homogeneity.<sup>17</sup>

*Code of the Freaks* has refined the Hollywood shaming documentaries by gradually honing a defiance of the "general audience" paradigm and creating an evolution: the space to acknowledge oppositional as well as intersectional gazes and pleasures.

Films in the "shaming" subgenre usually compile community members' commentary on and denunciations of degrading images, while providing sociopolitical context alongside the images themselves. Because of the real-life urgency of the social issues that *Code of the Freaks* sets out to amend, its methods resemble legal indictments against the oppressors and their accomplices. Like other Hollywood shaming documentaries, it also prescribes such critique as an antidote to the archive of audiovisuals that construct oppressive ideologies. Yet *Code of the Freaks* also acknowledges the transgressive powers and the real pleasures that certain items in the archive—as in Tod Browning's *Freaks*—bring to their community members. The style still consists of archival clips from Hollywood films critiqued by expert community members, with the aim of schooling a general audience taking pleasure in consuming questionable images; yet at the same time, it also winks at its community and allies.

The Hollywood shaming subgenre substitutes the notion of "general" with the more precise designation of white, masculine, heterosexual, cisgender, and nondisabled. In doing so, its films are not afraid to alienate spectators by naming them as such. Thus *Code* is not afraid to call out,

shame, or enfreak films for being what Sandahl cleverly termed "All the Same Movie."<sup>18</sup> The value of such documentaries does not lie with their representation of "real people" in "real situations." Nor does it lie with their poetics, aesthetic, or experimental approach to documentary. Rather, it lies with these documentaries' direct, thorough, and evidence-based indictment of Hollywood.

If the Hollywood fiction films shamed by the documentaries of the subgenre are created for a wide and broad general audience, the Hollywood shaming documentaries tend to struggle to find an audience. The simple aesthetics, straightforward narrative, apparent political agenda, and didactic tone of the subgenre may partially explain its relative marginalization within film and media scholarly discourses and popularity with educators, though big-budget Hollywood will always have the edge. Perhaps the biggest aversion to such films lies in the fact that they are most often used in classrooms, community events, and other spaces relying on the captivity of their audiences. The late Brian Winston explored the long-overdue question of the audience in the documentary canon that emerged in the late 1920s and 1930s. He suggests three types of audiences for factual films, with the third being closest to the majority of spectators in the Hollywood shaming subgenre:

[A] third audience ... [is] to be found in schools, universities, and training facilities. Spectators watch much of the same materials as did the second audience [factual-film enthusiasts], but they were distinct from it (and from cinema spectators) in that they had no choice in the matter of attendance. Some independent producers and companies were able to sustain themselves making film documentaries and other factual visual materials solely for this audience.<sup>19</sup>

For this reason, the still-captive audiences where Hollywood shaming documentaries are likely shown are rarely regarded with the honorable titles of "documentary film buffs," "cinephiles," or "culturati." The films' aesthetic, narratological, and political choices often get written off as "important" yet simplistic "talking heads," manifestational and overly enthusiastic. Yet the subgenre has prevailed, perhaps because the power of Hollywood's representations continues to cause harm.

### Enacting the Code of the Freaks

During the lockdowns of 2020, hundreds of people attended online screenings and Q&As for *Code of the Freaks*.<sup>20</sup> Before



The wedding feast in Tod Browning's *Freaks*.

watching it, I wrongly thought it would be “all the same movie,” shaming Hollywood in a talking-heads style and schooling the normative-bodied/normative-minded/neurotypical/hearing/sighted audience members—and thus not meant for me. It took only ten minutes of watching *Code of the Freaks* (and forty minutes of *Disclosure*)—and the accumulation of testimonies countering, opposing, and objecting to the derogatory clips from the fiction films—for me to realize that these films were not merely schooling general audiences but also addressing me, as a trans crip spectator, very directly. A renewed sense of safety is a direct result of the testimonies by diverse disabled (and trans) folks, owing not only to their responding to a range of clips, but to their actively recontextualizing them and resisting their original use, manifesting a visual and verbal opposition to Hollywood’s toxic ableism.

*Code of the Freaks* also goes further: it offers insight into the intersectional logic missing from the Hollywood shaming

subgenre by juxtaposing recurring tropes to the point of audiovisual tediousness. In *Code of the Freaks*, Sandahl suggests, the montaged tropes are overdetermined not only by impairment type (wheelchair users, facial difference, blindness, intellectual disability, mental illness) but also by their whiteness: “In a sea of disability whiteness, a montage of black men with disabilities who teach white communities about racism appears as a stark contrast, a toxic intersection of ableism and racism prettied up as consciousness raising.”<sup>21</sup>

One of *Code of the Freaks*’s prominent contributions to the evolution of the Hollywood shaming subgenre is its unveiling of the roots of antiblackness interwoven with stereotypes of disability in many of these films. Focusing on *Radio* (Michael Tollin, 2003), disability studies scholar (and *Code* cowriter) Alyson Patsavas explains that it portrays a sweet and innocent character who is “so good that he manages to teach the [residents of a] white town how racist they are.”

Aligning disability and race, Sandahl adds that “the more insidious message that the film leaves is that Radio [Cuba Gooding Jr.] always needs to be monitored. Not only because he’s intellectually disabled, but because he’s black and needs to be protected from his own behaviors. Because he’s not able to understand that he’s at risk as a Black man.” Over clips of the same kind of character played by the same actor in *Men of Honor* (George Tillman Jr., 2000), advocate Candace Coleman concludes:

Because we live in a society that isn’t equally accessible and if it is accessible it’s more geared towards people who have money, you don’t see a lot of diversity in disability. And so when writers or characters in movies portray this isolation of maybe one Black character being saved by a white character, I think it’s speaking to the inaccessibility of the world that we live in, but I also think it isn’t giving power to the fact that we can be in community, we can heal ourselves.

Looking at the historical data, Tsehaye Hébert, interviewed in the documentary, finds an unbelievable predominance of Black men and manhood being portrayed through disabled characters—such as in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962)—that continued to give “the American public a character who was more palatable, more sympathetic, and, I hesitate to use the word ‘neutered,’ but it was a way of neutering the Black male character on-screen.”

As the junior offspring of a subgenre born in such key historical works as *Black Hollywood* and *Ethnic Notions*, both released long before the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd, *Code of the Freaks* insists on unpacking the antiblack roots tied to ableism—and vice versa. Moving from the complicated cultural and historical meanings of the word “freak” to the words of “the code,” the documentary ends with Susan Nussbaum’s foundational insight:

[T]he operative word is “code,” not “freaks,” and it means community. And when you have community and disabled people, particularly activists really lean on each other.... [Y]ou have a sense that people have your back. Disabled people have your back. And in the movie *Freaks*, of course you see that.

Enacting the code, as elucidated by *Code of the Freaks*, requires identifying the offenders and demanding accountability for the pain inflicted on those most wronged within

the community. The code is solidarity.

*Code of the Freaks* seeks not only the criperati’s political critiques of past films, but also their insights into crip futurities, their visions of films that will celebrate crip lived experiences and accommodate disabled people’s desires. After exploring tropes of pity, inspiration, institutionalization, and death as narratological cures, even a sequence critiquing disappointing sex scenes in Hollywood films, *Code of the Freaks* ends by turning to the chorus of criperati who offer their desired crip films.<sup>22</sup> Writer and performer Tekki Lomnicki hopes to see a movie where two disabled characters are in love and have incredible sex with each other, with some intrigue (like three-ways, murder, even a spy who hides things in their wheelchair). Lehrer wishes for a movie featuring a character that experiences real vulnerability and for the film to explore that feeling more honestly and with more edge than usual. Anything but the same movie, again, they conclude. The code is accommodating crip futurities. The code is “Nothing without Us.”<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

1. Sally Chivers, “The Horror of Becoming ‘One of Us’: Tod Browning’s *Freaks* and Disability,” in *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, ed. Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 58.
2. Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns, eds., *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001). The first epigraph in this essay is from Carrie Sandahl, “It’s All the Same Movie: Making *Code of the Freaks*,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 4 (Summer 2019): 148.
3. Sandahl, “It’s All the Same Movie,” 146.
4. A few exemplary clips are from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (William Cottrell, David Hand, and Wilfred Jackson, 1937), *Dr. No* (Terence Young, 1962), *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch, 1980), *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988), *There’s Something about Mary* (Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly, 1998), *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999), *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004), and *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008).
5. Simi Linton, “Foreword: Cultural Territories of Disability,” in *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability*, ed. Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 52.
6. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3Q\\_EitGzp0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3Q_EitGzp0).
7. For an explanation of the term “cripface” as “an able-bodied person faking disability,” see Sally Chivers, “Still Julianne: Projecting Dementia on the Silvering Screen,” in *The*

- Routledge Companion to Disability and Media*, ed. Katie Ellis, Gerard Goggin, Beth Haller, and Rosemary Curtis (New York: Routledge, 2019).
8. See, for example, Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989), Patty Duke in *The Miracle Worker* (Arthur Penn, 1962), Cliff Robertson in *Charly* (Ralph Nelson, 1968), Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, Al Pacino in *Scent of a Woman* (Martin Brest, 1992), Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), and Geoffrey Rush in *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996).
  9. The trope that is negated most thoroughly in *Code of the Freaks* is the inspiration narrative, also called “inspiration porn” by the late Australian disability activist Stella Young. The main sequence begins with the inspiration scene from *Radio* (Michael Tollin, 2003), discussed later in this essay, followed by the scholar and *Code* cowriter Alyson Patsavas, explaining: “When disability appears in a story, it always serves a function. And often that function is one of inspiration.... Where the nondisabled character is inspired to be a better person.” Carrie Sandahl explains that *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009) humanizes the disabled Black character, Ayers, through his relationship with Lopez, who is depicted as a sensitive white man. Writer and performer Tekki Lomnicki suggests that the inspirational tropes originate in cinematic representations of Hellen Keller, and particularly in *The Miracle Worker*. Performer Crom Saunders points to the gibberish sign language Keller’s teacher, Anne Sullivan (Anne Bancroft), uses, aiding in the film’s disrespect of ASL. Writer Tsehaye Hébert sees the inspiration sequence from a different point of view: while she wasn’t inspired by it, she did find the actress’s performance to be extraordinary.
  10. Opening credit text of *Freaks*; italics added.
  11. Chivers, “The Horror of Becoming ‘One of Us.’”
  12. The term “enfreakment” was coined by disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her influential book *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Ordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
  13. Sandahl, “It’s All the Same Movie,” 147.
  14. While trans and bi representations appear in the films that the documentary addresses, both identities are disregarded and left unexamined.
  15. It could, however, be argued that the support for *Disclosure* was later used by Netflix to pinkwash Dave Chappelle’s transphobia.
  16. The main distinction here is that the callouts in cancel culture tend to boycott, conceal, and shun the offensive person, corporation, or artifact, while in shaming culture the goal is to amplify the visibility of the wrongdoing by publicly drawing attention to the wrongdoer.
  17. Sandahl, “It’s All the Same Movie,” 148.
  18. Sandahl, 148. See the first epigraph in this essay.
  19. Brian Winston, “The Marginal Spectator,” in *A Companion to Documentary Film History*, ed. Joshua Malitsky (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 423–24.
  20. An early version of this essay was first delivered as an introduction to the Q&A at a screening of *Code of the Freaks*, with Carrie Sandahl and Alyson Patsavas, that was organized by Nili Broyer of the Disability Studies Center at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I also introduced Sandahl following a screening of the film for the students and faculty of the USC School of Cinematic Arts.
  21. Sandahl, “It’s All the Same Movie,” 149.
  22. These tropes are often portrayed as an act of a charity on the part of the nondisabled character toward the disabled one.
  23. Lawrence Carter-Long coined this rephrasing of the long-standing disability slogan “Nothing about Us without Us.”