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SILVER SCREEN CARNIVAL

The reaction of Society to Different Manifestations of Otherness



*For Halloween, Oyster Boy
Decided to go as human*

T. BURTON, *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories*, 1997

The presence of monstrosity and deformity remains a constant theme in the history of cinema¹, from its origins up to contemporary times. Different genres, from horror to sci-fi, from fantasy to drama, have been involved with the most extreme declination of “otherness” and, even if the means of representation can vary, depending on time and artistic currents, the monster generally becomes a mirror of society's anxieties: through the encounter with its Other and dark side, the world reflects its mistakes, goes through a catharsis, more or less violent, and seeks for a firm point to control its unsteadiness. The purpose of this paper is to trace a partial history of the evolution of the figure of the monster through different cinematographic eras, with particular attention to those situations in which the relationship between normalcy and otherness is subverted. Since the width of the topic is more than considerable, the choice made here is to focus on lesser known operas, genres and authors, omitting those examples which have been already broadly investigated by film studies.

¹ Among many histories of horror and monster films, these volumes put particular attention on the role of the monster: Skal, D. J., 2001. *The Monster Show: a Cultural History of Horror*, London: Faber & Faber; Werner, A., 1976. *Freaks, Cinema of the Bizarre*, London: Lorrimer.

From the Twenties to the Fifties: literary monsters and post-war obsessions

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, it is mostly through literary adaptations that the audience is forced to have a confrontation with monstrosity: Mr. Hyde by Stevenson, brought on the screen for the first time in 1920 by John Robertson, Victor Hugo's Hunchback of Notre-Dame, portrayed by Lon Chaney for Wallace Worsley in 1923, Gwynplaine, another creature of Hugo, in *The Man Who Laughs* (Paul Leni, USA, 1928), Frankenstein's monster, created by Mary Shelley and transformed into an icon by the interpretation of Boris Karloff, in James Whale's 1931 version (a silent adaptation was first made in 1910), the Phantom of the Opera, written by Gaston Leroux and adapted in 1929 by Rupert Julian, with Chaney as a protagonist, Dracula, from the homonymous novel by Bram Stoker, and so on.

Generally, the monsters from these operas are victims of the cruelty of nature, responsible for their deformity or diverseness, and of the exclusion from a society that marginalizes them because of their physical characteristics. In some cases, however, they are the result of human *hybris*, as it is for Frankenstein or Mr. Hyde: under these circumstances, the relationship between the creator and his creature establishes a reversion of roles. The scientist, becoming the incarnation of a non-human voracity for absolute knowledge, embodies the real element of monstrosity, while his creation often represents the innocent scapegoat of his foolish and sacrilegious ambition. At other times, it is simply the sadistic instinct of the human being which leads to commit perverted deeds, as it has to be experienced by Gwynplaine, whose cheeks were slashed when he was a child so that he is forced to show an eternal grin: in any case, the monster, even when he chooses a negative and dangerous approach, as the vampire Dracula, is generally not responsible for his nature. It is the community that is guilty of obtuseness when it labels any element of otherness with the mark of "human oddity"². This process makes immediately clear that the destiny of every manifestation of non-conformity is to be segregated or exploited, when not even lynched, erased, neutralized and/or neglected.

Horror films of the Twenties-Thirties resound with the anxieties of the beginning of the century, and of the second half of the previous century, proposing the great themes of the conflict between mankind and nature, of the outrageous attitude of science, which aspires to become a substitute for God, of the contrast between inner and outer shape, so that a deformed creature can be kind-hearted, as it is for Quasimodo or Gwynplaine, and, on the contrary, a fascinating and handsome man, like Dracula, can become dangerous. Another point of view is furnished by German Expressionism, with *Das Cabinet des*

² For a better definition of the concept of freak and for an historical and sociological perspective about the exhibition of human oddities, see Bogdan, R., 1990. *Freak show. Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press; Fiedler, L., 1993. *Freaks. Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, New York: Anchor Books; Hartzman M., 2006. *American Sideshow. An Encyclopedia of History's Most Wondrous and Curiously Strange Performers*, New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin; Frost, L., 2005. *Never One Nation. Freaks, Savages and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture 1850-1877*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Adams, R., 2001. *Sideshow U.S.A., Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, Germany, 1920), a series of movies by Paul Wegener about the mythical character of the Golem, the only surviving of which seems to be *Der Golem. Wie er in die Welt kam* (1920), and with the revitalization of the figure of the vampire operated by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau with *Nosferatu - eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922).

But the most attentive and sensible celebrator of otherness is undoubtedly Tod Browning³, who has investigated the relationship between non-conformity and normalcy from multiple and innovative perspectives, putting it at the centre of an articulated ethical and artistic meditation. His work represents a crucial turning point for any reflexion about the theme of monstrosity related to society: the attraction to the Other is, in fact, among Browning's recurrent obsessions, together with the roots of crime and the epic themes of vengeance and sacrifice. His inquiry, therefore, dives into the two main aspects of deformity, the physical and the moral one. Segregated for different reasons from society, Browning's characters decide to take revenge or to forgive, to redeem themselves or to stick to criminality, to accept their nature or to refuse it by undergoing a mutation, which is often both physical and ethical. The focus of Browning's research, as mentioned, is not only the representation of diverseness, but also the approach that “integrated” people decide to adopt in their relationship with the Other. Both categories, the normal and the abnormal, seem to follow a precise path in his cinema: from *The Show* (USA, 1927) where, despite the fact that the freaks work only as background figures, the “normal” people are forced to interact with them, to *The Unholy Three* (USA, 1925), where the freaks, represented by a ventriloquist, a dwarf and a strong man, react by taking revenge on a society which stigmatized them in the role of “human oddities”. A similar process is developed in *The Unknown* (USA, 1927), where the theme of repentance is amplified to the limits of human patience and it is merged with the topic of sacrifice, which becomes mutilation and, later on, death: an extreme cathartic journey which, the director seem to suggest, only a “special” being can accomplish⁴. The same journey takes place as well in *West of Zanzibar* (USA, 1928), where the illusionist Phroso, deprived of the use of his legs after an accident caused by his rival, is initially motivated only by a blind thirst for revenge, but he later chooses to meet a violent death to rescue his daughter.

Vengeance and sacrifice work therefore as the centre of Browning's opera, together with the illusionary overlapping of reality and fiction. In some cases, in fact, “normal” people pretend to be deformed: in *The Blackbird* (USA, 1926), the criminal Dan Tate goes under the mask of The Bishop, a crippled priest, to hide his hideous deeds, in *London after Midnight* (USA, 1927), the police invent the existence of a society made of vampires to unmask a murderer. The most interesting of these examples remains, however, *The Unknown*, where Alonzo initially pretends to be armless in order to hide from the police that are seeking him, only to have his arms mutilated and become a real freak himself. At other

³ On Tod Browning, see Skal, D.J. Savada, E., 1995. *Dark Carnival: the Secret World of Tod Browning, Hollywood's Master of the Macabre*, New York: Anchor Books.

⁴ For an accurate analysis of the theme of vengeance and sacrifice in *The Unknown*, see Garsault, A., October 2000. L'Inconnu. Jeux des mains..., *Positif* n. 476.

times, are the freaks to be disguised as normal people: in *The Unholy Three* the ventriloquist and the dwarf pretend to be respectively an old lady and a baby, in order to easily enter people's houses and rob them.

But, of course, the masterpiece of his filmography and the manifesto of his conception of monstrosity remains *Freaks* (USA, 1932). A veritable gallery of human oddities, most of the actors were actual Freak Show performers. Armless and legless performers, dwarves, a bearded lady, siamese twins, pinheads, half-men, half-women: every single character of a typical American Freak Show stars in the movie. But besides this fact, what is mostly interesting about *Freaks* is the role reversal played out between the monsters and the normal people. The “beautiful” people are in fact the real villains: the gorgeous Cleopatra and his vigorous boyfriend, who don't hesitate to exploit and humiliate their less fortunate colleagues. The freaks, on their side, form an authentic community, based on true and admirable values, where friendship and love have a deep meaning, a form of purity, which the “normal” ones could most likely never experience. What Browning pictures here is a real inverted world, where the monsters, at first glance, are to be pitied, yet are in fact blessed with the most authentic form of human richness, the opportunity to be surrounded by real, disinterested love, while those who are gifted by Fate with an outstanding physical shape are internally corrupted by ambition and greed, and therefore doomed to eternal loneliness.

From the second half of the Thirties and into the Forties, the attention is turned towards monstrosity as a scientific theme: one finds a proliferation of mad scientists who build monsters in their gloomy laboratories. Among the many titles are to be mentioned *Island of Lost Souls* (Erle C. Kenton, USA, 1933), inspired by the novel of H.G. Wells *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (Michael Curtiz, USA, 1933), *The Monster Maker* (S. Newfield, USA, 1944), and Browning himself, with *The Devil Doll* (USA, 1936). The overlap of categories becomes even subtler: the real monster is the scientist who doesn't hesitate to experiment with his foolish inventions on people — creating deformed beings — but more often it is the society itself that drives him to commit perverted experiments, making him a victim, more than a torturer. This relationship is so aptly referenced by the already mentioned Hugo's *L'homme qui rit: homo homini lupus*. The disquieting sensations bound to the development of new technologies are undoubtedly a result of the transitional period between the two World Wars, when the dangerous element doesn't include post-atomic scenery yet, but embodies the disturbing shape of war mutilations⁵. There still are other examples of martyred monsters, like the Wolf Man, for the first time on the big screen with the 1941 movie by George Waggner. In this instance, the beast is played by Lon Chaney Jr.: infected by a werewolf, the tragedy of Larry Talbot lies in the fact that he is totally aware of his transformation in a bloodthirsty savage, but cannot do anything to prevent himself from slaughtering people. The resolution

⁵ Ivi, p. 89. “Freakishness, deformity, and disability had taken root as a staple of American entertainment in the years following World War I: it is difficult to ignore the parallels between the cinema's ongoing obsession with disability and the real social problem of a quarter million disabled American soldiers who returned to find limited employment opportunities in an otherwise thriving economy”.

of the mythological conflict beast/man will come from his father, who will kill the wolf without knowing his identity, making this a story where otherness is seen as a burden more distressing than ever to carry. It is the archetype of the *noir* cycle that, from the beginning of the Forties, would mark the American panorama for the entire decade. This film trend would bring to light the darkest sides of the human soul and we will see numerous operas based on the mutation and the emersion of an obscure, wild side of the human psyche, as it happens in *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, USA, 1952).

Between the Forties and the Fifties, the post-war trauma and the fear of nuclear weapons were large influences on the monster movie genre: dreading the foreign enemy is embodied in the alien. This foreign assailant was often a symbol of the political enemy at the time, the Soviet Union. In a paranoid age characterized by espionage the monster consequently becomes most dangerous when he pretends to be normal, hiding behind the reassuring features of a neighbor: the best example of this sub-genre is *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (Don Siegel, USA, 1956).

The Fifties mark the debut of a curious author, who deserved the title of worst director of the whole history: Edward Wood Junior. Ed Wood, with his nonsense films full of ridiculously homemade special effects, has demonstrated to be capable of adopting a surprisingly innovative point of view in dealing with the topic of diversity. The cast itself recurrently employed by the director was made of freaks: the television vampire Maila Nurmi, gothic announcer of a series of horror movies, the sensitive Criswell, the gigantic wrestler Tor Johnson, several transvestites in whose club Wood himself was included, and the old Bela Lugosi, addicted to morphine and fallen into disgrace at the time. With *Glen or Glenda?* (also known as *I Changed My Sex, I Lived Two Lives* or *He or She?*) produced in 1953, the most autobiographical of his movies, Wood offers a unique reflection on otherness. It is a fictional documentary that presents through the illustration of a psychiatrist, two different cases of sexual ambiguity, inspired by the true story of George – Christina Jorgensen, one of the first transsexuals in the Fifties. With this movie, Wood shows his importance as a pioneer, digging into a topic so outrageous for its time. Wood seeks for scientific, albeit clumsy, explanations to illustrate the psychological motivations that would drive a man to wear women's clothing. He employs a precise distinction between transsexualism and transvestitism⁶, without any form of condemnation, but rather merely offering an invitation to understand. And even if Alan, the transsexual, is defined as “created almost as a Frankenstein monster”⁷, the final message is positive and surprisingly modern for the time: why condemning a man who innocently finds his happiness in angora sweaters?

⁶ “The term *transvestite* is a name given by medical science to those persons who wear the clothing of the opposite sex (...). Most transvestites do not want to change their lives, their bodies. Many of them want to change the clothing they wear”. Quote from the movie.

⁷ Quote from the movie.

The Sixties and the Seventies: the fear of the invisible otherness

Towards the end of the Fifties and with coming on of the Sixties, monstrosity, as already mentioned, becomes ambiguous and difficult to recognize: the element of non-conformity often has the shape of normality, impossible to be identified at first sight as a threat: what's at stake now is the reliability of the neighbor, the safety of everyday life, in other words, the society itself. These anxieties are brought by the Cold war, with its heavy burden of fears: espionage, the hidden enemy, the probable explosion of a third and fatal world conflict. *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, UK, 1960), is one of the most significant representations of these concerns: the children from a British village, gifted with paranormal powers and capable of actions of real cruelty towards the adults, turned out to be controlled by an alien intelligence. On the same topic, the monstrosity covered by normality, the innovative *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, USA, 1968) becomes the archetype of the “demoniac” genre: a young middle-class woman is deceived by a couple of unsuspected elderly neighbors, members of a satanic sect that wants to use her as a vehicle for the birth of the Antichrist.

Containing some elements of social criticism, but with a different perspective on the monster, portrayed more as a victim of paranoia in the media and of the lack of control over scientific progress, *It's Alive!* (Larry Cohen, USA, 1974) is a story of a young mother who, as a consequence of the use of an experimental medicine while pregnant, gives birth to a monster with fangs, claws and an unstoppable homicidal instinct. As a result, the father loses his job and becomes the target of an obsessive media attention, feeling hunted, just like his hideous creature. The encounter of the man and his creature will be unexpectedly touching, even if it will work as a prelude to an unavoidable tragic ending. This baby monster belongs to the category of the victims of the human *hybris*, but the picture is even more complicated, as the role played by the media is of absolute relevance. The scariest scenes of the film are undoubtedly the hysterical and ruthless herds of journalists, incapable of the smallest gesture of humanity, rather than the scenes of the feral infant, who actually shows true feelings towards his relatives: when he is breast-fed by his mother and doesn't hurt her, when he doesn't attack his little brother, who gently speaks to him, and when he seems to beg his father to be rescued. Director Larry Cohen based the film on this ambiguity⁸: on one hand, the monster is a threat and must be eliminated, but on the other he is just a little baby looking for protection. There is also the intention to drag the audience into voyeurism, playing on the morbid eagerness to finally see the monster, which is never clearly shown until the end of the movie: it is the same mechanism on which the entire Freak Show is based, where the attractions are fully shown only after the spectator has purchased a ticket.

Besides these inquiries on the sociological presence of the horror in everyday life, some directors show a certain interest, even if occasionally, in real freaks, like those portrayed by Tod Browning: one of the most artistically relevant works of the Sixties in this sense is the Italian *La donna scimmia* (Marco

⁸ See the interview to Larry Cohen in *Re-Search #10. Incredibly Strange Films*, n. 10, 1986.

Ferreri, Italy, 1963). Ugo Tognazzi portrays Antonio, a dull parasite who finds a hairy girl in a cloister and decides to exploit her as a freak: as the success of the attraction grows, Antonio marries the girl to assure his control over her and when she gets pregnant, he is eager to see if his son will be furry, to enlarge his number, but the woman dies while she is giving birth to a dead baby. Seemingly desperate for a time, the man eventually shows his utter inhumanity, not hesitating to exhibit for money the embalmed bodies of his family. The vision of the freak in Ferreri is completely opposite to the one presented by Browning. The exhibition, here, is not a way to overcome diversity, but a real torture for the victim. And if in *Freaks* the whole carnival celebrates the birth of the bearded woman's baby, the ape woman is terrified at the idea of having a hairy child. Every touch of that magic and positive atmosphere that Tod Browning built around his freaks is here turned into the darkest tragedy, because the ape woman never ceases to be alone. She will never have a community of “very special people” with strong moral values to support her, and she is totally aware of the fact that her only friend in the world is there for exploiting her diversity. She does not find any relief even in death, once again deprived of any form of dignity. It is evidently another case of role-reversal, where the monstrosity of the freak is only superficial and the real monster, the non-human, the threat, hides under a mask of apparent respectability.

Another authorial look on diversity is given by Werner Herzog, always attentive to the surprising mechanisms which rule human life, with two movies: *Auch Zwerge haben kleine Angefangen* (Germany, 1970) and *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen Alle* (Germany, 1974). The first is a disturbing, almost avant-garde opera, which documents a riot in an anonymous institution for dwarfs: the director, the only “big” human, is forced to lock himself in his office, taking with him a rebel dwarf as a hostage, while the chaos degenerates outside his door. To pay the expenses of the destructive anarchy of the dwarfs are mainly the animals of the colony, tortured and killed with no purpose, but violence, both physical and psychological, is also inflicted to human beings, and in particular to a blind dwarf and to the director himself. It is the demonstration of the fact that forms of discrimination can be applied even among those who are considered different from the “regular” society. The film ends as it opened, with the hysterical laughter of Hombre, the head of the riot, incredibly deaf to every attempt of communication and while he is locked in his madness. It is the metaphorical representation of the relativity of normalcy, where the standard established by the majority makes abnormal everything that differs from it. In the vision of Herzog, however, the real monstrosity doesn't even lie in the dwarfs themselves, but in the setting of the story, deformed, disquieting and a natural vehicle for exasperated tensions, as it sometimes happens in contemporary society with postmodern urban environments.

Based on a true story is the case of Kaspar Hauser, found in 1824 in a square of Nuremberg, unable to speak nor explain where he came from. Exhibited in a small Freak Show, he is adopted by a doctor who becomes his tutor. Unfortunately, Kaspar shows uncommon sensibility and philosophical spirit, discussing the dogmas of the Church and other truths taken for granted by the society of his time,

until a mysterious aggressor wounds him to death. It is then discovered that the killer is the same person who had released Kaspar from a prison where he had spent his entire childhood and adolescence. According to the legend, Kaspar was the illegitimate son of a noble man, locked since childhood to be hidden from the world: the homicide of Kaspar represents the attempt to repress realities that are difficult and painful to accept. It is much easier to take him back from the oblivion he came from, silencing that collective conscience he was trying to awake. It's interesting to notice how the director, despite the fact that historically Kaspar was a teenager, about sixteen years old, chose for the role of the protagonist Bruno S., a non-professional in his forties, with a complicated history of mental illness: Bruno is indeed a freak, as real as the dwarfs in *Auch Zwerge haben kleine Angefangen*. Herzog goes on with his enquiry on deformity in his 1978 remake of Murnau's *Nosferatu*, restoring the hideousness of Max Schreck with his favorite actor Klaus Kinski. He completely abandons the elegance attributed to the vampire by the interpretations of Lugosi and Lee. But despite his monstrosity, *Nosferatu* carries a mysterious appeal, which allows him to attract his victims: it is this ambivalent attraction-repulsion of the evil and the deathly that makes the vampire a freak, triumphant over normality.

The same inexplicable mixture of fear, disgust and compassion lies in the eyes of the Freak Show spectator, as well as of the girl staring at the vampire: and yet, in both cases it's impossible to turn away, impossible not to watch and, therefore, not to surrender to the fascination of the Other. A direct homage to *Freaks* by Browning is *She Freak*, a rare movie by Byron Mabe (USA, 1967), in which the protagonist, the waitress Jade, marries the owner of a travelling *carnival*. Jade is quick to start an affair with an employee of the show and, although she loves the lifestyle of the *carnival*, she cannot stand the presence of the freaks that, as a consequence, reveal the affair to her husband: the man dies while facing his rival, bequeathing the *carnival* to his wife. The freaks rise against her and, as in Browning's movie, assault her, turning her into a monstrous, but profitable, human oddity.

From the Sixties to the Eighties, monstrous creatures of various kinds are a constant presence on the big screen: they are often created from homemade special effects, but nevertheless capable of generating deep meditations over their role.

One of the classical American B-movies of the time is surely *Spider Baby or the Maddest Story Ever Told* (Jack Hill, USA, 1968), with Lon Chaney Jr., the story of the horrible Merrye family, affected by a "regressive syndrome" which causes mental retardation and a certain tendency to cannibalism. The clan is composed by two sadist sisters, a sort of pinhead brother and two mysterious uncles who live in the basement and eat human flesh. Bruno (Chaney Jr.) is the guardian of the house and the only "normal" person who can live safely with the Merryes, who love him very much. When two relatives of the family visit them, accompanied by a lawyer and his secretary, to obtain the custody of the daughters, and to lay their hands on the wealthy estate, the situation turns into a pandemonium. Omitting any considerations about the poverty of means employed and some inexplicable gaps in the development of the plot, the

interest of the movie lies in the portrayal of the pure relationship which bounds Bruno to his monsters. Even if the Merrye are as far as possible from the touching poetry of Browning's freaks, it is interesting to see how their monstrosity is turned into real warmth from Bruno's eyes: like a new Madame Tetrallini, this stepfather takes care of his "kids" despite of the sense of horror provoked in "normal" society by their inhuman attitudes. In the subverted logic of the Merrye family, the weird people are those coming from outside the house, with their elegant clothes, their repulsion for insects, creatures which they consider lovely, and somewhat tasty: a sort of reversal as seen in *The Addams Family*⁹, but with a bitter and tragic ending.

Increasingly a topic chosen by directors, cannibalism encounters a certain popularity towards the end of the Seventies: the most famous examples are certainly *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, USA, 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, USA, 1977), where the represented tensions are still connected to the war question but this time linked to the anxieties of the Vietnamese conflict. In the first film, a group of young people travelling through Texas gets lost in the Southern countryside and become the victims of a psychotic clan of cannibals who are ruled by the gigantic and mentally ill Leatherface who wears a mask made of human skin and wields a chainsaw. The movie shows many innovations: the very restricted budget employed results in the use of primitive but nevertheless very effective techniques, and the disturbing gallery of evil cannibals is meant to become a classic of the villains hall of fame. The Texan family is basically a real catalogue of the specimen of monsters analysed insofar: the father is a "bodysnatcher", apparently a friendly and nice employee at the gas station but, in fact, a cruel murderer, the son is a schizophrenic with self-destructive compulsions, and the grandfather is an indeterminate half-mummified entity, with the ambiguous role of victim and meanwhile generator of the homicidal fury of the clan. The most impressive of them all is, however, the immense Leatherface, assumedly mentally challenged, since he never pronounce a single word, but yells and grunts as a beast. He is animated by a primitive and insatiable thirst for blood to boot. Another shocking element of monstrosity are the handcrafted ethnic decorations which embellish the family's house: recalling the style of the Native Americans, these objects are made with the remains of slaughtered victims. Once again, the film shows an inverted world, creating a sort of parallel dimension ruled by chaos, where eating tourists is totally normal because they don't belong to the family and therefore they are subordinate human beings. Considering that the victims of the clan are a group of hippies with the typical Volkswagen van, the historical context is rather explicit: the age of Aquarius is over, the utopia is gone and it is turning into a dystopia, there are new forms of evil hiding in the dark of our age, ready to strike when we don't expect it.

The message contained in *The Hills Have Eyes* is similar, but the topic of the deconstruction of the values is even more explicitly connected with the concept of family since the struggle takes place between

⁹ *The Addams Family* is an American television series based on the characters created by Charles Addams for *The New Yorker*. It was originally aired by ABC for two seasons, from 1964 to 1966.

two symmetrical clans: the cannibals and the victims. The Carter family is blocked in the desert with their camper because of an engine failure, when a wild tribe of somewhat deformed cannibals assaults them. They are forced to defend themselves in a brutal way, sometimes even revolting from a moral point of view, as when they use the dead body of the mother as a decoy for the cannibals. The circumstances bring the Carters to reveal, in the end, that their nature is almost as evil and perverted as that of their enemies. The “normal” family is comparable with the cannibal clan in that they are both paternalistic in nature; a comparison that subverts the consistency of values in paternalistic societies. The thesis here is that the very essence of civilization, and everything concerning it, therefore religion, moral, institutions, are nothing but a mask behind which the substantial bestiality of the man is hiding. The only space left for humanity at the end of the movie comes from a girl of the clan who, sick of the barbarity of his family, helps the Carters by rescuing their kidnapped baby. The “normal” family, instead, comes out of the story morally disintegrated, with the son-in-law raging against one of the cannibals with bestial fury in the last sequences, whereas the cannibals enjoy an albeit limited sense of redemption.

The Seventies also see the debut of directors particularly interested in the topic of diversity, such as David Cronenberg and David Lynch, whose work has been widely analysed under this perspective. Although an analysis of their reflections over these themes would require a separate discussion, it is necessary to mention *The Fly* (USA, 1986) from the Canadian director, which insists on the topic of the human *hybris*, by rendering the brilliant scientist Seth Brundle a disgusting, pitiable, victim of his experiments. Cronenberg will develop the topic of monstrosity especially in the analysis of the deconstruction of the flesh and of the incarnation of the essence of evilness, as it happens, respectively, in *Videodrome* (Canada, 1983) and *The Brood* (Canada, 1979).

David Lynch's research on monstrosity would deserve an even wider inquiry, being one of the obsessions the director has worked on throughout his entire career. The most evident example is of course *The Elephant Man* (UK/USA, 1980) based on the true story of Joseph Henry Merrick¹⁰ (John in the movie), where the freak becomes a source of entertainment for an unbearably superficial bourgeois society, and the attempt made by John to be integrated into it fails since, despite his noble spirit and his intelligence, his physical appearance forces him into the role of human oddity, even outside the cage of the Freak Show¹¹. Another declination of monstrosity in Lynch's œuvre is represented by the distasteful baby creature from *Eraserhead* (USA, 1979), an innocent and candid target of the hysterical reaction of a dysfunctional family to his deformity. Both Merrick and the deformed baby make the steadiness of the society and of its generally positively rated institutions (the family, the charity) oscillate: the role reversal between natural born monster and inhuman people is represented in both movies. But while Merrick is

¹⁰ On the case of Joseph Merrick, see Howell, M. Ford, P., 2001. *The true story of the Elephant Man*, London: Allison & Busby, New Ed edition; Montagu A., 2001. *The Elephant Man: a Study in Human Dignity*, Lafayette: Acadian House Publishing.

¹¹ To be inspired by the story of Joseph Merrick was also the theatrical piece *The Elephant Man* by Bernard Pomerance, staged for the first time at the Booth Theater of Broadway in 1970. The play was also adapted for television by ABC in 1982.

aware of his otherness and dramatically cut out of that society he hungrily attempts to be accepted by, the creature from *Eraserhead* is totally unconscious of everything. The representation of the relationship between normalcy and otherness is therefore offered only by the point of view of the parents, who show all the possible reactions analysed until here: refusal, denial, pity, fear, aggressiveness.

From the Eighties to yesterday. Good and bad freaks.

The freak, both seen as a *carnival* performer or, more generally, as a deformed being, continues to be a constant presence in contemporary cinema at various levels: not only as a monster, scapegoat of society's tensions in horror and sci-fi, but also as an element of otherness, seeking integration, as a parallel reality, as a metaphor of a world pushed towards globalization, where overcoming cultural barriers becomes an exigency of survival. Tim Burton is undoubtedly the most interesting director from this point of view: from his first works in the Eighties until contemporary days, he constantly insisted on the topic of the problematic integration of the Other, settling his dark, disquieting, magic and sentimental fairy tales in various contexts. But next to Burton, there are several other authors who build their stories around the theme of "magic" monstrosity.

Clive Barker, successful writer and director, creates in his books and his films alternative dimensions populated by fantastic beings, disquieting and marvellous at same time, with which the dull "normal" people have to deal. In his first film, *Hellraiser* (UK, 1987), to experience absolute pleasure, Frank enters a parallel dimension populated by the Cenobites: hideous freaks that tear him into pieces until he is deprived of his body. Finding out that he needs human blood to live again, he forces his ex-lover to kill people until he has a new, although disgusting, body. The film turns then into a reflection on the dissolution of the organic material and on the creation of a new society that is negatively Other, ruled by the Cenobites. In *Nightbreed* (1989), Barker faces diversity from a more traditional point of view. A boy accused of murder by his psychiatrist, played by David Cronenberg, discovers the subterranean kingdom of Midian, populated by human oddities who seem to belong to Barnum's American Museum¹². Monsters with many limbs, fauns, horned ladies with golden skin and every kind of weird creature constitute the *Nightbreed* who have been discriminated through the centuries by a humanity that is envious of their powers. The boy finds out that he belongs to this race and after an initiation reminiscent of the "We accept you, one of us!" of *Freaks*, he helps his people to fight against the evil psychiatrist and his allies, expression of a brutal society, dashed by any manifestation of diversity. Freaks are victims of the real "normal" monsters, following that logic of absurdity already seen in other cases.

¹² Phineas T. Barnum's American Museum of New York existed from 1841 to 1865 and is known to be one of the most important collection of human oddities ever existed. After the closing of the museum due to some arsons, Barnum founded the famous Circus which still bears his name. On Barnum and his career as a show entertainer, see Barnum, P. T., 2000. *The Life of P.T. Barnum Written by Himself*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.; Bluford, A., 1997. *E pluribus Barnum: the Great Showman and the Making of US Popular Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Saxon, A. H., 1989. *P.T. Barnum. The legend and the man*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Society (Brian Yuzna, USA, 1989) represents the diverse people who are discriminated against at an economic level in a world dominated by monsters, indeed exceptional in beauty, elegance, and luxury. The young Bill, a brat of a very wealthy Beverly Hills family, is considered a sort of freak by his relatives, totally absorbed by their superficial lifestyle to pay attention to his problems. He will discover that they belong, together with all the rich and famous people they use to frequent, to a sect of cannibal creatures who organize terrifying orgies in which they melt their bodies with those of their victims, absorbing them and sucking out their lives. The movie contains a rather strong political message, condemning the overwhelming power of the upper classes and the superficiality of the fashion society in which the ones who do not count, like Bill, adopted as a baby from the orphanage to be grown as cattle, are seen as slaves of the system, deprived of rights and feelings. The metaphor of the cannibal orgy is a clear invitation not to be absorbed by the market's mechanisms and to remark our own individuality, despite being considered outsiders.

Negative but nonetheless deserving some form of compassion is the protagonist of *Phenomena* (Dario Argento, Italy, 1984), a child with a monstrous face, victim of a psychotic mother: even if the identity of the murderer is revealed only in the ending, it is implied that the creature is kept chained in the insane attempt to protect him from a society which doesn't have the cultural resources to accept his diversity.

In *An American Werewolf in London* (John Landis, USA/UK, 1981), a revisitation of the wolf-man legend, the horror genre is contaminated with comedy. The film retreads topics already seen in the classic werewolf movies such as the tragic ending that the monster must face — unable to be accepted by society.

Based on a real-life figure, is Rocky Dennis, the protagonist of *Mask* (Peter Bogdanovich, USA, 1985), a teenager afflicted by *lionitis*, a rare disease deforming all features of the face, making him a new Merrick. The reflection on diversity here made, is interesting because it takes back that atmosphere of community already represented in *Freaks*: Rocky can find a place only between other freaks, like his mother, her hippy friends, and his blind girlfriend. But while the mother and his friends deal with Rocky in a normal way, aware of the fact he is extremely smart, the rest of society acts differently: the principal of his high school would like to send him to a special institution for the mentally ill, while his girlfriend's parents try to break up the relationship.

Being impossible to recall all the most recent movies in which monstrosity plays an important role, I will only mention a sincere homage to the Freak Show and to one of the artists most connected to the freak aesthetics: *Fur – An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus* (Steven Shainberg, USA, 2006). More than a biopic, it is a fantastic hypothesis about the reasons that brought the photographer Diane Arbus¹⁵ to research about the weirdness of humanity. When Lionel Sweeney, completely covered by a thick hair,

¹⁵ On Diane Arbus see Bertelli, P., 1994. *Della fotografia trasgressiva: dall'estetica dei freaks all'etica della ribellione. Saggio su Diane Arbus*, Piombino: Traccedizioni; Bosworth, P., 2006. *Diane Arbus. A biography*, New York: Norton & Norton.

moves in the apartment above her, Diane wakes up from her bourgeois sleep and discovers a wonderful world made of nudists, transvestites and human oddities. The fascination for what is deformed or non-conventional, which was a part of Diane since she was a kid, eventually finds a vehicle of expression in her attraction to the strange man, inciting shock among her relatives. A heart-breaking sentimental story which is reminiscent of the fairytale of *The Beauty and the Beast*, its joyful representation of the *carnival* world, seen as cheerful and colored, places it in violent contrast with the grey and rigid “regular” society, too busy in saving the appearance to look at the real core of things. However, the reversal of perspective here is only partial, because the two will get together only after the man has completely shaved, becoming normal.

To conclude, the cinematographic monster has often taken on the role of a social metaphor to analyse a given society’s relationship with otherness in different ages: a reflection of the war enemy or of the fear of an invasion. The different ways of relating to the Other are not simply bound to the vision of a single director, but they are rather expression of a collective feeling, an attempt to answer to the need of the audience to exorcise cathartically the fear of what we can’t understand. There still are some “exceptional” directors who, instead of choosing the brutal catharsis (killing the monster) or the forced integration (humanizing the monster) have inquired in a non-conventional way into diversity, taking the Other side, or mixing reality and fiction, humbug and truth in a radical way, according to the ancient lesson of Barnum. The role-reversion between normalcy and otherness established in these cases echoes the definition of freak made by Robert Bogdan: “freak is a frame on mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people”.¹⁴ And since the issue of identity has always been and will always be an open question, the constant presence of monsters will contribute to experience “the normality of Freaks, the freakishness of the normal, the precariousness and absurdity of being, however we define it, fully human”.¹⁵

¹⁴ Bogdan, R., 1988. *Freak show. Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 3.

¹⁵ Fiedler, L., 1978. *Freaks. Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, London: Simon and Schuster, p. 347.