



**The Moral Demand of the “Loving Cup”:
The Presence of the Abject Body in
Tod Browning’s *Freaks* and the Christian Eucharist**

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Abstract: Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932) cast real-life circus side-show celebrities in a tale of love, betrayal and revenge. Pulled from theatres soon after its release due to financial losses and critical controversy, it was rediscovered and championed during the 1960s. With the rise of disability studies, the film gained a new scholarly audience. This paper uses Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject to analyze *Freaks*. Specifically, the paper compares the film’s “wedding banquet” scene and the Christian Eucharist, arguing that both provide opportunities for the spectator/participant to reflect on and renegotiate their relationship to the abject.¹

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[1] After directing *Dracula* (1931) for Universal Studios, to great financial success and critical acclaim, Tod Browning returned to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (“M-G-M”) and resumed his relationship with producer Irving Thalberg (Doherty 295; Johnson 22; Savada 23; Skal and Savada 153-54). Thalberg warmly received Browning as he was anxious to use Browning’s talents to cash in on the success Universal was finding with its “monster pictures” – most notably, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (1931) (Herzogenrath 9; Norden 115; Savada 25; Thomas 187). Because many of his earlier ventures with M-G-M had been revenge narratives in circus settings featuring characters with physical disabilities, when Browning suggested to Thalberg

that he make a film dominated by a cast of genuine circus side-show performers – or “freaks” in the entertainment parlance of the time – Thalberg heartily seconded the motion (Brosnan 66; Flamini 223; Hanson 842; Norden 118; Savada 27; Sova 140; Thomas 188). Browning and Thalberg’s enthusiasm for the project would turn out to be overwhelmingly misguided.

[2] Browning’s film, based on Tod Robbins’ short story “Spurs,” told a conventional enough tale (Herzogenrath 9; Norden 115; Norden and Cahill 8; Savada 25; Skal and Savada 161; Thomas 187). Hans and Frieda, the film’s central romantic couple, are deeply in love. Hans ends this relationship when he falls in love with Cleopatra, the circus’ trapeze artist. Learning that Hans is quite wealthy, Cleopatra feigns romantic interest in him and plots with Hercules, the circus’ aptly named strong-man, to poison Hans and inherit his money. When the circus’ remaining side-show performers get wind of this plot, they swing in to action to alert Hans and exact a violent revenge on Cleopatra and Hercules. The main narrative is framed by a carnival barker’s spiel that begins by alerting the viewer to the “code of the freaks” and ends with the revelation of Cleopatra’s now-disfigured form. The film’s epilogue, consistent with Hollywood’s tradition of repairing broken couples, depicts the tearful reunion of Frieda and Hans.

[3] Hans and Frieda are not the film’s only source of romance, however. Venus, the seal trainer, and Phroso, one of the clowns, also find love among the sawdust and canvas. Violet and Daisy Hilton, the side-show’s conjoined twins, also find paramours. The film’s tales of romance and revenge are accompanied by numerous scenes depicting the side-show denizens going

through the paces of their daily lives. These vignettes allowed the film's cast, who had celebrity status independent of the movie, to demonstrate their particular talents and show off their comic abilities (Babcock 9; Hoberman 50). Consistent with the popularity of freak shows as a form of entertainment in the 1930s, Browning's decision to cast circus performers in his movie was a consistent and prominent part of the film's pre-release publicity (Flint; "Fox Theatre;" "Freak Call;" "Shadow Stories"). As Browning reportedly stated regarding his interest in making this particular film, "Millions of people have seen these freaks in side shows and museums for years, and evidently like to see them. Now, for the first time, they have an opportunity to view the topnotchers all together" (Babcock 20).

[4] This paper examines how Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) represents the exceptional body, formally and narratively. Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject will be central to my examination of the cinematic text. In addition to examining the film's codes of representation, I will argue that the abject body is also a central element in the Christian ritual of the Eucharist. Using Browning's film and Kristeva's theory as guides, then, I hope to expose the abject at the heart of Christianity.

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[5] Like all of the circus performers Browning hired as cast members, Prince Radian – who portrayed "the Human Torso" – exemplifies the abject body. The Human Torso, as the name implies, has neither arms nor legs; his head appears over-sized; his trunk is encased in a sack-like garment. He uses his mouth, teeth and lips like hands, and rocks from side-to-side to propel himself along the ground. In the longest scene in which he appears, he rests on the tailgate of a

circus wagon, framed in close-up, rolling and then lighting a cigarette, using only his teeth and lips. Unlike many of the film's other freakish characters – Schlitzey the pinhead, Violet and Daisy the siamese twins, Johnny the half-boy – the Human Torso is given only one line of dialogue, and it is garbled on the film's soundtrack. The audience possesses virtually no materials from which to construct a character or subjectivity for him – he *is* his (misshapen) body. This character's final appearance occurs during the revenge sequence near the end of the film. As the freak community pursues their victims, the Human Torso worms his way through muck and mud, with a knife between his teeth. The image is disturbing, but not because of the threat of impending violence. After all, even if his mouth is talented and dexterous enough to roll and light a cigarette, he could hardly do any damage with a knife when chasing someone. Even this characterization of him "chasing" someone, given his method of locomotion, is an odd one. The threat posed by the Human Torso is not a threat of violence – it is instead the threat posed by an entity possessed of sufficient subjectivity to seek revenge with a body insufficiently normative to be included in the category of subject in the first place. The Human Torso – again, as the name implies – floats somewhere between personhood and thing-ness; he is neither a subject nor an object, but something else.

[6] This "something else" is theorized by French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her "essay on abjection," *Powers of Horror*. According to Kristeva, the abject is

not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. [It is a] "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing significant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and

hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (2)

Distinct from the subject, given its opposition to the “I,” and distinct from the object, given its fluidity and unboundedness, the abject is a troubling third category, which defies categorization (2-3). The abject is the essence of pollution; it is that which defines the boundaries of the cultural order while at the same time threatens to destroy that order through contamination (3-4). In our culture, the physically disabled body is an abject body that threatens to annihilate the subjectivity of the able-bodied person. According to one, obviously able-bodied, commentator on *Freaks*, “our natural aversion to the deformed is based upon a deep-seated fear that the same could happen to us” (Rosenthal 38). The cultural logic of abjection requires that physically disabled bodies be objects of scorn and disdain so that able-bodied persons can maintain a privileged subjectivity by having something to define themselves against. In other words, because the normal body could become the abnormal body, and because the disabled body shows that no subject permanently and unquestionably occupies the privileged position in this hierarchical corporeal binary, any body perceived as disabled triggers the able-bodied subject’s sense of mortality, vulnerability and temporality (Girard 21). The need for, and subsequent power of, the abnormal is what aligns the abject with the sublime – terrifying and alluring at the same time (Kristeva 11-12).

[7] Through its spectacularization of the exceptional body, *Freaks* plays on the sense of anxiety generated by physical disability to create horror while at the same time exposing the violence inherent in the cultural process of making the exceptional body an abject body. The

film, presaging the insights of disability studies by several decades, reveals both the affective dimension and social construction of disability as a cultural phenomenon. With its complicated shifts in point-of-view and spectatorial identification, the film challenges the boundary between body types, keeping the line between monstrous and human constantly mobile. “Audiences felt (and still feel) incomprehension for being placed into a position of spectatorship unable either to relate to, or condemn entirely, the characters coming to life on screen” (Markotiz 66-67). Not only does the film challenge the boundary line between the monstrous and the human, it problematizes the very act of gawking and staring at monstrosity itself, marking the desire to be a spectator of the freak show as a more monstrous attribute than the possession of a freakish body (Butler 69; Cook 50). At the same time, the film generates pleasure by engaging the spectator’s voyeuristic desires. It is this multi-faceted lack of mooring for the viewing subject that is the film’s chief mechanism for producing terror.

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[8] The film that Browning made, the film that M-G-M released and the film that many people have seen are markedly different. Browning delivered and M-G-M previewed a ninety-minute version of the movie. After its initial preview screenings, and prior to its release to the general public, the studio trimmed almost half an hour (Johnson 69; Sova 140). One trimmed scene implied that Hercules, one of the able-bodied villains, is castrated by the freak community as part of their revenge (Clarens 92; “MGM ‘Freaks’ Repellent” 3; Savada 28; Skal and Savada 174; Wagner 8). Although existing prints of the film contain a penultimate scene that reveals Cleopatra’s disfigured body and an epilogue in which Frieda to Hans reconcile, at least one version of the ending had Phroso and Venus, the able-bodied couple who are friendly to the freak

community throughout the film, visiting the circus owner, Madame Tetrallini, and merely reporting on the reunion, and still other versions ended with the image of Cleopatra's disfigured body and no reconsideration of the romantic sub-plots (Peary 110; Savada 28; Skal and Savada 174). The written prologue that is part of existing prints of the film, including the version available on videocassette and DVD, was added after its initial release. Unlike the film, which adopts a neutral to sympathetic perspective on the freaks, the prologue positions the freaks as objects residing somewhere between human pity and divine wrath and characterizes the film as a text with scientific and moral import. Some sources report that Thalberg added the prologue when he re-released the film in 1933 (Hanson 842; Norden 118; Talbot 32); others attribute the prologue to Dwain Esper who began showing the film on the exploitation circuit in the 1940s (Gaycken 74; Hawkins, *Cutting Edge* 146-48; Savada 28; Skal and Savada 222-23).

[9] *Freaks* is generally characterized as an unmitigated financial and critical disaster. The film premiered in Los Angeles in February 1932 and in New York five months later (Babcock; James 57; Johnson 60; Skal and Savada 174-75). The delay between the Los Angeles and New York premieres signaled M-G-M's concerns about the film's commercial viability; at the end of its New York run, M-G-M pulled it from release due to poor box-office showing (Hawkins, *Cutting Edge* 143; Skal and Savada 181). *Freaks* recouped just over half of its production costs in box-office revenue (Johnson 69; Skal and Savada 181; Vieira and Morris 14). This loss was due to the film's showing in major U.S. markets – Los Angeles, New York and Chicago (Savada 28; Skal and Savada 175). While the overall financial picture was undeniably grim, not all venues were equally unkind. In Cincinnati, for example, *Freaks* generated five times the average

box-office revenues; in San Diego, it broke house records for ticket sales; in Buffalo, receipts were double the usual take (Babcock 9; “‘Freaks’ Replaces ‘Emma’ 5; Savada 28). In addition, the film fared well in Boston, Cleveland, Houston, Minneapolis, Omaha and Providence (“Picture Grosses” 8-10; Savada 28; “Tone Down ‘Freaks’” 1).

[10] The critical reception of the film is similarly characterized by greater variety than common wisdom would allow. Certainly, there were strong, negative reactions to the film. At a preview screening in Los Angeles, “some horrified spectators got up from their seats and ran – did not walk – to the nearest exit” (Babcock 9; Skal and Savada 174; Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus* 91).² The Board of Review in Atlanta successfully enjoined the screening of the film (“MGM ‘Freaks’ Banned” 2; “Showing of Freak Movie” 1; “Showing of ‘Freaks’ Enjoined” 7); the Better Films Council of Rhode Island attempted the same, but failed (“Tone Down ‘Freaks’” 44). The coverage in *Harrison’s Reports* was among the strongest denouncing the film, claiming that it was “so loathsome . . . [that] it was not fit to be shown anywhere” (“Freaks,” *Harrison’s Reports*, 27 February 1932, 35; see also “What to Do with ‘Freaks’” 60; “Freaks,” *Harrison’s Reports*, 16 July 1932, 114). In his self-titled publication, Rob Wagner went so far as to question the mental state of anyone who would enjoy the picture (8-9). *The Hollywood Reporter*, an industry journal, characterized the film as an “outrageous onslaught upon the feelings, the senses, the brains and the stomachs of an audience” (“MGM ‘Freaks’ Repellent” 3). At the same time, reviews from the trade journals *Motion Picture Herald* and *Motion Picture Daily* were positive (“Freaks,” *Motion Picture Herald* 48; Meehan 46; “Pay-Off” 2). The film received effusive reviews in *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Examiner* and *The Oregon Daily Journal* (Hunt 14; Larsen

and Haller 167; Skal and Savada 175; Watts 6). The review from *The New York Times*, the most frequently cited in the literature on *Freaks*, stated that it is unclear whether *Freaks* “should be shown at the Rialto – or in, say, the Medical Centre” (“Circus Side Show” 7). Although most authors use this quote as evidence that the *Times* review was part of the resoundingly negative response to the film, the same reviewer wrote that the film was “excellent at times” (ibid.)

[11] The negative critical and box-office response to the film is usually attributed to its use of actual circus side-show freaks as actors. This understanding fails to account for the fact that many of Browning’s prior films, including the critically and financially successful ventures with Lon Chaney, had been set in circuses, featured physically exceptional performers and told tales of violent revenge (Brosnan 63; Geltzer 412; Clarens 90; Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*, 143-44; Skal and Savada 89-92; Steinbrunner and Goldblatt 37). In fact, Harry Earles, who portrayed Hans in *Freaks*, appeared in *The Unholy Three* with Chaney and brought the short story on which *Freaks* was based to Browning’s attention (Brosnan 63; Geltzer 412; Norden 115; Savada 25; Skal and Savada 89-92, 161). This account also fails to acknowledge that freak shows were a reputable and financially lucrative form of popular entertainment until well into the 1940s (Adams 11-13; Bogdan ix, 10-12, 30-40; Larsen and Haller 169-70; McNamara 219). A careful review of the history of freak shows and the rhetoric of contemporaneous reviews of *Freaks* demonstrates that the controversy surrounding the film had much less to do with the display of freaks per se and much more to do with Hollywood’s desire to distinguish its product from the lower-brow products of vaudeville, carnivals and circuses (Adams 63; Savada 29). Displaying freaks in entertainment fora visited by working-class and “ethnic” populations was looked on as something

vastly different than displaying them on the screens of movie theatres that were found in “good” neighborhoods where women and children could gain access with ease. In other words, contemporaneous objections to the film may have been motivated by a more complex set of factors than Browning’s decision to use genuine circus performers with exceptional bodies as his cast. Contemporary analyses of the film that focus on the presence of these performers may reveal more about our current concerns than they do about those of the film’s original audiences. In this way, even my own appeal to Kristeva’s psycho-analytic framework may be unable to expose historically specific meanings of the film.

[12] After a failed re-release of the film in 1933, and an equally poor showing for the film on the exploitation circuit in the 40s and 50s, it fell into obscurity until resurrected at a screening at the Cannes Film Festival on September 6, 1962 – a month to the day prior to Browning’s death (Brosnan 67; Hanson 842; Hawkins, *Cutting Edge* 148; Savada 29; Skal and Savada 215-16). Billed as an exemplary horror film, *Freaks* was screened with *42nd Street* “as part of a tribute series called ‘The Birth of the American Talkies’” (Skal and Savada 215). In 1967, the film was screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Sova 140). Throughout the 60s and 70s, the film was championed as a formally sophisticated and ideologically progressive film; it was read by critics of this period as both a humanitarian effort to counter negative attitudes toward physical deviance as well as an allegorical response to narrow-minded attitudes toward social deviance generally (Durgnat 22-23; Fiedler 15-19; Milne 145; Thomas 59-61). With the rise of disability studies in the 80s and 90s, and its focus on how disability is to be found in social forms and cultural discourses rather than in corporeal features and mental attributes, the political and

ethical vision of the film has been subjected to a wider range of evaluations (Hawkins, ““One of Us,”” 265-76; Norden 115-19; Smit and Enns 47-85), but even these more critical assessments do not challenge Browning’s artistry and skill as a film-maker. Since the 1960s, then, in scholarly journals, retrospective film festivals and midnight screenings, *Freaks* has been celebrated as an undeniable masterpiece haunted by a history of controversy.

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[13] As noted above, for all its notoriety, *Freaks* tells a remarkably conventional story. The film is a typical Hollywood romance. Hans is engaged to Frieda, but calls off the engagement when he falls in love with another woman, Cleopatra. Cleopatra, however, is only marrying Hans for his money. When Hans learns of her deception, he ends his relationship with her and is reunited with Frieda in the final reel.

[14] The apparent conventionality of the story is disturbed by the corporeal uniqueness of its players. Hans and Frieda are midgets and Cleopatra is, in the language of the film, a “big woman.” The question the movie’s promotional materials posed – “Can a full grown woman truly love a midget?” – is one that Hans desperately wants to suppress given his desire for the beautiful Cleopatra. There are very few scenes in the film where at least one exceptional body – i.e., a body missing limbs or of atypical size or possessing some other culturally defined irregularity – is not in the frame and a number of shots contain *only* exceptional bodies. Virtually all of the characters are played by real-life circus side-show performers – some of them with quite noteworthy careers in the early twentieth century (Bogdan 72-73, 173; Drimmer 99-105, 354; Gerber 48-49; Hoberman 51; Hodges 13; Pingree 173-75; Savada 26). Even Cleopatra and

Hercules, who are presented within the film's narrative logic as outside the freak community, have atypical bodies. Cleopatra is well above average height for a woman and Hercules is the strong man of the circus.

[15] In addition to the unique attributes of the actors, the film is constituted by a mix of genres. With respect to its setting, the film borrows from the circus genre that Browning had successfully developed in his earlier films, but the narrative is told in the style of the developing horror genre Universal had initiated with *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (Larsen and Haller 169-70). As some commentators observe, the combination of elements from the established circus genre and the developing horror genre may have been partially responsible for negative reaction to the film; by failing to conform to narrative expectations of the audience shaped by genre, the film was unable to find an audience (Larsen and Haller 165). The romantic-drama formula of *Freaks* is overlaid with the tropes of the developing horror genre. Cleopatra does not merely seek to spend Hans' fortune, she tries to poison him so that she can inherit everything. Hans does not merely divorce or abandon Cleopatra; she is hunted down by the freak community, attacked and disfigured, transformed from the "Peacock of the Big Top" into the "Chicken Lady of the Ten-in-One," rendered legless and languageless, stripped of the beauty which was previously her source of power. Finally, the thunderstorm and atmospheric lighting of the final chase scene, features that would become formulaic features of classic horror films, further link *Freaks* to the horror genre.

[16] The formal construction of the film is also unusual. The first half of the film is a jumble of short scenes which introduce the entire company of performers that make up the circus troupe.

The scenes which unfold the central narrative, the scenes which develop secondary narratives and the scenes which are non-expository tableaux are almost randomly shuffled together leaving the audience unsure about the precise relationship between the characters, the progress of the story, the importance of various details and the passage of diegetic time. Moreover, as noted, a carnival barker's spiel brackets the film's central narrative. In sum, although the story is a familiar one for classical Hollywood cinema, *Freaks* is much more innovative formally, narratively and thematically than many of its cinematic precursors.

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[17] The wedding-banquet scene that depicts the celebration of the wedding of Hans and Cleopatra is among the most well-known moments in the film (Larsen and Haller 166; Thomas 60). The members of the freak community have gathered to rejoice with one of their own at a lavish feast laid out in the center ring under the big top. At six-and-a-half minutes, the scene is the film's longest. Even the chase scene near the film's conclusion, including both the freaks' pursuit of Cleopatra and their execution of Hercules, takes up less screen time. Unlike this chase scene, which is the film's second longest treatment of any single narrative subject, the wedding-banquet scene shows different characters with different points of view contained within a single physical space. The latter scene's temporal duration and spatial unity provide a greater opportunity for viewers to become involved with the characters and events than do the "snapshot" scenes that the film comprises up to this point.

[18] The structure of the wedding-banquet scene rearticulates much of the film's plot and points to Browning's artistry as a story-teller and film-maker. In fact, an attentive viewer could

probably start the film here and have a fairly clear sense of the entire story. From the cuts between close-ups on Frieda's fallen visage and tear-rimmed eyes and Hans and Cleopatra's jovial conversation, the viewer could infer Frieda's feelings for Hans and the fact that there is some history between them. The interactions between Cleopatra and Hercules potentially reveal that they have a relationship and history; the audience can well understand that her motives for marrying him may not be completely above board and that he has been successfully duped by her.

[19] In addition to this scene's gesturing to the film's overall plot, all of the film's thematic material – the spectacularization of the freakish body, the manipulation of subject position, the oscillation of monstrosity – is also contained within this single scene. Just as the first half of the film consists primarily of short scenes which show the freaks going about their daily business, several shots of the wedding-banquet scene similarly present the spectacle of the freakish body. The scene opens with a long shot of the Bird Lady dancing on the table, a dance intercut with close-ups of the beautiful Cleopatra and Hercules, as well as with shots revealing Cleopatra's poisoning of Hans' champagne. Prior to any expository dialogue, there are also shots of other freakish performers demonstrating their skills, including the Sword Swallower and the Fire Eater.

[20] After these freakish spectacles and the dialogue between Hans, Cleopatra and Hercules comes the moment for which the film is justifiably most (in)famous. As Cleopatra is encouraging Hans to drink his poisoned champagne, Angeleno, another midget performer with the circus, announces that the freaks will make Cleopatra one of them with a "loving cup." The freaks, including two armless women holding silverware with their toes, begin to pound on the table and

chant, “We accept her, we accept her, one of us, one of us, gobble gobble, gobble gobble.” Not only is part of the chant literal nonsense, the lines of the chant begin to overlap each other, creating a cacophony of unintelligible syllables. Because Browning did not record sound while he was filming the wedding-banquet sequence, the sound is slightly off-sync throughout the scene (Skal and Savada 173). The moderate audio-visual disequilibrium is heightened at this moment.

[21] To enact the ritual, Angeleno takes a large goblet and trots from one side of the table to the other. Each of the freaks drinks from the goblet, while the remaining freaks continue to chant. At first, the shots are close-ups of the freaks drinking or pounding on the table, but the frame changes to a medium shot of the table with the camera positioned at the end of the table where Cleopatra has been sitting. Alternating shots of the table and her face position the spectator within Cleopatra’s point-of-view. As the chanting grows louder and the freaks’ movements become more frenetic, Cleopatra stands and moves subtly and slowly away from the camera. Given the spatial relationships established by the prior cuts, she is understood to be backing away from the freaks, indicating to the audience through both her movement and facial expression that she is afraid and reluctant – even disgusted – to be ritually inducted into this community. When Cleopatra is finally offered the loving cup, she denounces those gathered as “dirty, slimy freaks” and dowses Angeleno with the contents of the goblet. Silence erupts; the freaks exit dejectedly.

[22] In light of the scene’s *mise en scène* – a wedding banquet generally and the “loving cup” ritual specifically – it is important to note that Kristeva argues that one of the principal ways in which cultures negotiate their relationship to the abject is through religiously articulated and

ritualized food taboos (2-3, 75-76). Here, the freaks engage in a ritual act, a ceremony they have obviously performed in the past. The passing of a goblet, the shared drinking, and the name of the ritual as a “loving cup” allude in fairly obvious ways to the Christian Eucharist. In addition, Angeleno’s act of standing on the table holding the goblet is reminiscent of medieval imagery of the Lamb of God standing on the altar holding the eucharistic chalice. Given that the eucharistic cup is understood to contain the blood of Christ or, at least, to refer symbolically to the bleeding body of Jesus, the loving cups of both rituals gesture toward the abject and invite participants to unite themselves with a community that celebrates the abject body. The ritual gesture, an invitation to join a communion of saints, is soundly rejected by Cleopatra. When she is handed the “loving cup,” she does not drink from it; instead, she hurls its liquid contents back at the freak community, drenching Angeleno and silencing the others. In an oft-quoted passage, Kristeva writes about expelling the skin on the top of a glass of milk offered to her by her parents in an effort to maintain a sense of her own identity as separate from them (2-3). This is precisely what Cleopatra does by baptizing Angeleno’s body with the contents of the goblet. By rejecting the offering of the “loving cup,” Cleopatra is able to maintain her sense of identity – specifically, to resist the transforming gesture of the ritual, to fight against becoming “one of them.” At the same time, she reinforces the (separate) identity of the freak community by marking their bodies with the contents of “loving cup.” Angeleno is forced to wear the sign of identity that Cleopatra refuses to ingest; he is a freak, she is not and the difference between them is signified by the liquid from the circulated goblet. Cleopatra’s negotiation of identity is figured, then, not in the rejection of a touch or an eroticizing gaze or any number of other possible gestures, but in the emphatic refusal of a food object.

[23] The unfolding of the scene places audience members in an almost impossible situation. To align oneself with the freaks, it is necessary either to elide their abnormality or to evacuate the culturally dominant position of able-bodied subjectivity. To align oneself with Cleopatra requires some kind of acceptance of her act of astonishing insensitivity and cruelty toward the freaks and Hans. Moreover, it is important to note who is *not* present. The three “normal” bodied characters who are *kind* to the freaks are absent from the scene – Venus and Phroso from its beginning; Madame Tetrallini by the time the “loving cup” is circulating. Frieda, a potential locus of narrational identification, has also exited. During the ritual portion of the scene, Hans is also invisible, except for brief glimpses of the back of his downcast head. The camera presents the audience with a stark, either-or choice: the beautiful Cleopatra and her cruelty, or the mistreated freaks and their abjectivity. Although I have been assuming that the spectator of the film is able-bodied, the choice would be just as stark for a viewer with a body marked as disabled by cultural norms. To identify with Cleopatra’s beauty and strength is to identify with emphatic rejection of atypical corporealities; to identify with the freak community is to identify with what is represented in the scene as unsettling and grotesque behavior. Untenable and unattractive choices are operative for any spectator, regardless of how their bodies conform to or deviate from cultural norms.

[24] On the formal level, then, *Freaks* uses a constantly shifting point-of-view and rapidly oscillating identification structure to create an experience of spectatorial fragmentation and incoherence. On an imagistic level, *Freaks* repetitiously displays the abject body as a means of

unsettling the viewer's sense of security and drawing attention to the guilty pleasure associated with voyeurism. On the narrative level, *Freaks* reveals how the process of abjection works and interrogates the violence inherent in that process. On Kristeva's account, the Christian Eucharist enacts a similarly disorienting reworking of the thematics it engages (113-32). By ritualizing the eating of flesh and the drinking of blood, the Eucharist does not cancel food taboos of prior ritual systems, but forces its celebrants to internalize pollution as a means of identifying with the purifying power of the new ritual order, thus creating a never-ending cycle of pollution and purification. By focusing on the broken body of Jesus and the act of eating itself, the eucharistic meal emphasizes corporeal existence while at the same time functioning within a system that emphasizes internal states, thoughts, words and desires as the locus of the holy and the unholy. By referring to the death and destruction of the embodied divine, the Eucharist requires the believer to confront her or his own corporeal vulnerability and mortality as the price for identification with the sacred. Although this is not Kristeva's characterization, at the very least, the eucharistic meal compels its adherents to remember that they serve a God incarnated in an abject body who calls them to identify with the socially abject – the sick, the criminal, the poor.

[25] Most commentators criticize Browning for using the freaks as a source of horror in the final scenes of the film (Brosnan 65-66; Cook 50-51; Fiedler 295; Hawkins, "'One of Us,'" 269; Larsen and Haller 170-71). According to this critique, the first half of the film ostensibly generates a feeling of sympathy for the freaks by showing them in everyday activities while the second half of the film generates a feeling of fear by depicting the freaks as agents of a terrifying and violent revenge. The problem with the film's narrative structure, on this reading, is that any

progressive message from the first half of the film is cancelled by the horrific aspects of its second half.

[26] It *is* accurate to say that the scenes before the wedding celebration depict the freaks engaging in everyday activities. It is more complicated, however, to characterize these activities as ordinary or to conclude that these scenes necessarily generate sympathy for the freaks. For example, when we see freaks engaging in the “ordinary” activity of eating, we see armless women who must use their feet to manipulate eating utensils. When we are privy to the arrival of a new member of the freak community, the baby is born to the bearded lady. In an activity so strongly connected with the feminine, we see a maternal body that bears the secondary gender marks of the masculine. The characters who generate the spectre of romance are the siamese twins and Josephine-Joseph, the half-man/half-woman of the side-show. In different ways, these characters disturb notions of gender identity and monogamy connected to culturally prevalent norms of sexual desire and sexual practice. In sum, although the freaks are shown in these opening sequences to be going about the activities of their daily lives, they are almost always depicted in a manner which focuses on, accentuates and magnifies the ways in which they are freakish.

[27] The post-wedding portion of the film does not necessarily require a response of terror or fear either. The over-riding function of the freaks in these scenes is as Hans’ ever-watchful guardians. When Hercules and Cleopatra discuss their plan for killing Hans, or act in furtherance of it, a freakish face appears at the window, from the shadows, or under the stairs. When Hercules appears on the brink of assaulting Venus, the camera quickly cuts to a gang of freaks

who are glaring at him. Oliver Gaycken, representing a minority opinion on the revenge portion of the film, has observed that

the freaks' revenge is in an important sense as humanizing a gesture as the earlier parts of the film where they are shown going about their daily business. The final sequences allows them to assert an agency that the 'big people' have ignored.

What this penultimate sequence tells us is that the freaks are just as human as the other revenge-obsessed protagonists of Browning's films. (79).

The narrative structuring of sympathetic identification also serves to humanize the freaks. Insofar as the audience members have begun to sympathize with Hans and to dis-identify with the nefarious intentions of Cleopatra and Hercules, the freaks within the film serve as the agents of the audience's desire for the punishment of these cruel characters. The freaks, despite their corporeal dissimilarity from the majority of spectators, become surrogates for spectatorial desires. Just as more recent slasher films may temporarily position the spectator within the point-of-view of the killer, *Freaks* allows its audience to occupy the space of the violent avenger. The distinction between the contemporary slasher film and *Freaks* – and, to me, the brilliance of the film – is the way in which it provides its viewers with an opportunity to align themselves with the abject, but does not require it. Understanding *Freaks* as a progressive text is not an experience that Browning imposes on his audience; instead, the film presents clearly and precisely the abject body, as well as the cruelty and inhumanity of the mechanism of abjection, alongside culturally normative beautiful characters who are terrorized and attacked and disgusted by these abnormal physiognomies. The film merely provides its audience an opportunity to resolve their own subjective positioning with respect to each.

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[28] In her introduction to the anthology *Freakery*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes that “the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation and incite regulation . . . It is always an interpretive occasion” (1). As one such interpretive occasion, *Freaks* deserves critical attention for the way in which it both participates in and exposes the relational construction of monstrosity and humanity, abject and subject. *Freaks* bears repeated viewings for the way in which it compels an active engagement, a choice, a *decision* from its spectators on questions related to voyeurism, exploitation, community and vengeance. *Freaks* also has value as a Christian theological resource for the way in which it exposes similar dynamics at work in the Eucharist. Like the cup offered by the freaks to Cleopatra, the cup offered by the priest to the congregation is a dangerous invitation to dis-identify with normative constructions of the subject and participate in the life of the abject God and this abject God’s rejected community. *Freaks* and the Eucharist, then, provide interpretive occasions that require ethical decision-making and allow for communal realignment on the part of their respective audience-participants. Part of the power of Tod Browning’s *Freaks* may be its ability to expose the radicality and risk of the choice at the heart of Christian ritual and practice.

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¹ This essay is based, in part, on a paper delivered to the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The author wishes to thank the organizers of and participants in that session, as well as Michael Bernstein, Frances Flannery-Dailey, Lynn Huber, Nina Martin and Rubina Ramji for comments on prior versions of the paper.

² Given that similar reports appear in the publicity of many classic horror films, the veracity of this report should be greeted with some suspicion.