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“We understand each other, my friend”. The freak show and Victorian medicine in *The Elephant Man*.

Anxieties around the human body are one of the main preoccupations in the cinema of David Lynch. Lynch’s films are littered with grotesque corporealities (such as the monstrous baby in *Eraserhead*, 1977; or Baron Harkonnen in *The Dune*, 1984) and those of disabled or crippled characters (the protagonist in the short *Amputee*; 1973; the one-armed man in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, 1992). The bodies in his films are often presented as fragmented (literally, cut off from the whole, or figuratively, by using close-ups) or distorted in the eye of the camera (a technique used, for example, in *Wild at Heart*, 1990, or *Inland Empire*, 2006). The director frequently highlights human biology, particularly in bodies that are shown to lose control over their physiological functions (vomiting blood in *The Alphabet*, 1968, or urinating in *Blue Velvet*, 1986). This interest in characters defined primarily through their abnormal corporeal forms is readily apparent in Lynch’s second feature *The Elephant Man* (1980) centring on a man severely afflicted with a disfiguring disease¹.

The film, loosely based on Sir Frederick Treves’ memoir *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (1923), revolves around three characters inspired by real-life personas: John Merrick (the titular ‘Elephant Man’ Joseph Carey Merrick, 1862-1890), Doctor Treves (the aforementioned Sir Frederick Treves, 1853-1923) and Bytes (Tom Norman, 1860-1930). Accordingly, the story shifts between dif-

¹ It is worth noting that the film was released in the wake of a cultural rediscovery of the John Merrick story nearly a century after his death. Halladay and Watt point to a large number of 1970s and 1980s publications on the subject, including Ashley Montagu’s *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity* (1971), Fred Shannon’s *The Life and Agony of the Elephant Man* (1979), Michael Howell and Peter Ford’s *The True History of the Elephant Man* (1980), Christine Sparks’ *The Elephant Man: A Novel* (1980) and, most notably, a 1979 stage production by Bernard Pomerance (1989, p. 868).

ferent perspectives: that of Merrick (in this role John Hurt), a freak show performer; Treves (played by Anthony Hopkins), a man of science; Bytes (Freddie Jones), an entertainer; and, finally, a number of peripheral observers from both the high and low classes of Victorian society. The film's period setting is notable since as Durbach suggests "the nineteenth century . . . marks a key moment of contestation between popular and professional ideas" (2010, p. 22-3). The Victorian era, as depicted in *The Elephant Man*, was a period when the scientific and the theatrical frequently overlapped. In freak shows, visited by both gaping crowds seeking entertainment and scientists aiming to further their academic knowledge, theatrical drama and the conventions of the medical lecture combined around the exhibited bodies. In these spaces, Adams suggests, education and entertainment often merged in tense, if profitable, collaboration around the display of these abnormal bodies (2001, p. 27).

By juxtaposing such a variety of viewpoints, *The Elephant Man* comments on attempts at imposing control on the body through normalising gaze: the marginalisation of those marked by a difference (here in a freak show) or placing those who undermine social conventions in a controlled and supervised environment (here in hospital). This paper argues that *The Elephant Man* draws parallels between the domain of sensational entertainment (Merrick as a carnival monster) and objective scientific analysis (Merrick as a medical specimen) thus commenting on the perception of the body in those two seemingly incongruous discourses. After discussing the wider background to the nineteenth century display of abnormal bodies and their representation in Lynch's film, I compare two scenes presenting Merrick's body as an object of spectacle: the freak show performance staged by Bytes, and the pathology society lecture delivered by Treves. I suggest that the exhibition of a monstrous body in *The Elephant Man*, both in the context of a sideshow and Victorian medical lecture, are consciously theatrical.

Inside a freak show

The Elephant Man begins by establishing a space central to the film: the freak show. The opening scene, cued by bursting flames, situates us within a carnival environment. It is a crowded and noisy place with music, balloons, fireworks and a variety of performers. We are introduced to one of the main characters: a mysterious man in a hat who is drawn to a large sign reading 'FREAKS' above the entrance to one of the tents in the fair. Framed in medium shot, he stands with his back to the camera facing circles containing moving spirals (a possible hint of the hypnotic power of this place). After a moment, the man suddenly turns round and starts walking through the dense crowd of amused visitors. The sub-

sequent shot offers a close-up of a 'NO ENTRY' notice on the door to the tent. Ignoring the sign, the character enters. The interior space is contrasted with the bustling fairground. The cheerful noise of the exterior is not audible, instead, all we can hear are raised voices and repeated, hysterical laughter reminiscent of the auditory leitmotif in Tod Browning's *Freaks*. Here Lynch revisits the 1932 film described by Adams as "the foundational text through which authors and artists in the twentieth century came to understand the freak show... a point of reference for all subsequent representations of that culture" (2001, p. 63).

After entering the tent, the man in the hat walks through a dark, labyrinthine corridor passing mirrors that distort his body. The distorted reflection serves to signify the shift into the domain of the corporeal difference. One of the first exhibits the character encounters is a jar containing a human foetus displayed against the backdrop of a painting showing Adam and Eve in Paradise. The exhibit is labelled as "the fruit of the original sin". Adam and Eve are portrayed naked, save for leaves covering their genitals, standing next to the Tree of Knowledge. Here, *The Elephant Man* explicitly evokes the biblical iconography. The presence of a snake points to the moment of gaining knowledge of good and evil, as well as acquiring awareness of the physical nature of the body. The canonical biblical scene is subverted by placing the embryo next to a half-eaten apple; sin has already been committed. The image embeds the foetus in the religious discourse, linking the first human transgression directly with sexuality and conception.

In this scene, Lynch presents the inside of the freak show as a dark space laced with guilty secrets. This setting is cloaked in mystery and conjures connotations with taboos and allusions to the breaking of laws established by society (via the presence of the police and a banning notice) and religion (reminders of the first sin committed by humanity). Thus, the light-hearted atmosphere of entertainment at the beginning of the scene gains the weight of guilty curiosity and forbidden pleasures. In a freak show the spectacle of bodily difference satisfies a curiosity for something deemed illegitimate in general discourse. Its main attractions are the lack of restrictions with regards to gazing at the corporealities of others, along with the excitement of breaking cultural taboos pertaining to viewing the body.

The diversity of freak performers investigated in this sequence is also explored once again later in the film, when Merrick returns to the freak show after his stay in the hospital. Ushered in by the lightning and the image of a dwarf winding up a gramophone, the scene begins. A tracking shot presents sideshow performers: a giant on the stage, Siamese twins, a tattooed man showing off his

muscles, a lion-man against the background of a poster explaining his story, an Asian couple in traditional costumes and, finally, the Elephant Man introduced by Bytes in French. Exhibited on a stage and separated by partitions, each of the performers is given their own space. This display – effectively a series of vignettes mirroring the hybrid cast of a variety show – places the spectator in the role of a visitor walking around the space.

Such a presentation illustrates Bogdan's division of freak show exhibits into three main categories (1990, p. 6-10). The first comprises of people of exotic races whose arrival in Europe was the consequence of a curiosity raised by the exploration of the world by Western Europeans; in *The Elephant Man* they are represented by the Asian couple. The second group discussed by Bogdan consists of self-made freaks, usually with self-inflicted body modifications; in the film, this is reflected by a man with tattoos covering nearly all of his body. The third group of carnival monsters constitutes divergent bodies with deformations later classified as medical conditions; Lynch shows us a giant, dwarves, Siamese twins, and the Elephant Man himself.

An abnormal body as a social construct

Adams emphasises that “the centrality of the body remains a constant and determining feature of the freak's identity” (2001, p. 6). A monster, or a “human form mirrored back in distorted embodiments” (Adams, 2001, p. 6), draws the attention of a spectator primarily to his or her own physical nature. Carnival monsters challenge moral and aesthetic standards concerning the body and thus introduce anxieties about (seemingly) established categories of human and non-human. In Durbach's view, “it was precisely this corporeal and social volatility – this refusal to uphold the natural order, that in turn sanctioned the social order – that made the freak so socially and politically disruptive and thus so frightening” (2010, p. 4). Also Grosz points out that:

freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications outside of or beyond the human. They imperil the very definitions we rely on to classify humans, entities, and sexes – our most fundamental categories of self-definition and boundaries dividing self from otherness (1996, p. 57).

For centuries, those who stood out due to bodily differences were to a large extent excluded from the rest of society and upon exposure evoked sufficient interest to be held up as an object to be gazed at. Labelled as monstrous, such divergent bodies featured frequently at carnivals and fairs in the Middle Ages, and since then, have appeared frequently in both medical contexts and popular

culture (Daston and Park, 1998, ch.1). The perception of physical irregularities varied. In the theocentric Middle Ages, freaks assumed the allegorical role of signs of God's wrath and punishment, omens of the imminent end of the world, or "emblems of the traditional sins of sodomy, avarice, pride and worldliness" (Daston and Park, 1998, p. 183). Bodies that deviated from an accepted norm often appeared in the collections of the wealthy (both in cabinets of curiosity and royal courts), where they functioned as objects of curiosity but also of aesthetic appreciation (Daston and Park, 1998, p. 209). The nineteenth century saw the rise of freak shows, which Bogdan defined as:

formally organised exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental, or behavioural anomalies for amusement and profit. The 'formally organised' part of the definition is important, for it distinguishes freak shows from early exhibitions of single attractions that were not attached to organisations such as circuses and carnivals (1990, p. 10).

With the birth of cinema, monstrous bodies found their place in film, particularly horror (Durbach, 2010, p. 174), as well as medical documentaries and sensational TV programmes (van Dijck, 2005, ch. 2). It was not until the twentieth century that those marked by bodily difference came under the purview of science, and became "medical cases that fade into hospitals, physicians' texts and specimen shelves" (Garland-Thomson, 2017, p. 79). Within the medical context, divergent bodies were divided into types and cases, and afflicted individuals were reclassified as patients within medical establishments.

Shildrick observes that "monsters operate primarily in the imaginary" (2002, p. 9). Indeed, the perception of carnival freaks that originates from medieval times, points to the confusion of creations of nature with products of fantasy. Such belief-based presumptions concerning the disfigured body are present not only in Lynch's film, but also in Doctor Treves' memoirs. Of his first encounter with Merrick he writes: "from the intensified painting in the street I had imagined the Elephant Man to be of gigantic size. This, however, was a little man below the average height and made to look shorter by the bowing of his back" (1923, p. 4).

Crucially, the Elephant Man's name is a part of the show, ensuring imaginary investment. As such, it echoes those of other popular freaks of that time, such as dog-men or ape-women. Montagu asserts that

for the purpose of attracting attention of those who would be willing to pay their pennies to gape at a man who looked like an elephant, 'the Elephant Man' was as good a description as any. And so John Merrick became 'the

Elephant Man'. The name was a showman's choice, and in no way bears any relation to the disease known as elephantiasis (1972, p. 82).

Apart from the name, the pre-performance imagery suggests a sensational background to the event and builds the anticipation of witnessing a supernatural creature. In his memoirs, Treves describes the poster advertising the show:

painted on the canvas in primitive colours was a life-size portrait of the Elephant Man. This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare. It was a figure of a man with the characteristics of an elephant. The transfiguration was not far advanced. There was still more of the man than of the beast . . . some palm trees in the background of the picture suggested a jungle and might have led the imaginative to assume that it was in this wild that the perverted object had roamed (1923, p. 2).

In the film, the poster promoting "The Terrible Elephant Man" features a picture of a human being with the head of an elephant presented against a backdrop of exotic plants – this image implies an uncanny union. The miniature portraits of a woman and an elephant on either side of the poster also suggestively mark the Elephant Man as the fruit of an unusual conception. Popular beliefs linked with divergent bodies strengthened by the pre-performance imagery, ensure imaginary investment on the part of the audience.

The bodies of freak show performers are also carefully presented in terms of costume. A fantasy linked to their corporealities assigns allegorical value to the excessive materiality. These bodies are enveloped in a particular set of beliefs that play on the sensational elements appealing primarily to the emotions and imagination of the spectators, and their willingness to co-operate in the creation of an illusion on screen or stage. Additionally, in a freak show, such bodies marked by a difference are encountered from a distance imposed by a stage – an audience is not permitted to interact with them – which ensures the maximal manipulation of imagination and emotions. Here, the spectacle of the corporeal, its terror or marvel, depends on belief-based presumptions.

Unlikely bedfellows

The Elephant Man juxtaposes Bytes, a showman motivated by profit, and Treves, a man of science with social authority and seemingly altruistic interests. In this way, the film emphasises the similarities between Victorian-era medicine and entertainment, particularly with regards to the display of the abnormal body. Treves' first encounter with Merrick takes place at a freak show, the space of the en-

tertainers. Prior to the exhibition of the monstrous body, Bytes leads Treves through a narrow hallway to the room where Merrick is hidden. The geometrical architecture of the corridor – its diagonal lines, stark angles, the exaggerated contrast between light and dark, and the long shadows thrown by the characters – endows the space with an air of mystery and danger. This fragment is a direct reference to early horror cinema, in particular German Expressionism and films such as *The Golem* (dir. P. Wegener, 1920), *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (dir. R. Wiene 1920) and *Nosferatu* (dir. F. W. Murnau, 1922). *The Elephant Man* employs these cinematic quotes to build our anticipation of encountering the horrific body.

The private performance in the freak show is orchestrated by Bytes who begins the event by turning on a lamp. In a theatrical pose and with a raised stick, employing exclamations and exaggerated gestures, Bytes introduces Merrick: “life...is full of surprises...consider the fate of this creature’s poor mother”. The pre-performance account delivered by Bytes describes how Merrick’s mother was struck by an elephant during her pregnancy, elaborating on the story presented on the poster². Such preamble echoes Huet’s suggestion that “a remarkably persistent line of thought argued that monstrous progeny resulted from the disorder of the maternal imagination” (1993, p. 1). In popular discourse, the impressions a mother had when pregnant were seen as having a crucial influence on the future physique of her new-born. Crucially, the showman’s narration plays on the audience’s anticipation of a sensational event; Kember notes that “Bytes delivers a well-practised spiel to Treves but, gazing outward to the left and right of the screen, he ominously addresses it to absent ‘ladies and gentlemen’” (2005, p. 25). Such an address includes the cinematic spectator in the act of looking like part of its target audience.

In a freak show, such as that depicted in Lynch’s *The Elephant Man*, the spectators were often presented with a story or imagery that emphasised and exaggerated the physical features of the exhibit (Bogdan, 1990, ch. 4). According to Bogdan, these additions were key to the construction of the stage identity of freaks: “by using imagery and symbols they knew the public would respond to, showmen created for the person being exhibited a public identity, a presentation, a front, that would have the widest appeals” (1990, p. 95). Bytes’ introduction escalates expectations concerning the body to be exhibited and provides a sensational explanation of Merrick’s misshapen figure. The account of the showman purports to give objective facts, but at the same time, it plays on the sensational.

² In the film, the reference to Merrick’s mother is also present in the surreal opening sequence of the film (with slow motion, distorted images and sound) depicting a woman being attacked by the animal.

As Bytes concludes the speech, an assistant opens the curtain to begin the display of the deformed corporeality: the camera reveals a figure covered with a torn piece of clothing. Bytes, the conductor of the performance, orders Merrick to stand up and turn around several times in order to assure better presentation of his deformed body. Meanwhile, the assistant repeats these commands in a loud voice. The growling of the Elephant Man and his half-nakedness emphasise his animality. During this scene, the Elephant Man's body is shown only briefly to the film viewer and is for most part hidden in shadow. Lynch comments: "I showed more, and then re-cut it to show less. I think that the compromise was to show something, because otherwise I felt that people would start looking at it too much like a horror film" (in Rodley, 1997, pp. 101).

In his memoirs, Treves elaborates on the first (private) performance of the Elephant Man he witnesses (interestingly, in the film, part of this description is delivered by the doctor during the medical lecture, which further emphasises the confusion of the entertaining and the medical):

The showman – speaking as if to a dog – called out harshly: 'Stand up!' The thing arose slowly and let the blanket that covered its head and back fall to the ground. There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I have ever seen. In the course of my profession I had come across lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as well as mutilations and contortions of the body depending upon like causes; but at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed (1923, p. 3).

The film, echoing this description, focuses on the emotional response of Dr Treves rather than the disfigured body of The Elephant Man. The camera fixes on his face, which reveals both fascination and horror: he begins with an expression of sheer curiosity, which changes to terror but, eventually, is taken over by compassion. In the concluding shot, the camera zooms in to present his emotional reaction; for Kember, "a protracted close-up of Treves' frozen and astonished face, a tear rolling from his eye, serves to sentimentalise and prolong the suspense" (2005, pp. 25). Here *The Elephant Man* repeats references to the tradition of horror film; according to Carroll, "our responses are supposed to converge (but not exactly duplicate) those of the characters; like the characters we assess the monster as a horrifying sort of being . . . This mirroring-effect, moreover, is a key feature of horror genre" (1989, p. 18). The reaction of the cinematic audience looking at the Elephant Man is supposed to be in parallel with that of Treves and move from terror to sentimental sympathy.

Under the auspices of the scientific gaze

The Elephant Man begins at a site of entertainment and sensationalism (a carnival freak show), but promptly moves to a sharply contrasting setting. The scene in which the audience is introduced to the scientific environment is cued by an image of flames mirroring the opening sequence in the freak show. In the hospital's operating theatre, we see an unconscious patient, medical devices and a figure who is revealed to be Doctor Treves, the character central to the preceding scene. This subsequent establishment of his occupation marks him as distinct from the amused crowd in the freak show and signifies a shift in the mode of regarding the human body. Treves is still "one of the curious", as he introduces himself to Bytes, but the gaze of curiosity assumes a different meaning in the medical context. Although *The Elephant Man* begins amidst the crowd gathered at the fair seeking the entertaining and sensational, as Chion remarks, "our curiosity will accompany that of Fredrick Treves, the respected, humane surgeon" (2006, p. 51).

While Merrick is an object of guilty amusement in the freak show, he is considered with legitimate scientific interest in the lecture theatre. The gaze directed at human exhibits in a freak show, objectifies the human body and reduces it to a single dimension, the physical one. In this respect, a similar act takes place in the domain of medicine. A medical practitioner is a person with recognised knowledge and experience supported by an institution. Medical doctors are endowed with the authority and social permission to observe and objectify the human body, as well as to discuss the notions linked with its material nature. Such a scientific gaze is reserved for the specialists, rather than for the popular audience.

The Elephant Man draws clear parallels between the freak show performance and the scientific lecture. Treves' speech in the medical setting, as presented in the film, contains strong theatrical elements and recreates some of the freak show dynamics. In this scene, the camera constantly changes its position of observation in order to explore various elements of the staged lecture (the setting, the audience and the presenters), which brings to mind Foucault's discussion of Bentham's panopticon (1979). The attention of those invited to watch the event – the medical professionals in the auditorium – is focused on the speaker (Doctor Treves) and the subject of the talk (Merrick). For the cinematic audience, however, the interest is shifted away from Merrick (the obvious target of observation), to a multi-layered spectacle. What is more, this exploration of different modes of looking makes us aware of our own gaze.

First of all, the cinematic audience watches a lecture with doctors as an audience and a lectern as a stage. Doctor Treves is revealed as the presenter of the talk, essentially repeating the crude performance of the freak show. Similarly to Bytes' spectacle, the lecture begins and ends with the appearance of stage lights that cue the opening and closing of a curtain. Treves uses a short stick to draw the attention of the audience while the assistants point to the discussed parts of Merrick's anatomy and move his body in order to ensure a better view for the audience. The doctor reveals factual information about the patient: "He is English. He is twenty-one years of age. His name is John Merrick". He continues his narration by announcing that the audience is about to watch the "most perverted and degraded version of a human being", a statement that adds a hint of sensational anticipation similar to that provided by the pre-performance story in the freak show.

The second layer is a shadow play performed by the Elephant Man for the cinematic audience. Here Lynch references techniques of the shadow theatre. The film shows the front view of the assistants pulling back the curtain in order to reveal Merrick's body, at which point the camera reverses its position to view him from behind another curtain against the backdrop of the auditorium. As Merrick is fully exposed to the audience of doctors, the cinematic spectator sees only his shadow projected onto the medical screen. The invited professionals are permitted to carefully regard the deformed body, while the idle curiosity of the cinematic spectator is frustrated with just a two-dimensional silhouette; we are not to see what is hidden behind the curtain. The screen acts as a protective device separating the cinematic audience from the views of the obscene body and from access to the scientific gaze. What is more, the presence of a medical curtain acts as a screen for the shadow show and likens this event to a proto-cinematic production.

There is also a third level: a performance seen on the doctors' faces. The emotional expression Treves displays during the private exposition in the freak show is here repeated and multiplied in the faces of onlooking medics. A tracking shot presenting close-ups of the doctors' faces reveals their curiosity and fascination, as well as shock and horror. Simultaneously repulsed and attracted by the exhibit, they are taken over by the pleasure of guilty gazes and double-takes. We are invited to watch as their initial response of disgust, or compassion, changes to one of excitement. This reaction mirrors that of the audience in the freak show watching the sensationalised spectacle of corporeality earlier in the film. Such exploration of the facial vocabulary of the characters refers us to the reading of *The Elephant Man* as "a film of faces" (Chion 2006, 57; Kember, 2005): Merrick's body is interpreted through the gazes of other characters. Additionally,

through repeated close-ups of the faces, the film comments on different acts of looking and makes us aware of our own gaze.

In *The Elephant Man*, the display of disfigured bodies of freaks in the carnival provokes a surface reaction of repulsion, but at the same time relies on a titillating aspect of the act of viewing to provide thrill and amusement. This is also illustrated by the response of the doctors watching Merrick in the lecture theatre who initially seem repulsed and terrified, but are gradually overtaken by curiosity and excitement; disgust and fear turn into pleasure with the visual. Miller makes the following observation about such a response:

It is commonplace that the disgusting can attract as well as repel; the film and entertainment industries, among which we might include news coverage, literally bank on its allure. The disgusting is an insistent feature of the lurid and the sensational, informed as these are by sex, violence, horror, and the violation of norms of modesty and decorum. And even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it is hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing 'double takes' at the very things that disgust us (1997, p. X).

This type of looking is key to horror and pornography, genres that *The Elephant Man* make strong reference to. Similar to the mode of viewing intrinsic in witnessing a freak show, these genres bring to mind the idea of peeking at what is behind the doctor's curtain (explicitly referenced in the film). This type of gaze is labelled with a 'NO ENTRY' sign, just like the entrance though which we pass to enter the freak show in *The Elephant Man*.

Essentially, the presentations of a divergent body in *The Elephant Man* underline the role of Bytes and Treves as the authors of the events who direct the attention and imagination of spectators. These are their narrated stories which elevate the performance to the status of a sensational happening. For Durbach,

Treves's 'riveting' and repeated presentations of his medical specimen at meetings of the Pathological Society of London necessarily echoed the sensationalism of the sideshow... But while Treves sharply contrasted his own 'careful' and scientific examination of 'the Elephant Man' within the privacy of the London Hospital with Merrick's public – and, in his opinion obscene – display across the street, he omitted from his memoirs his own role in the exhibition of 'the Elephant Man' (2010, p. 40).

Durbach's statement echoes that of John Bland-Sutton, the real-life assistant surgeon from Middlesex Hospital who had encountered the Elephant Man in a freak show before witnessing Treves's lecture:

my surprise was great... a fortnight later to find this man exhibited by Treves at the Pathological society of London. He not only submitted Merrick for examination by members of the Society, but published a detailed and illustrated account of this unfortunate man in the Transactions for 1885 (qtd. in Howell and Ford, 2001, p. 27).

Bland-Sutton points to the sensational element of Treves' lecture with regards to the choice of the exhibit. Correspondingly, in Lynch's film, after the private show paid for by the doctor, Bytes remarks: "more than money has changed hands. We understand each other, my friend". Correspondingly, in his memoirs Tom Norman, the real-life entertainer who inspired the character of Bytes, calls Treves "also a Showman, but on a rather higher social scale" (qtd. in Durbach, 2010, p. 55).

Caught between the freak show and a lecture theatre

On the one hand, spectacles at freak shows, such as those depicted in *The Elephant Man*, were often styled as medical lectures and appropriated scientific rhetoric in order to add legitimacy to the event (Adams 2001, p. 27-9). According to Durbach, such testimonials "suggest that the discourses of professional medicine were not in fact exclusive and could also be exploited for other ends entirely" (2010, p. 41-2). On the other hand, these sites of leisure did constitute a supply of raw material for the medical investigation of physical anomalies. However, scholars and doctors were not expressly open about their interactions with freak shows. As Adams observes, the men of science "attempted to distance themselves from the entertainment industry as they were pushed into competition for its audiences" (2010, p. 27). Nonetheless, teaching-oriented lectures did frequently recall the entertaining shows.

By comparing and contrasting the display of abnormal corporeality in a freak show and in a Victorian scientific lecture, *The Elephant Man* comments on perceptions of the body particular to these two contexts. The film presents the freak show as a dark place filled with shadows thus reinforcing the notion of the mysterious and the secret; darkness can easily mislead the eye. In this space Merrick is accompanied by a sensational story and becomes an object of imaginary investment. In other words, he is turned into the Elephant Man. By contrast, the lecture theatre is shown as a bright space facilitating careful observation; in this setting the eye seeks the truth. Under the auspices of medicine, Merrick's

body is described with scientific detachment and turned into a biological specimen examined in order to further knowledge about the human body. The type of gaze that is conceived as voyeuristic and tending towards the obscene in the context of a freak show, is justified within the domain of medical research, but restricted to a select few. Both popular entertainment and nineteenth century science objectify Merrick's body by transforming it into an exhibit and focusing solely on its physical nature, while as Kember asserts, "Merrick himself remains silent, unresponsive and all but invisible, his face hidden beneath his cap and hood or behind curtains and a medical screen" (2005, p. 26).

Abstract:

A large part of David Lynch's oeuvre centres around corporeal anxieties and grotesque, divergent bodies drawing attention to their own biological nature. One such example is the 1980 feature *The Elephant Man*, focusing on John Merrick, a freak show performer severely afflicted with a disfiguring disease. The film juxtaposes key characters in the film and moves between their different perspectives: that of Merrick, a freak show performer; Doctor Treves, a man of science; Bytes, an entertainer; and finally, a number of peripheral observers from both the high and low classes of Victorian society. The titular Elephant Man's disfigured body becomes the object of spectacle both in a freak show and in a medical lecture theatre. This paper compares scenes presenting Merrick's body as an exhibit and argues that Lynch draws parallels between the domain of sensational entertainment (Merrick as a carnival monster) and scientific analysis (Merrick as a medical specimen). In this way, the film highlights the similarities between the perception of the body in those two seemingly incongruous discourses. I suggest that the exhibition of a monstrous body in *The Elephant Man*, both in the context of a sideshow and Victorian medical lecture, are consciously theatrical.

Keywords: The Elephant Man; David Lynch; clinical gaze; cinema; medicine; freak show; deformed body; horror; pornography; body genres

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