



Angela M. Smith. *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. xii + 336 pp. \$87.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15716-2; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-15717-9; ISBN 978-0-231-52785-9.

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Eugenicist Impulses in Classic Horror Films

Angela M. Smith's monograph *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* opens with the reaction of Colonel Jason S. Joy, overseer of Hollywood's newly established Production Code, to the emergence of a horror as a genre. Smith recounts how Joy communicated his concerns about the latest batch of horror films—*Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), and *Freaks* (1932)—to various Hollywood executives, ending one memo with the question: “Is this the beginning of a cycle that ought to be retarded or killed?” (p. 1). Smith uses this question—notably similar to contemporary criticisms of multimedia horror productions—to introduce the twin themes of her monograph: how eugenic attitudes and concerns permeated horror films of the early to mid-twentieth century, and the close connections between horror, eugenics, and disability. Smith suggests that while classic horror, like melodrama, is typically considered a conservative genre—introducing extremes of plot, physical appearance, and sound to shock the viewer into emotional excesses, before allowing them a cathartic return to normalcy—it can also be a destabilizing influence, foregrounding that which society would prefer to be concealed, and critiquing many of the key tropes of the “normalizing” features of horror. Smith pays particular attention to the cinematic treatment of the “mad scientist,” and posits that the criticisms, implicit and explicit, leveled at characters such as Fritz and Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein*, Dr. Moreau in *Island of Lost Souls*, and Jekyll in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, are a

challenge to the science-driven polemics of the eugenics movement.

This approach to horror is akin to that offered by Martha Stoddard Holmes in her work on melodrama and disability in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[1] While reinterpretations of melodrama and disability have opened up in the wake of Stoddard Holmes's research, engaging with the subversive potential of melodrama, *Hideous Progeny* complements this work by providing an in-depth engagement with horror films. As such, it is a relevant work not only to scholars of disability, horror, and the gothic, but also to those working on melodrama and genre, both in fiction and film. While the majority of the films discussed in *Hideous Progeny* were produced in the 1930s, their status as adaptations of popular nineteenth-century novels ensures the relevance of Smith's study to literary scholars of an earlier period—and to critics approaching subsequent adaptations, given that six of the twelve films discussed in detail in *Hideous Progeny* have been adapted for cinema, television, or stage within the last thirty years (some of them repeatedly).

Hideous Progeny is organized into five main chapters, each engaging with different aspects of eugenics, horror, and disability. The first chapter, “Eugenic Reproduction: Chimeras in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*,” outlines the importance of hybridity to early horror, from the blood that transforms Renfield into a fusion of vampire and human in *Dracula*, and affects Mina and Lucy, to

Frankenstein's monster, composed from a variety of unsavory source material (including an "abnormal" brain). Yet while these representations initially seem to confirm eugenic attitudes towards disability, Smith offers a secondary analysis: where "the young, reproductive couple touted ... as the salvation of the superior class and race is, as the film progresses, increasingly traversed by the couple's own perversities and impairments, compromised by the woman's attraction or vulnerability to the monster or the man's instability and impotence" (p. 39). In both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, the eugenicist dream is undercut by the ideal couple, rather than the respective monsters, problematizing conventional family life, reproduction, and gender politics, and eschewing a neat pro-eugenics conclusion. Smith's argument for the destabilization of eugenicist rhetoric is convincing—her introduction of extracts from contemporary eugenics pamphlets on marriage and disability, and close study of the use of blood in *Dracula*, is particularly interesting. I would also have been interested to read more about the influence of auditory, as well as visual spectacle in these films, and how it relates to disability and eugenics, given that Smith introduces the shocking nature of sound as key to the development of both horror and the Production Code.

Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) is held to be one of the key prompts for the more rigorous application of the Production Code, after it was deemed so shocking by audiences and critics alike that it was withdrawn with significant losses. In her second chapter Smith focuses on Browning's use of disabled actors in the role of the "freaks," rather than the use of prosthetics and make-up to pass as disabled (as seen in *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*), as the source of most of the outcry against the film—but she also details the early introduction of eugenical elements to the plot, in caretaker Jean's attempts to evict the circus performers from the grounds of his employer's estate on their basis of their appearance. The audience's sympathies are thus encouraged to be with the physically abnormal characters—a position that only increases when the able-bodied Cleo and Hercules plot to take advantage of affluent dwarf Henry. While this sympathy is inverted in the violent conclusion to the film, with Hercules's death and Cleo's debilitation at the hands of the remaining cast, the earlier presentation of atypicality complicates the negative association of disability with bestiality (in nature and appearance) evident in the conclusion. As Smith points out, monstrosity in film is typically framed in obvious and shocking detail, for example, Jekyll's convulsions as he transforms into Hyde in each of

the versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920, 1931, 1941): yet when the title "Freaks" is torn away in the opening sequence, inviting the audience behind the scenes (of both the circus and the film), what is presented is a series of everyday images that have more in common with family melodramas set within a domestic circle, than with the gothic setting and conventions of *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*. Smith states that this is hardly the "freak show frame we [the audience] were led to expect" (p. 104)—and her attention to the beginning of the film is unusual, and welcome, as a critical response to *Freaks*, where commentators tend to focus on the explosive finale. Further description of the significance of the framing devices chosen by Browning would have been advantageous—Smith provides some screenshots, but none of these less dramatic scenes from the film—but Smith nevertheless offers a coherent and nuanced argument for the contested position of *Freaks*.

In "Revelations and Convulsions: Spectacles of Impairment in Classic Horror Film," Smith focuses on the use of blindness and epilepsy in horror, discussing a range of films: *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1925), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920, 1931, 1941). Smith aims to challenge the eugenicist association of physical or intellectual disability with moral turpitude, offering instead a selection of visually obvious impairments that foreground the acquired nature of characters' disabilities, and engage public stereotypes concerning disability, complicating any argument in favor of genetic degeneration. So, for example, in *The Phantom of the Opera*, Erik's mask satirizes the popular concept of physiognomy, made popular by Cesare Lombroso, in "layering lack upon lack" (p. 127); in *The Mystery of the Wax Museum*, not only does Igor pass as paraplegic while concealing facial disfiguration, but it is only after he is injured in an arson attack that he begins to act erratically—no previous evidence of unsound behavior was evident prior to the fire. Similarly, Smith demonstrates how in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Jekyll's transformation into Hyde is presented as a seizure, interrogating connections between epilepsy and demonic possession, as well as the presence of the uncanny double. The most interesting element of Smith's tracking of the treatment of Jekyll's transformations in the various adaptations produced is the directorial desire to render Jekyll's alteration into Hyde as visually, and often racially, obvious. Smith posits that this trend was part of a drive to render difference "visible and controllable" (p. 145). While Smith presents a convincing case for a drive to segregate disability by rendering it along

racial or ethnic lines, I would suggest that it is also part of a historical, and ongoing, distrust of disabilities that are not visually obvious, particularly intellectual disabilities. While implicit in Smith's argument, the separation between the presentation of physical and cognitive impairment in horror cinema could have been elaborated, and invites further study.

Building on the discussion of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the fourth chapter of *Hideous Progeny* concentrates on the prevalence of the "mad doctor" in horror films (p. 161). Smith posits that the development of the mad doctor as a stock character demonstrates a development of the complication of eugenicist themes. In *Dracula* there is a clear division between protagonists and antagonists, and medical science is presented as the only source of salvation for Mina, with Van Helsing a professional even Dracula can admire; yet in subsequent horror films, medical men frequently occupy a morally questionable position. Smith depicts horror films as refusing to "validate the medical gaze as objective, disinterested and disembodied" (p. 165), instead utilizing disability as a site from which to question the motivations of scientists. Smith concludes by reflecting on the role of the medical gaze—work that interacts usefully with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's recent work on staring and disability, published in the same year as *Hideous Progeny* (2009).[2]

The final chapter of *Hideous Progeny* shifts the focus on spectatorship and science into another arena: discussing X-rays and electricity in films such as *Doctor X* (1932) and *The Invisible Ray* (1936). Entitled "Shock Horror and Death Rays: Disabling Spectatorship," it examines the role of the viewer in the process of horror. In *The Invisible Ray*, in particular, disability is presented as preservative: Mrs. Ruhk survives where all others in her party do not, because, being blind, she chose not to attend a viewing of the eponymous ray. Smith suggests that this statement has wider significance beyond a quirk of plot—that *The Invisible Ray*, and films like it, challenge eugeni-

cist claims to possession and categorization of disability through satire and clowning, while prompting nondisabled viewers to justify their fascination with medical and scientific images and plots, and providing an obvious moral judgement on spectacle. Nor were such concerns about the dangers of prurient viewing limited to film. As Smith points out, by the early twentieth century a clear link had been established between X-rays and harmful cancers, including Marie Curie's early death from leukaemia, nearly blinded from radium exposure, as well as the potential benefits of X-rays. These well-publicized health complications built on earlier fashions for commemorative X-rays, particularly of the hands of Victorian ladies, many of whom developed bone cancers as a result. This contextualization clearly links cancerous consequences to experimentation with science, and to spectacle—not to inherent genetic weakness.

In conclusion, *Hideous Progeny* is a thoroughly researched and well-structured introduction to eugenicist thought on disability in classic horror films. It reveals eugenicist uses of disability as pernicious, and offers a variety of nuanced and developed arguments about the use of horror to undercut eugenicist rhetoric, and, more importantly, presents it as fundamentally unstable, "obsessively fascinated with the deviance it claimed to abhor" (p. 7). Such fascination is as relevant to contemporary cultural studies of disability as it is to 1930s horror films, and *Hideous Progeny* is a valuable contribution to discussions of disability, spectacle, and eugenics in genre fiction and film.

Notes

[1]. MArtha Stoddart Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

[2]. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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