The People Behind Monsters: Dehumanization of the Deformed in Horror

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In Fall of 2018, I went to my local movie theater to see a highly anticipated film that would kick off a new era of elevated horror and become one of my favorite horror films of all time, Ari Aster's *Hereditary*. Though I loved this movie, there was a nagging sense of dread and humiliation tugging at me from the screen. The little girl the movie centered around, Charlie, played by Milly Shapiro, was intended to come off as creepy, unsettling, uncanny, and somewhat demonic, and her actress has a craniofacial deformity, like me. I felt it was undeniably obvious that Shapiro was chosen for this role because of her appearance. It is so infrequent that deformed actors get on screen roles at all, so when they do get roles, but only as creepy characters, I can't overlook that trend. Most of all I think the embarrassment, shame, and sadness I felt in the theater that day speaks to the way Shapiro was being used in the film. I, as a person, with a cleft lip and palate felt embarrassed at what was supposed to make the average viewer feel unsettled. I felt as though it could have just as easily been my face on the screen.

This moment opened my eyes to a painful thing I would come to notice time and time again in horror cinema, which is one of my favorite things. It must've been the first time I noticed a connection between the supposedly ugly, monstrous humans on screen in horror films and myself. From then on, consuming horror was more complicated. I never knew when something would appear on the screen and give me this indescribable, sinking feeling of humiliation. If people like me are unsettling enough to be the stuff of horror films, how could anyone ever view me normally in everyday life? I argue that horror cinema has consistently dehumanized and made monsters and villains out of people with deformities and made spectacles out of them to illicit shock in audiences who unintentionally continue this process of dehumanization, contributing to stigma surrounding people with deformities in larger society as well as instilling shame in real people with deformities.

Human storytelling in general has a long and deeply culturally ingrained history of villainizing and making monsters of people with deformities. To give one recognizable example, Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's iconic *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* fits this mold. Most modern readers probably know Quasimodo as a sympathetic and humanizing depiction of people with deformities and/or disabilities from more recent adaptations, particularly Disney's animated *The Hunchback of Notre Dame.* In Hugo's original 1831 story, Quasimodo is a villainous monster with very little character at all, who mostly exists to move the plot forward. He is an uncritical and classically one-dimensional and dehumanizing representation of people with deformities and disabilities (Ellis). Similarly, the classic urban legend, most often just called "The Hook", portrays a man with a hook for a hand as the feared monster, on the loose, his bodily difference contributing to his ominous presence.

After the creation of the moving picture, this cultural fear of people with deformities naturally situated itself firmly in the horror film genre. Tod Browning's *Freaks* is probably one of the most famous examples of deformity and disability in visual horror media. It is a film about a circus freakshow of deformed and disabled people who cut off the legs of one of the circus' beautiful able-bodied performers to make her "one of them". Though the film paints some of these disabled and deformed characters as ultimately human and worthy of sympathy, a particularly poignant message for the time considering that *Freaks* was released at the tail end of the American Eugenics movement, the emotional response the film intended to elicit was shock, horror, and disgust, and it used images of deformity to generate these reactions at real deformed and disabled actors' expense (Madden). These depictions of deformity in horror typically fall into two categories: monstrous and villainous, which are both hard to watch as a deformed person for their own reasons.

One glaring example of deformed people being represented as villainous and morally corrupt is the final season of NBC's *Hannibal*, a prequel series to *Silence of the Lambs*. The villain of the final season of *Hannibal*, Francis Dolarhyde, dubbed "the tooth fairy" for his habit of biting victims and for the unusual shape of his bite, is driven to kill by deeply self-hating delusions that surround his cleft lip. Watching this show as someone with a cleft was deeply painful, humiliating, and alienating, so much so that I initially couldn't finish it. Unlike many deformed depictions of villains, Dolarhyde is somewhat sympathetic. He is deeply romantically insecure in his budding relationship with a blind woman who he finds he's able to relate to, and he generally avoids his coworkers and assumes that they talk about him and reject him because of his appearance. Though Dolarhyde is humanized more than many of his deformed counterparts in horror, the gaze of the camera often focuses on the parts that viewers are intended to find most grotesque. During his character's introduction, *Hannibal* seeks to shock the audience by showing shots of his crooked teeth and the mangled inside of his mouth as he throws his head back and wails madly. The viewers are expected to suspend their humanization of him momentarily and view his appearance as a part of his monstrosity to add to the horror in the moment.

What I found potentially most horrifying in my watch of *Hannibal* was the fact that Dolardyde was not only scary because of his appearance, but because of his insanity surrounding the trauma of having a cleft that the narrative stereotypically assumes must isolate him so greatly he is driven to slaughter people. The series almost expects the viewer to not just be scared of a person with a cleft but be scared by the idea of having one. "How could a person live like that?" the show asks. Moreover, the fact that he removes a pair of fake teeth to bite his victims and utilizes mirrors in his murders emphasizes his appearance as an inherent part of his terrifying killing spree. It ultimately reinforces the idea that people with deformities are in some way intrinsically and irreparably abnormal and cannot live normal healthy lives.

Horror movies tend to dehumanize and alienate the deformed most often through the king of dehumanization that depicts the subject as animalistic and beastly. One film that has been often overlooked for this yet has fallen into this trope quite hard is 2022's *Barbarian*. The main villain of Barbarian is a character referred to by fans as "the mother," the product of multiple generations of sexual assault, abuse, and inbreeding who has been living in a system of tunnels under an Airbnb in captivity with her aging abuser who has used these tunnel systems to imprison, torture, and rape 100s of women. The mother is a naked, wrinkled, dirty old woman with an unnatural skull shape,

rotten and malformed teeth, and thin, scraggly hair. She speaks in grunts, and behaves in a terrifying animal like way, chasing the protagonists and attacking or imprisoning them with superhuman strength.

While Barbarian accumulated much critical acclaim from most critics and horror fans, some found The Mother problematic, and claimed that it uses outdated tropes that depict the "ugly" and deformed as monstrous and evil. It drew particular criticism for its use of the old and decaying body to evoke revulsion in audiences, playing on the cultural disdain for bodies (especially women's) that show signs of age and no longer fit the strict beauty standard (Menta). This kind of horror is built on and plays off of societal prejudices against the deformed (deformity being implied by the inbreeding and skull/mouth shape) and ugliness in general.

A common response to this criticism of horror that uses ugliness and deformity imagery to create shock and horror, and specifically in discourse surrounding Barbarian is that these depictions are intended to represent and comment on the horror of real social issues. The real monster is something metaphorical; In the case of Barbarian, misogyny and the cycle of gendered violence therein (St. James). Ria Cheyne is a scholar and lecturer in disability studies at Liverpool Hope University, who has written a scholarly book published by Liverpool University Press on the subject of representation of disability and deformity in different genres of fiction called *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction*. In chapter 8, she discusses Disability and deformity representation in the Horror genre. Cheyne discusses the point of view commonly held by horror critics and scholars that horror should be viewed as "a legitimate subject for academic investigation" and that "In critical attempts to reclaim horror it is a requirement that the genre's excessively, problematically corporeal forms be translated into gender, racial, or class terms—repressed elements of society or of individual psyches" (Cheyne 34). In this way, horror can be respected on a scholarly level that is more equal with other genres of literature as "not just trivially about rampaging monsters, but which returns to the centers of social/cultural power" (Cheyne 34).

While I certainly sympathize with the push to view horror cinema as a genre containing multitudes of meaning and depth that is worthy of analytical study, to ignore the frequency of deformed people as a means for eliciting discomfort and its frequency in horror is intentionally blind for the sake "validating the genre as worthy of intellectual investigation" (Cheyne 34). The horror genre can and should be recognized as legitimate while also being analyzed honestly and critiqued for the way cultural prejudices inevitably appear in a genre that works off of our cultural fears. Horror fans, scholars, and critics alike should have the maturity to hod this complexity.

When I watched *Barbarian* myself,and saw yet another exaggerated, inbred, deformed villain behaves to the point of animalism and monstrosity I thought, "Oh, here we go again", ready to see the mass praise for its feminist critique that outright ignores or even contradict the few conversations being had about the extremely dehumanizing representation of those with deformities in horror. *Disability, Literature, Genre* points out that the horror genre, despite its real or perceived underlying meanings, by using disability imagery to create immediate physical and emotional reactions of fear in audiences, "[exploits] and [reinforces] the association of disability with fearful affects" (Cheyne 34-35). I share the opinion with the majority of the disability and deformity activism community surrounding our representation in fiction, that any metaphorical

fear takes a back seat to the fear of deformed faces and bodies that people have immediate gut reactions to. *Disability, Literature, Genre* compares and analyzes representations of disability/deformity in horror and conversation about horror films in both horror and disability scholarship and ultimately finds that "An ominous ambience is often intensified by the display of a grotesque human body, and the use of disability to generate or enhance ominous affects is particularly common in horror…Texts in the genre are therefore… perpetuating an ongoing cycle of prejudice and discrimination… emotions are encouraged that serve to cement longstanding associations of stigma with bodily difference. The dominant poles of disability representation in horror work to evoke fear, anxiety, and discomfort" (Cheyne 31-32).

I don't feel any less degraded as a deformed viewer knowing that deformed, disabled, and otherwise socially "ugly" people represent (in the case of Barbarian) misogyny. Nor is it any different if it represents trauma, class struggle, mental illness, the anxiety of inhabiting a body or any other higher concept that horror has sometimes been known to play with. When deformity is used to create metaphor for some sort of social ill, as interesting as an exercise as that is, what people are scared of before anything else is the imagery of a deformed person. When someone watches *Barbarian* and sees a naked, deformed, creature-like woman charge the camera and then bash a victims head to bits on the wall, is what immediately scares people, makes them scream or jump in their seats, truly the idea of generations of misogynistic abuse (Billie)? To me this seems unlikely, rather it is the exaggerated and monstrous image of a deformed person that imbues horror and fear in audiences, at the expense of real-life deformed people.

But is it that serious? Though I'm sure many people could see my point, the horror fandom notoriously tends to host reactionary beliefs that horror should be limitless, moral criticisms of the genre should always be rejected. If you can't handle it, suck it up or leave. But it isn't a situation of just simply being too easily offended. The experiences of people with deformities in society leave them with medically recorded higher rates of mental health and self-image issues which fully affect quality of life, and I've certainly experienced that reality firsthand. The consistency and extremity of this issue conveys that it is not a personal failing of over-sensitivity, but a reaction to the active continuation of old traditions of bigotry against the deformed.

It has been thoroughly studied that people with deformities usually experience a degree of psychological trauma stemming from self-image issues that related to their deformity. One article by Kristen Billaud Feragen et al., from a peer reviewed journal called *The Cleft Palate Craniofacial Journal* published by Sage Publications Inc found through qualitative data gathered over a series of phone interviews along with the synthesis of previous studies on the subject, that people born with clefts experience real and perceived heightened levels of social, romantic, and mental health issues because of their cleft. The journal finds "anxiety, depression, and palpitations to be reported twice as often by adults with CL/P compared with controls. These problems were closely associated with dissatisfaction with appearance, speech, and dentition and a desire for further treatment" (Feragen et al., 543). It was also observed that most cleft patients, "believed their confidence had been significantly affected by their cleft. Young adults with cleft may have fewer friends than their peers without CL/P and may struggle to initiate romantic relationships. Several studies have also suggested that adults with CL/P are less likely to marry, marry later in life, and are more likely to be childless" These issues were consistently attributed to social anxiety and lack of self-confidence (Feragen et al., 544).

These depictions of people with deformities that reinforce stereotypes and depict them as ugly to the point of monstrosity inarguably agitate the insecurities of deformed people and affect their mental health poorly. Not only does a vulnerable population like deformed people not need extra negative attention in society, but it also reasonable to say that the depictions of deformed people in horror cinema is an overt self-reinforcing manifestation of the larger social rejection and othering of deformed people, which causes these very real mental health concerns that lower quality of life. I for one, have certainly felt this reality firsthand. When I watch horror movies with exaggerated and dehumanizing depictions of deformed people, it often fuels my social anxiety and worry that that the larger society sees me and other deformed people as monstrous, or at least doesn't humanize us to the same degree and non-deformed people.

The monstrous and demonized representation of deformed people in horror movies also affects and reinforces the implicit dehumanization of deformed people by non-deformed people. Aversion to facial difference is something that is ingrained into our society, so when horror movies use these ableist cultural norms of in their horror content as any easy way to illicit shock, disgust, and fear by exaggerating or giving extra attention to deformed people's supposed ugliness, they are recreating and cementing well documented prejudices against deformed people held by non-deformed people.

The international peer reviewed journal *Body Image* compiles scientific articles on the human physical appearance and human perceptions of it. An article from volume 43 of this journal, "Towards a better understanding of the social stigma of facial differences" by Jessica Mange et al., discusses the function of stigma in deformed people's lives. One form it discusses in detail is "social stigma", which it defines as "cognitions, affects, and behaviors" and explains that "Cognitive reactions often reflect stereotypes, affective responses demonstrate prejudice, and behavioral reactions to a stigmatized condition like [facial difference] manifests as discrimination" (Mange et al., 451). One section explains the literature on the way non-deformed people stigmatize deformed people, both implicitly and outwardly. Mange et al., note some behavioral studies found that non deformed people tend to avoid physical proximity with visibly deformed people, and also, in some studies non-deformed people have self-reported discomfort around people with deformities (Mange et al., 452-453). People with deformities also seem to be the victims of a reverse halo effect, where people seem to unconsciously (or even consciously sometimes) view them as less morally desirable or socially valuable. The article presents data which shows that deformed people are often rated by non-deformed as "having less positive personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness, emotional stability), less positive internal attributes (e.g., intelligence, honesty), less positive social attributes (e.g., likability, school success), and as less attractive… with the emotion of disgust drawing specific interest" (Mange et al., 452-453). There is also some research to suggest that non-deformed people display physical threat reactions around some deformed people, like slightly increased breathing and heart rate, alluding to discomfort at their appearance. (Mange et al., 452).

The research consistently displays that non-deformed people have a tendency to discriminate against and unfairly judge those with deformities and also that people with deformities experience levels of distress and hardship in their lives that are at a higher level than the general population because of their difference, so like practically all aspects of our society, it manifests and is recreated in media, particularly horror which often dredges up cultural anxieties.

I am concerned about the larger affect this trend has had on deformed people in society if people don't make the effort to become more conscious about this issue. *Hereditary's* Milly Shapiro even briefly alluded to the mental harm that she underwent when she was exposed to audience reactions to her appearance which was being used to create discomfort, in the form of a video posted to her personal TikTok account in March 2021 where she lip synced a popular audio that goes, "I think this is affecting me mentally. Like long term shit it's gonna fuck with me" with text on the screen that reads, "Being in a movie and playing a character where they purposely made you look your worst and then millions of people seeing it." The video was captioned, "I just remember when the trailer came out and one of the top three comments was about how ugly I looked" (Shapiro). Horror cinema's historically negative treatment of people with deformities situates itself well into a larger picture of the social rejection of people with deformities and that has been recorded and studied thoroughly.

If anything, my ultimate problem with the demonization of deformed people in horror, maybe even more than simple that fact that it's extremely insulting and degrading, is the fact that non-deformed people rarely seem to take notice of or feel bothered by this trend. These depictions of deformed people are dehumanizing, but I also think the fact that they are so acceptable to most audiences is possibly the most dehumanizing thing. I think that people don't seem to consider the implications these sorts of depictions have about real deformed people or the offense they will cause because they don't imagine deformed people existing as fully fledged, real humans with their own experiences; They only imagine them as caricatures that exist as monsters in movies, not in real life. I've had many conversations with people about this subject, and people usually respond positively, but say that they never noticed this problem OR "never thought about it that way". In think much of the public's acceptance of these caricatures comes from ignorance, but I can never overlook the fact that they, as the ingroup, had the ability to be ignorant, and I did not.

Ultimately, I think that the architects of the horror genre should at least try to reevaluate the implications of horror monsters and villains representing the ugly, the scarred, and the deformed disproportionately, and ideally shift away from using deformity imagery for scares. So-called elevated horror is quite popular these days, and deformed people whom so much of the horror genre has been built off of, should not be left out of the movement to make horror that comments on and better understands the social ills of our world. I think the elevated horror sub-genre at it's best could make turn away from deformity imagery, since it often tries to make more intelligent and creative choices when scaring audiences. The voices of people with deformities should be elevated rather than brushed aside as they have been in the past. There are deformed and disabled led movements like I Am Not Your Villain form the organization Changing Faces, which raise awareness and campaign for better representation of people with facial differences, that could that people unaffected by deformity should try to educate themselves with (I Am Not Your Villain). Finally, most simply and maybe most importantly, I want to encourage audiences to always think critically about what horror uses to scare audiences and the implication therein, as a critical eye should be used to consume any art.

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