

Discussion Guide for a 2-hour Screening Event

Pre-screening Discussion (10 minutes)

Begin by choosing one of the pre-screening questions below. These questions are designed to get everyone in the room talking and comfortable and to reflect on their own perceptions of disability in film. Starting with a dialogue in the room further opens up audiences to the conversation that the film presents.

Pre-Screening Discussion Questions

- 1) What are some of the most memorable disabled characters in film? What makes them so memorable?
- 2) What are some of your favorite films that feature disabled characters? Why are they your favorite?
- 3) What role do you think films play in shaping how society views people with disabilities?
- 4) How do you think representations of disability have changed over time?

Screen the film (70 minutes)

Post-Screening Discussion: (40 minutes)

Begin the post-screening discussion by asking audience members to share their initial thoughts with the person or persons next to them. Those who do not wish to share can alternatively choose to write down or spend a moment just thinking quietly about their reactions to film. This will offer everyone a space to process the film before beginning a larger and more guided group discussion.

Post-Screening Discussion Questions:

- 1) What struck you most about seeing clips featuring disabled characters back-to-back?
- 2) What struck you most from what the interviewees said?
- 3) How does *Code of the Freaks* ask viewers to look at films with disabled characters in new ways?
- 4) How did each of the interviewees talk about the ways that representations have shaped their lives and the lives of other disabled people?
- 5) What differences of opinion did you notice among the interviewees?
- 6) *Code of the Freaks* argues that, despite the different themes, storylines, and character types, most films about disability tell the same basic inspirational story. How does the film make this argument? Do you agree or disagree with that claim?

7) One of the interviewees, Mat Fraser, argues that the wedding feast offers a “microcosmic scene of the relationship between disability and the mainstream non-disabled world.” What do you think he means by this?

For further information on inspirational narratives:

- Young, Stella. “I’m Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much.” *TED*, Apr. 2014, http://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much
- Kleege, Georgina. *What Keeps Me in the Ghetto?* Parallel Lines, 2001, <http://www.parallellinesjournal.com/article-what-keeps.html>.

Thematic Discussions:

Code of the Freaks presents conversations that cover a variety of themes exploring the intersections of disability with race, gender, and sexuality. It also covers concepts such as the exoticization of disabled and Deaf people and the belief that disabled people are dangerous and better off dead, cured, or institutionalized. Alongside this critique, interviewees address the power of disability community and culture. Discussions can be built around any of these themes.

For further readings on disability in film:

- Sandahl, Carrie. “It’s All the Same Movie: Making *Code of the Freaks*.” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, vol. 58 no. 4, 2019, p. 145-150. *Project MUSE*, doi: 10.1353/cj.2019.0044.
- Meritd. “Disability Inclusion in Movies and Television: Market Research, 2019.” *Ruderman Family Foundation*, https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/disability-inclusion-in-movies-and-television-market-research-2019/?fbclid=IwAR06hoIfGb1n6mXEV3CsnHr4LeVrUHI0hB5xaVqaBa_VRuWXfDDKOGz5x50.
- Longmore, Paul. “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures.” *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006. 131-146.
- Norden, Martin. *Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. Rutgers, UP, 1994.
- Chivers, Sally and Nicole Markotic. *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*. Ohio UP, 2010.

On Disabled Actors, Writers, and Directors

One key entry-point into the discussion about disability representations is the increasingly vocal call for the industry to hire more actors, writers, and directors with disabilities. The

Ruderman Family Foundation's research notes that, "While 20% of the U.S. population has a disability, fewer than 2% of all television characters do. Additionally," they write, "95% of top TV show characters with disabilities are portrayed by non-disabled performers" (Ruderman). Advocates have long called for greater inclusion within the industry and for disabled actors, in particular, to play disabled characters. These calls not only address the barriers that disabled actors face in access jobs, but they suggest that this inclusion will create more authentic representations of disability on screen. Many of the interviewees within *Code of the Freaks* address the relationship between disabled actors, the stories that film tells about disability, and the question of authenticity.

- 1) What do the interviewees say about disabled actors playing disabled characters?
- 2) What relationship does this question have to the Oscar sequence in *Code of the Freaks*?
- 3) How does *Code of the Freaks* complicate the argument that having disabled actors play disabled characters will make representations more authentic?

For more on the debate about disabled actors and disabled characters:

- Sandahl, Carrie. "The Difference Disability Makes: Unique Considerations in Casting Performers with Disabilities." *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative*, edited by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks. New York, Routledge: 88-99.
- Davis, Lennard J. "Let Actors with Disabilities Play Characters with Disabilities." *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 7 Dec. 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/let-actors-with-disabilit_b_380266.
- Kaufman, Jonathan. "Mindset Matters: How The New Power Brokers of Hollywood Are Influencing The Leadership Of The Industry." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 2 Dec. 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathankaufman/2019/11/30/mindset-matters-how-the-new-power-brokers-of-hollywood-are-influencing-the-leadership-of-the-industry/?fbclid=IwAR1MYvWHUSyeu65h-L-X3UriOAMdCSMRkRU2dAXZAUIP8GtQ6Qto9le_55g#1265688621f7.
- Somvichian-Clausen, Austa. "Should Disabled Roles Go to the Disabled?" *TheHill*, 12 Dec. 2019, https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/accessibility/474150-should-disabled-roles-go-to-the-disabled?fbclid=IwAR13-tnV5J_a-H3N0hHcyE4w_B2CV8liwXVsGMM5olNbTVjuDelz2F1Nusc.
- DiMarco, Nyle. "Representation Matters: Why Deaf Actors Should Play Deaf Characters." *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adAD4X1ri7w>.
- Rodgers, Lucy. "How to Win an Oscar - BBC News." BBC News. 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 11 Sept. 2015. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-16932374>>.

Disability and Gender

Code of the Freaks presents a discussion of gender through a look at depictions of blindness. Characterizations of blindness, in particular, illustrate the gendering of disabled characters. As illustrated, films like *Daredevil*, *Blind Fury*, and *Scent of a Woman* depict blind men as car-driving and sword-wielding aficionados. On the other hand, films such as *Jennifer 8*, *See No Evil*, and *Blink* feature blind women as helpless victims of violence in need of rescue (by a non-disabled male character). The juxtaposition of representations of blind men and blind women raises several questions for further discussion.

- 1) How might social perceptions of blindness (stereotypes of blindness) lend themselves to such gendered depictions?
- 2) How do these differing depictions of blindness rely on and/or further support gendered binaries?
- 3) Taking what you learned from this discussion, how do you see this gendering of disabilities play out in other films?

For more on the intersections of disability and gender:

- Bournis, Cynthia. "Crippling Heterosexuality, Queering Able-Bodiedness: Murderball, Brokeback Mountain and the Contested Masculine Body." *Journal of Visual Culture* 8.1 (2009). [Reprinted in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Third and Fourth Editions. Ed. Lennard Davis. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Lopez, Kristen. "On the Representation of Disabled Women in Cinema." *rogerebert.com*, March 30, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/chazs-blog/on-the-representation-of-disabled-women-in-cinema>

For more on representations of blindness:

- Crutchfield, Susan. "Touching Scene and Finishing Touches: Blindness in the Slasher Films." *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, Edited by Christopher Sharrett, Wayne State UP, 1999.
- "Losing My Sight – and Finding My Way to 'This Is Us.'" *BlindNewWorld*, 9 Dec. 2019, http://blindnewworld.org/blog/blake_stadnik_losing_my_sight_and_finding_my_way_to_this_is_us/?fbclid=IwAR3acb0Go4RaY8J56emvMq-2vP027WhZ8E65meOb5qJVcyOyxIJ3JWQOQys.

Disability and Sexuality

Presumptions that disabled people are not sexual, cannot find sexual partners, or are somehow sexually dangerous carry with them specific and, sometimes overlapping, implications for the lives of people with disabilities. Films play a key role in shaping these presumptions with storylines that feature sexually innocent, sexually frustrated, and sexually dangerous disabled characters. However, stories like *Coming Home* (1978), *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), and *The Sessions* (2012) depict disabled characters offering what Carrie Sandahl describes as an "elixir-like" effect on non-disabled characters.

- 1) How do we make sense of these overlapping depictions of disabled people's sexuality?
- 2) Thinking beyond "good" or "bad" representations of disabled people's sexuality, what role or function do sexually innocent or innocuous characters play in a film's overall storyline? What about the sexually dangerous? The sexually frustrated?

For more on the intersections of disability and sexuality:

- Gill, Michael. *Already Doing It: Intellectual Disability and Sexual Agency*, U of Minnesota P, 2015.
- Mollow, Anna and Robert McRuer, Ed. *Sex and Disability*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.
- Passanante Elman, Julie. *Chronic Youth: Disability, Sexuality, and U.S. Media Cultures of Rehabilitation*. New York UP, 2014.
- Kafer, Alison. "Sexuality." Burch, Susan. *Encyclopedia of American Disability History*, Volumes 1-3, Facts On File, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uic/detail.action?docID=3010560>.

Exoticization

The discussion of *Children of a Lesser God* (1996) highlights the exoticization of Deafness. Interviewees describe the film's depiction of the Deaf world as something to be conquered and the Deaf character as someone whose wildness and difference needs to be "tamed" or "managed" by the hearing character. Similarly, the interviewees discuss the ways that monsters and freaks tap into what Riva Lehrer calls a "lingering on the details of embodiment" that is tied to eroticism. Tommy Heffron notes that depictions of freaks or monsters invite a viewing that relies on "the forbidden, the unknown, the abject." In other words, the exoticization of disability takes multiple forms in the representations that *Code of the Freaks* explores.

- 1) What impact does this exoticization have on audience's views of deafness?
- 2) How do some of the clips *Code of the Freaks* shows illustrate this "lingering on the details of embodiment"?
- 3) What is gained and what is lost by bringing together a discussion of the eroticising of deafness with an analysis of monsters and freaks?
- 4) In what ways is the depiction of blind women as vulnerable and in need of protection similar to or different from this exoticization?

For more on the exoticization of Deafness:

- Wilson, Timothy. "Deaf Sexy Genre and Disability in *Read My Lips*." *Different Bodies: Disability in Film and Television*. Ed. Marja Mogk. Mcfarland and Company Press, 2013.

For more on the politics of looking or staring:

- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Clare, Eli. "Gawking, Gaping, Staring." *The Marrow's Telling: Words in Motion*. Ypsilanti, Michigan: Homofactus, 2007. 81-86.
- Manning, Lynn. "The Magic Wand." *The Gimp Parade*. 16 Apr. 2007. Web. 13 Sept. 2015.

Disability and Race

Race and disability intersect in both visible and less apparent ways within films. Interviewees discuss several films that depict African American disabled men in ways that use disability as a means of representing black men as less threatening and more "relatable" to white viewers. Films like *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Men of Honor* (2000), and *Radio* (2003) all offer messages of racial tolerance using a disabled character. Notably, more contemporary race-relation films such as *Men of Honor*, *Radio*, and *Fences* (2016) are set in the past (the 1940's, 70's and 50's respectively). The historical setting works to place racism in the past, and disability serves as a bridge to overcome this "old" way of thinking.

Any discussion of race and disability in film needs to also ask what is not present or commented on. With the exception of the films about African American men, the majority of the films addressed in *Code of the Freaks* features white characters. Even the films that do depict black men center the journey of the white non-disabled character. As TJ Gordon notes, black characters often serve to "empower the white non-disabled character." Candace Coleman argues that featuring only one black disabled character in a film speaks "to the inaccessibility of the world we live in." The lack of representation of black disabled women and other racial and ethnic minorities speaks not only to the imagined whiteness of disability, but also (and relatedly) the representational trend to view disability as *the only* aspect of otherwise one-dimensional characters.

- 1) How do films that feature disabled African American men work to shape understandings of race and disability? What messages do they send?
- 2) What impact does the lack of representation of disabled black women and other racial and ethnic minorities within film have on the cultural imagination of disability?
- 3) Tsehaye Hebert observes that black characters are often imbued with all-knowing or magical qualities in ways that, "rob us of a certain humanity." What does she mean by this?

For more on the intersections of race and disability:

- Manning, Lynn. "Poetry Monday: Every Man's Burden." *Poetry Monday: Every Man's Burden*, *The Gimp Parade*, 16 Apr. 2007,

<http://thegimpparade.blogspot.com/2007/04/poetry-monday-every-mans-burden.html>.

- Bell, Chris, Ed. *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, Michigan State UP, 2012.
- Nickel, John. "Disabling African American Men: Liberalism and Race Message Films." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no 1, Fall 2004, 25-48.
- Pickens, Theri Alyce. *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*, Duke UP, 2019.

Better Off Dead

The belief that disabled people are "better off dead" has both historical roots and present-day manifestations. The eugenics era, spanning from the late 19th century through WWII, saw practices and policies that lead to the sterilization, institutionalization, criminalization, and killing of disabled people. Film, emerging at the turn of the 20th century, became another vehicle for the spread of eugenic ideas that disabled people should be eliminated for the good of society (see Pernick's discussion of *The Black Stork* (1917)). Even after explicit eugenic practices ended following WWII, the belief that disabled people lead pitiful lives and, thus, are better off dead persists. Cinematic storytelling continue to favor narratives that craft a set of circumstances that lead to disabled characters' deaths (see also the section below: "On Narrative Solutions"). As discussions around assisted suicide and euthanasia reached a level of popular debate in the US in the 1980's, Hollywood began capturing these discussions in films like *Whose Life is it Anyway* (1981) and later *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Me Before You* (2016). *Code of the Freaks* places these films in conversation with other films that show death as a "happy ending" for disabled characters (films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *Of Mice and Men* (1992), and *The Green Mile* (1999)) in order to situate films about assisted dying in the context of a larger representational landscape that depicts disabled people as better off dead.

- 1) What impact does seeing images of disabled character's deaths back-to-back have on you as a viewer?
- 2) How does the shot-for-shot comparison between *Elephant Man* (1980) and *Gattaca* (1997) offer an analysis of cinema's depiction of disabled people as better off dead?
- 3) What is gained and what is lost by analyzing films about assisted dying alongside films that kill off the disabled character?

For more on the history of eugenics:

- Pernick, Martin. *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Fries, Kenny. "The Nazis' First Victims Were the Disabled." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Sept. 2017,

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/opinion/nazis-holocaust-disabled.html?_r=0.

For more on the disability critiques of assisted suicide and euthanasia:

- “Responding to Million Dollar Baby: A Forum.” Edited by Jay Dolmage, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Disability Studies Quarterly, 2005, <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/590/767>.
- Gill, Carol. “Depression in the Context of Disability and the ‘Right to Die.’” *Theoretical Medicine*, vol. 25, 2004, p. 171–198.
- Not Dead Yet, *Dead Yet*. <http://notdeadyet.org/>

On Narrative Solutions: Cure/Kill/Institutionalize

Disability Studies scholars have argued that disability often appears in literature as a problem to be solved (Mitchell and Snyder 2000; Dolmage 2013). Cinematic representations of disability are no different. Disability often enters a film as a problem that moves the storyline forward, culminating in one of several “solutions”: the curing of the disabled character, their death (from murder or mercy killing), or their institutionalization. *Code of the Freaks* addresses each of these “solutions.”

- 1) What examples does the film offer of each of the narrative solutions?
- 2) What variations in these solutions or endings does the film highlight?
- 3) What impact do stories that feature disability as a problem to be solved have on disabled people and social perceptions of disability?

Films that end with a miracle cure for disabled characters often rely on and reinforce a medicalized view of disability. A medicalized view of disability describes the understanding of disability as specifically and predominantly a *medical* problem to be solved. In this view, medicine and medical or rehabilitation professionals (alone) provide the expertise to address disability. This prevents an understanding of the ways that social attitudes, environmental barriers, bureaucratic policies, cultural contexts, and economic systems shape and limit the lives of people with disabilities.

- 1) How do miracle cures reinforce a view of disability as a medical problem?
- 2) What relationship do miracle cures have to the belief that disabled characters are better off dead?

Some films provide a more figurative cure where disability gets re-signified from a tragic fate to something a character symbolically overcomes.

- 1) What examples from *Code of the Freaks* fit this narrative trajectory?
- 2) Can you think of other films not shown and/or discussed that fall into this type of overcoming narrative?
- 3) How do we know that the character has “overcome” their disability?

If institutionalization offers a solution to the problem that disability poses, it is because films offer a romanticized view (fantasy) of institutional life. Characters like Raymond from *Rain Man* (1988) or Karl from *Sling Blade* (1996) express a desire or preference for life inside institutions, which are depicted as safer and happier places for disabled people, particularly for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Hollywood's versions of institutions and hospitals bear little resemblance to institutional life.

- 1) Why do narratives that romanticize hospital or institutional life persist?
- 2) What purpose does returning disabled people to the boundaries of an institution serve?

For more on the depiction of disability as a problem to be solved:

- Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Narrative and the Dependencies of Discourse*, U of Michigan P, 2000.
- Jay Dolmage. *Disability Rhetoric*, Syracuse UP, 2013.

For more on how this resignification intersects with gender and sexuality:

- Kim, Eunjung. "A Man, with the Same Feeling": Disability, Humanity, and Heterosexual Apparatus in *Breaking the Waves*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Breathing Lessons*, and *Oasis*," *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, Ed. Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic, Ohio UP, 2010.

For more on medicalization:

- Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Duke UP, 2017.
- Ellis, Kathleen. "Reinforcing the Stigma: The Representation of Disability in *Gattaca*." Australian Screen Education Dec 1 2002.
- Linton, Disability Studies, Not Disability Studies. *Disability & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1998, pp. 525-540.

For more on institutionalization:

- "The society timeline exhibit." *The Museum of disABILITY History*, 2019, <https://www.museumofdisability.org/virtual-museum/society-wing/society-timeline-exhibit/>.
- Ben-Moshe, Liat. *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition*, U of Minnesota P, 2019.

"The Code"

Code of the Freaks gets its name from Tod Browning's 1932 once-banned film, *Freaks*. While at the time of its release, general audiences recoiled from the film's use of disabled actors and its revenge narrative, disabled people have claimed the film as a celebration of

disability culture and community. The wedding scene's "One of Us" cry serves as an iconic expression of recognition for many people within disability communities. *Code of the Freaks* calls up this collective voice in its title's reference to another of the film's scenes. The story ends with the non-disabled villain, Venus, becoming disabled by the freaks en masse. Marking her entrance into the Freaks, the carnival barker explains, "Their code is a law unto themselves. Offend one and you offend them all" (*Freaks*). *Code of the Freaks* brings disabled people together to talk back to some of the dominant representations that have shaped their lives.

- 1) Interviewee Mike Ervin offers that he judges films by whether they "humanize or dehumanize." How would you build on this standard? What constitutes humanization? What constitutes dehumanization?
- 2) How do the interviewees describe what "code of the freaks" means to them?
- 3) How do the voices assembled in *Code of Freaks* present their own "code" for evaluating films?
- 4) What is the "code of the freaks" as you understand it?

For more on the future of disability and media:

- Hay, Mark. "Mat Fraser on the Future of Disability in the Media." *GOOD*, 1 Aug. 2019, <https://www.good.is/articles/mat-fraser-american-horror-story-freakshow-disability-media-oneofus>.
- Fries, Kenny. "The Fries Test: On Disability Representation in Our Culture." *Medium*, 1 Nov. 2017, <https://medium.com/@kennyfries/the-fries-test-on-disability-representation-in-our-culture-9d1bad72cc00>.
- Gray, Tim. "Disabled Artisans Seek Equality in Behind-the-Camera Jobs." *Variety*, 19 July 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/artisans/production/disabled-artisans-equality-1202499286/>.
- Carras, Christi. "Study Shows Viewers Want More Representation for Those with Disabilities." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 17 Sept. 2019, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-09-17/disability-representation-study-ruderman-family-foundation?fbclid=IwAR0gBFK5EA6fXwitbBaoR1Zm2JE2Q59LrUTUbJxHWcw7kj-4I_A_smkiuYw.

For more information on the cast of Tod Browning's *Freaks*:

- "Gorgeous Cast Portraits from Tod Browning's 'Freaks' (1932)." *Dangerous Minds*, 17 Dec. 2015, https://dangerousminds.net/comments/gorgeous_cast_portraits_from_tod_brownings_freaks_1932.

For more articles, information, and news on disability in the media, follow us on Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/CodeOfTheFreaks/>