

Module 1: Contexts, Concepts, Methods

Introduction to Code of the Freaks Curriculum Overview

By Theodora Danylevich

With the goal of helping instructors, students, and community members to enjoy deeper engagement with *Code of the Freaks*, this curriculum offers framing and contextualizing readings as well as companion reading and viewing materials. Included as well are some suggested experiential learning activities, which could be taken up as assignments in the classroom setting. Materials have been selected and organized to allow folks to fully appreciate the critical intervention that *Code of the Freaks* is engaged in. These supplemental reading and viewing materials are meant to invite and support engagement with the conversations that *Code of the Freaks* hopes to spark, additionally branching out into areas and subtopics that the documentary itself could not fully cover or address.

We begin (**Module 1: Contexts, Concepts, Methods**) with materials that articulate political, economic, and cultural stakes and contexts in relation to the emergence of the cinematic medium –the “moving image.” This module also historicizes disability identity politics in relation to the turn of the twentieth century, when the medium of film emerges. Within this first module, we also include scholarly materials that engage with the question of spectatorship and counter-hegemonic interpretations to facilitate analytical discussions informed by and alongside historical and political contexts. Following this broadly contextualizing module, we have compiled two shorter modules. **Module 2: Political Economy and Genre** looks into considerations of labor, particularly the fraught intersections of disabled people and employment in the performance industry, and into the political economy of movie-making more broadly. This module also dives into documentary filmmaking as a specific genre and mode of critique (in the vein of *Code of the Freaks*). Finally, as a praxis-oriented component of the curriculum, **Module 3: Access Hacks** offers the opportunity to learn about and engage in access work. Reaching beyond the presumptive sensory determinism (audio-visual) of films as we know them now, this module explores the varied world of accessibility “hacks” in creative media projects as well as day-to-day accessibility hacks.

Throughout, this curriculum encourages consideration of the relationship of both disability and cinema to shifting landscapes of labor and media economies as well as medical and scientific paradigms and nation-building agendas. Questions we hope to stimulate and facilitate conversations about include:

- How does the development of the **scientific gaze** contribute to the formation and persistence of “**disability as a problem**” tropes?
 - What is cinema’s relationship to the **codification of practices of diagnosis and taxonomy** emblematic of the 20th century?
- What is the relationship between **disability and race** on screen, and in production? How about **disability and gender**?
- How does the **type of disability** one might have impact inclusion and participation in the cinematic realm as **actors, directors**, and as **spectators**?
- What kinds of **sensory experiences** are produced and codified through film, and what do these experiences mean for the stories that unfold?

**NOTE: Some readings/viewings appear in multiple modules; this is not a mistake!*

***ALSO NOTE: The order in which readings appear in the below lists is neither strictly chronological, nor alphabetical. Rather, the order reflects a general sequence of ideas and approaches.*

MODULE 1: Contexts, Concepts, Methods

Socio-Historical Context & Media Studies-Specific Contextualization and Analytics

Sub-Fields of Interest: Disability History, Film & Media Studies, Black Studies, Gender & Sexuality Studies, Science & Technology Studies

Rationale

This module sets the stage for understanding cinematic representation of disability from a cultural and historical as well as media studies context. The emergence of the cinematic medium of the “moving image,” starting with silent film (1894-1929), coincides with a number of socio-political shifts in the West (Euro-American nations, with a focus on the specific context of the United States). For example, segregation and racialized violence characteristic of the Jim Crow era in the United States indexed racial anxieties at the core of the post-slave-economy society and culture. At the same time, what was known as Eugenic science built upon scientific racism to foster a medicalized sorting of people into categories –including the categories of disability, race, gender, and sexuality– and differentially valuing lives according to a hierarchy of “fitness.” This was a powerful cultural discourse oriented in the interests of honing an ideal population for the nation, and was pervasive at the time that cinema emerged as a medium. From within this context, sociologist, historian, activist and author William Edward Burghardt DuBois famously wrote that the problem of the 20th Century would be “the problem of the

color line,” forecasting the struggles for racial equality and meaning-making that the century bore witness to.¹ Queer theorist and literary scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would write, closer to the end of this same century, that the 20th century was defined by an epistemology of “the closet” and sexual taxonomies.² Just a few decades into the 21st century, the work that *Code of the Freaks* does, taking its cue and its title from Tod Browning’s 1932 *Freaks*, which comes out at the very beginning of “talkies,” looks backward to affirm that we must contend with a similar significance of ableist ideology in the 20th century.³

Media studies scholars also situated in gender and race scholarship have made significant contributions to cinema and media studies outlining and exploring the intersecting impacts of cultural anxieties and ideologies around race, gender, and sexuality as they have played out on the cinematic screen.⁴ What *Code of the Freaks* does, as an intervention engaged with cinematic representations that are informed by –and which, in turn, *shape*– cultural ideologies and attitudes towards disability, is to establish a foundation for including and understanding disability (and the insidious manifestations of a culture of ableism) as an imbricated category of identity that has shaped the history and methods of cinema, from its inception. Teaching *Code of the Freaks*, contextualized alongside materials that may not all directly touch upon disability offers the opportunity to identify parallels and disjunctures between how various strands of identity politics show up in film and visual culture, and will help

¹ Kara Keeling begins her introduction to *The Witch’s Flight* (part of our selected materials, below) by addressing this 1903 statement by W. E. B. DuBois, articulating an urgency to attend to the historical coincidence of this statement with the advent of cinema, writing: “An investigation of the nexus at which the epistemological and ontological mechanisms of racism and the socioeconomic interests that racism serves collide with the mechanisms and interests that animate cinema might open a critical interrogation into the lingering logics of racism and the complex ways in which ‘race,’ ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ have come to inform and deform various anticapitalist movements toward Black Liberation.” (1)

² Eve Sedgwick begins the introduction to her book (part of our selected materials, below), “*Epistemology of the Closet*” proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in the twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured –indeed, fractured– by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century. This book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin from is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory.” (1)

³ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Douglas Baynton, and Lennard Davis in our first category of selected materials, “Contextualizing Disability Identity Politics,” offer some useful context in this regard. Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer gesture to Sedgwick’s above-cited proclamation in “Cripistemologies: Introduction” (also included below), although they do so with regard to the 21st century (131).

⁴ Included in this module, you might refer to Miriam Hansen, Kara Keeling, Susan Sontag, Stuart Hall, Laura Mulvey, John Berger, Alexander Doty, Jennifer Nash, and Raquel Gates.

develop an attunement to the always-multiple layers of identity in motion –and the attending power differentials at play– even as they focus on the topic of disability representation.

***Instructor discretion note/suggestion: You may opt to have students read from and engage with this module prior to viewing Code of the Freaks; but not necessarily so.*

Reading/Viewing List

Contextualizing Disability Identity Politics: Understanding the Perpetuation of Stigma/Stereotype through Cultural Tropes and Narrative Conceits

- Ed. Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. NYU, 1996.
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. “Disability, Identity, and Representation,” *Extraordinary Bodies*. Columbia University Press, 1997. (2017)
- Hevey, David. “The Enfreakment of Photography,” *The Disability Studies Reader, 3rd Ed.* Routledge, 2010. 507-521. [in *4th Edition* (2013) pp.432-446]
- Baynton, Douglas. “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History.” *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky. NYU Press, 2001. 33-57.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. (Introduction)
- Davis, Lennard. “Constructing Normalcy,” *The Disability Studies Reader 3rd Ed.* Routledge, 2010. 3-18. OR in *5th Edition* (2017): Davis, Lennard. “Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power,” 1-13.
- Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder. “Narrative Prosthesis,” *The Disability Studies Reader 3rd Ed.* Routledge, 2010. 274-287. [in *5th Edition* (2017) pp.204-218]
- Quayson, Ato. “Aesthetic Nervousness,” *The Disability Studies Reader 5th Ed.* Routledge, 2017. 219-31.
- Bell, Chris. “Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?” *The Disability Studies Reader, 3rd Ed.* Routledge, 2010. 374-382. [in *5th Edition* (2017) pp.406-415]
- Johnson, Merri Lisa and Robert McRuer. “Cripistemologies: Introduction.” *The Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8:2, 2014. (pp. 27-147).
- Ed. Adams, Reiss, Serlin. *Keywords for Disability Studies*. NYU Press, 2015. (“Disability”)
- Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure*. Duke, 2017.

Concepts and Tools for critical analysis of cinema and visual culture

CINEMA CULTURE/HISTORY & MAKING SENSE: WAYS OF PERCEIVING & KNOWING

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"
- Hansen, Miriam. "Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?" *New German Critique*, Spring - Summer, 1983, No. 29, *The Origins of Mass Culture: The Case of Imperial Germany (1871-1918)* (Spring - Summer, 1983), pp. 147- 184.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/487793>
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. MIT Press, 1990.
- Anderson, Mark Lin. *Twilight of the Idols: Hollywood and the Human Sciences in 1920s America*. University of California Press, 2011.
- Deleuze, Gilles. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013. (1986)
- Deleuze, Gilles. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013. (1989)
- Keeling, Kara. *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Duke, 1995. (recommendation: "Introduction: Another Litany for Survival," [1-11] and "Chapter 1: The Image of Common Sense," [11-26].)
- Kirkpatrick, Bill. "'A Blessed Boon': Radio, Disability, Governmentality, and the Discourse of the 'Shut-In,' 1920-1930," *Disability Media Studies*. NYU, 2017.

METHODS & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- Sontag, Susan. "Notes on 'Camp'," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1966. 275-292.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Love, and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*. 128-38. London: Hutchinson, 1980.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3, 6-18, 1975.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (BBC Miniseries) (all on youtube) (1972)
- Muñoz, José E. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990. (2008) (recommendation: "Introduction: Axiomatic," [1-59].)
- Alexander Doty *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. Routledge, 2000.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Hyman, 1990. 67-90.
- Nash, Jennifer C. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. Duke 2014. (recommendation: "Introduction: Reading Race, Reading Pornography," [1-26] and "Archives of Pain: Reading the Black Feminist Theoretical Archive," [27-58].)
- Gates, Racquel. *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture*. Duke, 2018.

ADDITIONAL VIEWING

- *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Weine, 1920)
- *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922)
- *Freaks* (Browning, 1932)
- *Imitation of Life* (Stahl 1934; Sirk 1959)
- *Wonderstruck* (Haynes, 2017)
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Activities/Projects

- Creating slideshows⁵
 - Using open access museum and archival image databases, search for early cinema stills/advertisements and freak show advertisements; identify images that reflect some of what the module covered, and create a set of slides you'll talk the class through.
- Analysis of clips
 - Ask students to generate a list of key concepts either based on the readings and/or their own interest deriving from the materials.
 - Identify film clips either from *Code of the Freaks* or drawn from your own archives and watch together in class.
 - Alternatively, have students watch different clips in small groups, and explicate/analyze them for the class.
 - You can also make searching for clips part of the activity: use different keywords (disability, blindness, deafness, or specific film titles) and reflect on which images come up.
 - Share reactions, discuss connections, and apply terms and concepts from the class-generated list to the clips.
- Case studies/creating rubrics
 - Using the "code" that *Code of the Freaks* lays out, develop a Disability "test" with regard to disability representation in film; akin to the "Bechdel Test" or the "Russo Test" or the "DuVernay Test" – what are their tenets; what are ours?
 - Compare your test to the "[Fries" test](#). What overlaps are there? What differences?
- "Radical Glimpses": a performance studies inspired reckoning with "problematic faves"

⁵ Several possible resources for materials include: the Library of Congress' digital collections (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/>), ARTstor (<https://library.artstor.org/#/home>), Google Arts & Culture (<https://artsandculture.google.com/>), Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), Smithsonian Open Access (<https://www.si.edu/openaccess>), and Smithsonian Libraries Image Galleries (<https://library.si.edu/image-gallery>).

- Share “guilty pleasures” with regard to your media consumption, and analyze these from multiple perspectives: what are the irrefutably problematic aspects that make them “guilty” pleasures; what about them gives you life (makes them pleasurable), in spite of any ultimate framing or messaging that falls short? Look to: [#yourfaveisproblematic]. Can you read this media differently? What are the radical glimpses that it offers, despite, through or perhaps even because of its problems?



Theodora Danylevich, PhD, teaches courses in disability studies, writing, and women's and gender studies. Her scholarship explores questions of "sick" archives and critical historiography in creative cultural production. Her work has appeared in *Lateral*, *Rhizomes*, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, and *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*.

<https://csalateral.org/author/theodora-danylevich/>

