

Module 2: Political Economy and Genre

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 2: Political Economy and Genre

Labor, Material Conditions of Production & The Documentary Genre

Sub-Fields of Interest: Political Economy in Media Production, Film and Media Studies, Disability History, Deaf/HoH Studies

Rationale

Tod Browning’s *Freaks* came out in 1932, at a critical moment of change in film history. That is, around the shift from silent film to talkies. This is a sensory and labor reorientation of film as an industry and as a product. In itself, it also nods to freak shows as a site of employment for disabled, gender-nonconforming, and racialized people. In this module, we consider labor economy and identity politics and a mini-excursion into conditions of production. As well, we engage with the specific approach of critique and engagement that *Code of the Freaks* mobilizes as a documentary. We include some materials to contextualize the documentary genre and offer assignments where students can create mini-documentaries of their own as modes of critique and analysis and experiential learning. We also include a sub-module on how Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing labor, language, culture, and documentation figure into and are impacted by this period of development and shift in the labor and media history of film.

Reading

LABOR, IDENTITY & VISUAL CULTURE

- Ed. Garland Thomson, Rosemarie. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. NYU, 1996.
- McMillan, Uri. *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*. NYU, 2015. ("Mammy Memory: The Curious Case of Joice Heth, the Ancient Negress," 23-63.)
- Schweik, Susan. *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. NYU, 2009.
- Russel, Marta. Edited by Keith Rosenthal, *Disability & Capitalism: Selected Writings by Marta Russel*. Haymarket Books, 2019. ("Introduction: Capitalism and the Disability Rights Movement," "Chapter 1: Marxism and Disability," "Chapter 5: Backlash and Structural Inequality")
- Sandahl, Carrie. "Why Disability Identity Matters: From Dramaturgy to Casting in John Belluso's *Pyretown*," *The Disability Studies Reader, 5th Ed*. Routledge, 2017. 454-469.
- Tinkcom, Matthew. *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema*. Duke, 2002.
- Warner, Kristen. *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*. Routledge, 2015.

GENRE

- Minh-Ha, Trinh T. "Documentary Is/Not A Name," *October* 52, 76-98, 1990.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/778886>
- Russel, Catherine. *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*. Duke, 2018.

Viewing

- *Freaks* (Browning, 1932)
- *Histoire(s) Du Cinéma* (Godard, 1988)
- *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (Rappaport, 1992)
- *The Celluloid Closet* (Epstein and Fieldman, 1995)
- *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (Feder and Scholder, 2020)
- *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (Newnham and LeBrecht, 2020)

SUB MODULE RELATING TO DEAFNESS

Reading

- Sanchez, Rebecca. *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature*. NYU, 2015. (Introduction)
- Padden, Carol and Tom Humphries. "Deaf People: A Different Center," *The Disability Studies Reader, 3rd Ed*. Routledge, 2010. 393-402.
- Yates, Samuel. "Deafness: Screening Signs in Contemporary Cinema" in David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder Eds. *A Cultural History of Disability in the Modern Age: Volume 6*. Series edited by Robert McRuer and David Bolt. Bloomsbury, 2020.
- *The Silent Worker* (Deaf newspaper that ran from 1888-1929)

Viewing

- *The Preservation of Sign Language* (National Association for the Deaf, 1913)
- *Compensation* (Davis, 1999)
- *Wonderstruck* (Haynes, 2017)
- *CODA* (Heder, 2021)

Activities/Projects

Documentary Project

Make your own mini-documentary where you edit clips and narrate an analysis of the clips, informed by concepts and practices introduced in the readings. Consider which clips you choose, and why? Reflect on your positionality, access to resources, and how this might impact your process and product.

This process of engaging in creative work will give critical insight and greater understanding of *Code of the Freaks* as a politicized and economically-bound endeavor.

Further/Discussion Questions

- How do the political and economic realities of filmmaking and financing self-perpetuate disability tropes?
- What are some of the politics of how things get funded? For example, what's a story that "sells"? How might projects be shaped by funding?
- Some have argued that social media and the greater accessibility of technology has democratized the means of production, making it easier for marginalized communities to create their own representations. What are the limits and promises of this increased accessibility? In what ways has it changed the political and economic realities that impact disability representation?



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/>