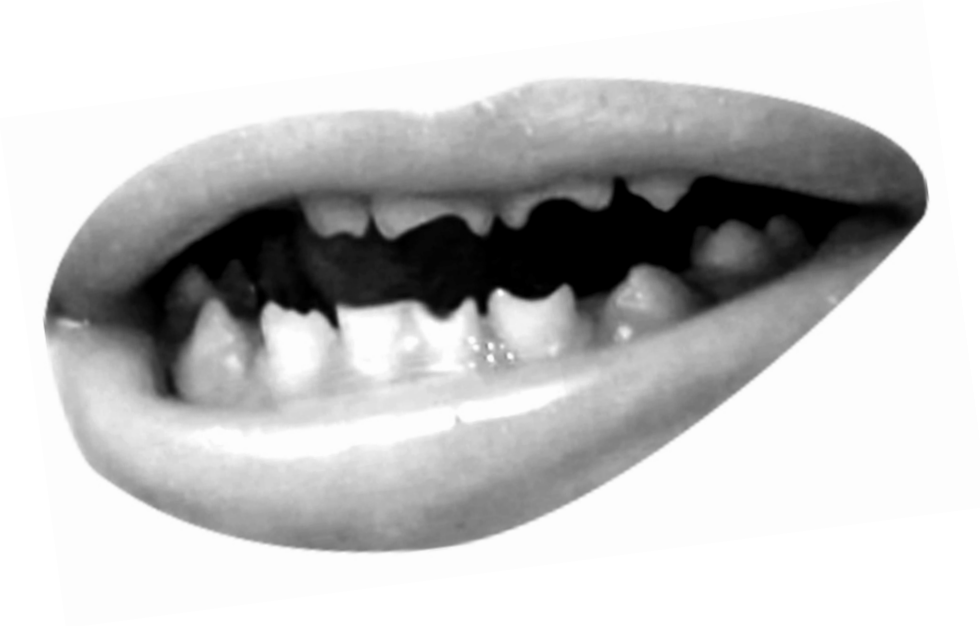
HORROR & DISABILITY



Disability Action Research Kollective

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INTRODUCTION

The horror genre has long grappled with its portrayal of disability, often reflecting the societal prejudices of its time. Emerging alongside early cinema, many early horror works were influenced by eugenic ideology, rooted in Victorian advancements in science, technology, and pseudoscience like degeneration. These theories positioned disabilities as markers of a "less evolved" human prone to immorality and criminality, promoting a constructed ideal of bodily "perfection." As horror reflects societal anxieties, early films mirrored fears of the "monstrous other," often emphasizing science and rationality to defeat such threats, aligning with eugenic thought. Historically, individuals with physical or mental impairments have been depicted as either weak and vulnerable or as archetypes of evil, chaos, and social disorder. While these representations reflect entrenched prejudice, they are not unique to horror and unfortunately mirror broader societal biases.

The association of the disabled body with horror, fear and monstrosity is rooted in history; early medical studies of disability were collectively and offensively termed "teratology," derived from mythology and meaning "the study of monsters." At the time, medical practitioners often worked alongside circuses and freak shows, with both reinforcing the disabled body in the general public's collective consciousness as a spectacle and site of fascination and fear.

However, horror is deeply involved in exploring the subversive, controversial and the "other" and frequently offers complex alternative perspectives on the human body and identity. Modern horror continues to use the body as a spectacle to disrupt societal norms and critique ableist ideals. By incorporating disabled and extraordinary bodies, the horror genre contributes to conversations on inclusion, equality, and social reform. Horror's capacity to fracture the illusion of the "normal" body ultimately aids in dismantling entrenched biases and advocating for a more inclusive worldview.

This zine contains plot spoilers, as well as mentions of assisted suicide, ableism, murder, freak shows, etc. It is primarily focused on western, English language films.

FILMS

The Black Stork (1917) may be one of the most evil films ever made, as it directly promoted the murder of disabled children, racism and the pseudoscience of eugenics. In real life, Dr Haiselden decided to withdraw treatment from a disabled newborn who took five days to die. He then went on to make the film "The Black Stork", also known as "Are You Fit To Marry?". The core message of the film is that it is better to be dead than to have a disability and that it's God's will for disabled children to be killed. The film was made to discourage promiscuity and "race-mixing", which at the time were believed to cause disabilities in children. The story within the film is that a couple have a disabled baby that, after being repeatedly socially excluded and discriminated against, becomes a violent, thieving, rapist who also murders a doctor for not euthanizing him and therefore condemning him to a life of being disabled. The film casts a long shadow to the present day, having influenced everything from medical protocols and immigration controls to disability representation in cinema. While legalised infanticide is still practiced in places like Belgium, it is thankfully rare. Prenatal testing and abortion is currently done for Down Syndrome, spina bifida and autism, even though people with those conditions can grow up to live fulfilling and happy lives. In the UK, it is legal to abort a disabled foetus up to the day of birth, regardless of the nature of the disability or if it is a danger to the life of the mother. In many countries like the USA and EU, it is legal to sterilise disabled people without their consent. Films showing disabled people being parents are extremely rare but tropes of connecting disability to violence, sin, evil, criminality and sexual abnormality are exceedingly common.

Freaks (1932) was banned in many cinemas and subsequently flopped. The bans may have been rooted in prejudice as the film may have given its disabled stars too much visibility which may have been too challenging for a 1930s audience. The attempt to ban and hide the film parallels society's attempts to control and marginalise those with disabilities. The original release of the film was lost due to a fire, the surviving heavily re-edited and sanitized version cut a third of the

runtime, replaced castration and inclusion with murder, and added a new beginning and ending, which arguably added the most problematic aspects. While it was initially criticized for being exploitative, the film has since been reappraised by the disabled community as an early example of representation. It may be set in a freak show, but the film portrays the disabled community with compassion, casting the non-disabled "normal" characters as cruel and monstrous villains. The film was co-produced with disabled people, had disabled actors playing the disabled characters, and it still has the record for most disabled people in a film. No disabled characters were killed, institutionalized, cured or forced to inspirationally integrate into a society which refused to accommodate them. In Freaks, disability isn't a metaphor for evil, the film presents a normalising portrayal of ordinary people living their lives, who happen to be disabled. The film shows disabled people having belonging, community, relationships, getting married, having children. All these things are very rarely seen in depictions of disability since this film.

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962) is a psychological horror film enshrining multiple ableist stereotypes. Sisters Blanche (Joan Crawford) and Jane (Bette Davis) live in a decaying mansion, which allegorises their fading showbiz careers. Due to a series of events that links disability with tragedy, Blanche is now a paraplegic wheelchair user, and Jane is her reluctant caregiver. The sisters' relational dynamics, and current circumstances, are rooted in childhood neglect and emotional exploitation. Nonetheless, their characterisation is mainly established through stereotyping. Blanche is entirely dependent on her (increasingly volatile) sister and is patronisingly defined by her inability to protect herself, or take control in her life; she reinforces stereotypes of disabled people as inherently, helplessly vulnerable. Jane resents Blanche's perceived neediness, subjecting her sister to violent whims – including imprisonment and torture. Jane's cruelty is framed as a symptom of her emotional and psychological distress. In this way, she embodies harmful tropes of mentally ill people, where madness = evilness. The film's portrayal of disabled people as pitiable and manipulative is consolidated by its twist, and the ending. The

tragedy is the burden of living with disability; the horror is that of living with a disabled person. Moreover, ableist tropes are a key part of this film's legacy in the horror genre. After WEHTBJ?, Hollywood released many horror films about once-glamorous women growing old; losing their beauty and social standing; descending into madness and addiction; and terrorising others. This has been identified as a subgenre: "Grande Dame Guignol", which refers to the Grand Guignol – a Parisian theatre that specialised in horror shows – and the Grand Dame – an archetypal elderly, eccentric 'great lady'. It is also known as 'psycho biddy horror', or 'hagsploitation', highlighting how the subgenre exploits ableist, ageist, and sexist stereotypes to create horror. Notably, the studio behind WEHTBJ? heightened these tropes by exploiting an alleged feud between Crawford and Davis, to market the 'aging' stars. Their rumoured rivalry, and the film's campness, has made it an historic text in queer and feminist cultural analyses. Nevertheless, this film manifests the media's obsession with disability as a source of spectacle.

Let's Scare Jessica to Death (1971) is told from the perspective of Jessica, a woman who has recently been discharged from a psychiatric institution. While her mental illness remains unspecified, we experience her ongoing symptoms of paranoia, hallucinations, ruminations, and suicidal ideation. And though the director intended for Jessica's mental illness to make her an unreliable narrator, the film's voiceover technique places the viewer in her head; we are able to understand, and empathise with, Jessica. Jessica has been discharged to her husband and their friend, and they have all moved from the city to a farmhouse. There they find Emily, an enigmatic squatter, whom Jessica invites to stay with them. Jessica's reasons for doing so are unclear. But as the first person to spot Emily in the house, we are painfully aware of Jessica's fear that she is relapsing. Only when the men notice Emily does Jessica's anxiety relent. Maybe this is why she's kind to Emily. Or perhaps she's hesitant about living in the isolated countryside - a choice made for her by her husband, leaving her the only woman for miles. Emily possesses some strange magnetism over Jessica and the men, and as the story progresses,

we come to suspect Emily may be a vampire. We can't know for sure. The men certainly don't believe Jessica. An eerie and atmospheric horror, LSJTD has elements of folk horror and the gothic tradition that adds to its ambiguities. Its vampire mythos refuses prescriptive readings, and offers the supernatural as a fluid medium to explore madness. Consequently, LSJTD offers a startlingly informed portrayal of a woman deemed as "mad". Throughout the film, Jessica grieves her struggles with reality and delusion, sanity and madness. While the men dismiss Jessica's fears that Emily is responsible for violent attacks on the townspeople, it is her scepticism that serves to protect her. This claustrophobic, unnerving film encapsulates what it feels like to live in fear of the repercussions of being seen as 'mad'. Importantly, it does so without relying on demeaning tropes by foregrounding Jessica's inner life and lived experiences in its storytelling.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) features several disabled characters, mostly as villains. Leatherface is a caricature of a mentally disabled person. He also has Hutchinson's teeth, a symptom of syphilis. His brother has a vascular birthmark on his face, and displays erratic behaviour associated with neurodivergence. The depictions of their disabilities are dehumanising. A film festival noted: "These are mentally retarded people, crazy people, people who we do not know ultimately if they are human or animal". They hunt and kill a group of mostly non-disabled people. The villains do this because the slaughterhouse their family worked at for generations has mechanised. They have turned to cannibalism, for survival, for pleasure, for absurd purpose. They treat human flesh the way they treated their meat; they have accepted the brutality and disposability of the body under capitalism. They have accepted America's politics of the flesh in the context of the Vietnam war, and industrialisation's consequences for the working class. Their victims have not; they are disgusted with the rural south's abject poverty, and they are disgusted by their disabled companion, Franklin – a wheelchair-user the prologue introduces to us as 'invalid'. Franklin is not afforded the same human dignities as the rest of his group. He is forced to urinate in a can by the side of the road in the film's opening scene, he is excluded from the group's activities, and his

companions privately state their desires to leave him behind or simply, for him to die. The slaughterhouse family treat their disabled members with chaotic respect; Franklin is an annoyance to his group, which his own juvenile behaviours augment. Given that he is forced to travel in a wheelchair that is unsuited to trips outside of a hospital corridor, with a group that constantly degrades him, in the blistering Texan heat – his irritated temperament is entirely understandable. He is not the first to die when the slaughterhouse family starts picking the group off, and he is the only protagonist to discern the peril they are in. Nonetheless, the film constructs horror by exploiting historic archetypes of disabled people as disturbing.

Deafula (1975) is set in an alternative reality where everyone is deaf and uses American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate. When it was released deaf communities, organisations and clubs in the UK were still under the control of the missioners, ordained clergy who ruled the deaf clubs and associations in line with their Christian morals. The deaf-led organisation, the National Union of the Deaf (NUD) that fought the influence of the missioners was still a year away. Deafula highlights just how far ahead deaf freedoms were in the USA, that this film of demons and horror and threats to the authority of the church could be made. The director studied at Gallaudet University and the National Theatre of the Deaf in the USA – both institutions that did not have equivalents in the UK. There is comedy in the film which might be missed by naïve eyes. The English detective's ASL is clumsy and exaggerated, to emphasise his comic role. To a non-signer this lack of fluency might pass by unnoticed, but it's an important element of character building and comedy in the film. At one point the detective makes a phone call from his car using a minicom balanced on the car transmission. For those of us who remember how unreliable and clumsy these bits of technology were, it's hilarious to think that such a thing would work in a car. The film is of course set in an alternative reality in which accessible technology keeps pace with hearing people's technology in our world, true, but it is presented with an added twist for comic effect.In a scene early in the film, Deafula hypnotises a biker to make him kill his partner and himself by riding their motorbike off a cliff

while his partner dances in the street, not watching their conversation and therefore oblivious to what is going on. As a result, she dies without ever knowing why or what happened. This very much ties into the visual nature of the film and will chime with deaf audiences in a way that won't with hearing audiences – missing out on information through not being included in conversations is a common experience for deaf people, and for this to result in your death is particularly chilling.

The Elephant Man (1982), while officially categorized as a biographical drama, corresponds with the horror genre's horizon of expectations. Director David Lynch crafted a black-and- white homage to classical horror films—Freaks in particular—and the aesthetics of German Expressionism. The film follows John Merrick, a man with possibly Proteus syndrome, causing physical deformities, who survived being a circus attraction. His death at the film's end—whether by suicide or as an attempt to mimic the sleep position of "normal" people—remains ambiguous. Through its stark visual style, the film critiques the medical gaze over Merrick's body, particularly highlighting his transfer to the hospital for non- medical reasons. The hospital, ostensibly a site of care, is shown to reproduce the exploitative logic of the circus. The medical gaze—like the freak show audience—is portrayed as a form of violence that masks itself as benevolence. The film stages the spectacle of physical difference to unsettle viewers and expose the complicity of medical and cultural institutions that exploit disabled people for status and profit. One striking example is the film's delay of the ableist gaze (and audit) by withholding Merrick's appearance for thirty minutes and his voice for forty—a suspension that heightens scopic (looking in a specified direction) desire while simultaneously questioning it. Similarly, static long shots frame Merrick as if in a freak show, implicating the viewer in the very gaze the film critiques. Yet, despite this cinematic critique, the film still relies on the spectacle of the disabled body for melodramatic affect, and ultimately concludes with "the horror of becoming disabled," presenting physical excess as unable to exist within an ableist world. By engaging horror's aesthetics and logics, The Elephant Man intensifies the tension between medical

and cultural appropriation, scopic pleasure, and the horror genre's conventions and history. It confronts audiences with disability as horror—both revealing and reinforcing the systems that render disability as terrifying.

Cube (1997), a debut offering from Vincenzo Natali, remains a classic example of the Autistic Savant stereotype, a trope we've seen in other titles such as Rain Man just under a decade earlier. Though the film centres on a group of survivors, the character of Kazan invites the most attention; the sole survivor of the group as a direct result of his disability. His survival ability as it were, is expressed simply by his discovery by the group – he's still alive despite being disabled. Kazan's autism is not explicitly spoken by name, but visual stims allude to the condition. He's subject to abuse by some characters and care from others, however it's not until one member of the group listens carefully to his musings that they realise the worth of this character. Kazan is a savant and a dab hand with prime factors. The treatment of this character thus far has been far from pleasant. Still, it is also with this revelation of the character's ability to do a specific task that we see the key issue presented by almost all examples of Savantism in disabled characters – they are required to prove their worth to be worthy and/or validated of their place in the story. A disabled character, in this case most often presented as an Autistic character, cannot be allowed to exist within a story, without having a reason for their worth. Whilst able-bodied characters are allowed the agency to exist as a myriad of characters – the deadbeat, the villain, the clueless – the savant's mere existence is intrinsically tied to their value. They are seen as being less; a prime example is in media that presents end-of-world situations where characters often turn on the disabled character as being a 'liability', and therefore their only redemption can be through being useful, often essential, to the success of the party and/or plot. In Kazan's case, not only is his value tied to success, but he is presented as the only survivor – his worth exceeding that of the group's needs and elevating to that of survival.

Alien Resurrection (1997) features multiple disabled characters. The cloned alien hybrid, Ripley, is described as “emotionally autistic” implying that autism is a defect from an imperfect cloning process (a regressive stereotype), or that it is another inherited trait from the aliens species which is described as “the perfect organism”. The viewer is free to infer that autism is superior to being neurotypical. Ripley has more empathy for the android than any of the other characters. Possibly a suggestion of disabled solidarity, as android characters are often crip-coded as autistic. When Ripley discovers some of the earlier clones, all of which are disfigured, one of them is still alive and asks to be killed. The better off dead than disabled trope often depicts disabled people wanting to be killed, and equates a life of visible difference being worse than being dead. One of the supporting characters, Vriess, is a paraplegic bounty hunter who uses a powered wheelchair. His asshole crewmate, played by Ron Perlman, verbally abuses him and drops a knife into his leg as a joke, but it is framed as immoral and he is held to account for doing it. This is used to give the character some rough edges but not disqualify his likeability entirely (Violating the bodily autonomy of a disabled person should make him irredeemable, but the movie disagrees). Vriess, the wheelchair user, is the first to be attacked by the alien but turns out to be alive later, the trope of the disabled person dying was deliberately subverted, playing on audience expectations. A non-disabled character dies to save him, the non-disabled character has acid thrown on his face and is disfigured, and immediately decides to sacrifice himself, again invoking the disfigurement being worse than death trope. This is one of the very few films, not just within horror but in cinema generally, where wheelchair users are still alive at the end. Having a non-disabled character dying to save a disabled character, implying that their lives approach equality, is also extremely rare.

Trick ‘r Treat (2007) is a Halloween cult classic that has a nasty surprise in the “Halloween School Bus Massacre” segment wherein a bus driver is bribed to murder several disabled kids as a mercy killing. All of the kids drown and he escapes, though not by his hands. The kids show up in the final segment to exact their revenge in the vein of Freaks.

The real horror comes not from the undead but rather the continual problem of filicide (the murder of a child or, more broadly within the context of the disability community, when a parent or other relative or household member kills a child or adult relative with a disability, by action or inaction). Every March 1st since 2012, Disability Day of Mourning (DDoM) has been observed with a reading of victim names that only gets larger with each passing year. 2023 alone had over 70 documented names from around the world with victims ranging from four months to 100 years old. Some of the more high-profile names in years past include George Hodgins (the catalyst for DDoM), the attempted murder of Issy Stapleton in 2013, and London McCabe among others. There's an anti-filicide toolkit provided by the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network that walks through the process of reporting filicide in the press and holding a vigil. The segment also features Rhonda, a girl that displays autistic traits, as a heartless killer for leaving her friends to die as the result of a backfired prank. It doesn't help that autism is brought up as a probable factor for mass reported acts of violence in America, especially shootings, when in reality autistic people are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators. By having Rhonda choosing to escape as revenge, this segment has disabilities front and center for victims and villains. Nobody wins.

American Horror Story (Murder House 2011, Freak Show 2014) is an anthology series that offers a complex, if problematic, exploration of disability within the horror genre. Across its various seasons, the show frequently uses disability as both a visual and narrative shorthand for otherness, often conflating physical or mental difference with monstrosity or victimhood. In seasons like Freak Show, where characters with visible differences are central, there is an attempt to reclaim agency and celebrate uniqueness. However, the spectacle of these differences can also reinforce historical patterns of exoticisation and exploitation, reducing multifaceted human experiences to mere objects of shock or pity. The series' treatment of disability often mirrors broader societal fears of deviation from normative standards. Characters are sometimes depicted as embodying the very aberrations that society has long stigmatised, whether as grotesque figures

or tragic outcasts. While this can serve as a potent metaphor for marginalisation, it also risks perpetuating reductive tropes that fail to capture the true diversity of disabled lives. For many in the disability community, American Horror Story is a double-edged sword: it offers visibility and subversive narratives that challenge conventional norms, yet it simultaneously leans into sensationalism that can dehumanise its characters. Ultimately, the show reflects ongoing cultural tensions regarding disability, urging us to scrutinise the fine line between empowering representation and the exploitation of difference for dramatic effect.

Hush (2016) distinguishes itself within the horror genre by placing a deaf protagonist, Maddie, at its core—a decision that has been hailed by some as a progressive step for disability representation. Maddie's deafness is not relegated to a mere plot gimmick; it shapes her experience of isolation and enhances her survival instincts when faced with a home invader. The film utilises sign language and a heightened sense of visual awareness to authentically capture aspects of deaf experience. This centralisation of a deaf narrative can challenge conventional expectations of what it means to be resourceful in the face of danger. Yet, Hush is not without its limitations. While Maddie's character is crafted with agency and resilience, the film ultimately leans on familiar horror tropes that reduce her deaf identity to a mechanism for suspense rather than exploring its deeper cultural and social dimensions. The actor is not deaf and can't sign properly. The narrative rarely engages with the everyday challenges or rich tapestry of deaf culture, instead utilising her condition to heighten tension. This tension between genuine empowerment and reductive representation mirrors broader societal debates about disability portrayal in media. In the end, Hush is a commendable yet imperfect foray into inclusive horror, leaving viewers to ponder whether its use of disability ultimately enriches the narrative or simply repackages old tropes for modern audiences.

Spring Break Zombie Massacre (2016), is found in full within the 'making of' documentary Sam & Mattie Make a Zombie Movie (2021). This film was written by two male teenagers with down syndrome, who also play the lead roles. It was funded via kickstarter but manages a lot on a very limited budget, including waving flame painted cardboard instead of fire in some scenes which adds a surreal theatrical charm. This movie has gore, zombies, drugs, martial arts, jetpacks, bionics, skateboarding, hackers, tattoos, demons, DJs, zombies and a lot of blood. For better and worse, the creative vision of its writers can be felt on every element. It is rare to see films that feature disabled people where disability is just incidentally there and not part of the plot and nobody makes a big deal about it. The film does a lot of things that are very rarely seen, such as empowering disabled people to tell their own stories, having more than one disabled character, them being alive by the end, centering disabled heroes instead of their non-disabled friend, seeing them expressing sexuality and having relationships. A less unique element is its problematic representations of women. Women are almost always being saved while the men fight the zombies. Women are often portrayed as emotional and only caring about men, and the prom and college scenes feel like they are at their expense. When the devil kills the moms he calls the women hoes, implying women who are sexual are more worthy of being killed. There are also some unusual sexual narratives about a teenage boy dating both a mother and daughter, and a female teacher seducing a male highschool student, which is a sex crime. There is a behind the scenes discussion about lines not to cross and the importance of making sure women were respected, but this should have led to script wide changes, perhaps with a sensitivity reader. Instead there was an addition of a scene of a woman protecting the male protagonist by killing a zombie and everyone shouting 'Girl Power'.

Get Out (2017) marks an intersection of conversations around race and disability. While the film's commentary on race is progressive, its depiction of disability is not. Get Out focuses on the changing context of blackness in American society; that the exploitative attitudes of the white ruling class hasn't changed, but the concept of blackness has become an enviable, desirable identity to them in the modern era. "Black is in fashion," one character states. Jim, a white blind gallery owner is able to sustain a career while disabled, explains how it is made accessible to him, and that his expertise is still valuable. Through the appreciation of black protagonist Chris' photographic art and their shared marginalisation, they form a bond; as Chris says "Shit ain't fair." This teased solidarity is probably what makes the twist in the third act of the film such a gut punch to disabled audiences. It turns out that Jim has "purchased" Chris, and is about to take over his perfectly abled body by force. This is a pretty common ableist trope, that disabled people are entirely motivated to cure their disability by any cost, and no amount of accessibility or an illustrious career make this life worth living, apparently. Disability here serves its usual function; as motivation to a villain rather than a lived experience that informs the life of a disabled character. Ironic, considering the over-representation of disability in the arts, and how much disability informs the work of artists everywhere from Frida Carlo to Francisco Goya to Kurt Cobain. Of all the misapprehensions that Get Out has about disability, it is the teased and discarded solidarity between victims of racism and ableism that stings the most, probably because this is historically untrue. During the 504 Disability Sit-In Protests of 1977, the Black Panthers arrived with food, bedding and medical supplies, largely thanks to Brad Lomax, a disabled activist and wheelchair-using Black Panther who fought for the rights of both disabled and black Americans. Does that solidarity exist now? It's hard to gauge, but Get Out certainly hasn't helped.

Midsommar (2019) has two key disability themes. The first is via the main character who has an anxiety disorder for which she takes an anti-anxiety drug. She has just lost her parents and only sibling to a combined murder/suicide. Her boyfriend and his circle do not take her or her mental health issues seriously. When she travels overseas she

forgets her meds, and so encounters the increasing isolation, lying, and violence in a raw mental state. Everyone around her, especially those in the cult (which frequently uses psychedelics in its rituals) takes advantage of her vulnerability. By the end of the film she is addled enough to join the cult and allow her boyfriend to be murdered. Her situation is so untenable, and almost everyone else in the film so lacking in compassion, that the viewer sees her response as horrific but also understandable. The cult and its effect are a distinct commentary on the present world, where those struggling to maintain their mental equilibrium understand far more about what it means to be 'sane' than those who have never personally reflected on that concept. Proper care i.e. meds, therapy, community support etc. are not only moral requirements, but must be available to every person to develop empathy for the suffering of others. The second disability theme comes via a young member of the cult with learning and intellectual disability. The cult intentionally practices specific inbreeding so that they always have at least one member disabled in such a fashion. These people are seen as prophets, and the art they produce is worshiped as divine writ. As viewers we are immediately called to wonder exactly why this strikes us as so amoral, incest taboo aside. There is of course nothing inhuman about a person with intellectual disability, but ableist viewers might find their visceral response to be dismay and even disgust. Instead, as disability-accepting viewers, we understand that this situation is another aspect of eugenics – where children are engineered to meet preconceived notions of use, product, and personhood instead of valued for who and what they are as deserving, full humans.

Saint Maud (2019) manages to be a one-two punch of ableism and homophobia by presenting queer disabled people as a novel concept while also making them acceptable murder victims. The intersection of the two identities isn't new but film and television seem to think so. What's more concerning is that the disabled person, Amanda, is inevitably the victim of Maud's crusade to save her soul thanks to Maud's intense religious fervor. The rhetoric Maud uses is similar to faith healing services where the state of being disabled is seen as a result of a sin. In Maud's eyes, Amanda developed stage 4 lymphoma

because she was a lesbian and focused on the sordid sins of the flesh. Rather than respecting Amanda's autonomy, Maud slaps Amanda at a party and continues to stalk her in order to prove that she is doing what God wanted. So much for the "do no harm" part of the Hippocratic oath. The horror in this film lies not in the discussion of faith in the vein of The Exorcist but rather the abuse suffered by Amanda. While abusive patients do exist, so do abusive healthcare workers. Yes, Maud was fired from her position after slapping Amanda in front of witnesses but we do not see the reporting of the incident and the inevitable bureaucracy that happens before authorities act upon the report. The film makes it seem like a quick procedure but that's more for the sake of the story. All of this is for nothing as Maud stabs Amanda during an episode where Maud envisions Amanda as a literal demon. It's a wretched scene as we have another dead cripple. The only saving grace is knowing Maud will never harm another patient as she sets herself on fire at the end.

Run (2020)'s stars actress Kiera Allen who uses a wheelchair and in the film portrays Chloe. It's the first major thriller in 73 years to star a wheelchair-using actor and it shows. Chloe's movements and flow in her manual wheelchair feel authentic, full of character and emotion, from a fast pace, sharp turns and flat-out sprints. Her movements convey the tension and drama of horror, acknowledge a realistic understanding of wheelchair movement and provide very little reason for the character to ever need to run. In fact the title of the movie seems aimed at able-bodied audiences, evoking a fear of being trapped in a wheelchair and unable to run away. The movie overturns this 'trapped' assumption, with characters projecting Chloe's wheelchair as an insurmountable block, one she repeatedly subverts. Chloe's character also embodies the idea that disabled people are the ultimate hackers, repurposing and adapting tools to overcome barriers in their environment. Chloe's world is full of things she built herself rather than medical tools built for her. This adaptability is also present in overcoming the obstacles of horror in the story. One negative theme raised is the character seems very removed from a full life in society, she is home schooled, we never see her engaging

in a social life and no friends are mentioned. It helps the theme of entrapment in the movie, but does negatively project disability as an exclusion from social life. Another reveal that feels misplaced is when her mother is presented with scars at the moment we are questioning her motives. This association with physical scarring and evil feels out of place within the film's otherwise nuanced approach to disability. The movie's final moments do well in not performing a miraculous healing of the character, embracing that using a wheelchair does not preclude walking, and ensuring the character's disability is not erased which would have weakened the films overall portrayal of disability.

Come Play (2020) depicts autism in both its non-verbal protagonist and through its monster as a metaphor for overstimulation, along with societal expectations, burdens and fears of the disorder. Portrayal of the boy Oliver and his family casts a wide net to the detriment of the individuality autistics and parents of neurodivergent children may experience, resulting in some ideas that may feel deeply personal while others may range from inconsequential to offensive. Oliver frequently subverts common stereotypes with time taken to establish he is not a savant in math class, can participate and communicate effectively in schoolwork with accessibility options, self-advocate, and exhibit empathy toward others, however at one point the character is used to exposit the multi-dimensional logistics of the monster in a way that seems unlikely a child would intuit. Oliver's parents and their struggles similarly work to normalize the multitude of feelings that come from raising autistic children removing the stigma and guilt those feelings embody. Setting appropriate realistic expectations as parents becomes a recurring theme, however the latter is somewhat undercut with a climax that includes a specific behavioral breakthrough previously established as desirable.

Titane (2021) is one of the most highly awarded horror movies of the twenty-first century, winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and making its director Julia Ducournau the first solo female filmmaker to receive the award. The French-language body horror film explores disability, gender presentation, and deviant sexuality through the eyes of Alexia, a woman with a lifelong fixation on cars. After a childhood traumatic head injury leaves her needing a titanium plate implanted in her head, Alexia develops an intense and unsettling fixation on cars, which evolves into a deviant form of sexuality known as mechanophilia. This relationship with machines becomes central to her identity, leading her to a career as a car model, where she performs sensual acts at car shows. As she grows older, Alexia's violent tendencies surface, and her body begins to undergo further transformations, blending the boundaries between human and machine in a disturbing, body-horror narrative that explores complex ideas relating to deviance, gender, and desire. The film's horror comes not only from its shocking and graphic imagery but also from its exploration of the grotesque transformation of the human body, the unsettling intersection of human and machine, and the complex psychological and emotional turmoil of its protagonist.

Censor (2021), Prano-Bailey-Bond's debut feature film, set in the height of Thatcher's Britain and the crusade against "Video Nasties". The film follows Enid, a dedicated worker for the British Board of Film Classification, who works to censor horror films that come their way. The film presents Enid as a Neurodivergent-coded person, which is seen in their hyper-fixation towards their work as a Censor (and later, their obsession with their missing sister) as well as their mannerisms, stims and how they interact with their family and other people. What makes this an interesting representation is how the film descends Enid down into Psychosis as we go through it, showing a clear distinction between her natural mental state (which represents a lot of neurodivergent commonalities) and her psychosis, something that many other films tend to blend as if they are the same. It is enjoyable as a piece of neurodiverse media because it presents Enid's neurodivergence as just who they are. Although they may be commented on for being different, it's still treated more like an ingrained part of their being and less of a

villain trope or exaggeration. That being said, it's never explicitly talked about as neurodivergence either, so its presence can be interpreted as an artistic choice, or possibly, a conscious choice considering the film's time context, that it wouldn't be spoken expressly about when it is set. Nevertheless, the film provides a fine example of Neurodivergence and Enid's spiral into Psychosis is treated with a bit more artistic value than a few other features that try to tackle the same topics. However, it can be argued it treads similar water to media that treats neurodivergence as synonymous with evil or at least leading to more unhinged behaviours.

Midnight Mass (2021) is a supernatural horror series that initially seems to centre themes of morality, guilt, recovery and forgiveness around two characters' different experiences of alcoholism, as well as cures in the form of faith healing. What makes Midnight Mass an interesting and positive representation of disability is how it builds disablist narratives throughout the plot but subverts them at the last minute.Supernatural events follow the arrival of a young priest. At first, the story appears to follow common negative tropes with the story of Leeza Scarborough, who is a wheelchair user with lower body paralysis. Leeza's paralysis was caused when another villager, Joe Collie, shot her in a drunken hunting accident. Leeza is shown as angry, and unforgiving and this resentment is encouraged by her parents. Leeza's parents encourage the other villagers to keep Joe in exile, whilst the priest, as expected, encourages forgiveness. Leeza is "healed" by the priest who insists she walk to receive communion. Despite shock and anger at this insistence from Leeza and the congregation, the priest is fully aware that she can walk, as Leeza and the other villagers have been altered by a supernatural force.The 'miracle cure' is a common trope in many forms of fiction that sustains a damaging narrative that disabled lives are not worthwhile unless we can be cured in some way. In horror, cures often come via supernatural, or religious means. Miracle cures in the form of faith healing are especially harmful because they reflect (and encourage) "religious model" ideas of disability originating from sin or a lack of faith. They suggest that impairments can and must be overcome by faith in a higher power and that disabled people are

objects of pity who cannot live fulfilling lives.Midnight Mass builds its storyline into a complete subversion of this trope, turning it into a narrative of acceptance and pride. When Leeza and a handful of survivors escape the island by boat, and the supernatural force is vanquished, Leeza says that she can't feel her legs anymore. But Leeza is genuinely pleased about this and happy to be herself again.

Alien: Romulus (2024) features Andy, a damaged biomechanical humanoid, as one of the supporting characters. He is cared for by the film's protagonist, Rain Carradine, who views him as a younger brother figure, despite his physical appearance suggesting that he is older than her. Andy is strongly coded as autistic, with the writers expressing an underlying sense of "inhumanity" in the way he behaves. He remains calm and composed even in the face of abuse, persecution, and intimidation—particularly from Bjorn, a human character depicted as being "robophobic." At the same time, Andy is jovial and possesses a somewhat childlike innocence, often telling simplistic, pun-based jokes. In the film, this can be read as serving to highlight his sense of being out of place and perhaps not fully grasping the gravity of the situations he finds himself in. Notably, Andy becomes more able-bodied upon inserting a Weyland-Yutani chip—an event that coincides with a transformation in his personality. He becomes cold and calculating, losing his empathy. While the portrayal of autistic-coded characters as lacking empathy is yet another problematic trope, this moment simultaneously subverts the more common narrative of characters becoming more disabled when they turn "evil." By the film's conclusion, Rain restores Andy to his original self, demonstrating her deep love and care for him as he is, despite his "damage." However, in one of the final scenes, she places him in a cryopod, promising to "fix" him—undermining a message of full and unconditional acceptance that would have made for a stronger resolution. While director Fede Álvarez has stated that Andy was intended as a subversion of the "evil android" trope, the film's framing still raises concerns. The implication that Andy—who is coded as autistic—requires a "fix" or a "cure" reinforces problematic narratives about those who are perceived as "broken" by those closest to them as well as the wider society.

Trizombie (2024) is a Belgian horror comedy that follows a small group of friends with down syndrome, who are the only ones immune to the virus. The disability representation is excellent, and the film is funny, colourful, has good practical effects and a lot of unconventional weaponry. It has multiple disabled characters, which is rare, as disabled people are very often shown to be isolated and without community. The characters have depth, with their own personalities, interests, hobbies and ambitions not related to their disabilities. They show a range of complex emotions like happiness, concern, disappointment, regret, fear, anger, and love. They also have romantic feelings and sexuality, and one wants to have kids, something very rarely seen, as disabled people are often desexualised. While the film starts in a group home facility with communal carers it does show somebody going on to live independently in their own home. One of the disabled characters calls one of the non-disabled characters the R slur as a joke, but as the film is in Belgian it may have different cultural connotations in that language.

TOPICS

The Ableist Gaze and the Horror of Becoming Disabled. While staring at disabled people in real life has consequences (we stare back!), film is entirely different. Being a spectator in a theater means the film and the people depicted in it can't defy their subordinate status of being looked at. Just as narrative cinema constructs a male gaze that objectifies women's bodies to satisfy a desire to look at sexually stimulating scenes, and relieve anxieties, we can similarly trace the operations of an ableist gaze. Like the male gaze, the ableist gaze produces visual pleasure by objectifying the disabled body. As misogyny fuels patriarchy, so too does eugenics underlie ableism—both systems depend on essentialist distinctions between "normal" and "deviant," "healthy" and "sick," and justify these segregations through policy. Exposing the ableist gaze in cinema, then, might interrupt visual pleasure. The ableist gaze in mainstream cinema is constructed by satisfying the scopic desire to know the "other" body by centering its "to-be-looked-at-ness." Nowhere is this desire more fully realized than in the horror film. Horror films often use the disabled body as the

outward manifestation of inner corruption: disfigurement symbolizes a disfigured soul. These characters portray evil incarnate, reinforcing three main prejudices: that disability is a punishment for evil, that disabled people are bitter on account of their tragic "fate," and that they harbor hostility toward nondisabled people. The prevalence of these tropes reflects a widespread social anxiety around disability, anxiety from encountering disability either personally or through our loved ones. These anxieties, in turn, generate media that enhance them, embedding disability within narratives of fear and horror. Disability in horror films often emerges from "inborn monstrosity" and the idea that disabled characters are frequently motivated by revenge. This type of gaze constructed on the disabled body magnifies the physical difference, only to eliminate it, and ease the anxiety through the character's death. The ableist point of view in horror perpetuates the tradition of the medical point of view, with aesthetic and emotional investment: the disabled body framed as excessive, threatening, and ultimately disposable.

Using disability to symbolise evil. Much like glowing red eyes, disability being used to denote moral differences is an old trope that is broadly seen in movies. This is based on the medieval prejudice that the body is a reflection of the soul, or that disability is a punishment from God for being a sinner. This is similar to the prejudice many white people engage in attaching stigma to darker skin tones, which they believe signify a lack of purity, intelligence, a damaged soul or no soul at all. This of course being motivated reasoning to dehumanise, to attempt to morally justify murderous conquests, or otherwise deprive others of access to resources and opportunities. The Definitive Guide To Screenwriting, by Syd Field (2003) is widely used to teach screenwriters today and is considered to be "The Bible" of screenwriting. In this book, a section about writing characters recommends adding disability to evil characters. For physical disability to visually represent moral failings. Physical difference = Moral difference. Disability = Evil. More recent screenwriting textbooks soften this to adding "a limp or an eyepatch" to "make non-hero characters more distinctive". Depending on the era, the nationality/racialised identity of the villain tended to be whoever

America was likely to be at war with, Russian during the Cold War, Asian during the Vietnam War and WW2, and middle eastern ever since. While prejudiced, it is understandable why one might use the aesthetic of political enemies to make villains more threatening and to dehumanise them in mind of the public to make war more acceptable. However disabled people have been similarly positioned as villains the entire time since the dawn of cinema.

How many good guys have facial scars? Bad guys in films are generally clearly identifiable because they have facial scars or disfigurements. For example, Freddie Kruger, Chucky, Jason Voorhees, Voldemort, The Joker, Twoface, Thanos, Scar from The Lion King and almost every single Bond villain. In the books, James Bond has a facial scar and his best friend is a multiple amputee but, in the movies, they took the disabilities from the good guys and gave them to the bad guys instead. In the 1940s and 50s, after WW2, facial scars were seen as a symbol of bravery and sacrifice, whereas in the 1960s and 70s they became a shorthand for evil and a motive for revenge. Facial scars are often linked to an event which turned the character evil or drove them to a rampage of vengeance. When alien designs in Star Wars were developed, the bias of thinking that beauty = goodness, ugly = evil, was consciously and actively avoided, they made sure that there was a mix of pretty and ugly, good and bad aliens to not reinforce that idea (And yet they still gave facial differences to both their villains, Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine).

Syphilis, society and horror. There is an old trope of associating disability with evil and wrongdoing, or as divine punishment for sin, either that of the disabled person or their parents. When it comes to syphilis however, the sin of breaking marriage vows can lead to an infection which can cause disability in the child. Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease that can cause deformity, blindness, deafness, and madness. It can also cause birth defects in children, including collapsed nasal bridges and Hutchinson's Teeth, characterised by sharp, or saddle-like teeth with points at either end. Leatherface, Dracula, Nosferatu, Dr Jeckyll, Voldemort and IT at times present many

of the particular facial deformations associated with syphilis. Guy de Maupassant, the grandfather of cosmic horror, had an advanced case of syphilis; the paranoia and hallucinations it caused inspired many of his horror stories, which went on to influence the racist H.P. Lovecraft. Prior to the invention of penicillin in 1943, syphilis and its symptoms were more widespread than they are today, but it has left an indelible mark in our cultural language. Representations of syphilis were often politically charged, generally racialised, associated with foreigners, the poor, debauchery, immorality, "fallen women" as well as being used as a justification for eugenics. It was incredibly influential on culture in general and horror in particular, impacting portrayals of monstrosity, generational curses, body horror, physical transformations and madness.

Cultural Imperialism is when those with power in a society determine how those without power are thought of and represented. These representations are often used to create, reinforce, justify and maintain unequal social and economic relationships. For example, the fictional portrayal of the disabled character 'Lenny' in Of Mice and Men was used to justify laws legalising the execution of people with learning disabilities; the Judge declaring the film demonstrated they were all violently dangerous. Associating disability with evil in the minds of the public makes it easier for societies to justify their awful treatment of disabled people. Prejudice is often generated against groups at the bottom of society to justify the inequality that those at the top benefit from. For example, portraying the poor as lazy or 'genetically inferior' distracts from the structural causes of poverty. Inserting a character from a marginalised community without doing the work to understand their context, history, experience and culture can lead to depictions based on harmful stereotypes, potentially exacerbating the exclusion and stigmatisation of that community. Disabled people do not generally get to portray or have any input on representation of disabled characters. As such, the non-disabled creators base their representations on their own prejudices, often without engaging their empathy or imagination. These representations tell us nothing about disabled people and everything about what non-disabled creators and

audiences approve of and are comfortable with. Having to see yourself through the eyes of your oppressor creates a Double Consciousness, i.e. the psychological experience of marginalized individuals who must consistently view themselves through the lens of a dominant group, which is prejudiced against them. This leads to a fragmented sense of self as there is a conflict between their own identity and how that identity is viewed by others. For example, the films Me Before You, Gattaca, Million Dollar Baby position disability as worse than death, likely reinforcing ideas of low self-worth in disabled viewers. These views also influence social policy. Recently, Canada began prioritising access to assisted suicide over accessible housing, health care or psychological treatment.

Disability representation by the numbers. Representation is important, not just the quantity but the quality. Disabled people are eight times more likely than other minority groups to say that how they are represented in the media is inaccurate; in fact, many disabled people find existing depictions problematic and disempowering. Disabled people constantly rate improving representations in the media as a top priority yet little has been done to achieve this. Non-disabled people learn about disability primarily from the media, which frequently presents disabled people in negative ways. 43% of the British public claims not to know anyone disabled, and 67% admit to feeling uncomfortable talking to disabled people. 87% of disabled people said that the negative behavior and attitudes of non-disabled people affect their daily lives. Disabled people are under-represented on television. Disabled people are 18% of the total population, yet only 8.3% of on-screen characters. A core issue in sustaining harmful portrayals of disabled people is that the industry not recognising and understanding disability as a civil rights issue in the same way as other minority groups.

A tool for analyzing disability representations in film.
Developed by Richard Amm, the People or Props quickscore can be found in more detail in the DARK zine Disability Film Analysis Tools. This includes the following dimensions:

AUTHENTICITY

Is the actor playing the disabled character disabled?

FREQUENCY

Is there more than two disabled characters?

EMBODIED EMPATHY

Is the story told from the disabled persons point of view?

STATUS

Is the disabled character equal to other characters, neither superior or inferior, and not pitying, subordinate, dependent or a super crip?

DEPTH

Does the disabled character exist for themselves, with flaws, ambition, character development, a range of emotions and disability being one aspect among many, avoiding the character being primarily defined by disability or their narrative purpose being exclusively for the education, growth or motivation of non-disabled characters?

RANGE

The portrayal is normalizing, counter-stereotype or stereotype subverting and avoiding reinforcing stereotypes?
(These may include Linking desexualisation, emasculation or childlike or animal-like traits to disability, linking evil, vengeance or violence to disability or facial difference. Disability being caused by supernatural forces as punishment for wrongdoing or lack of faith or it being healed by prayer. Presenting somebody faking a disability. Disabled character framed as a burden, or dead, institutionalised, cured or “overcame disability” by integrating into an excluding world by the end.)

Would you like to know more?

Books

Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies by Martin F. Norden.

Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema by Angela Smith.

Horror and Disability by Darren Gray.

House of Psychotic Women (Paperback): An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror and Exploitation Films.

Body Genre: Anatomy of the Horror Film (2023) by David Scott

Contemporary Body Horror (2024) by Xavier Aldana Reyes.

Videos

(Documentary) Code of the Freaks (2020)

Youtube : Freaks Isn't a Horror Film by Coldcrashpictures.

Youtube : Why the "Disabled Villain" Trope is So Offensive by The Take.

Youtube : Oh, The Horror: A Short Critical Analysis of Femininity and Disability in Horror by Cpikoart

Youtube : Disability In Horror: A Three Film Timeline/Analysis-DYNAFIRE

Articles

(Zine) Disability Film Analysis Tools by Disability Action Research Kollective.

Disabling Imagery : An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People by Colin Barnes.

It's All the Same Movie: Making Code of the Freaks by Carrie Sandahl

The Presence of Disability in Horror Films: Ableism and Counter Discursivity by Bluth (2019)

Villainizing Bodies and Minds: Ableism in Horror Movies. (2018) Garcia

Resources

Bodies of Horror Podcast - Horror movies through a disability lens.

Free movie archive with a collection of disability-related films: https://www.solidaritycinema.com/

Deaf movie Database : https://deafmovie.org/titles/

Disability film course https://www.codeofthefreaks.com/teaching

This zine is produced by the **Disability Action Research Kollective** (DARK), which is a disabled-led group working to make disability perspectives, history, and research more accessible to a general audience. We are always looking for disabled (and non-disabled) volunteers to help write, edit and share their perspectives. Choose to be part of something bigger than your self, join us in the DARK today!

FIND MORE HERE

linktr.ee/disabilityark

Our zines include a wide range of topics including **Disability History:** Ancient Greece, Ancient Egypt, Communists, Anarchists, Feminists, Radicals, Fascists, Leaders, Saints, Wheelchair History, Walking Stick History, Mythology, Disabled Gods... **Disability Media**: Film Analysis Tools, Horror, Marvel, Batman, Action, Video Games, Shakespeare, Star Trek, Fantasy... **Disability Education:** Disability Radical Reading Digest**,** Disabled Housing Cooperatives, Why the Gap?**,** Models of Disability, Sexism & Ableism, Racism & Ableism, Homophobia & Ableism...