

Larry Dachslager
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“...And It’s Gonna Have a Beard”:
Childbirth and Tod Browning’s *Freaks*

We are never actually shown the second titular character in Roman Polanski’s classic horror film, *Rosemary’s Baby*, but its presence is keenly anticipated and felt throughout the movie. As Lucy Fischer points out in her essay, “Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary’s Baby*,” a baby does not have to have been born yet for it to play a substantial role in the mother’s life. Fischer closely examines the many elements of universality in Rosemary’s (Mia Farrow) pregnancy, leading up to the final terrifying revelation that her off-screen baby is something monstrous. Tod Browning’s 1932 film *Freaks* takes the opposite approach. It focuses on the physically unusual offspring of mothers who, though never depicted onscreen, are often recollected, both in the film’s screenplay and in the minds of the viewers.

The premier of *Freaks* was a financial and critical disaster. If the reports are to be believed, traumatized patrons *ran* out of the theater or fainted, and one woman supposedly attempted to sue MGM claiming that the film had caused her to have a miscarriage. Subsequent attempts at remarketing the film included changing the title to *Nature’s Mistakes*, adding a contrived “happy ending,” and beginning the film with a lengthy explanatory (some read apologetic) prologue which focused on the history and plight of the title characters and others like them, referring to them as “the abnormal and the unwanted.” “The accident of abnormal birth,” reads the scrolling text, “was considered a disgrace and malformed children were placed out in the elements to die. If, perchance, one of these freaks of nature survived, he was always regarded with suspicion.

Society shunned him because of his deformity and a family so hampered was always ashamed of the curse put upon it.” This is the first of several allusions to the natal origins of “the abnormal” whose story follows. In the opening scene, a barker intones, “But for the accident of birth, you might be even as they are. They did not ask to be brought into the world, but into the world they came.”

In her essay, Lucy Fischer recalls literature from the 1930s to the present that extolls the “rewarding and fulfilling” aspects of parturition. “Any deviance from this was considered a sign of maladjustment. Even a current manual promises expectant women a purely “joyful” pregnancy, urging them to ‘be free and full of confidence.’” Though there is, no doubt, much happy anticipation to be found in the process of pregnancy and childbirth, Fischer writes that films like *Rosemary’s Baby* tap into the seldom-addressed anxieties and traumas that accompany motherhood, including the “horror stories” the mothers-to-be may have heard or read. In consultation with other experts, Fischer writes, “The premise of *Rosemary’s Baby* is that the heroine gestates a devil-child; but worries of an abnormal fetus are common. (Freudian psychiatrist Helene) Deutsch mentions the ‘painful idea that the baby will be a monster, an idiot, a cripple.’ And (Myra) Leifer reports: ‘Women typically...vividly imagine a variety of deformities that they had either read about or seen.’”

Rosemary’s Baby is, of course, fictional, along with the notion of the devil fathering a mortal woman’s child. The cause of the baby’s evil lineage is also explained. His birth is the result of a plot between Rosemary’s disturbingly ambitious husband Guy (John Cassavetes) and their next-door Satanists, Minnie and Roman (Ruth Gordon and Sidney Blackmer). *Freaks*, on the other hand, depicts the real thing – children with

pronounced abnormalities born to otherwise normal mothers and fathers who did nothing to “deserve” abnormal children. Aside from the apparatuses used for the final “duck woman” effect, the deformities that populate Tod Browning’s movie are genuine, with no special costuming, make up, or special effects to enhance their often grotesque appearance. These people were, in fact, born that way.

Most of the action in *Freaks* takes place behind the scenes of Madame Tetralini’s (Rose Dione) Circus where she has appointed herself as official caretaker and surrogate mother of the amorous obsession with the show’s beautiful but treacherous trapeze artist, Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova). The story turns on Hans’s spurning his equally diminutive fiancé (Daisy Earles – Harry’s real-life sister) and Cleopatra’s plot to marry Hans and then murder him for his money – and the sideshow freaks’ resulting grotesque vengeance on Cleopatra, based on their familial “code.”

Early in the film, a groundskeeper and landowner encounter a group of sideshow performers, accompanied by Madame Tetralini, cavorting in the woods near the circus. The appalled groundskeeper shrieks, “There must be a law in France to smother such things at birth! They’re monsters!” Madame Tetralini pleads with the landowner explaining that the performers are “Children from my circus. When I get a chance, I like to take them into the sunshine and let them play like... children.” Embracing three frightened “pinheads,” she poignantly affirms, “That is what most of them are. Children.” As the landowner gazes upon the performers, he somberly repeats, “Children. Children.” The close ups Browning shows to accompany the word “children” show people who are most certainly different from the norm, but they are also clearly older than children. Throughout the movie, regardless of their age, these characters are spoken

to and treated like children. Even as Hans is dying from being poisoned, the evil Cleopatra puts on a motherly act and talks to him as though he were her young son.

Just as Lucy Fischer refers to *Rosemary's Baby* as a “skewed ‘documentary’ of the societal and personal turmoil that has regularly attended female reproduction,” *Freaks* is also a “skewed documentary” on the existence and day-to-day life of a maternally (and paternally) abandoned society. At the time when “Freak Shows” flourished in popularity, circuses were often the only professional refuge for those born abnormally. Some, like Daisy and Violet Hilton, conjoined twins who possessed genuine performing talent, worked successfully in Vaudeville, but most were objects to be gawked at rather than actual performers. Prince Randian, for example, was born with neither arms nor legs. Billed as “the human torso” or “the human caterpillar,” his “act” consisted of shaving or lighting cigarettes with his lips. Watching *Freaks*, it is clear that the only “freak” with actual talent for acting is Angelo Rossitto. He alone went on to enjoy a substantial acting career that lasted through the 1980s.

Freaks, like most sideshow performances, inspires many questions in the viewers’ minds. How do conjoined twins manage marriage and pregnancy? How does Johnny Eck, a man whose body stops at his waist, go to the bathroom – much less have sex? And what happened between the time when these people were born and they became – sometimes unwitting performers? Very little is known about the origins of the unique performers featured in *Freaks*. The aforementioned Daisy and Violet Hilton, at a very young age, were literally *sold* by their mother to the women who served as her midwife, with the purpose of putting them in show business. It is likely that many of the other sideshow stars were likewise abandoned early in life.

For their appearances in *Freaks*, most of them were gathered for the film from international circuses where they enjoyed a certain brand of “stardom” in the sideshow world. Stories abound of jealousy and diva-like behavior on the set. As depicted in the movie, and supposedly in real life, the circus world is its own society with its own rules and codes. In *Freaks*, the “Human Skeleton” (Peter Robinson) and the Bearded Lady (Olga Roderick) are married. (It was common for sideshow performers to marry one another. In real life, 58-pound Robinson married to a 467-pound woman.) In the scene where the bearded lady gives birth to a girl, the circus folk gather around her bedside and Phroso the clown (Wallace Ford) says gleefully, “...and it’s gonna have a beard!” In the outside world, this would probably be a life sentence of misery and abandonment, but in the insular realm of the circus, at least as portrayed by the movie, she’s welcomed with open arms. Thankfully, just as Roman Polanski doesn’t show a close up of Rosemary’s baby, Todd Browning spares us a shot of a baby with a falsely applied five o’clock shadow.

Naturally, there are countless examples where parents give birth to babies with abnormalities and love and nurture their children unconditionally. *Rosemary’s Baby* ends with the initially horrified Rosemary gaining some loving empathy and acceptance for her child. *Freaks* seems to ask the same of its audience, alternating between blatant exploitation of its horrors and a plea for sympathy, tolerance, and even love for those we gawk at. Despite its ambiguities and resulting mixed audience emotions, the film makes one thing abundantly clear; it is the evil Cleopatra’s mother who gave birth to a monster – long before the circus folks make her “one of them.”

Works Consulted

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