

The Normalization of Freaks in Popular Western Media

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Abstract

Such one-time sideshow curiosities as the fat man, the bearded lady, and the person with full-body tattoos are no longer confined to circus tents nor seen as inevitable social outcasts. This paper suggests that the power of film and moving image media to reform perceptions and turn the exotic into the familiar may well have played a role in the migration of certain freakish types into the mainstream. The paper tracks the portrayal of abnormal and irregular persons in Western media, suggesting that such portrayals might have contributed to social changes. Important milestones include: the 1932 Tod Browning production *Freaks* (once considered exploitative but now popularly regarded as oddly compassionate); the 1975 musical comedy horror film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (the longest running theatrical release of all time owing to the participatory accompaniment programs it gave rise to); and the 2017 musical period drama *The Greatest Showman* (depicting P.T. Barnum as interloper between the worlds of high society and socially outcast freaks). The 2024 film *Wicked* is also considered as it seems to offer a rehabilitation of the freakish witch from *The Wizard of Oz*, casting the former as Dorothy's/Ariana's equal, but for the outmoded thinking from a former time.

