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The Elephant Man (David Lynch, EMI Films, 1980): an analysis from a disabled perspective

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ABSTRACT A paper that uses Foucault's ideas on normalisation and medicalisation to discuss David Lynch's The Elephant Man as a movie that dehumanises and objectifies its subject rather than one that represents abnormality/disability as human or valid in itself, as it is often claimed for the film. I analyse the methods by which the film inadvertently portrays the historical process of medicalisation and reinforces its ideology of normality as 'common sense' and abnormality as inhuman and 'unbearable' due to its pathological state rather than social construction; with the 'Freak'/abnormality (as carnivalesque) also being examined. I consequently analyse the ambiguities of the film to show its hidden agenda (through unconscious acceptance) of placing abnormality further and further into the realms of the Other, with eugenic overtones.

Most film criticism, especially around representation, assumes disability to be an 'identity' that is either true or constant. It is neither, being as constructed as femininity or blackness or anything else. Movies that exploit disability as a metaphor abound (usually constructing disability as inhuman in order to make others, normals, more human), but the most insidious are those that claim to represent disability factually. Using a Foucaultian framework—his ideas on 'normalisation' and 'medicalisation' in particular—I will show below, by the example of David Lynch's 1980 film The Elephant Man, the methods and ideology used by cinema to construct disability for a social purpose, and against its own supposed cinematic liberal/egalitarian intentions or interpretations (Norman, 1992, p. 36). Hopefully, with the emergence of more disabled people in movie criticism such misinterpretations will cease.

I have chosen David Lynch's version of Joseph Merrick's story because when I first saw it on its initial release as an 18-year-old I felt uncomfortable about it, whilst all around me raved about it, without knowing why; this is my attempt to decipher why? Lynch's first film, Eraserhead (1979), should have perhaps alerted me; a recent revival of it at the National Film Theatre described the plot as "boy-meets-girl-has-mutant" (BFI, 1993, p. 36), the girl being an epileptic and the boy having a mother with a abnormal head. Though the film is surreal one can only assume from the film...
that the reason for the mutant birth is its mother's and grandmother's abject abnormalities. Lynch continued, and continues, to use abnormality and disability as a curio or menacing motif throughout his subsequent films: *Wild At Heart* (1990), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Dune* (1984) and even his television series (and film prequel) *Twin Peaks* (1992); dwarfs being especially popular for him as twisted minds in twisted bodies or indicative of a Gothic underworld.

On first viewing *The Elephant Man* seems to be portraying a man, Merrick, with a very severe abnormality, as someone who has endured a lot, but succeeded in living as 'full' and as 'valid' a life as is possible, despite his deformity (French, 1987; Norman, 1992). The film seems to question his treatment from both the medical establishment and the exploiters of the 'Freak Show', championing difference whilst highlighting society's intolerance. But further viewing reveals that the film is confused as to its aim and complies to many stereotypes of abnormality/disability. The film becomes what it appears at first sight to be a criticism of: the normalisation of society as seen by bourgeois medicalism and morality. Normalisation I take as being the attempt to make all people subject to one view of individuality (both somatically and ideologically) and the marginalisation, or institutionalisation, of those who fail to conform to that prescribed idea(1) of normality. *The Elephant Man* seems to show the historical movement of abnormality aetiology from sin to crime to sickness, but Lynch and his writers, in an attempt to understand 'why?' someone is disabled, manage to turn full circle and return abnormality to the metaphysical and moral arena of sin.

**The Unnaturalness of Conception: disability and sin**

The opening scenes are a surreal representation of the myth about The Elephant Man's birth, his mother being knocked down by an elephant whilst she was in the early stages of pregnancy. The images play to this myth, whilst reinforcing age old myths about abnormality: impressionism (an incident during birth affecting the fetus) or the result of 'evil' or 'unnatural acts' by the individual or his parents, in this case parental bestiality. The scenes further imply, as correct, that deformity is the result of 'unnatural', bestial, intercourse, by having the mother of the Elephant Man (John Merrick, played by John Hurt) apparently raped by an elephant: the woman's screams, the tossing of the head and the approach, and subsequent withdrawal, of the elephant, all combine to imply a possibility of rape. The scenes combine the myth of impressionism with the viewers deepest fears of impending abnormality due to 'unnatural acts', thus reinforcing ignorance rather than challenging it. The film, and this specific scene, seems to be getting its kicks out of such an interpretation, no matter how surreal. The reason for the representation must be placed in its desire to try to answer 'why?', why is such a deformity/disease placed within an individual? The movie proceeds to offer a model of treatment in such cases (medicalisation) but it cannot ignore trying to evoke (somewhat haphazardly) a metaphysical cause for Merrick's medical condition. Significantly the opening surreal scenes of the mother's 'rape' by an elephant were, in the original script, to have been more explicit, with the
elephant wiping its 'trunk' (with all that implies) across the mother's chest leaving a slimy mess (Graham & Oehlschlaeger, 1992).

The background of the scene places it further in the realm of the 'Other' by giving it a 'foreign' atmosphere: the woman is lying on tropical and exotic greenery, it is dark, and the elephants, almost a herd, seem to be roaming free. Such an environment places the scene further into the 'bad', 'dark' 'Other': Africa; and all the colonialist racism about Africa is invoked, especially its supposed native bestiality. A challenge to this illusion could have been achieved by placing the scene in a context that Merrick himself advanced, that it was a street in Leicester, where a circus was passing; though even this is probably a myth employed by the promoter of the Elephant Man Freak Show. The film exploits and titillates the audience in the same way as the 'Freak Show' did, and by placing Merrick's birth and death in pseudo-religious concepts of spirit/spirituality the film lays claim to placing Merrick's abnormality in the terms of a religious rationale. The 'steam' that follows the elephant scene (Merrick's birth) and subsequently Merrick's death is, one presumes, supposed to be Merrick's eternal spirit. In consequence, the film is in no way 'agnostic'. By placing the scene, stylistically, in the 'dark' unconscious (and consciousness of the spectator) the film immediately concedes to the myths (impressionism, result of 'wrong' or evil acts for example) of the Elephant Man's birth and disability in general. It continues in the same vein.

The next few scenes are of Treves (played by Anthony Hopkins), the surgeon who saves Merrick from the 'Freak Show', following the police to shut down The Elephant Man show in the 'Freak Show'. On the way he passes a pickled fetus, a virtual mini replica of Merrick; it is labelled as "The Fruit Of Original Sin". Such images place the viewer in the context of the Victorian carnival, but also reinforce the fear of sin as the cause of disability. Because Merrick is repeatedly seen to conform to that myth (his conception, his solace from the Bible and the medicalisation model advanced—called 'Christian' by the head nurse—as an ideal plan for his 'care') the myth becomes, in this film, the rationale for the cause of Merrick's condition. The rationale of sin as the possible cause of (Merrick's/all) deformity is never challenged in any real sense and by having the rape at the beginning the myths are, at best, reinforced and, at worst, confirmed as reality. To read the whole scene/film as a critique of a Victorian belief system could be justified if subsequent alternative ideas were advanced to critique them against, but they are not. Even though it could be argued that the medical frame of definition that Treves later employs to describe what Merrick has is such an alternative, I will argue below that even that (by its choice of language and action) reinforces the false assumptions about what is or causes disability/abnormality. In this film it is Merrick who has the problem and not others.

Normalisation and the Carnivalesque: the anti-democratic body

Foucault (1988) stresses that society tries to normalise all that is abnormal into the normal, achieving normality by supervision and examination, which creates knowledge, which is then activated as power. The Elephant Man inadvertently demon-
strates the tactics by which medicalisation achieves such technologies, but Lynch is not ‘showing’ this to critique it but accidentally and with a supportive ideology that makes such technologies appear as natural and ‘right’. In order for the abnormal to be under supervision, a system of placing the abnormal in an institutional environment is needed; thus Treves needs to get Merrick out of the hands of Bytes (Merrick’s evil working-class manager, wonderfully played by the ever-salivating Freddie Jones) and into a hospital. The hospital becomes the supervising institution.

Supervision is not practical in a ‘Freak Show’ as it, and its exhibits, freely travel (or did so until they were virtually eradicated by the hegemony of medicine). The ‘Freak Show’ represents that element of ‘Carnival’ in society that is a threat or provocation to any normalising influence, difference, freedom and non-conformity being the order of the day during carnival (especially the ‘Freak Show’). Russo using Bakhtin, beautifully sums up the threat of Merrick and the Freak Show to bourgeois society when she states that:

The political implications of [carnival] heterogeneity are obvious: it sets carnival apart from the merely oppositional and reactive; carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counter-production of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen above all as a sight of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal. (Russo, 1988, p. 219)

Merrick’s body is a wonderful example of the completely free body, it even grows and spreads externally at will. Thus society must take control of the ‘freak’ and place it in a controlled and supervisable environment. Although ‘carnival’ can be seen as a pressure relief to the repression of the bourgeoisie (and therefore helpful to capitalism), the large numbers of carnivals (and extreme nature of their ‘carnivalesque’ exhibits—‘The Elephant Man’) meant that it became imperative, and inevitable, for the bourgeoisie to act. Treves does this with Merrick; getting Merrick into the hospital firstly for examination and then ‘care’. Bytes is initially shut down because Merrick is “degrading to all who see it (him)”; the reality is that he is a threat to the authority of normality as signified by those who shut the show down: bourgeois authority in the shape of the local Alderman—played by Treves’s namesake and true life grandson—and the police.

Treves’s wife and daughter were, in the original script (Graham Oehlschlaeger 1992), to be shown at the initial carnival; they were to be shown as disturbed and frightened by the ‘atmosphere’ of the carnival, a scene that might have added more value to the film as critique rather than validation of carnival as a freedom from repression and as such bad.

Examine the Danger and Take Out the Threat

Knowledge, for Foucault, is created by the examination. In this case Treves obtains knowledge of (and power over) Merrick by the clinical examination which in turn makes him docile, passive and supportive of his own institutionalisation and incar-
ceration. It is worth noting here what Armstrong states, about the medical examination, in order to place the examination of Merrick in a Foucaultian framework:

In Foucault’s analysis of the emergence ... of the body as an object which could be used, transformed and rendered docile, part of the mechanism by which passivity was achieved was the newly discovered clinical examination. In that the clinical examination involved an invasion of ‘private’ body space ... Thus the body was held in, and constituted by, a field of surveillance from which it could not escape. (Armstrong, 1983, p. 103)

Merrick is put to detailed examination and studied as a comparison to the supposed ‘normal’. The ‘showing’ of Merrick to the Pathological Society is a key example of this. All the time Merrick is shown, Treves is standing in front of a set of drawings and diagrams of what the normal should look like; this is in conjunction with Treves describing in detail all of Merrick’s abnormalities. Significantly the language used is the language of alarm and threat to those who are normal: Merrick’s deformities are described to the Society by Treves as “lamentable ... degraded ... insidious ... (and) alarming”.

The threat is thus to normality (not to Merrick, because he has them as pathological, for him they are normal). Merrick is stripped, analysed in detail, and made passive by the authority the Society lays claim to and by the objectification of his condition as a pathological abnormality rather than the subjectivity of being a freak. This is a key scene that shows the films main weakness: although the manner of Treves’s presentation is paralleled to the showman Byte’s spiel, by each’s method of formal—lecture style—presentation, the rest of the film, specifically the institutionalisation of Merrick and his suicide, combine to validate Treves’s language as the language of truth. In his speech to the Pathological Society Treves states, of Merrick’s deformities, that “at no time have I met with such a perverted or degraded version of a human being as this man”, and classifying the condition as “insidious”. These phrases, combined with other more technical medical (‘factual’) jargon, combine to place subjective emotive terms (usually related to character) in equal value with apparently objective medical reality which act to reinforce the aetiology of Merrick’s condition as moral rather than unknown (what caused, and what was, Merrick’s condition are still argued about in present day medical—even dental—journals).

That the film is labelled in the titles as “The True Story of The Elephant Man”, and is acknowledged as mainly from Treves’s account, merely serves to reinforce Treves’s account as the true account, and Merrick as “lamentable ... degraded ...” etc. Graham & Oehlschlager support such a view when they state of Treves’s speech that “the language available to [Treves] puts somatic conditions in to categories identical to those ascribed to moral behaviour and distinguishes Merrick from the ‘sound’ amongst his fellow creatures” (op. cit., 1992, p. 43). The film would have succeeded much more as a critique if it had shown that the language used was all that was available to Treves rather than a language that to a large extent is left unchallenged. A legal case at the time of making the film (over who could use the title The Elephant Man) ensured that Lynch’s ‘Elephant Man’ was seen as the true version over a play, of the same title, performed just prior to the films release.
Interestingly the film is also called the “real life tale of John Merrick” in the issue of the *Radio Times* (Norman, 1992, p. 40) I have already mentioned. (For an essay on how untrue the other popular disability film *My Left Foot* (1991, Jim Sheridan) is see Lavery (1993), an excellent account of how even the most irrelevant truth is distorted for dramatic and cinematic effect.)

**The Diseased Body Infecting the Good Society**

In the *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (1976), Foucault stresses the way that the Victorians medicalised all that was abnormal so as to prevent any kind of biological threat and that this is achieved if you stigmatise and isolate all those who are seen as a direct threat: Merrick/the disabled. As a modern discourse the film *The Elephant Man* acts as a modern version of the warning of biological contamination; the reference to the normality of the genitals continues the illusion of a biological threat from abnormality through from Victorian to modern discourses around abnormality. Significantly, the film tries its hardest to discover the cause of Merrick’s condition within the Victorian era, consequently we are shown much working-class degradation and industrial dirt. All the scenes of the working class, and their environment, are shown as dirty, disgusting, loud, violent and exploitative. This contrasts with the bourgeois scenes of clean, quiet sensibility and sensitivity. Consequently, in the film, all that is ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ is bourgeois, and all that is ‘bad’ and ‘diseased’ is working class. The safeguard of society is thus placed in the hygienic bourgeois world and not the unhygienic working-class one. The reason for such an apparently commonsensical medical reasoning can be found in the medical theory to justify the power of intervention and surveillance, described by Armstrong when he states that “if bacteria are to be regarded as the seeds of disease, it is now realised clearly that the soil is also fundamentally important” (*op. cit.*, 1983, p. 99).

The soil of disease, and abnormality, for Lynch in this film (and to large extent in other Lynch films, despite their superficial appearance as celebrations of the ‘Other’) and bourgeois morality is the working class. To fear the working class, the masses, is expected from middle-class medicalism, but here it is advocated as completely understandable. The working class in this film are seen as, perhaps, overworked physically (in a nightmare of Merrick’s) and in the front line of machine injuries (Treves is seen condemning industrial machinery as unsafe soon after leaving the soon-to-be-closed Freak Show), but their ‘nature’ is seen as disgusting and ‘evil’ repeatedly for no other reason than that that is how they are. On hearing of Merrick’s residency in the hospital, for example, the local public house customers, led by the hospital attendant, immediately seize a chance to tease and torment Merrick, an action seen as characteristic of the class of people who treat Merrick badly by nature. A recent reviewing of *Blue Velvet* and *Wild At Heart* seems to show Lynch seeing the urban, modern, working class of America in very much the same way.

For Foucault (1988) the abnormal are controlled by society and used to control other who may step outside of what is normal. Consequently it is essential that those who wish to dictate the ‘norm’ must control those who pathologically fail the test of
normality. The hospitalisation of Merrick gives Treves and the bourgeois men who control the hospital (the Pathological Society and Board members of the hospital are clearly shown as bourgeois in dress, cleanliness and speech) clear control of, and over, the abnormal. Merrick becomes a prisoner within the institution of the hospital; mixing and participating freely in society is assumed to be a non-viable proposition. Although Lynch seems to follow the Romantic idea that to make someone interesting one must make them ill, he then can not help but see them as a threat because, as Sontag (1979) argues (in relation to cancer and TB—and more recently AIDS—but also relevant to such a visibly inverted cancer as Merrick has), disease is chaos and health is order (the visible manifestation of Merrick's body alone represents such a dichotomy), a view Lynch seems to further support considering the 'chaos' that Merrick creates whenever he is freely in the public arena.

Medicalisation as Total Control and Complete Power

How does the film signify the control of the 'Other'? The film inadvertently demonstrates the bourgeois control over the 'Other' in quite a few ways, especially through medicalisation. As the film is dealing with a spectacle made case by the medical profession, the film can not not show the process by which power and control over others takes place, because, following Foucault, that is how it works. The film is 'showing' the process of medicalisation because it has to. The criticism I have is that it is not shown critically and consequently reinforces the process as natural and/or morally correct. That 'Jack the Ripper' was active in the streets around the hospital Treves and Merrick are in, at the same time as Merrick was 'news', could have acted, in the film, as a counter-point to add critical analysis of the medical process of the time—especially as one of the key suspects of the day was a fellow doctor of Treves's (Howell & Ford, 1980)—as 'The Ripper' was (is) assumed to have had expert anatomical knowledge of the body: i.e. to be a doctor.

Merrick is prevented from circulating freely in society at large and isolated, ironically, in the 'isolation Ward' to start with. Thus the threat of abnormality is isolated and a warning is given to all, that abnormality is treated with isolation. As soon as isolation takes place authority (in the shape of the hospital administrator) starts writing to the press. In The Elephant Man the hospital administrator sends a letter to The Times, to tell (warn) everybody of the consequences of being classified as abnormal, it states that "women and nervous persons fly in terror from the sight of him"; clearly emphasising that abnormality must be, at this stage, clearly identifiable if it is to be treated in a 'Christian' and socially responsible manner. By publishing a letter about Merrick, others are warned that if they wish to become abnormal (not work) their freedom will be restricted and surveillance tactics instituted upon them. In order to differentiate between people who are deserving of charity or just malingerers, the medical profession became (and is still) instrumental in deciding who would and would not get charitable aid. It had to decide who could, who could not, and who would not, work, so that malingering and hardship could be differentiated, with malingerers forced back to work and the treatment of the
abnormal championed as the ‘heart’ of the bourgeois capitalist (Oliver, 1991; Hevey, 1992).

Foucault further states, in *Discipline and Punish* (1988), that the sign of punishment (for deviance/abnormality) must be articulated as rapidly and widely as possible; the letter to *The Times* mentioned achieves this. But the readers’ reactions to the letter are given as two stark contrasts: a working-class hospital porter (played by Michael Elphick) immediately plans exploitation whilst the respectable actress, Mrs Kendal, (played by Ann Bancroft) immediately seeks to meet Merrick for purely charitable/Christian purposes. (Mrs Kendal did provide assistance for Merrick but never actually met him (Howell & Ford, 1980.)) If the film had been showing the articulation of technologies of power critically it could have passed as brilliant cinema, but again the film uses this articulation further to advocate bourgeois morality and behaviour as preferable (even civilised) by having Elphick’s character proceed to torment Merrick whilst Bancroft’s character brings tears of joy and high culture (Shakespeare), and even physical affection, to Merrick. Consequently, the film acts as a modern discourse itself, supporting bourgeois ideals of morality and education.

The film portrays the problems faced by the bourgeoisie when they take the abnormal away from the working class in particularly simplistic ways. The Elphick and Bytes characters resist the fact that they will lose the right to exploit Merrick; exploitation (and as such, control) will become the sole preserve of the bourgeoisie, as represented by Treves whilst Bytes’ and Elphick’s behaviour parodies them as ‘the horrible, degenerate masses’. The film does question the bourgeois right to sole charge of the abnormal when Treves and Bytes’s spiels are paralleled and when Treves goes through a little piece of self-examination one night at his own home: Treves asks his wife if he is a “bad man or a good man?” That she affirms that the reality, as she sees it (her position—class and character wise—give her views authority over most others), shows that Treves’s intentions, and his institutionalisation of Merrick, are Merrick’s only hope for a reasonable life. Mrs Treves (played by Hannah Gordon with supreme middle-class righteousness) consequently validates and reinforces all that Treves (and his ideology) stand for and perpetrate upon Merrick. The film further falls right behind Treves by giving us two clear opposites to choose from between Bytes and Treves: Bytes as a violent, unkempt, seedy working-class money man who lives in squalor or Treves: the well-kempt man, nice wife, home, job and respect from his fellow doctors, a man who questions his own conscience, and someone who “does everything in (his) power” for Merrick. Not much of a choice really. Treves (and medicalisation by implication) are seen as the only real alternative Merrick (and all who are abnormal) have. The crowning glory of the film’s support for Treves’s sense of Christian morality is by having Merrick’s only act of agency support his own incarceration by Treves’s institution.

**The Rewards, or Not, of the Medical Model**

Merrick’s own gratitude to Treves sums up the supposed futility of the abnormal’s place under the medical model of disability: Merrick’s life for Treves’ (and for
Merrick) has been as fulfilled as was socially or pathologically possible in the hospital. The significant scene here is when Merrick states that he now has “a happy, full life... because he knows he is loved... and (has) gained (him)self... (and) could not say that but for (Treves) ... my friend”. The alternative of full social interaction and participation for Merrick is never even considered. Treves’ reply that Merrick has “done so much for (Treves) as well” is the key to putting the film into a Foucaultian context.

What Merrick has done for Treves far outweighs what Treves did for Merrick. Merrick has made Treves a celebrity, a rich man (patients specially ask for Treves, we are told at one point, because of his treatment of Merrick; he also helped Treves get a knighthood, something that could also be said of Anthony Hopkins). But most importantly it has made the doctor and the hospital the true home of those who challenge any standard of normality. The power of the medical profession is established. The film’s constant reference to the hygiene of the hospital (and the doctor’s other environments, i.e. his home) is startling in comparison to the grime and dirtiness of the working classes.

The hospital is the disseminator of hygienic practice and ideology; the floors shine, the staff wear crisp white, clean uniforms and the like and they are healthy and ‘good’ people. Armstrong states, using a Foucaultian paradigm, that the hospital “represented the Panopticon writ large, a whole community ‘traversed throughout by hierarchies, surveillance, observation, writing” (op. cit., 1983, p. 9). “At the same time both justification and explanation were provided for this surveillance by the invention of new medical problems” (ibid., p. 18). Lynch’s film inadvertently demonstrates such a process by having Merrick classified as diseased (he is made ‘a case’) and then institutionalised for his own, and society’s, good.

Foucault states that the subjection of the body can be as positive as negative and Merrick is a good example of this. Merrick is ‘saved’ from physical abuse from Bytes and enabled to live in relative comfort with regular, healthy meals; a life style only a few could afford at the best of Victorian times. The film never challenges the restrictions that medicalisation have placed upon Merrick, but idolises them as the ideal. Howell & Ford (1980) in their detailed analysis of Merrick’s reality portray a very different picture of his life as a freak than the one the film shows. Merrick seems to have been very well-liked and cared for by his manager, earning a considerable amount of money. Although he was robbed by a foreign manager on a tour of Belgium, his English manager was his partner and not master. In fact, Merrick wrote to the man who was to become his manager in order to escape the horror of institutionalisation in the shape of the workhouse. Lynch’s film The Elephant Man gives the typically negative view of the Freak Show that is held by the charitable bourgeoisie. Bogdan, in his book Freak Show (1988), gives a very different picture of the Freak Show, revealing how many freaks found it very rewarding and often achieved great fame, wealth and social respect from exhibiting themselves. At least for them it was often an act of self-determination rather than exploitation. The most revealing story Bogdan tells, for me, is of the Hilton sisters—Siamese twins—who appeared in Tod Browning’s Freaks (1932). The Hilton sisters feared one thing much more than any abuse or discrimination that they had ever experienced: the
doctor; they wrote that they feared that “‘Auntie’ (their manager) would stop showing us on stage and let the doctors have us—to punch and pinch and take our pictures always.” Bogdan continues that “[I]ndeed, most exhibits preferred being presented as freaks to being cast as pathological” (op. cit., 1988, p. 173).

The film’s complicity in the disempowerment of those who are ‘abnormal’ is manifest by its having the process of disempowerment (withdrawal of agency, especially via institutionalisation) appear as right in commonsensical terms. Medicalism has built its empire upon the bodies of the abnormal to such an extent that it needs the disabled to justify its own particular power even today, a fact that is the only reason why ‘disability’—as in the oppressive medical model—will not be fully eradicated. Without extreme cases to make examples of, medicine would have been much more restricted in its normalising philosophy; unless you have an abject abnormality to compare to your supposed normality, normality will be much more difficult to define. Thus, in reality, Merrick was turned into a case, and marginalised, so as to justify his own isolation. Foucault states that solitude brings about total submission. Merrick becomes so isolated that he is grateful beyond belief for the small parts he gets to play in the normalising game he is placed in.

The Doctor Imprisons the Tragic for Their Own Sake

Foucault states that the condemned man is persuaded to confess, so as to justify the acts against himself. Merrick does exactly this, much to Treves’s need and delight, at the point in the film where Treves needs Merrick to show he can communicate, in order to maintain the support of the hospital administrator. In this scene Treves angrily says to Merrick that he “can’t help (Merrick) unless (Merrick) helps (Treves)”. Treves needs Merrick to confess to his own abnormality (and horror of it) so that Treves can initiate some form of normalising treatment (care and control in this case, not cure and rehabilitation). The pure fact that Merrick can talk (and think!) makes Merrick’s abnormality even more horrific and tragic, because earlier in the film Treves “pray(s) to God … [Merrick is] an imbecile”. By not being an imbecile Merrick confesses to his own horror of himself, making the administrator immediately accept Merrick as in need of institutionalisation. Thus, as Foucault states, the body must justify acts against itself, so as to legitimate those acts carried out against it. This, combined with Merrick’s screaming at the sight of himself in a mirror, confirms the righteousness of the normalising practice of medicine within the film itself, and validates the social exclusion of Merrick, even to the extent that Treves does not allow mirrors in Merrick’s room. Thus, Merrick, by feeling disgust at his own appearance and the desire to be normal, confesses to his own horror of himself, a fact that validates all Treves’s actions and institutionalisation of Merrick, at the same time as marking Merrick’s sensitivity as part of the reason for his institutionalisation.

That Merrick is reduced to ‘craft work’ (the making of a cardboard cathedral) in his own room is not addressed critically in the film, it is accepted as obvious, and natural, for him to do as a hospitalised freak (is this the first example of a Day Centre?); that Merrick gets the card out of a bin and seems to initiate his ‘craft work’
himself further reinforces disability as only being capable of trivial activity. Merrick's construction of a cardboard cathedral—which as Merrick did actually do, and is still to be found in the hospital museum, seems to necessitate its inclusion in all the versions of Merrick's life—is clearly given as therapy and not art; art being the sole preserve of the able-bodied. If we look at the cathedral's inclusion in this film critically we can see its insidious connotations. Foucault felt that exercise is used as a method of 'behaviour modification'; obviously in Merrick's case physical exercise is not possible, as such, and another form of exercise is called for: 'craft work'. Such exercise gives an illusion of a satisfying past-time, whilst at the same time it modifies Merrick's behaviour, makes him more docile, to fit the treatment of the abnormal. Merrick's isolation is maintained without him ever really questioning his isolation, indeed it makes Merrick submit to it as the best possible treatment for him.

Prior to Merrick being a case for care it must be remembered that he did circulate within society, as a member of a specific community that valued him for his subjective self rather than the, supposedly, objective pathology that Treves places upon him. That his fellow freaks (dwarfs, giant etc.) call him "friend" when he is being used and abused by Byes in France, and that it is they who help him escape surely shows that he is, at least by 'fellow travellers', seen as a valid human being with his deformity rather than despite it. Alas, the scene of freak friendship may also be read to imply that perhaps segregation (or destruction via 'moral medicine') of the whole group may be in order as only they can really like one another; another generally held belief in society that the film blithely concedes to.

The Tragedy of Wanting to be What We Aren't: normal

Tea with the Treves's is a scene in their home which reinforces the inability of Merrick to be normal, whilst setting up the Treves' home as being the norm and ideal. Merrick cries at meeting Mrs Ann Treves because he has never met someone so beautiful, middle class a woman before. All the other women in the film have been working-class (and as such, in the film's terms, common tarts) and diseased, signified by either dirty, bloody or poxed faces and implied promiscuity. Ann is a healthy, sensitive and considerate person who is unable to touch Merrick and breaks down at the thought of Merrick having a (beautiful) mother. The mother is repeatedly sympathised with as particularly unfortunate throughout the film and by such parental sympathy Merrick is further marginalised and abnormality is further portrayed as destructive to the family; the reason for Merrick's mother's absence is in no other way explained. The power of family destruction that abnormality seems to behold is highlighted in Ann Treves continued reactions to Merrick at the tea. When Merrick states that he "must have been such a disappointment" to his mother, Ann retorts that "[N]o son as loving as you could ever be a disappointment". The look on Ann's face and her whole 'niceness' reveals this to be a polite lie (something she has already participated in, when discussing the whereabouts of her children), given with the best intention; we are left in no doubt that he would have been a disappointment in the eyes of Mrs Treves, a woman we are led to admire greatly for her sympathetic behaviour to her husband and Merrick. The tears
of Mrs Treves enable the viewer to feel pity, sympathy and regret for Merrick’s mother; one is almost glad she is dead so that she does not have to ‘see’ Merrick. Joy is completely absent from Merrick’s social interaction, and joy signifies at least a pleasure in life that is not prefaced with calculated planning or administration; strategies that dominate Merrick’s life once institutionalised. The ideal mother, Ann Treves, the intelligent and sensitive bourgeois mother, cannot even contemplate giving birth to such abnormality without deep sorrow and rejection. This scene negates any positive feeling the film had so far given to Merrick, by rejecting that Merrick could be loved by any ideal, normal, healthy mother (i.e. Ann Treves), let alone loved sexually by a ‘woman’. Significantly the junior nurse who most cares for Merrick is similar in appearance to his mother (a role that normally be the object of the patient’s desire, or the ‘love interest’ in most films), and as such reinforces even further the notion that abnormality is asexual and childlike.

Mrs Treves (and the Princess of Wales, Mrs Kendal and the theatre audience) accepts the bravery of Merrick but not his fantasy of being an equal human being. Merrick is to be pitied not loved, or even treated as equal, because he is abnormal. Significantly Howell & Ford (1980) reveal that when Merrick went to the theatre there was no standing ovation and that it was very secret, with Merrick screened from the audience so that his appearance could not disturb them. The audience is the same class of people who riot at Merrick’s appearance on the station platform. Lynch, by having the audience applaud Merrick in the controlled atmosphere of the private theatre, by implication, reinforces the control of disability in both public and private spaces as positive, not only for Merrick but also as a socially positive discourse: the wandering Merrick causes a riot whilst the controlled Merrick enables the audience to show their benevolent, Christian, character.

Foucault argued that the Victorians placed normalisation firmly in medicine and science, and that the abnormal are created as a specific medical group so as to reinforce the powers taken to enforce normality. In one scene Merrick parades himself for himself, he pretends to be smoking as he carries a walking stick and is brushing his hair, all the time parodying the welcoming talk of the bourgeois he has met. Lynch could be trying to ridicule such mannered behaviour in ‘normal’ people, but what he actually does (by making it more tragic than comic: the Elphick character walks in only to laugh at Merrick) is to create, what Bogdan, calls the “aggrandized” (op cit., 1988, p. 175) freak model of representation, a sort of miniature version of normality, showing freaks doing what normal people do so as to validate normality at the expense of difference. Bogdan continues that “People saw them as caricatures of elite adults, as freaks first and performers second” (ibid., p. 175). Consequently Merrick’s parody of normality only serves to place Merrick further in the arena of tragedy not humanity, whilst validating normality as intrinsically superior into the bargain. By letting us first laugh at Merrick’s parody of himself as ‘bourgeois man’, and then making us feel bad by having the Elphick character laugh at Merrick as well (a character so inhuman no one would wish to be as he is!), we are made to feel guilty at having laughed (or been amused) in the first place. Such a ploy only serves to increase antagonism against abnormality by having it reflect the fragility of ‘normality’ upon itself. The attempt to question the
spectator's reactions fails because it is so isolated (and clumsily done) that it only increases the tragedy of Merrick and the disgust at the working class's mentality.

**It is Better to be Dead than Disabled!**

The closing scenes of Merrick's life, in this film, are perhaps the most dangerous scenes in respect to the encouragement of eugenic ideals of death as a preferable to abnormality for both the individual and society, much in the same way that *Whose Life Is It Anyway*? (John Badham, 1981), film and play, does. Foucault felt that from the turn of the Nineteenth century, man saw man as in God's image, and as such had to eliminate all irregularities of a pathological nature. *The Elephant Man* acts in the same way by reinforcing the illusion of normality as the correct and only satisfactory, God given, state of being. Most overtly by its constant use of religious imagery.

The closing sequence has Merrick actively laying down, knowing it will kill him (he has stated earlier that he would like to sleep like a normal person, knowing that he cannot), to sleep. The closing can have two possible readings, both negative. Merrick either has fallen totally into the fantasy that he is normal (because of his behaviour modification and social interaction), in which case the illusion that he is now normal kills him due to his having succumbed to that illusion. Or, Merrick lays down knowing he will never be normal and as such life will always be abnormal and pointless unhappy, the only happiness available to him being the construction of cardboard cathedrals followed by a swift reunion with God and his Mother; Merrick's final words echoing those of Christ on the cross emphasising the Ascension that is Merrick's only true hope for peace and normality (in the film's logic that is).

The whole scene is interspersed with Merrick looking at the etchings of the normal way of sleeping, with the audience being given constant reminders of Merrick's inability to sleep "like a normal person". Two significant points need to be made here. Firstly, there is the repeated combination of the words 'normal' and 'person'. For society, and the film, the two words logically imply one another, which logically then means that an abnormal does not constitute a person. Secondly, one should note that the attitude in which Merrick can sleeping is the standard representation of depression and impending madness (Gilman, 1988); Merrick sleeps and sits with his knees up so that he can rest his arms and head on them (so as not to suffocate from the weight of his head). The reliance on such a physical attitude followed by suicide surely implies that deformity is so depressing that death is preferable. The photograph of the mother is brought in, after Merrick's suicide, to re-assert death as the 'best' option, and the poem that she speaks, during the montage of Merrick's spirit passing into eternity, gives Merrick's death the moral justification that the spirit will be normal in the after life (even if it is just a cloud!).

Thus physical abnormality, disability, is constructed, in the present, as inevitably depressing for the bearer and one step away from madness. This stance is further advocated earlier in the film by the Treves's hope that Merrick is an "imbecile" and the stated belief that the horror of his deformity is unimaginable for
those who are normal (in a statement made by the hospital administrator—wonderfully played by the ever-authoritative John Gielgud—to Treves just after Merrick talks for the first time).

A good example of where the negative images override the liberal intention is when Merrick asserts in the railway station, having been cornered by a riotous mob in a public toilet, that he is a “human being”. Merrick symbolises the opposite: in the scene he has become a chased, hounded animal, cornered in a seedy lavatory, so degraded to the extent that his life is no longer human. However much the intention was the opposite—that he is a human being despite his degradation and suffering (i.e. the epitome of Tragedy)—the image given (and civilised society’s reaction) confirms the opposite. The subsequent incarceration of Merrick returns Merrick back into the realms of a ‘beloved pet’, far from ‘really’ human. Interestingly in *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992) the Penguin parodies the speech of Merrick to claim that “I am not a human being, I am an animal”; here the audience is left in no doubt at all that what is ‘wrong’ with the Penguin is a physical deformity. The Penguin is no surreal manifestation (unlike Batman and Catwoman) but merely disabled and as such “an animal”.

The use of music in Merrick’s death scene is particularly interesting. The whole final scene is acted out to Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings (a haunting piece of music and used to similar effect—the fight against mortality—in *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1987) and *Lorenzo’s Oil* (George Miller, 1993), to name but two). It is melancholic at the very least, reminiscent of the morbid mood music of Mahler (especially his Fifth Symphony, fourth movement). Interestingly the ‘Adagio’ is commonly associated with death in the US after the death of the United States only wheelchair-using disabled President, F.D. Roosevelt, due to it being repeatedly played on the radio soon after the announcement of his death. Thus, in Merrick’s case, the doom of disability and abnormality is played out in all its eugenic and normalising glory: the abnormal commits suicide, lays down his own life, so that others can appreciate their own normality or normalising treatment. Merrick’s actual death was not at all like that portrayed in the film; it was mid-afternoon and due to natural causes. The very Romanticism of Merrick’s filmic death further uses him to perpetuate the very dangerous, for us, idea that we (the disabled) should wish to die in order to not be a burden to others or society. Few of us have not been taunted or persuaded of such eugenic/fascist slogans (usually from people who think they are the epitome of liberal thinking).

**Conclusion**

Graham & Oehlschlaeger (1992) claims that Merrick’s story is resistant to closure, resistant because it lets the interpreter use Merrick for their own purpose. This film, and most others, are unable to let the disabled ‘be’, they must always try to ask ‘why?’. Why? is the question which is answered by having the disabled/abnormal placed negatively as a sacrifice to the idea(1) of the ‘normal’. The 1989 film *The Tall Guy* (Mel Smith) contains a parody of *The Elephant Man* in the guise of a musical
called "Elephant". It contains one song that perhaps aptly sums up Lynch's view of Merrick: "He's Compulsive because He's Repulsive".

Medicalism and disability/abnormality have a long relationship that is based, in reality, on the idea of objectification and dehumanisation and is subsequently used as the tool by which normality is carved; even now I am unable to go to a doctor without extreme trepidation, a fear most accurately summed up for me by Kristeva when she talks of abjection, a state that knows the doctor's power of destruction, a power that is aimed at me:

A 'something' that I do not recognise as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucinations, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (Kristeva, 1992, p. 2)

The Elephant Man by David Lynch bears little relationship to how Joseph Merrick lived, felt or was treated. This version, and it is a version, acts as an example of a modern anti-disabled discourse by buying-into (even if inadvertently) all the standard and traditional disablist ideologies that circulate in society: medicalisation, impressionism, religious, tragedy and charity to name but a few that I have discussed. Merrick used to joke to Treves that he'd probably end up pickled in a jar like other freaks in the shows he had worked in, to which Treves said that that would not happen; and after Merrick's death the newspapers all reported his Christian burial. Merrick was not buried and was pickled, his skeleton preserved for the medical profession to study (his skeleton is still in the museum of the hospital at which he finally resided and is only on view to medical students) in the privacy of their own institutions. Lynch does for Merrick what medicine finally did to Merrick (and the disabled in general), it betrays him in the name of medicalised normality; it preserved him as an example, an example of what ever they choose him to be. After all, the hospital owns him (and his bones) now. Lynch and Treves (and medicine) have become their own versions of Bytes, despite what would be their undoubted protestations. If I have shown that, above all, The Elephant Man is not the liberal, tolerant and pro-difference film it, and its supporters, suppose it to be, I will have succeeded in the article. So often the positive image of disability is really very negative, so, beware of bearers of positive images!

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REFERENCES


**FILMS**